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Community, Conversation, and Conflict: a Study of Deliberation and Moderation in a Collaborative Political Weblog

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COMMUNITY, CONVERSATION, AND CONFLICT:

A STUDY OF DELIBERATION AND MODERATION

IN A COLLABORATIVE POLITICAL WEBLOG

by

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PREFACE

As a longtime user of computer-mediated communication (CMC), I have direct experience of its utility and benefit in staying connected with people from whom I am distant. As an interested observer of online political blogs, I had long anticipated that they would eventually harness the energies of disparate populations and attain political relevance in the United States' political arena, as seemed to be occurring in election year 2008. As a student of Urban Studies, I have been interested in the possibilities the Internet offers for distributed communication and community development. The triumph over space and time that such technology offers seems magical, although its practice is oftentimes much earthier, grounded as it can be in the lowest common denominator of communication practices. As important as it is for face-to-face communities to participate and work together, I am inspired and hopeful about the possibilities that participation in online communities might afford, on a state and even national scale.

For various reasons, and at various times, computer-mediated communication can be problematic for new and experienced members alike. Text based CMC's lack of social cues, depersonalization, and anonymity can result in ineffective or abusive communication, which in turn facilitates negative behaviors that are not easily checked. Recent developments such as community administered reputation systems or community moderation within discussion groups might minimize these problems,

thereby extending the experience of online participation to diverse populations which previously may have found CMC too intimidating to attempt.

In order to evaluate the effects of the above developments, I first undertook an examination of the means by which conflict resolution could occur in an online community, studying the processes by which community members enacted conflict resolution principles within the context of an online conflict. My conflict resolution Master's thesis (Soma 2007) studied the ways in which conflict is enacted in an online community, and involved a qualitative investigation of conflict resolution and other social behaviors within an online political community. Specifically, I did an inductive content analysis to determine how the community discussed its conflict, how it used the moderation system as a weapon and a tool, and what avenues community members used if they felt that the conflict itself was intractable or at least too difficult to handle.

What I discovered was that conflict resolution can and did occur within this community, and that new communication behaviors were being employed as well. I also discovered that the mechanisms that were intended to improve communication were sometimes applied inappropriately. The study community has a comment rating / moderation system that allows for the public evaluation of the value of commentary within the community. The rating system was intended to be used to elevate thoughtful comments and inspire commenters to create valuable commentary, while also decreasing visibility of abusive or unproductive comments and of course reducing their frequency. The lessons learned from that research caused me to wonder about

how this community was really using the comment rating system, and whether it was

being applied in service of what could be considered specific discourse or community

identity goals, to facilitate more deliberative communication.

This led me to the current research. I examined comments responding to

communications by the site owner about a community-wide conflict event that I

studied previously[1]. However, in this research I have undertaken a more extensive

content analysis combined with a statistical analysis of the ways in which ratings were

assigned to specific types of comments. I have determined that the community used

the rating system both to further its discourse goals and to enforce and support

community norms.

The rating system that seemed to be of benefit to the community at the time of

this research, is unfortunately no longer in use at the community in question. It is my

hope that the coding scheme I have developed will be useful when examining how the

current rating system is being used within the studied online community, as well as to

evaluate comment moderation rating systems similar to the original within other

political communities. Lastly, a variation on the coding scheme could be used to

examine other types of online communities as a means of evaluating other ratings

systems' fitness in supporting community discourse goals and in enforcing community

standards.

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[1] The conflict event, known within the community as The Pie Fight, concerned the placement of an advertisement that some members of the community found objectionable. The ensuing conversation concerned issues of the community's reputation, purpose, ownership, and future. It is described more completely on page 64.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Concerns about computer-mediated communication have existed for as long as the medium itself. Issues ranging from the depersonalization of conflicts to the dehumanization of conflicants, the demise of "real" community values and supports, and the fact that, as was humorously posited in a New Yorker cartoon, "On the Internet nobody knows you're a dog," have led to legitimate concerns about identity and anonymity in the online world. However, the increasing prevalence of CMC in the daily life of many Americans means that these problems are not going to disappear. Rather than complaining about them, users and developers need to discover means to mitigate those problems that are known to exist when people gather and communicate online.

The Internet also represents a promising online space and opportunity for people who are separated by distance and time to coordinate and participate in unison toward a shared goal, as was seen in the 2008 Presidential campaign of Barack Obama. As participants in online communities grow more proficient in their communication and organizing efforts, so too can those online communities develop a larger influence on the off-line world. One oft-touted benefit of online communication is that it facilitates the interaction of people who might not otherwise meet. The benefits of communication from a distance are tremendous and, barring language barriers, allow connections between individuals around the world. While there is a concern that people who seek information and community online are only spending

time in venues with others like themselves, members are likely to encounter diverse viewpoints within communities' larger groups of affiliation (Stromer-Galley 2003).

This research examines a popular online political community and the means by which this community seeks to moderate its discussions in the service of more efficient and deliberative communication. The larger an online community grows, the more difficult becomes the practice of comment moderation and the more likely that the community becomes a target of trolls[2] or inexperienced communicators who waste both time and bandwidth. Comment moderation tools were developed to enable community members to self-police communication, placing both the burden and the privilege of maintaining community standards on the community at large.

But how well do these tools actually work? Are they being used to homogenize the debate and quell dissenting voices? Are they being used to create in-groups and out-groups, which also can lead to homogenization, stagnation, or insularity? Or are the tools being used as advertised: to quell offensive or harmful communication practices in the service of more and better communication? This research seeks to address these questions by focusing on the way a comment rating / community moderation system (described in more detail in Chapter 2) is used in a specific online

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[2] A troll is a newsgroup post that is deliberately incorrect, intended to provoke readers; or a person who makes such a post. From: http://www.archivemag.co.uk/gloss/T.html Trolling was originally intended as a means to bait other members of the community into responding to messages that were intentionally obtuse or inflammatory. Community members who were in the know would not respond to these posts, so trolling became a means by which in-groups and out-groups were created, and at times could actual solidify a community's bonds. Trolling is primarily attention-seeking behavior; the main purpose is to engage the community's energies toward the troll, rather than toward a wider conversation. Troll posts are more frequently encountered in online communities that deal with socially divisive subjects such as racism, sexism, and politics, but no online community is immune.

community. The main question this research seeks to answer is whether a community-administered comment moderation system helps that community to support conditions of deliberation.

The present research examined a moderation system used in an online political blog to determine how it is being used in the discussion of a site-wide conflict, and to evaluate its use as a tool to enforce the conditions of deliberation. I sought to understand what types of comments received good or bad ratings from an online community. I also sought to establish whether or not there is a relationship between the type of thread in which a comment appears and the ratings behavior that occurs. To do this, I analyzed a corpus of comments concerning a singular event affecting the community and its members. The content analysis coding of those comments was followed by a statistical analysis of the ways the comment ratings were applied to specific subsets of comments within the main corpus. I then made conclusions about how the community used the rating system, and whether it appeared to support deliberative as well as community identity communication goals.

The Internet in Daily Life

The Internet is rapidly becoming the communication medium of choice for an increasing number of Americans. A 2003 Pew Internet and American Life Project report found that online communities were increasing in scope (Horrigan 2003). A later study found that people were going online to supplement or augment their offline communities and social capital (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, and Rainie 2006). Time

Magazine named Internet site YouTube as its 2006 Invention of the Year in the same issue it named Internet Members as Person of the Year (Grossman 2006). The technology that drives YouTube is seen as an exemplar of the newly emerging "social web", also known as Web 2.0, which relies on community members' co-creation of the content of the site, and of its community (Madden and Fox 2006). People turn to these online communities to fulfill professional and social needs, such as the creation of professional social networks (http://www.linkedin.com), spirited discussion of television shows (http://televisionwithoutpity.com), "due diligence" research and information on political candidates and issues (http://www.mydd.com), and the sharing of photos (http://www.flickr.com), videos (http://www.youtube.com), or "micro-blog" snippets of daily life (http://www.twitter.com).

Online communication studies conducted to date have looked at the means and timeframes in which people interact: synchronously with chat and web conferencing programs, and asynchronously via Usenet, newsgroups, and email groups (Lemus, Seibold, Flanagin, and Metzger 2004). Some studies have measured interaction in a broad cross-section of Usenet groups (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997), or within various political or issue-oriented Usenet groups (Smith 1999). Group weblogs (blogs) are a newer form of online community that have developed extremely rapidly, and which affect an even broader base of people than Usenet groups, but which have not yet received much study.

Blogs initially gained popularity because they are more visually oriented, provide easier access to information, and require a lower technological threshold for use and enjoyment than Usenet groups or Listservs. Group blogs have gained a larger online audience for several reasons. First, the inclusion of more authors means that the available content will be more diverse, which increases content accessibility to a wider audience. Second, they usually enjoy increased visibility in more traditional media, which increases the probability of their discovery by the casual user. Last, for those groups whose blogs are public, there is more open access to the information and dialogue that is contained therein, unlike Usenet, chat, and many email discussion groups, which typically require registration in order to read or participate in the discussion. As in Usenet and other discussion groups, the conversations and stories that exist there generally persist over time. When combined with increased public access, this gives current and future community members the ability to look back at previous conversations or decisions made by the community that has formed around the group blog (Wright, Varey, and Chesney 2005). Either on- or offline, a shared history and communal memory increase community cohesion, and thus community longevity (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999).

Because online conversations on political blogs persist over time and represent the communities they serve, it is important that they are representative of a wide range of views, so that the community is represented in detail, not just broad brush strokes of opinion. One way to facilitate the expression of diverse views is by regulating

community participation. This requires a means of culling out comments that do not constructively advance in-depth discussions or dialogue, but without sanitizing the debate to such an extent that there is no apparent difference of views.

Current Research

Some previous research on community and computer-mediated communication has been somewhat contrived, extrapolating from the results of experimental settings and surveys that might not be as applicable to conditions experienced outside of the laboratory. The current research was conducted using the communications of an existing online community, and as such helps to localize the findings in a real-world context. One of the benefits of studying a previously existing online community is that the examined behavior is natural and unselfconscious, as opposed to other CMC research which used laboratory experiments, or other deliberative research whose subjects could not help but be aware of the researchers' goals (Wilhelm 1999).

This research differs from other examinations of online community and communication in three significant ways. First, it focuses on the interactions that took place in an already established community. Second, it analyzes conversation about a specific conflict event within that community, an event that received significant community and external media attention, and which was still referenced on the site in 2008, almost three years after the event occurred. Finally, it uses real-time judgments made by community members to assess their community values, particularly concerning deliberative communication goals.

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Doing this research in a pre-existing community takes advantage of the fact

that the persistence of conversation allows evaluation of dialogue concerning the event

to take place in the same locale and context in which it initially occurred. The visual

rhetoric of the community (comments are displayed in a threaded format), and the fact

that responses can be easily attached to the comment they respond to minimizes the

possibility of misinterpretation. This particular venue also has another benefit, in that

it allows its members to assign a value rating to the comments they deem either

especially valuable or especially lacking in value to the community. By examining

which threads (and comments within threads) received the highest ratings from

community members, I was able to determine whether the community members value

comments that are in the context of a deliberative conversation. Because trolling or

non-relevant comments are systematically removed from the discussion by virtue of

the community's moderating practices, I was able to evaluate which type of individual

comments that are, by default, deemed to be of value to the conversation. The

comment moderation rating system was introduced in order to improve the value of

the commentary that is encountered on the site. This ratings system enabled me to

draw my conclusions about community values based on the comments that have

received the most attention from community members.

Context of Study

Internet usage is increasing in scope across all demographic categories, with

nearly 88% of the American population routinely going online as of 2004 (Fallows

2004). As of June, 2008, the Pew Internet & American Life project reported that a

"Record-Breaking 46% of Americans" had used the Internet to gain information about

politics in the current Presidential election cycle (Smith and Rainie 2008:1). These

uses ranged from seeking news and information about the campaign, receiving

candidate emails, and engaging in political debate. It is clear that the Internet is now

an accepted venue in which to engage in political debate.

Younger Internet users are becoming more civically and politically engaged

(Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, and Marcelo 2006), which is welcome news

considering they are the demographic which had been found to be least likely to vote

or to engage in other civic behaviors (Putnam 2000). Internet users have also been

found to watch less television, spend more time with friends, and are more socially

active than their non-Internet using peers (Cole, Suman, Schramm, Lunn, and Aquino

2003).

In more recent developments, interactivity on political or media websites has

evolved, offering more substantive benefits than merely the ability to fill out an online

comment or donation form. For example, the Barack Obama campaign website hosted

an active online community, offered telephone scripts and phone numbers to people

who wanted to contact voters, and offered the ability to create a private "microsite"

that allowed for in-depth interaction between the campaign's supporters. Candidates'

sites are becoming more sophisticated and involve more social networking tools

designed to get out the vote and increase donations, but it is not clear whether

deliberation take place on such sites, outside the support of a specific candidate. This more personal and dynamic approach to online campaign outreach could be a means of increasing political participation, and subsequently, involvement on the part of Internet users.

In spite of the problems inherent in CMC, participation in collaborative political weblogs could form a gateway to political discussion that is more interactive and contextualized than that which occurs on other political or media websites. An earlier problem with political websites was that they either didn't offer the ability to interact with fellow constituents, or in the case of some comments areas, they were free-for-alls similar to unmoderated Usenet groups, sometimes with even less conversational salience.

Although there have been many studies of communication within political groups on Usenet (Davis 1999; Kelly, Fisher, and Smith 2005; Sack, Kelly, and Dale 2005; Wilhelm 1999) thus far, much of the focus has been on interactivity and social or communication networks than on the communication itself. Furthermore, there has been little examination of what type of communication is valued by those who participate in political weblogs, and whether or not deliberation can occur within them, through an examination of the community's use of its own moderation tools.

Rationale

Given their increasing prominence in civic life, the lack of recent research on deliberation within political weblogs points to a need for study. The comments

community of a political weblog provides an excellent venue for this type of examination. As in the research on Usenet groups, the interactions that occur are recorded and may be analyzed within the original context. The comments are threaded, which increases communication salience and interactivity, thus increasing the chances that conversation and deliberation can occur. In some cases community moderation in the form of comment rating can give insight into what types of communication are valued versus what types of communication are sanctioned.

Examining a popular political comments-enabled community-moderated weblog to measure the way the community uses the moderation system is a good first step toward determining if these types of venues can indeed provide a place where in-depth political discussion can occur, as opposed to replicating the limitations of Usenet discussion groups. Early electronic communities had few methods to deal with or mitigate conflict (Usenet, particularly). Typically, they relied on the expulsion of disruptive members, or in later cases, barred entry by requiring users to register before they were allowed to participate in the community. This led to the perception that electronic communities are either places of high conflict or of limited diversity of views. In the first case, this limited their usefulness for those who do not work well within these constraints. In the latter case, it limited their value as places of deliberation or objects of study. However, I would argue that the recent developments have the effect of improving community functionality and, as such, increase the value

of electronic communities as places where diverse viewpoints and in-depth interaction might be found.

While people typically go online to meet needs that can't be met offline, these needs are different for each person. A person who has many like-minded others with whom she can discuss political issues is more likely to go online to seek different examinations of an issue. Similarly, a person who might hold his tongue in the offline world where his views are in the minority would be more likely to seek to connect with people who share his viewpoints. As more people move online to discuss issues, they will want tools that enhance deliberation, such as more sophisticated interfaces that assist the reader in digesting or dismissing certain types of content. A comment ratings system can also help those people whose time is limited to screen out the commentary that has been judged as less relevant or valuable by their community members. However, it is important to recognize the danger that Sunstein (2001) might consider is inherent in this type of moderation – that members will merely use the ratings system to homogenize the debate rather than value the comments for their contribution no matter what their actual position on the discussion.

I undertook an examination of this new social space. My goal was to measure its current ability to serve as a venue for differing viewpoints to emerge and be accessed, via the evaluation of the types of comment moderation that occur. The prospects of CMC and the Internet in general as a tool for increased political deliberation have been discussed a great deal in the wake of both the 2000 and 2004

elections. However, if CMC becomes just another area where people of like minds merely reinforce one another's views, this promise becomes muted.

Implications

This research will be the first step in evaluating whether or not a comment ratings system could be an important tool to helping online political deliberation groups improve their quality of discussion about topics of interest to the community. In addition to providing insight into how one community uses comment moderation, my findings also provide information about how comment moderation was used to enforce community norms, what types of commentary were chosen to be sanctioned so that differences of opinion could be surfaced and evaluated, and how moderation may be used so that deliberation instead of disputation may occur.

This research adds to the existing body of knowledge examining communication within an online political community, and will be of value to researchers who wish to understand how comment moderation might be more usefully employed to address community deliberation goals and enforce community social norms. This research will also be of use to managers and participants in online communities where group process is valued but not necessarily modeled, and may persuade them of the value of a complex moderation system versus merely ascribing singular positive or negative comment ratings.

CHAPTER 2 CONTEXT: A BRIEF HISTORY OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

This chapter provides a brief overview of the evolution of the Internet as we know it today. Usenet newsgroups, personal Internet websites, community weblogs, and the research site for this study, the Daily Kos, are discussed. The Daily Kos is a political weblog with community-moderated discussion. The machinations of the Daily Kos site are described, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of my own background and experience within online discussion groups.

Online Communication History

Usenet

Usenet is a communications system that supports email and file transfers from one computer to another via a global computer network. Usenet is solely text-based, and provides access to the thousands of past and present email based discussion groups, called newsgroups or Listservs. Listserv is a software program that facilitates the administration and moderation of Usenet newsgroups, which are sometimes termed Listservs. Listservs are organized via category with private or public access to the group and its archives.

World Wide Web and Weblogs

In 1994, the release of Mosaic, a graphical member interface web browser, marked the beginning of the transition of the Internet from a text-based communications network to the more visual medium we use today. Previous Internet use was limited to the display of text on a page, useful primarily for email

communication, and later for Usenet newsgroups. The development of web browsers that could display graphics in addition to text was capitalized on by numerous corporations who saw in the Internet the next marketing frontier, leading to the commercial dot-com boom which lasted from approximately 1995-2001.

In the late 90's, non-commercial personal websites published by web developers became increasingly popular, leading to the creation of online publishing software for non-technical web-publishers. pitas [sic], the first free build-your-own-web-page creation software became available in July, 1999; it was followed by Blogger one month later (Blood 2002). Both publishing tools enabled less technical members to easily create their own web pages, included a mechanism for 'pasting' links, and provided a layout so that creating and posting web pages became as simple as using a word processor. The increasing popularity of personal web logs (known as blogs) encouraged even more web surfing as bloggers sought to find the most unique and/or newsworthy links to share with their readership. The focus shifted from personal news and information about the individual site owner toward unique or informative content presented on the web at large. Online publishing was transformed from a personal journaling space to a one-to-many content delivery stream, similar to a radio broadcast, with site owners publishing links and commentary with an increasing awareness of their audience.

One early shortcoming of these sites was that they remained a broadcast one-to-many format. This precluded the interaction that would have deepened the

conversation started by the blogger, until the addition of commenting functionality on the part of several blog software publishers transformed the medium once again. This development enabled readers to talk back to the blog owner, and to other readers of the blog, evolving blogs from a broadcast format to a place where two-way communication could occur, and creating the possibility for communities to form around a single person's site.

The "blogging revolution" engendered a great deal of publicity and discussion about the purposes and uses of personal blogs. Were they merely an enhanced version of Usenet newsgroups, a means by which individuals could connect with other "weirdoes" like themselves, or were they actually the means by which true online communities could be formed? Beginning in 1999, numerous news articles hailed the advent of this new medium as a boon for personal publishing, and the number of blogs has increased exponentially every year since. In 2003, the estimate was that there would be over ten million hosted blogs by the end of 2004 (Perseus 2003). In 2005, the Pew Internet and American Life project found that more than 8 million people had created blogs and 32 million people regularly read them (Rainie 2005).

Community Blogs

Community blogs, combining the discussion capabilities of Usenet news groups with the display capabilities of independent blogs, allowed for multiple people to post links and commentary to a single blog. Slashdot and Metafilter are the best-known early examples of this format, although there are now innumerable different

collaborative blog/filter sites. Community blogs/filters give front-page publication

power to multiple people, either via invitation as in the case of BlueOregon.com, or to

any member who logs in, broadening the field of discourse to as many as would like to

participate. Not all of the members in filter blogs post links, or even comment on the

front page, but the presence of non-participants (termed lurkers) is of much less import

when there is such a large but anonymous contingent of community members (or

merely readers), and is rarely mentioned by members of the online communities

(Nonnecke and Preece 2000). The potentially more serious "free rider" problem of

non-participators taking from the community while giving nothing back is usually

offset by the number of participants in an online space. This unequal participation is

also less noticeable than it would be in a face-to-face venue; online lurkers are

invisible, and while they don't participate in the gift culture itself, they don't

necessarily diminish it by their non-communication either (Kollock and Smith 1996;

Preece 2001).

Metafilter

     Metafilter is one of the first community blogs, created in 1999 to "filter the

best of the web." Discussion subjects on Metafilter run the gamut from politics to pop

culture to personal problems and are only limited by the efforts of the community

members to find interesting web site links to add to the discussion. Usenet lists are

organized by topic (such as alt.politics.party, alt.soc.abortion, alt.tv.lost) which is

designed to screen out any "not relevant" content – in Metafilter (and other

collaborative blogs) any topic posted by a community member is considered to be relevant to its member base. Posts are seldom deleted although the community members might register their disagreement or disgust with those links that are personally offensive. Matthew Haughey, the site owner, controls who is able to participate via a minimal registration hurdle, and, on rare occasion, will remove unrepentant or obstructive members from the community.[3] Display of comments on Metafilter and similar community blogs is sequential, with the oldest comment closer to the top of the page, and subsequent comments appearing below. To indicate a specific response, commenters can either use the person's name or comment theme, or cut and paste the relevant part of the comment to which they are responding.

Metafilter also provides a separate area to address the conversations and interactions that take place on the main site. Metatalk[4] allows members to discuss posting etiquette, problems with specific members or comments, and other questions or comments about the site "offline" from the discussions that take place on the main page. The ability to discuss the state of the community adds another level of interactivity to the site – rather than grouse about issues "in secret," the discussions about the health of the community take place where those interested can participate in the discussion. Those who are not interested in community management discussions

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[3] See the thread concerning the banning of "Rightwinger" by site owner "mathowie" here: http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/419#2915 for discussion of a rare instance in which a member was banned from the Metafilter community.

[4] http://www.metatalk.com.

do not have to opt out, because they take place elsewhere. Members are free to participate as their time and interest dictate.

In addition to the site's front page there are additional community pages that promote members' personal projects, or offer information about member employment or employability. There are also two additional discussion areas: an "ask Metafilter" advice section, and Metatalk, which allows the community to discuss happenings on other areas of the site. Metatalk is also used to request specific site improvements or obtain information about the mechanics and decisions behind the site's daily operations. This capability to discuss discussions within the same site is what makes collaborative blogs like Metafilter different from previously studied online communities, and more similar to the self-reflective discussions that occur on some newspapers' public editor columns where the editor critiques or responds to reader critiques of the newspaper's reportage.

Moderation in Community Blogs

Even though the purpose of online discussion groups is discussion, there are some types of commentary that are unwelcome or inappropriate for inclusion in the conversation. Flames and troll posts, designed to derail the conversation, or comments that are out of character for the group at large, are included in this category. Design decisions can help to mitigate the mechanical issues that can make CMC problematic, building the possibility for salient, multi-threaded communication into the layout and functionality of a site. However, the possibility for conflict, miscommunication, and

inappropriate communication to occur still exist, just as they do in face-to-face

communication. Similarly, just as moderation can assist face-to-face deliberation and

in heated discussion, so too can it be of use to online discussion groups.

The advent of member moderation and judgment of comment value, was first

seen on the Slashdot[5] technology collaborative blog, which focuses on "News for

Nerds. Stuff that matters." The moderation system enabled all participating members

of the community to have the opportunity to moderate and rate individual comments;

community members who consistently post comments deemed worthwhile by the

membership were rewarded with higher "karma points" and often received community

privileges based on these ratings (CmdrTaco 2003; Powazek 2002). For example, as

designated "trusted members," their own comment ratings might be given greater

importance and weight and their opinions more often solicited by other community

members than those of someone with fewer karma points might. The only limitation

on Slashdot is that members may not rate a comment in a thread in which they are

participating.

Because Slashdot and Metafilter are privately owned and run, the site owners

are the final arbiters of what is allowed on their sites; banning people is often a last

resort, occurring only after other methods of conflict resolution have been attempted

(CmdrTaco 2003; Haughey 2002).

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[5] http://www.slashdot.org

Collaborative Blogs

Single-issue blogs that combine the media-focused aspects of early blogs with the community-publishing aspect of community blogs are termed collaborative blogs. Usually political in nature, these blogs offer their readers a space to post comments concerning a single topic or theme, such as healthcare or getting members of a specific party elected.

Site managers of more sophisticated collaborative political weblogs may require members to register with a unique ID before they can comment. Some sites also allow for the threaded arrangement of comments chronologically by thread topic, in addition to a non-hierarchical and chronological linear display format. The adoption of this new visual rhetoric increases the likelihood that members will respond to each other and increases the interactivity and conversational salience on the site. Some sites allow members to rate each others' comments, which may increase the depth and breadth of participation within the community. Although there is always the possibility that ratings will be used to elevate commentary with which a rater agrees, this capability also allows for readers to ignore comments rated below a certain threshold. These tools could lead to the development of a community "echo chamber" as posited by Sunstein (2001), but they also permit a more focused exploration of the commentary within the site.

Daily Kos Overview

The collaborative weblog I have chosen to study is Daily Kos[6] (See Figure 1). The site has existed since May 26, 2002, and has grown from 5,000 registered members (Markos Moulitsas, Personal Communication, December 13, 2003) and around 3.1 million site visits per month in late 2004, to the current statistics of almost 80,000 registered members and about 12 million site visits a month in early 2006 (Sitemeter 2006).

Daily Kos (so named because "Kos" was the owner's nickname when he served in the U.S. Army) is owned by Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, who operates the site full time and is supported by ample advertising revenue.[7]

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[6] http://www.dailykos.com.

[7] Advertising revenue was approximately $104,000 for the month of June 2008 http://web.blogads.com/advertise/liberal_blog_advertising_network). Operating expenses for the site are not publicly available.

Site Overview and Images

Figure 1. Front Page of the Daily Kos Website

The above image shows the main elements of the Daily Kos site. Front Page stories are to the left, advertisements are in the middle column, and to the right are the member controls for the site. The Menu, on the top right, contains direct links to the homepage (pictured), current Diaries, dKosepedia (which is an information page about the site), a Search engine, Create account page, Login for members who have an existing account, and an auto generated email request link, for members that have lost their password. Just below the Main menu is the About section of the site, and below

that is the list of Recommended Diaries. Not shown on this image, just below the

Recommended Diaries list, is the list of Recent Diaries. Both Recommended Diaries

and Recent Diaries refresh every time the page is reloaded in the browser.
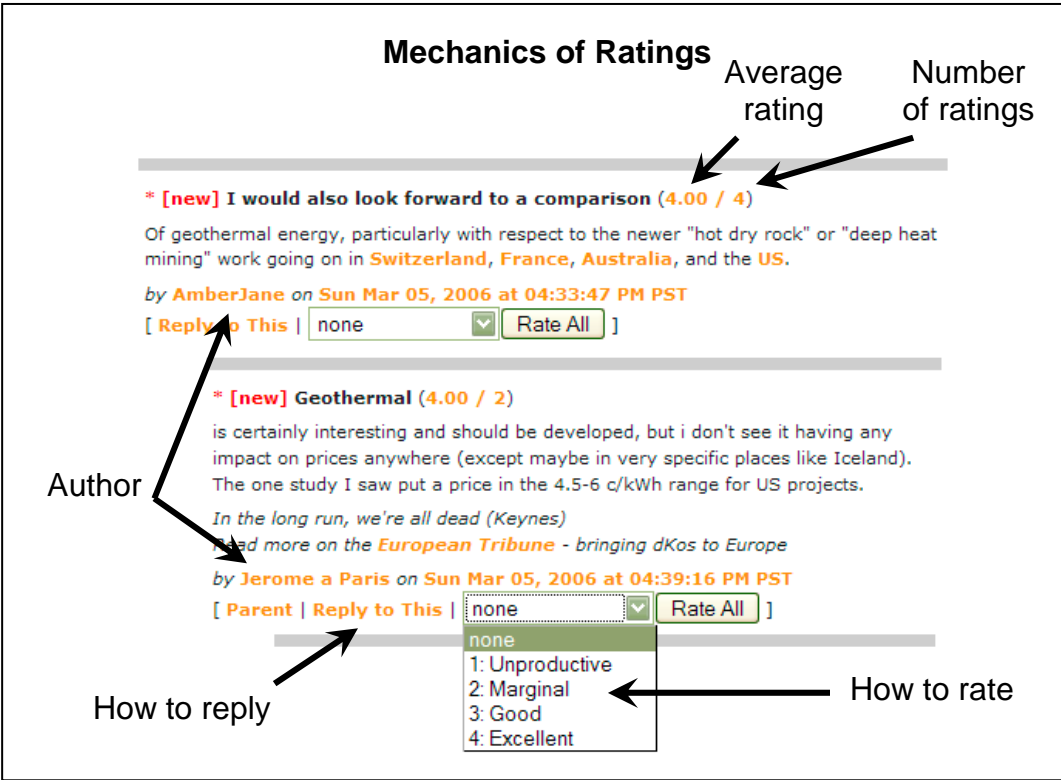
Figure 2. Ratings Description

Figure 2, above, shows the key features involved in commenting or rating on

the Daily Kos site. The Reply to This link, and the Ratings dropdown menu, are only

displayed to members who are logged in to the site. The horizontal gray bars separate

comments from each other. The increasing rightward indentations give a visual

indication of the comment being responded to. Gray bars that share the same indented

left margin indicate that the comments below are responding to the same single

comment above them on the page. In Figure 2, the position of the second and third

bars indicate that the comments below are part of a single thread, with each comment

responding to the one directly above it.

Daily Kos Site History and Format

Site History

Started in May of 2002, Daily Kos was the most highly trafficked non-

corporate political blog with more than half a million visits/day in December 2005 (as

calculated by the Truth Laid Bear Blogging Ecosystem[8] and Sitemeter[9]).

In 2006, there were almost 80,000 registered members (up from 5,000 in 2003)

who had posting privileges on the site, but there was no way of determining how many

of those members were active readers of the site. Member registration is required for

those who would like to post diaries or comments, recommend diaries, or rate

comments on the site, although read-only access to the site is available to anyone. It is

free to register on the site, and there are no formal posting requirements or limitations,

excepting a one-week probationary period limiting the member's ability to post a

diary. While previous iterations of the site (and many other political blogs) do not

employ this registration barrier to commenting, Daily Kos moved to this format in

October of 2003. The reasons for this change included the fact that the anonymous

comment format incurred several cases of inundation by advertising spammers,

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[8] http://www.truthlaidbear.com/ecosystem.php.

[9] http://www.sitemeter.com/?a=stats&s=sm8dailykos&r=0.

trolling, mistaken identity, and even identity theft. As well, members could only read comments chronologically, and could not easily reply directly to a comment that occurred earlier in the thread. These software limitations hindered the conversational salience and in some cases the substance of the commentary. Members could cut-and-paste from comments to which they wanted to reply, but the process required an extra step that not every member chose (or was technologically astute enough) to employ.

Markos began taking in advertising revenue in late 2003 to support the site's operational costs. Members who wish view an ad-free version of the site can purchase a site subscription fee, which remains unchanged since 2006: $4/month, $40/year, or $100 for a lifetime subscription. Subscribers receive no additional content or access privileges for their subscription.

Format

The Daily Kos is most properly considered a combination of a community blog and a political Usenet group. A seminal article, called a Diary, is posted on a topic. Community members are invited to post responses, or comments, about the article.

The Kos community is primarily self-regulating, with the posting members taking an active interest in the health and wellbeing of the community. During the week of my study period approximately 5,000 individuals posted diaries and comments, both within and outside of the Pie Fight articles. It is not known how many of the registered members read the site without posting on it, but the overall site

statistics run on the order of over one million visits a week. These site statistics include both registered and non-registered readers.

There is an active reference encyclopedia of the site, called the dKosopedia, a play on the word encyclopedia, which includes information about the site and various political concerns.

Membership

As noted above, anyone at all can view the site or its comments. Membership privileges include the ability to comment on posts, create diaries, and rate other members' posts for quality. The Daily Kos site is similar to earlier political weblogs in that registration is open to anyone with an email address and that there are certainly people who post with the desire to "win" more than the desire for earnest, open political discussion. Since the site enables its members to screen out undesirable content, it is possible that these communications are less troublesome than those occurring in other political discussion groups.

As of November 4, 2005, there were 70,555 individual member names registered on the site, although the actual posting figure was closer to 6,000 in any given week. Adding to the site's legitimacy, the dKosepedia includes a page which listed "Important Guests at the Daily Kos" listing various US Representatives, Senators, State Officeholders and candidates for the 2004 and 2006 elections who have posted Diaries on the site (dKosepedia 2006).There is no indication anywhere on the site of how many people are paid subscribers.

The Front Page – Stories and Front Page Authors

The Daily Kos site has various areas where readers of the site can read originating articles. Originating articles on the front page of the site are known as stories. In 2006, these stories were written by five people within the Daily Kos community who have been given the privilege of front-page posting status. These people are the site owner and four others of the site owner's choosing (in some cases, the community has voted on who should be given front page posting status). As described below, diaries may be promoted to the front page by any of the front page authors. The authors of the diaries retain their diary author status, but their site status is increased by the promotion, since their diaries will likely be seen by the same number of people who view the front page stories.

Open Threads Stories

Interspersed with the Stories on the front page are Open Threads, where generic comments of any type are permitted, and with no set topic of conversation. There are two types of Open Threads: those that are auto-generated (under the *open thread* author) and those that are typically written by Markos or another front page author. Sometimes there are themes of the open threads, but they are primarily designed for community members to comment and/or discuss issues that have not been covered within a recent story, or are not otherwise deserving of front page treatment. In many cases, the open threads are where the community aspect of the Daily Kos shines through. It is here that inside-jokes are shared (or explained),

community building occurs, where references to other diaries that didn't make the front page or the recommended list are made, and where community members promote their own diaries.

There is also a "Cheers and Jeers" story that functions in the same way as an open thread, but is not considered as such. The official Cheers and Jeers author, *Bill in Portland ME,*[10] has been accorded unofficial front page author status in recognition of the value such community building efforts bring to the community (Wikipedia 2008).

To the right of the front page stories are the advertisements. These are typically combinations of text and images, and are only hidden if a community member has purchased a subscription to the site.

Diaries

Diaries are originating articles written by community members without front-page posting status. Diaries determined to be worthy of community-wide exposure are promoted to the front page of the Daily Kos site, either by Markos or one of the other five front page authors. As well, there is a dynamically created list of member-recommended diaries on the front page. Community members can also recommend a diary via a link on the diary page. The title of the diary, the diary author, and the number of comments it has received are all that is visible on this list, but the site viewer can click on the title to see the entire diary and comments. Registered members

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[10] In the fall of 2007, Bill in Portland ME lost his job, and the Daily Kos community collected $50,000 in pledges to allow him to continue to write Cheers & Jeers as a full-time paid position. Wikipedia. 2008, "Daily Kos", Retrieved June 9, 2008 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daily_Kos).

can select the number of "most recommended diaries" that they would like to view in the member preferences area, or they can leave the display to the site-generated default number of recommended diaries.

There is also a dynamically created list of recently posted diaries – registered members can choose how many recently posted diaries they would like to see on the front page. Alternately, there is a link to the main diaries page where all diaries are posted. Since the Daily Kos community has almost 80,000 members, it would be impossible to keep up with all of the diaries that are written – in 2005, approximately 200 diaries were written per day.

Commenting

After an article or diary is written, community members can extend the dialogue by commenting on the diary, and/or on a previous member's comments on the diary. This results in several threads of conversation, with the initiating post typically being in response to the original diary and subsequent posts being in response to the preceding comment or to the diary itself. Each comment that responds directly to the originating diary starts a new comment thread.

Tip Jar

A *tip jar* comment is often posted by the diary author as a means of increasing his/her Mojo (described below), which eventually can help a person attain Trusted User status (described below). Since diary recommendations are not included in Mojo

calculations, this is often the only means by which diarists' contributions are measured or rewarded. This practice is resisted by some diarists, but is predominantly an understood and supported convention of the site.

Rating / Mojo

Ratings on the Daily Kos site are a means of participating in the dialog without having to take the time to write. Comments can be given a rating of 0-4 in order of increasing "value" to the community, although 0 is a rating only Trusted Users may give, and which can cause the comment to be hidden from view. At least two community members must rate a comment for that comment to receive a numerical rating that is visible, without clicking, to readers of the site.

Members can rate any comments except their own, and the ratings are intended to reward members who craft insightful or informative comments, while weeding out the trolls who might invade and destroy the community. Ratings are not supposed to indicate agreement or disagreement with a particular commenter or point of view, but there is no formal prohibition against a member choosing to rate comments solely based on this criterion. Raters who go on "sprees" and negatively rate (a practice known as downrating) multiple comments are usually noticed and called out or sanctioned by the community. Oftentimes, a commenter who receives a bad rating will post a second comment within the same thread to demand that the person who gave the rating give an explanation for the rating. Occasionally, retaliatory downrating occurs, but if so, it is usually noted within the comment thread. Excessive commentary

about ratings is typically seen as counterproductive to the conversation, and seems to be looked down upon by the community.

In the interest of giving back to the community, and perhaps to avoid the result of hiding comments, or because those who do not have the power to give zeroes would still like to have input on the conversation, a convention has arisen on Daily Kos where a member will post a recipe as a comment to a post that they would have rated as Zero. This is an interesting and useful modification of the means by which a non-Trusted User can admonish another, and develop community feeling at the same time. Its use is noteworthy because the posting of a recipe likely requires much more effort than merely rating a post or member with a zero.

In addition to spotlighting valuable comments, comment ratings also provide value to the community by increasing the status of users who write them. A member's comment ratings are combined into a weighted average which results in a Mojo value. Mojo is an idea borrowed from the Slashdot community, which ostensibly helps to keep the comments on the site as "high quality as possible." The Mojo value is the projected rating of a member's subsequent comments. Commenters who successfully endeavor to enhance their Mojo are likely also increasing the amount of useful, interesting, or otherwise valuable commentary on the site. After a member has posted a sufficient number of comments, and has also obtained a Mojo value higher than a certain undisclosed minimum, that member attains Trusted User status.

Trusted User Status

In addition to the typical rating ability, a Trusted User is able to rate comments below the normal minimum rating (e.g. they may rate comments from 0-4, rather than 1-4). This privilege allows a trusted member to join in the policing of Daily Kos, enabling them to "zero rate" comments. There are no specific sanctions to this rating, although comments with an average rating of below 1 are hidden from the view of regular daily Kos readers.

While the means by which a regular member becomes a Trusted User are very generally explained, the actual calculations are not made transparent to the community members. What is known is that a member who makes either comments or diaries that are favorably rated by the community eventually attains enough Mojo to become elevated to this status. Trusted Users have three specific privileges that Regular Members do not: they can anonymously give comments a zero (troll) rating; they can see all hidden, troll-rated comments; and they can see who has given a comment a zero rating.

There is no transparency in the community about how many members are actually Trusted Users, nor is a member formally informed that they have attained this status. When trusted member status is discussed in comments, most trusted members note that they realized they'd been elevated because their ratings system had changed from 1–4 to 0–4. Markos himself, when asked how the calculations are performed, and by what means a member is accorded this status, has simply stated "Don't worry about

it – it's not a big deal." However, since the Trusted Users are able to hide certain posts from the typical member's view without either detection or accountability, the Trusted User likely has a greater influence on the community than is immediately apparent.

Tags

As of October 2005, author defined tags/keywords could be attached to each diary that is posted. Tags are designed to improve usability of the site by enabling members to search for specific keywords to locate diaries that are of most interest to them. Although each community member may create their own tag, and many do, there has been a great deal of discussion about the rules for tagging posts. For now, Trusted Users are empowered to remove inappropriate tags from diary posts if they so choose, and authors are asked to use preexisting, somewhat generic tags rather than create idiosyncratic or "clever" tags that aren't as useful in terms of narrowing a search for a specific diary subject.

Researcher Background

I have been a reader and participant in online fora for about 15 years and, as such, have viewed the evolution of online communities with both optimism and despair. I have been impressed with the ability of CMC to facilitate asynchronous connections across distance, and I have been dismayed if not offended by my early experiences in AOL chat rooms populated by people determined to see how verbally aggressive or scatological they could be. Different online venues serve different purposes, and my own evolving use has given me a more sanguine view of the

beneficial prospects of some forms of online community. I agree with Robert Putnam that "It is hard to imagine solving our contemporary civic dilemmas without computer-mediated communication" (Putnam 2000:180).

I found Daily Kos through another now almost equally well-known blog – Eschaton, written by then anonymous blogger Atrios (since revealed to be Duncan Black, a former economics professor who is now a full-time blogger). Although Daily Kos was not initially that different from other comments-enabled political blogs I read, its evolution into a collaborative blog led me to believe that the site might eventually be a place where reasoned deliberation might take place.

Although I have been reading Daily Kos almost since its inception, I did not post or rate very frequently in the community. I have engaged in previous research on this community (Soma 2007) concerning the same conflict event that the current research diaries discuss. My experience with the community's rules and norms was of benefit in both projects, although I ceased participating as a member when communication in the community became the focus of my research.

CHAPTER 3 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The question of whether or not the Internet can support deliberation, much less deliberative democracy, has long engaged theorists and governments alike. Democracies in the UK and Europe have studied the feasibility of electronic voting or town halls (discussed in Price and Cappella 2002) and currently offer government-run discussion sections at both the local and national level (Wright and Street 2007), while in the United States, the focus has concentrated on connecting disparate constituencies together, and on evaluating the medium as a forum for deliberation (Davis 1999; Fishkin 2000; Gastil 2000b; Price and Cappella 2002; Price and David 2005; Sunstein 2001; Witschge 2002). The current study will add to the body of research by measuring whether an online political community uses the tools of moderation to create an environment where deliberation can occur.

This chapter will discuss early findings in computer-mediated communication research, and the present benefits and shortfalls of the medium with regard to deliberation and online community. The conditions in which face-to-face deliberation can occur will be discussed first, and compared to conditions which are encountered online. An examination of online deliberation and moderation research is followed by a discussion of how the tools used within the study community discussed in the previous chapter might facilitation more deliberative communication. The chapter ends with a discussion of the research question arising from the current research and the moderation tools used within the study community.

Deliberation

For the purposes of this research, deliberation is considered to be a means for citizens to become better informed and to lobby for their choice of policy. Citizen participation in deliberation has been found to increase political reflection, knowledge, efficacy, and participation (Barber 1984; Gastil 2000a; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Price 2006). There are minimal communication preconditions that must be met before deliberation can be considered to have occurred. While some of these factors are difficult to establish in an online context without a survey of participants, there are some factors of deliberation which might reasonably be assessed.

Rationality, reflexivity, equality, inclusivity, and civility are the overriding principles for deliberative discussion (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002; Fishkin 1999; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Min 2007; Wilhelm 1999). Most traditional definitions of deliberation require face-to-face communication within a small group that is discussing a specific issue or range of issues that effects a broader group of constituents, within a pre-existing and limited timeframe (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002). The process of deliberation likewise has specific expectations, constraints, and factors that must be present: a range of information, both factual and personal, must be presented; a diverse array of solutions and views should be considered; the criteria for evaluation of legitimacy must be transparent and explicitly articulated by participants; all solutions presented must be given equal consideration by participants (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002). There are rights and

responsibilities inherent in deliberative participation as well—all participants must be equally empowered to speak and must be spoken to in a way and with language that is comprehensible to them (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002; Fishkin 1991). The deliberative group must have shared norms and values, while maintaining respect for the inevitable disagreements that occur among diverse groups of people (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Finally, the practice of "normative completeness," involving a back-and-forth exchange where an initial argument is answered by people with an opposing view, their counterargument is answered, and is then followed by another response, and so on, is the preferred mode of dialogue, time permitting (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004:182). Deliberation "involves listening as well as speaking, feeling as well as thinking, and acting as well as reflecting" (Barber 1984:178).

Deliberation Online

The time and resource commitments that deliberation in face-to-face contexts typically require can make it difficult for many citizens who would like to become more politically engaged. The Internet could offer a venue for these citizens who would like to participate in deliberation but find themselves constrained by other factors in their daily life. However, computer-mediated communication has its own limitations which may negatively impact deliberation.

The most frequently cited concerns about the efficacy of computer-mediated communication have to do with adverse effects resulting from depersonalization and the absence of non-verbal cues that are so useful to face-to-face communication (see

discussion in Kollock & Smith (1996), Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997), and Riva (2002)). These early detractors stated that CMC is an ineffective medium because of its inability to include the nonverbal communication signals that add so much to face-to-face conversation. Such depersonalization can result in increased misunderstanding between discussants, not to mention disinhibition when one or more parties get frustrated with the direction the conversation takes (Sproull and Kiesler 1986). Both of these can lead to conflict escalation because the initial message was misunderstood.

The lack of conversational cues may limit the meanings, connection, and understanding that can occur in CMC (Dorado, Medina, Munduate, Cisneros, and Euwema 2002; Hebert and Vorauer 2003). For instance, without tone of voice accompanying a message, communications intended to be playful may be perceived as serious, starting an online conflict because the initial message was misunderstood. To preempt such misunderstandings, emoticons (such as :-) or ;-( ) were developed to provide shorthand for communicating emotional tone or context (Shea 1994). While they can be amusing, emoticons do not seem to appreciably alter the understanding or impact of the verbal message, especially when either the message or emoticon is negative (Future 2005; Walther and D'Addario 2001). Some message boards consider the use of emoticons to be an indicator of communicative incompetence, and urge their members to be more explicit and judicious when communicating. Confusion about or distrust of emoticons was likely more common for earlier users of CMC, but at the time of this research, their meaning has permeated popular culture (Sanderson

1997), and misunderstandings of their meaning are likely to be less frequently encountered than they once were.

A separate though related concern is that the cloaking function of anonymity gives people license to try on other personas (Turkel 1995). This type of exploration and experimentation is usually harmless, although anonymity can also be used by people whose intentions are to disrupt communication (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab 2002). Even among people of good will, depersonalization in conjunction with anonymity can lead to needlessly and unavoidably combative communication, because one is interacting with a nameless, faceless actor, usually in an unmoderated space (Bellini and Vargas 2003; Davis 1999; Reid 1999; Riva 2002; Suler 2004). Conflict can escalate when miscommunication occurs in these spaces, with the result that people feel less responsibility for communicating in a way that would be inappropriate in a face-to-face conversation (Witschge 2002).

While depersonalization and anonymity in CMC can result in problematic interactions, they have demonstrated advantages to communication as well. The fact that CMC offers no physical conversational cues has been found to facilitate improved understanding between online collaborators (Hebert and Vorauer 2003). Research on online feedback in communal work found that the lack of extraneous communication cues allowed the reader to focus on the content of message rather than the sender of it, resulting in more effective and content-rich communication (Herbert and Vorauer 2003). This indicates that CMC may actually extend the communication sphere of

those who might otherwise be limited by the gating functions that govern face-to-face

interactions, or of those who might not conform to norms of appearance, ability, or

gender (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002), allowing for the presence of diverse

groups to participate in deliberation. This accords with Stromer-Galley's (2003)

finding that the absence of social cues might free people from the psychological

barriers (such as conflict avoidance, as described in Ulbig and Funk (1999)) that might

prevent them from discussing politics in a face-to-face format. The Internet allows

social bonding to occur asynchronously, enables a larger number of people to

participate, and helps them to maintain a communal memory due to the maintenance

of conversation artifacts and archives (Etzioni 1997). These factors assist in the

development of online community, and perhaps can facilitate deliberation as well

Online Group Dynamics

People join online groups for many reasons: a lack of "real-world"

counterparts, a preference toward not being seen or being uncomfortable in face-to-

face groups, time constraints, the desire to share a common predicament, or social

anxiety and loneliness (McKenna and Green 2002:117-118). In many cases,

participation in online groups resembles a modern gift culture, with fellow members

freely offering each other technical support, travel recommendations, medical advice,

and additional information useful to the community at large (Kollock 1999; Preece

2001; Rheingold 2000). Spatial distance is no longer a determining factor of whether

or not a relationship between community members can develop, or be maintained over time (Rheingold 2000).

Where it occurs, the increase in intimacy and self-disclosure that results from anonymous participation in online discussion groups can be of great benefit to members of stigmatized or marginalized social groups who may have few resources of offline support (Turkel 1995). This increased intimacy can also have a beneficial effect on deliberation, wherein the sharing of personal stories among a diverse group can add additional information and context, providing a more complex understanding of the issue under discussion (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002)

However, there is some concern that the absence of visual cues, instead of being a positive factor, may diminish a person's critical thinking, rather than increase it. When information about interpersonal differences is obscured, people of different offline social standings connect because of their similarities, and increased attachment to and identification with the online group is the result (McKenna and Green 2002:122). The Social Identity/Deindividuation (SIDE) Model (first put forth by Spears and Lea (1994), as discussed in Wilhelm (1999)) posits that participants in an online group are more likely to adhere to the expressed or expected identity and norms of the community, creating stronger in- and out-groups than would be expected to occur in face-to-face groups (Wood and Smith 2005).

Research on the location of one's Real Self indicated that for those online users who might not connect with others offline due to the gating effects of unattractiveness,

evidence of social anxiety, or physical impediments, the relationships they form online are just as important, if not more so, as their offline relationships (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002). The social effects resulting from online interaction are no less real than those which occur offline in face-to-face interactions; people who are ignored or snubbed online feel the same way as users who are snubbed in face-to-face interactions (McKenna, Green, and Gleason 2002). Thus, while some people do use depersonalization on CMC in order to act out in ways they can't do so in their daily lives, most people behave in the same way they would behave in face-to-face interactions, so as not to incur threats to their offline sense of self.

The question becomes whether the polarization of attitudes described by the SIDE model will take place in all online political discussion groups (Sunstein 2001). It is possible that in online communities where deliberation is a stated or implicit goal, with the attending group norms, the SIDE model could predict a positive outcome for deliberation, evidenced by a tolerance or even support of reasoned disagreement.

Deliberation Components

There is no doubt that face-to-face and computer-mediated communication are different, but it does not necessarily follow that these differences make deliberation impossible. When considering deliberation in an online space, it is useful to look at the previously mentioned deliberative components and determine how they might be differently experienced when occurring online. It is possible that some of these differences might offer benefit to a deliberative space. In this section, specific

deliberative factors relating to the current research will be examined as they are affected by online space.

Inclusion, equality, equal speaking opportunities. In brief, inclusion and equal speaking opportunities mean that "Every person affected by the issues under consideration is equally entitled to participate in deliberation" (Chadwick (2006:89) adapted from Dahlberg (2001a; 2001b)). The invisibility of identifying characteristics that might affect message reception (such as race, sex, physical ability, or appearance) can improve the chances for inclusion and equality, as described in the previous section. In an asynchronous format there are usually fewer limitations regarding speaking opportunities. The most prevalent problems that occur concern managing the flow of communication from so many individuals, and supporting the ability to coherently display the conversations that result (Herring 2008). Obviously there remain access issues due to the continuing digital divide, but given the time constraints on participants in face-to-face deliberations, an asynchronous online format gives more people the opportunity to take part in the discussion (Gastil 2000b).

Some diversity of participants and viewpoints. When considering whether online deliberation is possible, a key question is whether or not citizens would willingly seek out information that contradicts their own point of view and seek diversity, or if they would rather communicate exclusively with people with whom they agree, seeking homophily (Witschge 2002). Cass Sunstein's (2001) concerns about the "Daily Me" homogenization of online readers' access and exposure to public media were

understandable, focusing on the broadcast nature of early political web content and its likely effects on media consumption. Similarly, early researchers of interaction within Usenet groups and online communities expressed concerns about an "echo chamber" effect, that users would rarely encounter information with which they disagree (Wellman 1997). While it is possible that the Usenet groups under study, with names that might be considered to suggest specific framing such as alt.politics.bush or talk.libertarian, might have served to polarize discussants in divergent camps (Stromer-Galley 2003), it is unsurprising to find that political theorists felt that the prospects for civil deliberation in such an environment were dim.

Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2003) researched the homophily versus diversity perspective, interviewing newsgroup, message board, and chat room users to ascertain how and why they sought out specific online political discussion. While some interviewees indicated that, where their offline lives did not involve discussions with people who held similar views, they went online to find people with whom they agreed, the majority of interviewees went online to seek a diversity of perspectives. Even when users went online to find people with whom they agreed, they were seeking different perspectives from those they encountered in face-to-face conversation. Stromer-Galley's (2003) key finding was that the online experiences of her interviewees were ones of diversity; her interviewees went online to be exposed to different perspectives than they typically encountered in other areas of their lives.

Civil disagreement. The communication of disagreement online has been the focus of many researchers. Internet discourse about politics has been described as aggressive, fragmented and confrontational (Margolis and Resnick 2000), and less concerned with problem-solving and deliberation than with a desire to dominate one's opponent (Davis 1999). How can this behavior be reconciled with the requirement that deliberative conversations must promote heterogeneous views and incorporate cooperative argumentation (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002)? One problem could be that agreeability and civility have been conflated with politeness. While impolite discourse can be unpleasant, it does not necessarily follow that it is actually uncivil.

In her evaluation of civility and politeness in online discussion groups, Papacharissi (2004) determined that the most worrisome communication was that which was polite, yet uncivil. The etiquette-related concerns of politeness (such as a lack of profanity) were of less import than the presence of civility, demonstrated through respect of individual's rights, and abjuring antagonistic stereotypes or threats to democracy such as advocating to overthrow the government (Papacharissi 2004:279). One can speak very politely while advocating for clearly undemocratic goals.

Concerning impoliteness, it is true that flames and profanity often go hand in hand (Hill and Hughes 1997), but it is not always the case that profanity indicates that non-deliberative communication is taking place. Civility is a behavior that conveys

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"an attitude of respect and understanding toward one's co-discussants" (Hurrell 2005:67), and restraint is important in the maintenance of civility (Hurrell 2005). At the same time, "robust, rude, self-absorbed" and therefore, honest, conversation should also take place (Papacharissi 2004:260). Moral disagreement is inevitable within a non-homogeneous population, so there must be means and avenues by which members may disagree with each other (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). The respectful accommodation of disagreement in the face of personal moral objections is a cornerstone of deliberation, no matter where the conversation takes place (Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

In face-to-face communication, exposure to disagreement has been found to contribute to more deliberative opinion, helping people to better articulate their own point of view, as well as understand the rationale underlying an opposing point of view (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002). This broadening of understanding and exposure to a wider range of viewpoints has been found to help citizens to craft better solutions to the problems they face (Gastil 2000a).

The beneficial effects of such exposure have been found to occur online as well. Although Internet users have been found to seek out information that supports their previously held views, they do not avoid exposure to other opinions (Garrett 2006). A comparative study of the resulting change or hardening of opinion following participation in either online or face-to-face deliberation found that both cohorts experienced an increase in their knowledge, efficacy and willingness to participate in

politics, although the online group experienced a slightly lesser effect (Min 2007). Also of interest, the participants in the online cohort were found to "express more candid and direct opinions and engage in more heated debates" (Min 2007:12). Due to the differences in online versus face-to-face communication, subjects may have felt able to exchange more frank opinions due to the absence of visual cues (Min 2007).

Trust, shared goals, perceived common ground. As in a face-to-face deliberative group, the participants need not necessarily share specific goals at the outset, as long as they have some minimum common ground (Barber 1984; Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002; Gutmann and Thompson 2004). In spite of an expectation to the contrary, a comparison of social capital in e-communities and communities of place showed that both sets of groups were able to facilitate social trust and collective action among their users (Scott and Johnson 2005). This finding led to their hope that carefully targeted and thoughtfully designed online communities could offer a new way for citizens to participate in public dialogue, and that these new types of online communities would be able to support the same levels of civility and social trust online as have been observed in face-to-face groups (Scott and Johnson 2005:14).

Personal revelations which lead to perspective taking. "Strong democracy promotes reciprocal empathy and mutual respect." (Barber 1984:223). This empathy is more likely to occur when interpersonal narratives are exchanged within the deliberative discussion. In deliberative spaces, storytelling has been found to broaden the field of discussion, as well as introducing perspectives that might not otherwise be

encountered in participants' daily life (Enslin, Pendlebury, and Tjiattas 2001). While

not obviously part of the procedure that makes deliberation work, the introduction of

personal narratives can introduce a broader or more comprehensive viewpoint to the

proceedings (Black, 2008). As with the current healthcare debate, the introduction of

personal narratives reifies the issues under discussion; no longer can the personally-

related issues be considered abstract if there is someone present whose life has been

directly affected by the topic under discussion. In the online space, the discussion of

personal experience can sometimes flesh out the writer's persona, in addition to giving

them more credence, respectability, or authority about the topic under discussion. Of

course, as with any gathering, people will have different experiences to share and

different levels of comfort about sharing them. The sharing a personal narratives is not

meant to substitute as therapy, but a modicum of consciousness raising can sometimes

result in a more sympathetic or empathetic view of the issue under discussion (Dolan,

Cookson, and Ferguson 1999).

Previous Research on Online Deliberation

Previous research on political communication online has at focused on content

analysis, network analysis, site design, or moderation, individually or in tandem with

other factors. Early studies on political discussion on Usenet tended to focus on

interactivity measures such as thread depth, either alone or in conjunction with content

analysis of the comments within threads. This focus makes sense considering the

conversational salience difficulties described earlier. The majority of online

deliberation research has been tested within town hall-like situations, and carefully

chosen groups, but has not undertaken a field examination of deliberation as

experienced by a self-selected group of discussants.

Usenet

Hill and Hughes (1997:20) evaluated a broad spectrum of political newsgroups

on Usenet, and found that while comments threads were much longer when

disagreement was present, "ideologically dissonant posts were more likely to be

flamed or outright attacked". Although evaluating the ebb and flow of the topic

development and evolution in a single thread can give information about the diversity

of viewpoints, the mere existence of lengthy conversation threads does not necessarily

indicate that deliberation is occurring. Conservative groups were found to be display

more message and community cohesion than liberal groups, but this may have been a

function of the time period that was studied (1995).

The "wild west" nature of Usenet political groups has been attributed to the

lack of discussion moderators or facilitators to "stimulate and regulate discussion,

encourage representation and maintain direction" (Davis 1999:166). The predominant

amount of interaction within the networks that formed in Usenet political discussion

groups was between people who disagreed (Kelly, Fisher, and Smith 2005; Kelly,

Fisher, and Smith 2006). However, network analysis of interactions within these

groups also showed that people who did not respect community norms of engagement

did not receive responses (Kelly, Fisher, and Smith 2005; Kelly, Fisher, and Smith

2006), indicating the possibility that some online communities organically impose minimal conditions of deliberation.

Minnesota E-Democracy Project

The Minnesota E-Democracy project is ongoing, and its impact on the civic engagement of its participants has been positive (Chadwick 2006). Several factors may be responsible for its success: the list was originally conducted through email (now it is hosted by Yahoo! Groups), all messages pass through a single moderator's mailbox, only Minnesotans were allowed to join, and members are required to use their real, complete names when posting comments to the site (Dahlberg 2001a). Speaker visibility likely led to authenticity, and in some cases participants were seen to modify their positions after discussion with others (Dahlberg 2001a). Members also were able to meet face-to-face in town hall meetings – again, this added a level of personal commitment and authenticity to their participation on the site (Dahlberg 2001a).

The Electronic Dialogue Project in Campaign 2000

Another area of research about deliberation online concerned whether or not groups of citizens could be brought together specifically for the purpose of deliberation about candidates and policies being discussed during a federal election (Price and Capella 2002). The findings for synchronous, real-time, structured and moderated group discussions where diversity of participants was controlled, were that changes of opinion among participants did occur, participants' "argument repertoires"

(the range of arguments held in support of and against their favored position) were broadened, and social trust, political engagement, and community engagement were all increased (Price and Cappella 2002). One concern of this study was that, in spite of attempts to control diversity of co-discussants, the people who showed up for the discussions were more likely to be white, and were significantly older and better-educated than those who did not (for example, the 60-and-older category was three times larger (Price and Cappella 2002: 313)). As with face-to-face participation, time constraints were a factor that adversely affected participation.

Various aspects of computer-mediated and face-to-face communication have been brought to bear in the creation and evaluation of political deliberation online. These have enjoyed some level of success, but have also involved face-to-face meetings (Minnesota e-democracy), included the provision of administrative support and material assistance (the electronic dialogue project), or have measured presences of topic change and disagreement, but not necessarily deliberation (Usenet studies).

As might be expected, these studies provide information in a limited range, but do not address the advent of new and better website design and how it might impact deliberation. As well, synchronous groups replicate the same time barriers to entry as face-to-face groups; groups requiring face-to-face participation might also replicate the race, class, and gender stratifications that are rendered invisible by online participation; and the highly managed evaluations of deliberation across a federal election cycle might not be fiscally tenable in the long run.

Importance of website design to deliberation

As noted previously, early research on interactivity and the feasibility of online deliberation was pessimistic for many reasons. In addition to the technological impacts of CMC that affected interpersonal communication, the earliest sites under study did not support threaded discussion, a minimum requirement of a deliberative space.

Because the visual rhetoric of such sites did not facilitate deliberation, measures of message salience—the degree to which subsequent messages relate to previous ones—were necessary to determine whether a website supported "interactive" conversations and/or deliberation, either through intentional design decisions, or in spite of the site's technological and communication shortcomings (Rafaelli and Sudweeks 1997). Examinations of message salience were undertaken to evaluate the deliberative possibilities of Usenet groups or blog comments areas, often enumerating the strategies through which members maintained conversation threads within sites that did not have a threaded display of responses to an originating comment (Rafaelli and Sudweeks 1997). Name-based callouts and the inclusion of pasted snippets of conversation to be responded to are the most frequently encountered strategies to enforce coherence within such sites. Yet, even within venues where inter-user communication is not the main aim of the site (such as within multi-participant online games, interactive news sites, and social network sites) users still manage to find a way to engage in "coherent conversation" by the focused, self-enforced

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adherence to message salience (Herring 2008), indicating that, where the format is specifically designed to promote in-depth conversation, it is likely to occur.

<center>*Moderation to Improve Discussion*</center>

Top-Down Moderation

Rules of conduct, while designed to improve community functionality and interaction between members, may limit who feels comfortable participating in the community, but might not actually improve the prospects for deliberation. Depending on the type of leader the community has, these rules may severely limit the diversity of views allowed within the community, or they can allow for the presence of reasoned disagreement. Deliberation research indicates that allowing more diverse perspectives into the discussion increases the creativity of the discussion group as a whole and frequently results in the creation of more and better solutions to problems, in addition to increasing understanding of other points of view and developing a clearer articulation of the rationale behind one's own (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002).

Behind the scenes moderation via the pre-screening of messages has been used with success in newsgroups and listservs for many years, but there are tradeoffs in this approach. Pre-moderation can disrupt conversational flow, and is dependant upon on the time constraints and sensibilities of the moderator, while post-moderation allows offensive messages to remain visible to the community until they are removed (Wright and Street 2007). Either type of top-down moderation can benefit discussion groups with a limited audience and traffic level, but can be problematic for larger or more

heavily trafficked groups. When top-down post-moderation rules are comprehensible and transparent, participants were found to appreciate moderators' enforcement of a clear, rule-bound of discussion, only finding fault when a comment or post deemed "offensive" to a segment of the community appeared within the discussion because it was not considered to be so by the moderator (Hurrell 2005:72).

Community Moderation

Another means of moderation is community or peer moderation, via the use of individually administered comment ratings. Community comment rating systems can give every community member (or a designated subset) the ability to rate comments according to their value to the discussion, dispersing the responsibility for enforcing community norms to the community itself.

In addition to the removal of disruptive or destructive commentary, community moderation can also help readers of a site identify for themselves the type of communication they deem valuable or harmful to the goals of discourse (Lampe and Resnick 2004). Through this evaluative process, community members are able to gain proficiency in evaluating arguments and possibly learn to become better deliberators themselves.

One community where such tools have been used with success is Slashdot. The site supports threaded discussions, and also allows a constantly rotating selection of trusted users to offer feedback on each other's commentary via a comment rating system (Powazek 2002). Slashdot's model is unique, in that a limited number of

stories are posted each day, only a small segment of the user population has moderation privileges at once, and those privileges expire in five days' time. These measures were undertaken to make Slashdot as readable as possible for as many people as possible, to not overwhelm community moderators with responsibility or time requirements, to have moderation be undertaken as a community service, and lastly, to ensure that no one moderator or group of moderators can become too powerful over time (CmdrTaco 2003; Lampe 2006).

The focus of most research on Slashdot has been on the quantitative aspects of moderation and user participation, such as measuring the effectiveness of the rating system in helping readers process a high volume of messages. Specific efforts include evaluating the chronology and perceived "fairness" of comment ratings (Lampe and Resnick 2004), determining whether the ratings system makes the venue more comfortable or navigable for new users (Lampe and Johnson 2005), and exploring how such a "distributed conversation" might be visually represented (Halavais 2001).

An immediacy function has been discovered, such that earlier comments typically garner more ratings than later comments in the conversation. As might be expected, much of the conversation can pass before the best and worst comments get identified and moderated. Comments that were posted later in the conversation, not at the top level, or that had lower "start" scores, were less likely to receive attention from moderators (Lampe and Resnick 2004). Political communication on Slashdot differed from other types of communication on the site, and the way moderation was employed

in political discussions also differed (Lampe 2005). Political stories in Slashdot had more comments than other Slashdot stories, and comment moderation was employed similarly to recommending systems such as those used in eBay or epinions; the ratings were assigned as much for the purpose of evaluating or commenting on trustworthiness as for rewarding a well-crafted comment (Lampe 2005).

Specifically, ratings in Slashdot's political discussions seemed more frequently to be used in a divisive way, applied so as to seemingly punish difference of opinion, through use of the +1 and -1 rating to change the base rating[11] of a comment (Lampe 2005). While this functionality is available in all sections of the site, its application occurred more frequently in politics than anywhere else (Lampe 2005). As such, the community's use of comment ratings in the Slashdot politics section cannot be said to be used to support the conditions of deliberation.

Summary and Research Question

Deliberation is necessary to have a democratically engaged and informed citizenry, but in practice face-to-face deliberation has constraints that can be difficult to overcome: physical, financial, or chronological resource limitations on the part of the citizenry or the state, and evident replication of class, race, or gender markers that might adversely impact the ability for all present to be heard. Computer-mediated deliberation, with its lowered burden of participation, ease of use and diminishment of

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[11] In Slashdot, the base rating of a comment functions similarly to Mojo in the Daily Kos, and impacts both the reputation and the visibility that the author's subsequent contributions receive.

problematic social cues might offer an additional and useful venue for citizen

deliberation to occur (Gastil 2000b). There remain concerns about the feasibility of

computer-mediated communication to be used for deliberation, resulting from

previous research on the adverse effects of depersonalization, anonymity, and lack of

accountability on the part of discussants. As with face-to-face deliberation, with

appropriate guidelines, participants in the conversation are best situated to determine

for themselves communication that is deliberative. Community moderation tools give

citizens who would like to deliberate the means to support and enforce the conditions

of deliberation. The main research question suggested by the previously discussed

research is:

> RQ: Does a community-administered comment moderation system help
>
> that community to support conditions of deliberation?

My main hypothesis is that comment moderation can be used to support

conditions of deliberative communication. One of the first things to measure is

whether or not agreement and disagreement are equally welcome in a discussion. Will

ratings be used to enforce an echo chamber environment, or will community members

actually support comments that are part of a conversation that includes a back and

forth exchange of views?

> H1: The community will use the rating system to support a diverse
>
> discussion of views within comments threads.

If the community positively rates more comments within threads that contain more disagreement, we can state that they are more likely to read and participate in threads that contain more give and take, and that they are more likely to appreciate a well reasoned argument, both of which are markers of deliberation.

However, as in the Usenet studies above, the mere presence of a diversity of views is not enough to infer that deliberation has occurred. If the community were to tolerate poor behavior resulting in the quelling of a segment of the population in its support of a diverse discussion of views, it could not be said to support deliberative communication. Thus, the next two hypotheses concern a more focused analysis of the community's rating behavior. First of all, are community members using the ratings system in such a way that one could infer that deliberation is a community-supported value that needs to be protected through judicious use of the ratings system, specifically through their use of it to punish disruptive, harmful, or not useful commentary?

H2: The community will use the rating system to punish or diminish specific types of comments that hinder deliberation.

Secondly, are community members using the rating system to indicate support of comments that discuss the community itself, specifically the inference that there is in fact a community value system that supports deliberation and deliberative expression? I chose to examine the application of positive ratings to comments which were coded to indicate a community deliberative self-concept:

H3: The community will use the rating system to applaud or support

specific types of comments that support conditions of deliberation.

The current research will look at deliberation using content analysis of

comments in conjunction with an analysis of the community ascribed ratings given to

these comments. The resulting information will give a more focused idea of how one

online political community uses a comment moderation rating system, to determine

whether the moderation that occurred actually indicated support of the conditions of

deliberation as described above.

Conclusion

In spite of the shortcomings of CMC, previous research has shown that design

decisions that enforce communication salience can increase the likelihood that

deliberation may occur online. A following question is whether community

moderation can further support the conditions of deliberation. This work focused on an

online discussion group that supports threaded display of messaging, in keeping with

the evolution of previous deliberation research from focusing on message salience and

interactivity (because subsequent messages are now understood to relate to each other)

to examining of the content of user comments in context. The study community's use

of a comment moderation scheme allows for an in-depth analysis of whether members

are using moderation in order to support and enforce the deliberative factors described

earlier in the chapter. The specific factors measured were: supporting the presence of

differing viewpoints or interpersonal experiences, rewarding communication which is

civil and supports the community identity as a place where deliberation can occur, and sanctioning communication which is uncivil or otherwise unsupportive of deliberation among people of differing viewpoints.

This research undertakes an examination of a collaborative political weblog community's use of a comment rating system whose purpose is to increase the ratio of signal to noise in community communications. A content analysis of comments in conjunction with a statistical analysis of comment ratings gives an opportunity to see what types of discussion the members of a find valuable. There has not yet been a field examination of what a community of discussants who created and/or read comments deemed valuable about these communications, or what those values say about that community's commitment to deliberation. This research seeks to fill the gap, determining what the study community's use of comment moderation can indicate about the community, whether the community appears to use it to reflect their values, and whether those values include the protection and promotion of deliberation.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

Case Selection

Given the preconditions to deliberation that have been discussed (inclusion, equal speaking opportunities, diversity of participants and views, civil disagreement, perceived common ground), the Daily Kos collaborative weblog was chosen as the site for this research. The maintenance and support of conversational salience is an obvious precursor to deliberation, thus a site with threaded discussion was chosen. More importantly to this research, there continues to be a numerous and prolific community that writes comments and diaries on the site.

One thing that separates the current research on Daily Kos from other research and experiments on deliberation is the fact that many members have been posting to the community for years and are therefore highly invested in the perpetuation of good relationships between members, as well as good communication on the site. The site's ratings system was implemented to increase the ratio of signal to noise within comments threads, to reward the authors of substantive, thoughtful comments, and reprimand, or at least educate, the authors of those comments that do little to add to a reasoned conversation. Responsible and interesting community members are thus empowered to help create the type of discussion they want to see via increased rating privileges, most notably (as discussed in Chapter 2) the ability to hide the most objectionable comments from public view.

Daily Kos was the only community discussion blog I knew of that combined this type of comment rating system with explicit support of "deeper conversations" about political issues. That Daily Kos was also well known and discussed in popular culture added to my desire to study it, as its exposure may have increased the number and diversity of people who participate on the site. Notwithstanding the negative impact of the digital divide to equality of access, any person with time to engage can participate in the conversation. The topicality of Daily Kos is deliberative, although I chose to evaluate a conflict about the site itself rather than a particular political issue. This non-political but relevant issue was chosen because it may be possible to dispassionately discuss political issues that do not directly affect the speaker. I chose to study how the community would deliberate when there was a clear vested interest (the future of their community) at stake, versus a policy issue by which only some members might feel personally engaged or affected.

Additionally, I felt that the community members were more likely to be emotionally invested in a discussion about the site mores and parameters, and that the participants in the discussion would have strongly held views. If the moderation system were going to be abused, or ill-used, choosing such a discussion would provide a stress test of the system and its users. A less contentious topic may not have inspired so many passionate or well-reasoned comments, such an invested readership, and as much comment rating activity.

The Pie Fight, a community-wide conflict event that took place during June 2005, was chosen for study. The bounded conflict was chosen so as to involve the greatest number and broadest diversity of community members in the analysis. While some members might have chosen to participate in content-specific diary threads, I was reasonably certain that a majority of the community who cared about the community would choose to participate in the diaries I chose for this research. This improved the likelihood of having enough information to determine whether or not community talk would receive favorable ratings, and whether differences of opinion were welcome in the discussion. There is a "cheers and jeers" section that might have been a good indicator of civility measures, but it generally offers little in the way of difference of opinion. Similarly, purely political threads would have offered difference of opinion, but less opportunity to look at comments discussing differing views regarding the nature and purpose of the community.

Only the Pie Fight discussions were bounded in content and time, known to a large segment of the community, and were likely to contain difference of opinion to be deliberated as well as meta-discussions about the community itself, providing the opportunity to measure moderation behavior of both contexts within a single space. By focusing on the diaries that concern the Pie Fight, comprising as it did issues of sex, community ownership, and feminism, not to mention longevity in communal memory, this research examined community interaction about topics that contain a strong emotional component and are thus more likely to include conflict in their interactions.

While this was not the first controversy that the Daily Kos community had experienced, it generated commentary on numerous other well-traveled blogs and even garnered mention in mainstream media (Dkosepedia.com). In addition to highlighting the controversy, the external discussion also demonstrated how wide a readership the Daily Kos site enjoys, and that many people know about and reference the community. It also demonstrated that what happens on the Daily Kos site does reverberate past the community, and indeed, of that community's blogroll.[12] It is still being referenced within the community itself almost three years after the fact, mostly in the form of inside jokes seeming to indicate concern about expressing an unpopular view, e.g. "I don't want to start another Pie Fight, but…" or as cautionary tales designed to remind the community of former unpleasantness (Trix 2008). During the time of the Pie Fight, between 5,000-6,000 community members posted at least one comment per week, and around 200 individual diaries were posted per day (jotter 2005a; jotter 2005b).

Description of Pie Fight Incident

On Friday June 3, 2005, an advertisement for Turner Broadcasting Network's reality show *The Real Gilligan's Island*, first appeared on the Daily Kos website. This advertisement contained a picture of two women depicting Ginger and Mary Ann, two characters from the original television show *Gilligan's Island,* in the middle of a food fight featuring coconut cream pie. The image showed a pig-tailed Mary Ann, licking

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[12] A blogroll is a list of links to other weblogs which might be affiliated with the blog either through personal connections or topic content.

her finger while gazing seductively at cream-pie-covered Ginger. Clicking the ad took

the member to a web page containing a video commercial of the show. The

commercial featured two women, Mary Ann dressed in short shorts and a low-cut,

midriff-baring tie-top, Ginger wearing a low-cut gown with a thigh-high slit, each

getting progressively more disheveled and aggressive as they threw pies at each other,

eventually culminating in their wrestling each other to the ground.

Community response to the ad was rapid. At least one community member

posted a derogatory diary article, on Saturday, June 4, about the advertisement being

sexist and thus inappropriate for the Daily Kos site. The following day, Sunday, June

5, Moulitsas himself posted a diary entry that took issue with the initial anti-"Pie

Fight" diary and with similar additional comments he had received via personal email.

Moulitsas ended his post with the admonition that if people didn't like it, they "could

go to other sites (which could certainly use the traffic)," but that he was going to focus

on "the important shit." This front page article unleashed the firestorm of commentary

that has subsequently become known as "the Pie Fight."

On Monday, June 6, an even more risqué 60-second "director's cut" of the

advertisement was placed on the site. This version was explicitly targeted at mature

audiences and was only viewable between 10pm and 5am EST. The new ad, combined

with increased commentary about Markos' response to others' criticisms, kept the Pie

Fight and related discussion going for a week. The final comment in the research

corpus was posted on June 13, nine days after the initial diary entry. The comments, discussions, and subsequent diaries from the Pie Fight are the focus of this research.

Total Number of Authors, Comments, Ratings

During the week in which the Pie Fight took place, approximately 5,000 community members wrote a comment on the site, with 1,820 community members (about 36% of the active member base) participating in the twenty-eight Pie Fight diaries, either by writing or rating a comment. Given these numbers, a conservative estimate of the number of member-lurkers who read the Pie Fight diaries would be 3,180 members. However, because the site receives approximately half a million unique visits a day, it is impossible to know how many people – community members or not – viewed the diaries in this study.

<center>*Definition of Terms*</center>

The terms below were more thoroughly and generally explained in Chapter 2. They are included here as a review, with special attention to how they are of import to the present research.

Diary

A Diary is similar to an article or opinion piece, a story designed to inspire and initiate discussion on a particular topic. Diaries are typically much longer than comments. At the time of the Pie Fight, each Daily Kos member could only post one Diary per day, so it is understood that authors put more care and attention to crafting a

diary than they might to writing a comment. There were 28 diaries within the Pie Fight, two of which were written by site owner Moulitsas.

Comment

A comment is a written response, either to the diary or to another comment. There are no restrictions on how many comments a Daily Kos member may post in a day. There were 7,238 comments within the Pie Fight diaries, written by 1,279 authors.

Thread

A thread is a string of related comments, a conversation that begins with each first comment responding to the initial diary. Threads are typically arranged in sequential order, with each subsequent comment slightly indented to the right and below the comment to which it is responding. However, more recent comments within a thread which began earlier at a point in time may appear on the page before comments posted earlier in time but in a subsequent thread. More than one comment can be posted in response to a parent comment located earlier in the thread, but each comment can only be directly threaded to a single earlier comment to which it is responding. The layout/presentation of the diary threads is intended to enable the community to engage in focused conversation that follows a topic throughout the thread. (See Figure 2 and Figure 3 in Chapter 1). There were 1,355 threads within the 28 diaries of the Pie Fight.

Rating

  The purpose of the ratings is to place a valuation on the comments that are posted. The benefit for the writer in writing a highly valued comment is a possible increase in ratings privileges (e.g., the acquisition of trusted member status), increased standing in the community, and the satisfaction of having expressed oneself well in a public forum. The benefit to the community in rating comments is that they will, presumably, see more (or fewer) of the types of comments that they reward or punish with the appropriate rating.

  Each member of Daily Kos may rate a comment using the following criteria, which are posted in a dropdown menu just below the author's name, and to the right of the "Reply to This" link: 1 – Unproductive, 2 – Marginal, 3 – Good, 4 – Excellent (See Figure 2 in Chapter 1). A convention of the site is that at least two people must rate a comment for the rating average to be "visible" to the community on the main comments page, which would be displayed with the average rating value followed by the number of ratings received, such as (3.89/11) for a comment with an average rating of 3.89, where 11 people rated the comment. In cases where only one member rated a comment, the display changes from (none/0) to (none/1). Interested readers can click on the (none/1) link to see the given rating value, but it is not displayed to the casual reader. There were 18,568 comment ratings given by 1,294 community members within the Pie Fight diaries. Only 1459 comments (receiving 5655 ratings) were evaluated for the current research.

Research Corpus Selection

In their entirety, the Pie Fight discussions took place in 28 diaries, containing 7,238 total comments in 1,355 total threads, written by 1,279 total authors (70% of the Pie Fight's total participants, with 44% of those participants contributing three or more comments). There were 18,568 comment ratings given by 1,294 community members (71% of the Pie Fight's total participants, with 56% of those participants rating three or more comments). In all, 753 participants (41%) made both comments and ratings, 526 participants (29%) wrote comments but did not rate any comments, and 541 participants (30%) rated comments but did not write any.

Numerous corpus selection criteria were considered and rejected for this study. Initially, I planned to do a close reading of all diaries in which over one-third of the comments received two or more ratings, regardless of the rating value. This number was chosen based on a preliminary review of the entire dataset and reflected my desire for a corpus that contained a minimum distribution of ratings of 1, 2, 3, and 4. However, further examination of these diaries and the distribution of the ratings they contained disclosed that the ratings for the majority of these diaries were overwhelmingly 4s, the highest rating possible.

To adequately address my hypotheses, but not over-represent data that would not add to the final analysis, I needed to measure both favorably rated comments (those which received a rating of 3 or 4), which the community would like to reward, as well as unfavorably rated comments (of 1 or 2), which the community would like to

see less of, as indicated by the explanation of ratings in Chapter 2. I initially sought diaries in which no more than 90% of the comment ratings were 4s and at least five percent of the ratings were 1s. Since the majority of all ratings in the corpus were complimentary, this selection was made to allow for inclusion of as many comments as possible that received a less than optimal rating.

The two diaries that were chosen for this research contained 1,459 comments, of which 72% received at least one rating, and there was a minimum distribution of comment ratings from 1 – 4 (8% of comments received at least one rating of 1, and 87% of comments received at least one rating of 4). This distribution is important because comments which receive ratings have received more attention, by definition, than comments which have not received a rating. That a member has taken the time to rate a comment, either positively or negatively, means that the comment was seen as deserving either special censure or special praise outside the normally expected value of comments on the site.

Both diaries were written by Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, the site owner, and they appeared on the front page of the site, which resulted in increased exposure, readership, and community participation.

All comments included in Markos' two front page diaries comprise the research corpus. Although six comments were not deemed codable, no comments were removed from study. The resulting database contained 1459 comments within 283 total threads. There were 149 single comment threads within the corpus.

Observed Frequency Calculation

A test run of a non-parametric chi-square calculation was made on a subset of the data. The chi-square statistic was determined to be inappropriate for the following reasons: the data being evaluated are more properly considered ordinal rather than categorical data; within the dataset, there were too many cells containing a zero value, which also make the chi-square problematic; and calculating a chi-square with 5 cells would not give specific information on where exactly the significant differences lie.

Instead, the observed frequency of ratings was used as a baseline measure to compare the allocation of ratings for the corpus as a whole against the ratings received by comments which received specific content analysis codes as described below. To calculate the observed baseline frequency of ratings, the total number of each rating given was divided by the total number of comments in both diaries in the sample. The observed baseline frequency for each rating is displayed in Table 1, below:

Table 1. Summary of Ratings Allocated to Comments within the Dataset

Rating Value	Percentage of Dataset	Total # allocated	Observed Baseline Frequency per comment
1 (Unproductive)	8.0%	452	.310
2 (Marginal)	2.77%	157	.108
3 (Good)	2.16%	122	.084
4 (Excellent)	87.07%	4924	3.375
TOTALS		5655	

While the majority of ratings within the sample were 4s (within the entire Pie Fight, the overall percentage of 4 ratings was upwards of 90%), the usage of other ratings bears further examination, as they were assigned almost exclusively to certain types of comments.

Comment Coding Overview

In order to determine how the community was using the rating system, comments needed to be coded as to their content. It is not enough to know that a certain percentage of comments within a thread were given ratings if the content of those comments remains unknown. If the community was using the rating system to support the conditions of deliberation, certain aspects regarding comment content needed to be called out.

All comments were hand coded in the context of the thread in which they appeared. The original codes and my adaptations are included in Appendices. My adaptations were developed based on the research question and then piloted with two additional researchers. All coding was done by the researcher, with the acknowledgement that this could limit the reliability of the resulting findings. The codebook development and procedure are described in more detail in the next section.

Codebook Development and Coding Procedure

In my previous research on this community I used a grounded theory approach to developing content analysis codes to determine how the community used various

conflict resolution techniques and how they communicated about their experience of the Pie Fight. The present research used *a priori* development of codes, which were created to test for the presence of specific elements in conjunction with expected ratings behavior. As such, a specific and defined number of codes was developed before coding began. The codes were consolidated based on the literature which enabled me to focus my energies toward the issues I felt would be most valuable (agreement and community values) as well as my previous research which spotlighted certain types of communication about the community itself.

The selected diary comments were coded using a codebook developed after examination of interactivity and community formation content analysis codes (Beauchot and Buellen 2005; Cassell and Tversky 2005; Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997), and Bales' (1950) interaction process analysis system (IPA) (discussed in Neuendorf (2002)), in conjunction with my experience as an observer of the community and with deliberation concepts discussed within the literature review. In addition to agreement and disagreement, the codes measured deliberative and community-specific values, which were not included in the standardized interactivity measures used by earlier researchers.

After reflection on the suggestions made during and after the colloquium, I piloted the original coding scheme with closer attention to the hypotheses, and the codes needed to test them. After this study, I reduced the number of codes from twenty-five to twelve. A new coding scheme was then piloted with two test coders—

fellow Ph.D. candidates—using comments from the main corpus. Additional revisions to the coding scheme were based on their input.

Pilot testing of the codebook also revealed that ratings information attached to the comments seemed to affect the way the reader interpreted a comment, which had an impact on coding decisions. Comments which did not receive ratings were assumed to be of lesser value to the community and a comment's received rating value and/or number of ratings also had an effect as far as whether or not it was seen as a negative or positive comment.

Consequently, at no time during actual coding was the number of ratings a comment received, nor the final rating value, visible to the coder, so as not to bias a coding decision in any direction. In this way, each comment was considered both in context of the conversation, but also in isolation in terms of its perceived value to the community. The resulting coding did not take into account any effects of social contagion which may have occurred if community members rated comments in response to previously allocated ratings. I acknowledge that despite my best efforts, there may be bias inherent in the coding of the data, as is true in all content analysis undertaken by only one person.

Individual Comment as Unit of Meaning

For this study, the initial unit of measurement was the individual comment message. This measure has several advantages. Standardizing on the message creates an objectively identifiable unit whose parameters have been created by its author

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(Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer 2000). Even though there may be multiple meanings embedded within each message, there is no question about the centrality of the message as the unit of analysis.

An additional justification to consider the individual message as the final unit of meaning was based on the subsequent application of the codes, which were analyzed in conjunction with the ratings each individual message received. Although community members may have been rating in response to only one aspect of the comment, or to a more general tone of the comment, their ratings were given to the comment as a unit, so all aspects of the message had to be considered in the same grouping. Multiple codes per message were allowed and expected, and because the codes were mutually exclusive, there were no codes that contradicted each other.

Researcher Developed Codes

The following overview of the codes used in this research is intended to supplement the more complete description of them, which is located in Appendix A.

Topic Centeredness: OFFTOPIC – Comment does not directly discuss the Pie Fight or Markos' right to run the ad. This relates to the deliberative goal of cohesive conversation. Is off-topic discussion rewarded, punished, or ignored?

Position on Markos or Ad: ANTI-M – Author indicates disagreement with Markos in running the ad, or with his form of address to the community; PRO-M – author indicates support of Markos running the ad; NEUT – author expresses 'lack of

understanding' about the high emotions surrounding the ad, or alternately believes that the community has more important things to discuss; INDE – author's viewpoint about the ad or Markos's rights as the community owner not able to be determined. This code was used to determine agreement or disagreement with the previous comment. It also was used to determine the diversity of the viewpoints of the commenters in the sample.

Position on Previous Message: AGRE / DISAG – Comment either expresses or implies agreement or disagreement with previous author's viewpoint, or with previous comment. This code was used to evaluate whether disagreement was present in the discussion. Does the group use ratings to create or reward an echo chamber of views?

Reserve: RESERV – Author indicates a desire to cease conversation about the Pie Fight or Markos' role as community owner. This code was used to evaluate the community's commitment to deliberation. Does the group want to keep the conversation going?

Profanity: PROFAN – Comment contains what is commonly acknowledged as profanity or coarse sexual language. Also includes acronyms. This code was used to measure the community's commitment to politeness as determined by sanctions or approval in relation to applied ratings. Is the use of profanity treated as a threat to civility?

Emotional Tone: EMO+ – Emotional tone of comment is positive, calming, supportive, or humorous (with the exception of sarcasm or snark); EMO- – emotional tone of comment is negative, incendiary, angry, sarcastic, distrustful, accusatory, or contains an *ad hominem* attack; EMOIND – there is no perceptible emotional tone to comment – or it conveys merely factual information. This code was used to measure the community's commitment to deliberative goals of trustworthy communication behavior, and to civility as determined by sanctions or approval in relation to applied ratings. Are supportive comments uprated? Are destructive comments downrated?

Interpersonal: INTERPER – author relates a personal story about their offline life. This code was used to examine how personal revelations are received within the context of perspective-taking in deliberation. Are interpersonal narratives rewarded within the conversation?

Community as Entity: WE/US – author refers to the community as an entity with a past or a future, to the community as having changed over time, or to him/herself as part of that community. The comment does not have to include the terms we or us. This code was used to determine whether there is an understood community identity that supports deliberation. Are comments that speak to the community's past, present, or future rewarded?

Attempt at Humor: HUMOR – Comment includes an attempt at humor, wordplay, puns, sarcasm and the like (often used in conjunction with emotional tone). This code was used to determine whether the employment of humor was rewarded as a

conflict minimizing and/or community development device within the context of deliberation. Is humor rewarded as a means of lessening tension?

Metacommunication: META+ / META- – Comment includes communication about other communication which took place earlier in the discussion about the Pie Fight or the community. META + comments include historical communications about how the community used to deliberate, or compliments in the context of the current discussion. META- comments include critiques about tone, profanity or the current deliberative state of the community. This code was used to measure the community's commitment to deliberative goals, specifically civility goals. How does the discussion about discussion get rated?

Group Reputation: GROUP+ / GROUP- – Comment includes communication about either the group's prior reputation and standing in the political community, or else about the group's reputation as a result of either running the Pie Fight ad or the community's discussion of the Pie Fight. This code was used to measure the community's commitment to deliberative goals as a part of their public reputation. Is there a community value about deliberation, or a sense of community reputation to uphold with regard to either how the community talks to each other, or what they talk to each other about?

Ratings Discussion: RATING+ / RATING- – Comment includes either a positive discussion of a high rating given to an exemplary or well-articulated comment; alternately, comment includes a complaint about the allocation of a low

rating given to a comment or author with whom the rater presumably disagreed. This code was used to measure the community's approval of discussion of ratings usage to support the conditions of deliberation. Is discussion about the means or mechanics of community moderation punished?

Machine Codes

Machine codes were automatically and transparently attached to each comment, and are described in Appendix B. These codes were used to facilitate the display of comments during coding, as well as providing location and ratings information for post-coding analysis. The codes were as follows: Comment Date, Comment Time, Number of Ratings, Value of Individual Ratings, Average Rating Value, Member ID, Number of Member Comments in Diary, Number of Member Comments in Thread, Number of Member Ratings in Diary, Number of Member Ratings in Thread, Comment Number in Diary, Comment Number in Thread, Comment Depth in Thread, Comment Parent. With the exception of the date, time, and thread location codes, these codes were not visible during the content analysis process.

Layout of Threads for Coding

The layout of comments on the page was similar to the layout of comments within the Daily Kos site, with indentation of each comment indicating response to the comment immediately above. On the site, hyperlinks take the reader to the parent comment to which the present comment is responding. This was not possible for pen

and paper coding, so the organizational structure described in the following paragraphs was used.

As stated earlier, a comments thread is a string of coherent messages that are arranged to appear as a conversation as the reader reads down the page. Each comment in the dataset was assigned the following organizational markers, which were displayed below the content analysis codes, and above the body of each comment: Diary Number, Thread Number; Comment Number, Parent Comment, and Depth. The coding layout is described in more detail below, and is depicted in Figure 3 on page 81.

The originating Diary is treated as Comment 0, Depth 0, and has no Parent. Each comment that responds to the original diary has a Parent of 0 (the original comment number), begins a new thread, and is at Depth 1. The first comment in a thread is always Thread X.0, so that single comment threads can be removed from consideration in Hypothesis 1, which is a thread based measure.

The first comment in a diary would be labeled as Parent: 0, Depth: 1, Comment: 1, and is the first comment in Thread 1.0. The responding subsequent message would be Parent: 1, Thread: 1.1, Depth: 2, Comment: 2. The responding subsequent message would be Parent: 2, Thread 1.1, Depth 3, Comment: 3, and so on down the line.

The next comment responding to the initial diary, having a Parent of 0, would begin Thread 2, and have Depth: 1, and a comment number reflecting its location within the dataset.

In Figure 3, below, the first comment is located in Thread number 110, Subthread 1, is Comment number 812, is responding to Parent comment 811, and is at Depth level 4. The next comment is located in Thread number 110, Subthread 1, is Comment number 813, is responding to Parent comment 812, and is at Depth level 5.

Figure 3. Diary Coding Example

In the event that a comment within Thread 1 responds to an earlier Parent comment than the comment immediately prior, that comment starts a new subthread, which is numbered Thread 1.2. The Parent comment number is then used to identify the comment that is being responded to, to assist with contextualization during coding.

All comments within the data set were date- and time-stamped at the bottom of the comment, to the right of the author's name, but are numbered in the database in the order in which they appear on the page within their respective threads. In some cases, a comment that was posted at a later time in the lifespan of the conversation will appear earlier in the data set because it is responding to a comment within the context of a conversation thread.

The list of codes was placed above each comment in the following order: OFFTOPIC ANTI-M / PRO-M / NEUT / INDE AGRE / DISAG RESERV PROFAN EMO+ / EMO- / EMOIND INTERPER WE/US HUMOR META+ / META- GROUP+ / GROUP-   RATING+ / RATING-

and the appropriate code was circled after the comment was read.

Reading and Coding Procedure

The research coding procedure consisted of reading the originating diary before every coding session began, followed by the Parent comment of the comment to be coded. Subsequent comments were read in the order displayed on the page, within the context of the thread. Comments were displayed in the same order and

indentation as was on the website, and the content codes were included in the list at the top of each comment, as described in the previous section. All comments were read according to their position in the conversation and were coded with the applicable content and tone codes immediately after the comment was read. Codes were circled upon the completion of each comment. This adaptation of reading a comment and then coding it immediately, rather than reading the entire comment thread before coding, was made because my previous research indicated that people typically rated comments "on the fly," so the coding interpretation needed to occur within the same frame of reference. Every comment was read and coded, whether or not it received a rating.

After the pen and paper measures were completed, the applicable comment codes were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis with the measures described below.

Statistical Procedure

The diaries analyzed for this research contained at least one comment rating for 72% of the comments, and two or more comment ratings (meaning that the resulting average rating was visible to the community within the context of the conversation) for 55% of the comments. This percentage is noteworthy because a minimum percentage of comments should be rated to provide a differential between those comments which have been rated and those which have not. Because the data existed prior to this research, this percentage is merely a descriptive rather than a

prescriptive value. Both diaries, however, have a similar distribution of ratings of 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Upon the completion of the content analysis and data entry, the comment's ratings information was appended to the end of each comment's row in the Excel file. The rating information consisted of the following machine coded values: the number of ratings the comment received, the average rating value of the comment (both of which are displayed to the right of the comment's title on the site), and a listing of every rating the comment received. The inclusion of all ratings values for analysis, rather than an analysis based on the average rating value, allowed for a more precise examination of the community's ratings behavior.

Comment Rating Analysis

Because the purpose of analysis for this research has to do with the attention community members give comments, every rating was analyzed, whether or not it resulted in the comment being given an average rating that was visible to the community. Initially, ratings information for only those comments with two or more ratings was going to be included in the analysis. However, this cutoff would have resulted in a dismissal of ratings information for about 16% of comments in the dataset. Even though single ratings were not visible to the community on the main page of the site—the rating value may be accessed by clicking on the ratings field, which opens a new page—that information is valuable to determine how the community uses ratings. Since I sought to measure community ratings a, when this

information was made available to my analysis due to improvements in the database, I decided to include it.

It is possible that as soon as a comment receives a rating that becomes visible to the community (which happens after it has received two ratings), that comment is then more likely to receive subsequent ratings attention from the community at large. Slightly more than half of the comments in the dataset (53%) did not have a visible rating, but almost 16% of the total number of comments did receive one comment rating. Almost 90% of the dataset had 10 or fewer ratings.

Research Question and Hypotheses

The Daily Kos forum is similar to earlier political forums in that registration is open to anyone with an email address and there are certainly people who post with the desire to "win," more than the desire for earnest, open political discussion. However, given that Daily Kos also enables its members to screen out or sanction undesirable content (via the comment-rating system which is discussed above, and in Chapter 2), it is possible that deliberation may occur.

Notwithstanding Rafaeli & Sudweeks' finding that interactive communities support agreement over discussion, I expected the members of the Daily Kos community to discuss a diversity of views. I expected to find that the most highly rated threads contained posts which were relevant to the Pie Fight and served to inspire discussion (and possibly disagreement) among members, rather than posts

which contained personal attacks or put-downs that typically shut down discussion and contribute to an inhospitable environment where deliberation is unlikely to take place.

More specifically, I expected that deliberation among members would be evidenced by comments which contain explicit disagreement with previous comments (or authors). Finally, I expected that comments which explicitly discussed the value of the community to the author—either as a safe place for the author to participate in political discussion (personal), or as a vanguard of progressive or democratic deliberation online (group reputation vis-à-vis commercial media)—or which discussed the community as an entity, would be more frequently, and favorably rated by community members.

The main research question addressed by this research is: Does a comment moderation system help an online community to support the conditions of deliberation? The following hypotheses were advanced, and their operationalization is described below.

H1: The community will use the rating system to support a diverse discussion of views within comments threads.

H2: The community will use the rating system to punish or diminish specific types of comments that hinder deliberation.

H3: The community will use the rating system to applaud or support specific types of comments that support conditions of deliberation.

As has been described in Chapter 2, the purpose of allowing community members to rate comments on Daily Kos is to increase the number of valuable or thoughtful comments and decrease the number of unproductive or disruptive comments in the discussion threads. The ratings system is designed to reward comments deemed "insightful, informative, moving or funny," and to denote progressive disapproval as comments move down the list toward those which add only "marginal" value to the conversation or are "unproductive, devoid of content, add nothing to the conversation, and/or are offensive" (Soj 2006). The current research focuses on determining whether or not the moderation system was being used in a systematic way to help users support the conditions of deliberation on the site.

Discussion of Procedure for Hypothesis 1

As presented during the colloquium, this measure was going to include the author's stance on Markos and the Pie Fight on one level followed by whether or not the author appeared to agree or disagree with the preceding comment in the other level. After coding the entire data set and evaluating the breakdown of Pro-Markos, Anti-Markos, Neutral and Indeterminate comments on one level and the Agree and Disagree comments on the other level, I determined that focusing only on the agreements and disagreements made the most sense as far as statistically evaluating the ratings information, and that the Pro-Markos, Anti-Markos, Neutral and Indeterminate comments did not add value to the analysis for the agreement factor. These codes were initially intended to be used for the conflict resolution component of

the research, which was removed after an extensive review of the data indicated that addressing it would involve procedures outside the bounds of the current study.

H1: The community will use the rating system to support a diverse discussion of views within comments threads.

Operationalization: Comments that contain the highest number of high ratings (of 3 or 4) will occur more frequently within threads that contain people who disagree with each other's points of view.

The initial procedure for the ratings analysis component of this hypothesis involved adding all ratings within all comments in each individual thread in the corpus diaries. This resulted in a per-thread total ratings points value. From there I originally planned to use the average thread rating (with the total ratings points value divided by the number of comments in the thread) as a measure of community rating behavior. However, because the purpose of the hypothesis was to look at only positive ratings of 3 or 4, this measure was dropped because 1s and 2s are included in total rating points.

To address this hypothesis, I began by determining whether each thread contained more agreement or disagreement. I counted the number of comments that were hand-coded as agreeing (AGRE) or disagreeing (DISAG) with the previous comment within each thread; single comment threads that contained either code were also included in the analysis.

The agreement factor (Af) was then calculated for each thread by determining the difference between the number of comments that were hand-coded as AGRE and DISAG, and then dividing the result by the number of comments in each thread. Af will range from -1 (every comment was coded DISAG) to 1 (every comment was coded AGRE). Threads that did not contain either AGRE or DISAG comments were not included in the analysis (19 threads), although threads that had an Af of 0 resulting from an equal number of AGRE and DISAG coded comments were included in the corpus.

Using the resulting dataset, I determined the frequency of high ratings (of 3 or 4) within the selected threads in both diaries. The Frequency of high ratings (Fh) was calculated for each thread by totaling the number of high ratings (rate 3 + rate 4) and then dividing the result by the number of comments within the thread.

Fh = (rate3 + rate4)/number of comments

The results were calculated in SPSS for every thread in the dataset, using Pearson's R correlation coefficient. If more numerous positive ratings occurred within threads containing an agreement factor that was negative, the community would be said to support a diverse discussion of views. While this is a gross measure, it provides initial insight into whether or not the community is using the ratings scheme in support of more deliberative threads that involve more give and take versus using the ratings scheme in support of a string of comments that agree with each other.

Discussion of Procedure for Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3

There were multiple ways to evaluate the resulting data concerning Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3. Initially, the data for these hypotheses were to be analyzed using the average ratings value in relation to the content analysis codes, and then comparing the results with the average ratings value for comments in the remainder of the corpus. Because subsequent developments in the database allowed for additional and more focused examination of the ratings behavior/allocation by the community, this process was modified. An examination of the number of individual ratings for a given comment code allows for a more focused analysis of which community values are most important to the community members who rated the comments.

For Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, the number and percentage of received ratings is compared against the baseline frequency of the same ratings for the remainder of the dataset, as well as against the baseline frequency of the dataset as a whole.

Due to improvements in data collection and analysis that were made after the colloquium, I chose to evaluate comments based on their individual content codes in conjunction with individual ratings for each comment as described above, rather than the average rating value that was initially proposed. This allowed for a more precise examination of the ratings behavior of the community, which was based on individual or targeted grouping of content codes.

H2: The community will use the rating system to punish or diminish specific types of comments that hinder deliberation.

Operationalization: Comments that are coded with codes conceptualized as threats to the civility of the discussion will more frequently receive low ratings of 1 or 2 as compared to comments within remainder of the dataset, and the dataset as a whole.

To address this hypothesis, I created separate corpuses containing comments that were hand-coded with the following codes, conceptualized as threats to the civility of the discussion: those that were sarcastic, angry, or contained an *ad hominem* attack (EMO-); that contained profanity (PROFAN); or that contained a complaint about the way ratings were given to comments (RATING-).

Next, I determined the frequency of low ratings (of 1 or 2) for each of the coded comments within all threads in both diaries. The Frequency of low ratings (Fl) was calculated for all comments meeting the above coding criteria to come up with an average ratings frequency for the comments within the corpus subsets.

Fl_1 = rate1/number of comments.

Fl_2 = rate2/number of comments.

This average frequency measure was then compared against the baseline frequency for low ratings calculated for the remainder of comments in the dataset as well as against the dataset as a whole. The baseline value of low ratings per comment

for the entire corpus was used as a comparative measure to determine whether or not the comments within this dataset were more or less likely to receive a low rating.

The Frequency of low ratings (Fl) was calculated for each comment in the corpus and then compared against the remainder of comments in the dataset as well as against the dataset as a whole. The baseline value of low ratings per comment from the entire corpus was used as a comparative measure to determine whether or not the comments within the corpus subsets were more or less frequently given a low rating than the dataset as a whole.

> H3: The community will use the rating system to applaud or support specific types of comments that support conditions of deliberation.

> Operationalization: Comments that are coded with codes conceptualized as supporting deliberation, or deliberation as a community value will more frequently receive high ratings of 3 or 4 as compared to comments within remainder of the dataset, and the dataset as a whole.

To address this hypothesis I created separate corpuses containing comments that were hand-coded with the following group identity codes, conceptualized as indicating that deliberation is a community value: those that have been deemed to affirm the writer's community identity or purpose (WE/US), that discuss the community's political goals or reputation in a positive (GROUP+) or negative light (GROUP-), that include a personal narrative (INTERPER) and are off-topic

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(OFFTOPIC), that are humorous (HUMOR) and off-topic (OFFTOPIC), [13] or that criticize poor communication behaviors within the Pie Fight (META-).

Metacommunication was separated into positive (META+) and negative (META-) categories to more accurately capture the tenor of the conversation about the metacommunication. META+ was not included as a measure in this instance because the focus of the measure is on the protection of the group's self-concept as deliberative, in response to a perceived threat.

The emotional tone of comments was not included as a measure in this instance because the focus of the measure is on the strength of community identity and mores, or interpersonal discussion – any comment focusing on these issues is considered to be addressing these measures, no matter how the content is stated.

Group Reputation comments included both positive (GROUP+) and negative (GROUP-) measures. Positive measures were more likely to discuss the scope or reach of the community in the media landscape. Negative coded comments might also include those issues, but also expressed concern about the negative effect of either the Gilligan's Island advertisement or the Pie Fight diaries themselves would have on the reputation of the Daily Kos community as an actor in the political landscape. Mentions of elected officials and their use or readership of the site were coded as either positive or negative, depending on the context of the comment. In either case, the

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[13] These types of comments are used to reduce or dissipate conflict by changing the subject or tone of a discussion thread (Serfaty, 2002).

acknowledgement that the group had a reputation to uphold or continue was the main focus.

Next, I determined the frequency of high ratings (of 3 or 4) for each of the coded comments within all threads in both diaries. The Frequency of high ratings (Fh) was calculated for all comments meeting the above coding criteria to come up with an average ratings frequency for the comments meeting the criteria.

Fh_3 = rate3/number of comments.

Fh_4 = rate4/number of comments.

The Frequency of high ratings (Fh) was calculated for each comment in the corpus and then compared against the remainder of comments in the dataset as well as against the dataset as a whole. The baseline value of high ratings per comment from the entire corpus was used as a comparative measure to determine whether or not the comments within the corpus subsets were more or less frequently awarded with a high rating than the dataset as a whole.

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Data Set Statistics

The content analysis was undertaken with the two diaries that were authored

by Markos, the site owner. These two Pie Fight diaries meet the desired criteria of

number of posts which received a response and which received a distribution of

ratings—almost half of the comments received two or more ratings; no more than 90%

of the ratings were 4s, and at least 5% of the ratings were 1s. Because these two posts

were on the front page of the site, and were written by the site owner, they were the

most likely to have been discovered and read by the majority of community members

in their casual visits to the site. Categorical tagging of posts had not yet become a

feature of the site, which meant that members would have needed to put more effort

into finding the other diaries which discussed the ad and Markos' response to it. The

corpus is described in Table 2.

Table 2. Dataset Statistics

	Pie Fight Ad (Diary #4)	Everything to Everyone (Diary #20)	Totals
Number of Threads	215	68	283
Number of Comments	1035	424	1459
Comments that Received One Rating	161 / 15.6%	70 / 16.6%	231
Comments that Received Two or More Ratings	510 / 49.3%	180 / 42.5%	690
Ratings of 1	325 / 7.1%	127 / 11.5%	452 / 8%
Ratings of 2	113 / 2.5%	44 / 4.0%	157 / 2.8%
Ratings of 3	76 / 1.7%	46 / 4.1%	122 / 2.2%
Ratings of 4	4032 / 88.7%	892 / 80.4%	4924 /87.1%
Total Ratings	4546	1109	5655

In the final accounting, the dataset included 1035 comments from Diary 1, and 424 comments from Diary 2 for a total of 1459 comments coded.

In Diary 1, six comments were not coded: two were duplicate comments which were coded previously, two comments were supposed to have been posted elsewhere according to their authors and so were not coded as part of the conversation, and two comments were not codable: one comment was in Spanish, and the other was impossible to interpret. None of these comments received a community rating, and because they represent such a small part of the dataset (.0041), their inclusion in the database in spite of not being coded will not adversely impact the subsequent findings. In Diary 2, all 424 comments were coded.

Discussion of findings

Hypothesis 1: The community will use the rating system to support a diverse discussion of views within comments threads. Comments that contain the highest number of high ratings (of 3 or 4) will occur more frequently within threads that contain people who disagree with each other's points of view.

Findings Based on Agreement

In terms of raw ratings, independent of what type of thread a comment was located in, 68.2% of comments coded as Disagree received one or more ratings, and 63.0% of comments coded as Agree received one or more ratings. 40.7% of comments that were coded as Indeterminate received one or more ratings. The percentage for

comments coded as disagree was higher in both cases than the percentage for all

comments in the corpus, which is approximately 62.6%. The fact that agree and

disagree comments were more frequently rated speaks to the use of ratings in the

service of supporting deliberation and discourse versus mere statements of fact.
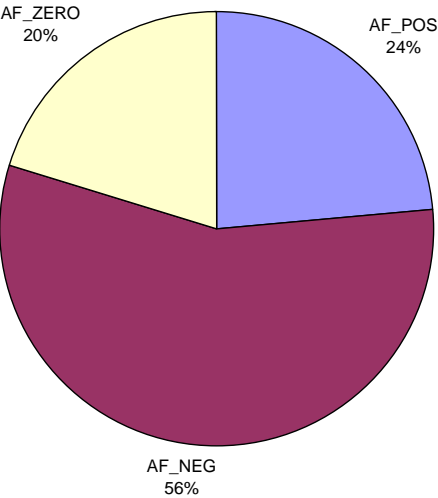
Figure 4. Agreement Factor Distribution for Corpus

Within the corpus, there were far more threads that contained more

disagreement than agreement. Specifically, 56% of threads had more comments coded

as DISAG than AGRE (AF_NEG on chart), and 20% of threads had either no

comments or an equal number of comments coded as DISAG and AGRE (AF_ZERO

on chart), with only 24% of threads having more comments coded as AGRE (AF_POS

on chart).
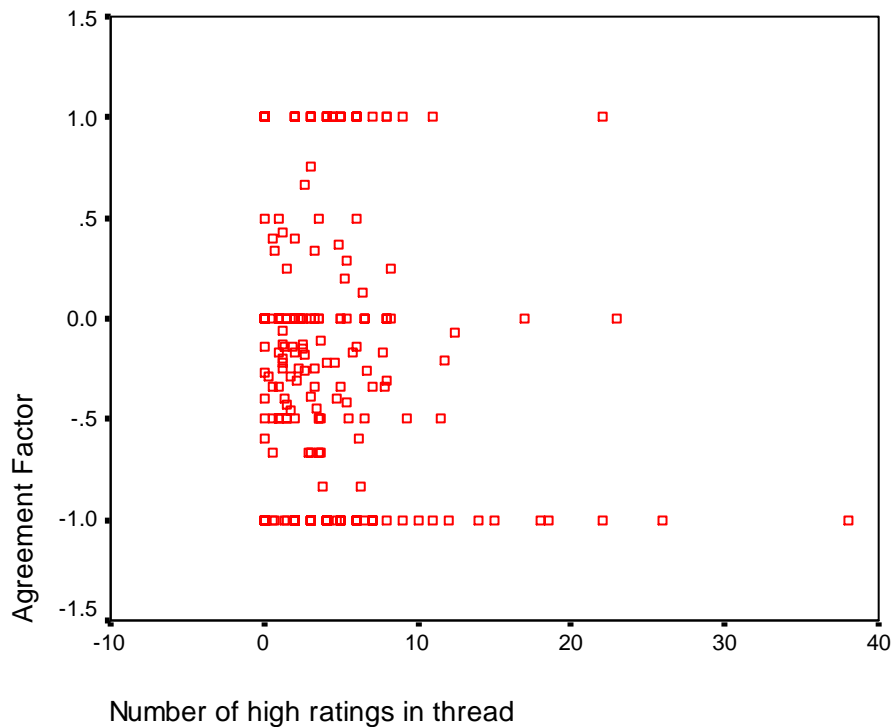
Figure 5. Correlation of High Ratings with Agreement Factor

When calculating Pearson's correlation coefficient for the 264 threads in both diaries, comprising the entire dataset, there was a slight negative correlation of -.083. Although this was statistically insignificant (at .177), the result means that there were more high ratings allocated to comments where the agreement factor was below zero and approaching -1 than for the comments where the agreement factor was above zero, approaching 1, which can be seen in Figure 5. This hypothesis was supported by the data, indicating that, perhaps because of the strong community cohesion that is evidenced by the findings in Hypothesis 3, the community does demonstrably value the discussion of disagreement.

Findings Based on Reserve

Although not initially included in the procedures for Hypothesis 1, an examination of the RESERV comments (those which contained a plea or admonition for the conversation to cease) provides additional evidence that the community supports deliberation over silence. The minuscule number of comments within the dataset that were coded as RESERV (2.12%) adds to the conception of the community's appreciation and support of deliberation versus quelling disagreement. Even when the comments appeared within threads that were deeply contentious, the number of ratings they received never went above the baseline ratings observed for the dataset as a whole. The results are described in Table 3.

In Table 3 through Table 12, below, numbers in parentheses signify the number of ratings within the category divided by the number of comments in each category, denoting the observed frequency of ratings in that category. In the shaded area, the number immediately preceding the number in parentheses indicates the difference between the observed frequency of ratings in the code category versus the observed frequency of ratings given within the dataset as a whole. Numbers in the shaded area preceding the parentheses that are below 1 indicate that ratings were given less frequently in the code category than in the dataset as a whole; a number of 1 indicates that ratings were given equally as frequently in the category as in the dataset as a whole, and a number higher than 1 indicates that ratings were given more

frequently in the category than in the dataset as a whole. A complete table listing all

comment codes and ratings frequencies is located in Appendix C.

Table 3. Findings Based on Reserve

RESERV	Comments	3s	4s	3s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	4s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
Yes	31	2	97	0.75 (0.06)	0.93 (3.13)	0.92 (3.19)
No	1428	120	4827	1.00 (0.08)	1.00 (3.38)	1.00 (3.46)
Baseline	1459	122	4924	(0.08)	(3.38)	(3.46)

Hypothesis 2: The community will use the rating system to punish or diminish

specific types of comments that hinder deliberation. The community will punish

negative behavior (comments which are angry, contain sarcasm or attack, contain

profanity, or which negatively discuss ratings behavior), by more frequently giving

those comments a low rating (of 1 or 2).

As mentioned elsewhere, a comment ratings system is designed to give

members the ability to control the types of communication on the site. When used

conscientiously and well, it can increase the ratio of signal to noise on the site, by

rewarding good comments, while punishing those that do little to add to a reasoned

conversation.

The results were as follows:

Findings Based on Emotional Tone

EMO- comments where those which contained anger, sarcasm, *ad hominem* attack, arguments in bad faith, name calling, or described the writer's negative emotional state. Profanity could also be present, but the presence of profanity did not always result in a negative emotional tone coding. EMO+ comments were those which were complimentary, calming, or described the writer's positive emotional state. Comments with a neutral emotional tone (EMOIND) contained neither of the above descriptors and conveyed primarily factual information.

EMO- codes were more likely to receive ratings of 1 and 2 than any other comment within the dataset, at almost twice the frequency. However, they were also almost as likely to receive 4 ratings as other comments in the corpus. This information is not displayed in the table below, but is included in Appendix C.

There were 332 comments that were hand-coded EMO- and a total of 1127 comments coded EMO+ (312) or EMOIND (815). The six uncoded comments were included in the EMOIND category.

Table 4. Findings Based on Emotional Tone

Emotional Tone	Comments	1s	2s	1s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	2s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
Negative (EMO-)	332	277	93	2.68 (0.83)	2.60 (0.28)	2.64 (1.11)
Positive (EMO+)	312	44	8	0.45 (0.14)	0.24 (0.03)	0.40 (0.17)
Neutral (EMOIND)	815	131	56	0.52 (0.16)	0.65 (0.07)	0.55 (0.23)
Baseline	1459	452	157	(0.31)	(0.11)	(0.42)

As seen in Table 4, EMO- comments were given a low rating every 1.11 comments, EMO+ comments were given a low rating every .17 comments, and the remainder of comments in the sample were rated low every .23 comments. There is a marked difference in the frequency of low ratings assigned to comments throughout the sample, such that comments which were coded as EMO- received ratings of 1 at more than two and a half times the baseline frequency (2.68). This supports the hypothesis that the community will seek to police itself by giving low ratings to comments that violate the norms of emotional expression.

Findings Based on Discussion of Ratings

Negative discussion of ratings allocation (RATING-) comprised comments which contained a complaint or critique about ratings being given – the ascribed rating could be either high or low. Positive comments about ratings allocation (RATING+) often contained the phrase "Here's a 4" or the ratings value of 4 in the title. These typically occurred in response to the RATINGS+ comment author's perceived mistreatment of the commenter being addressed, and to whom the RATINGS+ author

had also presumably given the 4 rating. In essence, ratings positive comments described or explained the reasoning for giving a different commenter a positive rating, while RATINGS- comments contained complaints about the way the ratings system was being used, either against the RATINGS- author or against another commenter in the thread.

There were 54 comments that were hand-coded RATING-. There were 38 comments coded RATING+ and 1367 commends that did not discuss comment ratings at all.

Table 5. Findings Based on Ratings

RATINGS	Comments	1s	2s	1s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	2s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
Negative	54	27	5	1.61 (0.50)	0.84 (0.09)	1.40 (0.59)
Positive	38	13	5	1.10 (0.34)	1.21 (0.13)	1.12 (0.47)
No code	1367	412	147	0.97 (0.30)	1.02 (0.11)	0.98 (0.41)
Baseline	1459	452	157	(0.31)	(0.11)	(0.42)

As seen in Table 5, RATING- comments were given a low rating every .59 comments, RATING+ comments were given a low rating every .47 comments, and the remainder of comments in the corpus were rated low every .41 comments. There is a slight difference in the frequency of low ratings assigned to comments throughout the corpus, such that comments coded as RATING- were 1.47 times more frequently given a rating of either 1 or 2 than comments which did not discuss ratings at all (.59/.41), Given the relatively small number of comments within the corpus (about 4%) that negatively discussed ratings, this finding seems to indicate that the

community does not consider such comments valuable to the discussion, and they are almost half again as likely to give such comments a negative rating in response.

The fact that these comments received so many low ratings, in spite of their limited representation within the dataset as a whole, demonstrates the extra effort that the community took to rate these comments. From this we can infer that the community does not want to see ratings discussed within the comments threads about more substantive issues. Since ratings are intended to be used to elevate or demote specific types of comments in the service of more high-quality deliberation on the site, then negative discussion about their use is clearly unwelcome and counterproductive. Adding to this interpretation, Daily Kos community modified the ratings system in early 2006. The current scheme shows only a raw number of "+" ratings and "-" ratings, which seems to indicate that while the use of 1-4 ratings may have elevated the overall level of commentary, discussion or complaint about low ratings was seen as disruptive to the community.

Findings Based on Profanity

Comments coded as PROFAN include the commonly accepted terms that are sanctioned during primetime commercial television and radio broadcasts. Also included were slang terms that were not necessarily sanctioned but are nonetheless offensive within polite conversation. There were 215 comments that were hand-coded PROFAN and a total of 1244 comments that did not contain profanity.

Table 6. Findings Based on Profanity

PROFANITY	Comments	1s	2s	1s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	2s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
Yes (PROFAN)	215	122	40	1.84 (0.57)	1.77 (0.19)	1.81 (0.76)
No	1244	330	117	0.87 (0.27)	0.84 (0.09)	0.86 (0.36)
Yes + HUMOR	30	33	6	3.55 (1.10)	1.86 (0.20)	3.55 (1.30)
Baseline	1459	452	157	(0.31)	(0.11)	(0.42)

As seen in Table 6, comments coded PROFAN received ratings at a higher proportion when compared to comments within the remainder of the dataset. Lower ratings were given to PROFAN comments at a rate of 1.84 more frequently (for 1s) and 1.77 more frequently (for 2s) than comments in the rest of the corpus.

However, PROFAN comments also received more ratings of 3 (1.67 more frequently) and 4 (1.67 more frequently) than the remainder of comments in the dataset. This could be explained by a finding by Herring et al. (2002:379) which found that "nonspecific use of obscenities was considered to be emphatic, while obscenities directed at a specific person were considered to be hostile." I cannot say that the community rates solely to reduce the amount of profanity that is used for self-expression within comments, but it is clear that comments containing profanity received more attention, proportionally, than the majority of other comments in the diaries.

Hypothesis 3: The community will use the rating system to applaud or support specific types of comments that support conditions of deliberation. The community will reward positive behavior (comments with codes conceptualized as supporting deliberation, or deliberation as a community value), by more frequently giving those comments a high rating (of 3 or 4).

Findings Based on Community as Entity

In addition to comments which used the word we or us within the text, WE/US coded comments included discussion about the community as an entity of which the commenter is a part or that was important to the commenter. References to the community's past and future were also included in this category. There were 186 comments that were hand-coded WE/US and a total of 1273 comments that were not coded WE/US.

Table 7. Findings Based on Community as Entity

WE/US	Comments	3s	4s	3s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	4s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
Yes	186	22	777	1.44 (0.12)	1.24 (4.18)	1.24 (4.30)
No	1273	100	4147	0.96 (0.08)	0.97 (3.26)	0.97 (3.34)
Baseline	1459	122	4924	(0.08)	(3.38)	(3.46)

As seen in Table 7, there was a slight difference in the number of positive ratings each WE/US comment received compared to the remainder of the dataset. These comments were about 25% more frequently given a 4 rating than the remainder

of comments in the corpus. The results support the hypothesis somewhat, but not a great deal.

What is interesting about these comments is the use of the 3 rating; 20% of 3s were located in comments comprising 13% of the dataset. The use of the 3 rating in the WE/US category, even though the total number is so small, is still worth noting. In the current corpus, the 3 rating may have been given in order to provide recognition for comments that reflect a concern for the community by taking the time to denote them as Good for the conversation, even if the content doesn't necessarily meet the criteria for an Excellent comment. Because these comments were discussing community identity, and since the topic under discussion was how the Pie Fight had already affected or could negatively change the community, this targeted allocation of 3 ratings adds to the interpretation of the community identity as a deliberative group. Whether or not all community members comported themselves well within the Pie Fight, at least some commenters spoke of the community identity as something to be returned to or cherished. This use of the Good (3) rating was a way for fellow members to show their appreciation and support, whether or not they chose to add a "me, too" comment as well.

Findings Based on Group Reputation

Concerning as they do issues of the site's reputation as something of value, GROUP+ and GROUP- are not exactly obverse measures, although the ratings that each type of comment received make it clear that the community seemed to value

those comments which expressed concern and value the group's reputation as

something that is mutable and worthy of protection. Although there were not many

comments that discussed the group's reputation, they were responsible for a

significant proportion of ratings activity.

Table 8. Findings Based on Group Reputation

GROUP	Comments	3s	4s	3s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	4s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
Positive	5	1	26	2.39 (0.20)	1.54 (5.20)	1.56 (5.40)
Negative	26	3	232	1.44 (0.12)	2.64 (8.92)	2.61 (9.04)
Baseline	1459	122	4924	(0.08)	(3.38)	(3.46)

Table 8 shows a marked difference in the location of positive ratings

comments tagged with GROUP+ received in the dataset. There were only 5 GROUP+

comments (.34% of the dataset) to be analyzed. These comments were rated 4 more

than half again as frequently as the entire dataset. Given their small number, it is

difficult to make sweeping claims about their importance. However, the fact that the

community took the time to rate these comments at all, in spite of their paucity in the

dataset, shows that they were seen as especially deserving in the context of the

conversation. I believe that as people encountered these comments, they chose to

uprate them because they were saying something unique, and because they were

indicating that the community's reputation was something worth protecting.

The GROUP- comments had an even more marked ratings percentage. These

comments represented only 1.78% of the dataset, and yet were given 4s at a rate of

over two and half times the rating frequency as the baseline 4 comments. From this we can infer that the community members who participated in rating these comments felt very strongly that the Pie Fight, or the ad itself, could adversely affect the community's reputation in the wider world.

There are subtleties in the differences of the codes here, but I would like to focus on people speaking about the community as a place with value and reputation. One notable GROUP+ comment contained an entreaty that a valued member not leave, because it would tarnish the group's reputation. That single comment, one of five coded as GROUP+, received sixteen of the twenty-six 4s in the sample. GROUP- comments tended to contain complaints that the community was not well served by having this type of advertising on the front page, or that the intra-group dialogue about the advertisement and about the community value system being hashed out in public was somehow ignominious. Feelings that the community should be "better than this" were coded as WE/US; the GROUP- code was added when the community's public face or Congressional members were mentioned. When 4 ratings are clustered so dramatically—e.g., located in comments responsible for 3/1000th of the dataset in the case of GROUP+ comments—it appears that the community is demonstrably focusing their ratings activity to elevate comments that support a specific and positive community self-concept.

Regarding GROUP-, there was likewise a fairly high amount of interest and energy and engagement around this discussion. It is also possible, although I did not

test for this, that these comments were more likely to be longer and more impassioned, and thus there was more content to which a rating could be attached.

Findings Based on Interpersonal + Topic Relatedness

The rationale behind this particular measurement was that the community would value off topic conversation, as long as it promotes a deeper level of intimacy or community understanding between members. This was not supported by the data – in fact, OFFTOPIC comments in general did not receive ratings at the baseline level for any of the ratings values. This would seem to indicate that while off-topic conversation is tolerated within the community, it is neither highlighted as especially worthwhile to the discussion, nor downrated to reduce its visibility to those members who choose to read comments rated at or above a certain rating.

Table 9. Findings Based on Topic Relatedness + Interpersonal

OFF TOPIC	Comments	3s	4s	3s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	4s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
+INTERPER	62	2	106	0.36 (0.03)	0.51 (1.71)	0.50 (1.74)
INTERPER	109	8	417	0.88 (0.07)	1.13 (3.83)	1.13 (3.90)
Baseline	1459	122	4924	(0.08)	(3.38)	(3.46)

As seen in Table 9, only 62 comments were coded as INTERPER and OFFTOPIC, and they were only given a positive rating between one-third and one-half as frequently as comments the dataset as a whole. This seems to indicate that the community does not often rate comments that expressly do not add to the

conversation, even when those comments could be considered as adding to the intimacy and community feeling on the site.

Within the context of deliberation, interpersonal revelations can help to increase perspective-taking which then can increase participants' ability to understand a broader range of viewpoints. The 108 INTERPER comments were rated slightly more frequently than the average, indicating that within the context of the discussion, comments containing interpersonal information were seen to have some value. An in-depth examination of the content of these comments is beyond the purview of this study.

Findings Based on Humor + Other Comment Codes

Table 10. Findings Based on Humor + Off Topic

HUMOR	Comments	3s	4s	3s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	4s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
+ OFFTOPIC	144	16	185	1.32 (0.11)	0.38 (1.28)	0.40 (1.39)
Baseline	1459	122	4924	(0.08)	(3.38)	(3.46)

My initial expectation was that the community would reward comments which seek to "lighten the mood" and mitigate conflict by moving the conversation off topic with a joke. As with the WE/US comments, the 3 ratings were given at a markedly higher frequency than the remainder of the dataset. This supports my supposition that the 3 ratings are being awarded specifically to comments that are pro-community, even if, as in this case, they may not be very substantive.

However, given the nature of the subject matter being discussed, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the humor that ensued bordered on the puerile. In fact, the Humor and Off topic comments included the notorious thread which was 27 comments deep, and which contained a lengthy list and discussion of slang terms for a woman's breasts. That discovery led me to examine the number of humor + profanity comments to determine whether there was a relationship there as well; specifically, whether those comments received more negative than positive ratings.

Table 11. Findings Based on Humor + Profanity

HUMOR	Comments	1s	2s	1s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	2s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
+ PROFAN	30	33	6	3.55 (1.1)	1.86 (0.2)	
Baseline	1459	452	157	(0.31)	(0.11)	(0.42)

Only 30 comments in the corpus were coded with both HUMOR and PROFAN tags, with ratings being assigned high above the baseline frequency for comment ratings of 1 and 2. There were also a number of 4 ratings given to these comments, though those comments only reached .73 of the baseline frequency of 4 allocations.

Without interviewing the people who did the ratings battle, there is no way of knowing why positive ratings were given to the notorious nine comments in the "Bazongas" thread discussing preferred slang terminology for the female breast. Of the 33 ratings of 1, three comments were given six 1s, two comments were given five 1s, one comment got two 1s, and three comments got one 1. As with the GROUP+ coded comments discussed above, this minuscule portion of the dataset (.06%)

received a disproportionate amount of ratings attention (7% of all 1 ratings), indicating that comment moderation was being used in a targeted fashion by the community. The ability to do this level of analysis was facilitated by the small number of comments within this particular dataset.

The comments described above also received enough 4 ratings to bump the average rating to above a 1. As with the rest of the dataset, there is no display of the zero ratings, so it is unknown whether any zeroes were given to these comments, and if so, how many 4s were required to make the comment visible to the community at large. At least two possibilities exist. First, that raters gave 4s to support the authors who the raters may have felt were being unfairly maligned within the community for what the raters saw as a harmless attempt to lighten the mood. Alternately, that raters gave 4s in order to daylight what they felt were egregious comments, in an effort to show that the community's ethos had changed and that it was not as progressive or feminist as it may once have been. A more extensive content analysis (and information about which members gave which ratings), and possibly an interview with the raters and authors, would be useful to pursue either hypothesis.

Findings Based on Metacommunication Negative

Table 12. Findings Based on Metacommunication Negative

METACOMM	Comments	3s	4s	3s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	4s vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)	Total vs. Baseline (obs. freq.)
Positive	28	0	37	0 (0)	0.39 (1.32)	0.38 (1.32)
Negative	297	29	2186	1.20 (0.10)	2.18 (7.36)	2.16 (7.46)
Baseline	1459	122	4924	(0.08)	(3.38)	(3.46)

Comments coded as META- (meaning that the comment included a discussion of the way the commenters in the diary were talking about the Pie Fight issue and these comments were critical of the tone of the commentary) were more likely to receive a 4 ratings than any other type of comment in the corpus except for GROUP-. META- comments do not have the same qualities as EMO- comments, which concern specific yet more latent behaviors, such as sarcasm, name-calling or arguing in bad faith. In contrast, META- commenters usually expressed sadness or disappointment (although sometimes anger, which garnered an EMO- code) about the way the discussion was progressing, or the way that community members expressed themselves. These comments definitely reflect a pro-community bias as they express concern about the communication behaviors of community members, and they are based on the idea that there are expectations of community norms which are not being met.

What is even more interesting, however, is the sheer number of 4 ratings that comments in this category received: 2,154. This number represents about 44% of all of

the 4 ratings for the entire corpus, given to comments that represented just 20% of the dataset. It is quite clear that the community was incredibly affected by the tone of commentary as it differs from what their expectation of a good community should be, and that the community had previously upheld those expectations of deliberative, respectful communication.

Additional Observations on Ratings

Ratings Splits within Comments – Use of 1 and 4

In my Master's thesis (Soma 2007), I found that the mere mention of giving a 1 rating to a comment caused an agitated response, whether or not the rating was actually given. I have to wonder if the balancing of the 1s with 4s was used to support the right of every community member to expression. Other possible explanations might be that friends of the aggrieved community member might uprate a comment as a gesture of personal support and aid, or to offer their understanding of one's previous status and participation in the community, or lastly to ensure that the author not lose Mojo because of a misunderstanding of a good faith intention. At the least, such a behavior demonstrates that some community members do take pains to be sure that all constituents of the community are heard from, even those that other people in the community have deemed marginal.

Middle of the Road Ratings – Use of 2 and 3

Ratings of 2 seemed to be more broadly dispersed rather than localized, so it is less likely that they were used in a targeted fashion by the community. Where 3s were

localized, they seem to have been used to offer support to comments that express group norms and values, specifically WE/US and HUMOR + OFFTOPIC.

Also of note, EMO- comments received a rating of 3 at the highest frequency per comment within the dataset for which there was a considerable number of comments, with 3s given at 1.91 times the baseline frequency.[14] This may be explained by the fact that a 3 rating doesn't connote the approval or comment valuation level of a 4, but still may be used to elevate the author's standing in the community (via Mojo). An alternate interpretation is that the 3 rating was used either to support the commenter who had taking a ratings hit of 1 or 2, for expressing either justifiable anger (in the rater's point of view), or else to applaud the author for their use of what might be considered amusing sarcasm. The purposeful use of negative communication such as sarcasm, irony or wordplay can foster a sense of community, neutralize unwanted behaviors, and assert dominance over other community members, serving to create or enforce community cohesion (Serfaty 2002).

Usefulness of a Varied Ratings Format

One surprising concentration of 2s was in the GROUP- category. Without interviewing the people who gave the ratings, it is impossible to know why these ratings were given. One theory is that the members giving the 2 ratings felt that the commenters were taking the situation too seriously, or that the raters were otherwise

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[14] GROUP+ received one rating of 3, which represented 20% of its dataset, so it is not considered in the same category.

trying to limit comments to a more limited range of topic. As described earlier, the 3 ratings could have been used to offer moral support to authors whose comments might not advance the discussion, but do speak to community norms and values that the writer and rater would like to see applauded or preserved.

In spite of their limited use within the corpus, the gradations of the ratings system seemed to allow for a more reasoned, considered approach to providing feedback by the community. The benefit here is that, while comment ratings could be used to overwhelm a minority segment of the population, the way ratings actually are used seems to indicate otherwise. I suspect there is a psychological underpinning to the use of these types of ratings, in which the intent of the author of the comment is seen as a valuable contribution, and is supported whether or not the comment itself was either so exemplary or so unproductive as to deserve a rating at either extreme of the scale.

The comment rating system that was in use on Daily Kos seemed to be employed to allow a diverse segment of the community to speak freely, while also encouraging members to pay close attention to the perceived value of their communications. At the same time, it provided all members, lurkers and commenters alike, the means of expressing their valuations of the commentary that occurred.

Limitations

Hidden Comments

As mentioned in Chapter 1, comments with an average rating of <1 (e.g., any comment which receives a 0 and a 1, or multiple 0s in combination with any sum for which the average will be less than 1) are hidden from view of the average member. Numerous references to these hidden comments testify to their volubility and rancor; whenever hidden comments are mentioned on the site, members frequently state that they "need to shower" after reading them. Study of these hidden comments would have been a useful adjunct to this research, showing, as they would, which comments were deemed unproductive by the community's Trusted Users. However, they are not publicly available, and my communications to the site owner requesting access went unanswered.

Ratings Timeframe

Within Slashdot, time elapsed from the originating comment in a thread was shown to have a deleterious effect on the moderation frequency of later comments. Specifically, comments posted later in the life of comments threads, or deeper within a thread were less likely to receive a rating, when compared to the moderating attention earlier comments received. This led to the researchers' conclusion that ratings were "not entirely fairly applied to all comments" (Lampe and Resnick 2004:138). Since this research did not incorporate chronological information into the statistical analysis

of the ratings, it is unknown whether this was a factor either in the number or type of ratings comments received, nor in when certain types of comments were posted.

Social Contagion and Individual Ratings Analysis

Because this study did not incorporate the timestamp of individual comment ratings, the possibility of social contagion on ratings allocation also remains an unexamined factor. The possibility that community members would choose to read and then uprate or downrate comments based on a comment's displayed current rating could not be examined. It is not known whether social contagion was a factor determining whether community members chose to rate comments in response to previously allocated ratings.

New Ratings Format

The Pie Fight took place in June 2005. Since that time, many changes to the site have taken place—most notably, the comment ratings function has been simplified to allow only ratings of + and -, and only Trusted Users may use the -. Thus, the current research cannot adequately be replicated to determine whether or not the community as a whole has maintained its deliberative orientation, or if the viewpoints of community members have become more uniform over time. Because the ratings system is now a brute measure rather than a continuum, the valuation distinctions which were surfaced regarding different types of comments can no longer be made.

Identity and Authenticity

One issue that this research did not anticipate, and which has become increasingly noted in political blogs during the 2008 election, is the presence or participation of people who express opinions which are in fact not their own. The practice, which originated in the Nixon era and has a uniquely crude name, is much more likely to occur online than in any other place. The anonymity and concurrent benefits that it provides in online communication is the perfect foil for behavior of this type. While such sock-puppeting is something that is called out on the Daily Kos and other sites when it is discovered, this type of duplicity is something that bears further attention and study. The Obama campaign reputedly had hired (or sought volunteer) bloggers to participate in comments sections in political weblogs, to debunk inaccurate comments or smears (stopthesmears.com); although they may have posted opinions with which they agreed, it is unknown whether or not bloggers who participated disclosed their affiliation with the campaign. More to the point, such tactics also provide a roadmap to those who would wish to counter such messages.

There is an assumption that everyone who is online is an honest actor, and regrettably, as in face to face communication, this is not always the case. As more campaigns move online, and as political weblogs grow in number, the risk is that people will pose as actors in the community when really what they are doing is trolling, but in a more sophisticated way – to have an effect on the offline conversations of the community members. Conversion narratives (such as when a

current or former member of Party X writes strongly in favor of a Candidate from Party Y) involve their author taking a dramatic or provocative or manipulative stance so as to make the eventual "conversion" in favor of a candidate or an issue that much more powerful. Because there is no way of knowing whether or not anything written online is the work of an honest actor, all research concerning anonymous deliberative communication on the Internet needs to include this factor as a limitation.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

This study found that community-controlled comment moderation, when designed well, provides an important tool to facilitate deliberation during a time of highly-felt conflict within the community. Given previous concerns that the Social Identity/Deindividuation (SIDE) effects of computer-mediated communication could be more likely to create in- and out-groups within online communities, online political communities were seen to be at risk of takeover by members who are not as open to the expression of opposing viewpoints. This limited their usefulness as sites where deliberation might take place.

It is true that not everyone is comfortable or skilled in expressing reasoned disagreement, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be allowed the opportunity to develop those skills. Exposure to moderated discussion can help less-skilled discussants to learn the protocols of deliberation and eventually participate more competently in such conversations. Paradoxically, a politically deliberative community needs to provide its members with low impact means of expressing dissent, which have a low threshold of commitment or risk. This research demonstrates that a moderation system based on comment ratings provides online communities an important tool, not only for measuring the type of communication that the community prefers, but also for moderating the commentary that occurs on the site.

This research sought to determine whether or not online political discussion groups could be appropriate venues in which deliberation could occur, thus paving the way for online deliberative democratic participation. Cass Sunstein (2001) and Richard Davis (1999) both expressed skepticism. Sunstein (2001) believed that these groups would be merely echo chambers where people only went to hear others like themselves. Davis (1999) expressed concerns that participants in online communities would be driven away by the unwelcoming argumentation, and even abuse, which took place within them.

This study indicates that neither of these dire predictions is true in at least one online community at the time of the research. While we can't know how these results are reflected by what is happening in the community now, the findings indicate that, at the time of the Pie Fight, the Daily Kos community was in fact a place where reasoned deliberation of disagreement could occur. There was neither an echo chamber effect where dissenting viewpoints were quelled in favor of a unifying narrative, nor was there a free-for-all atmosphere where bullying or emotionally overwrought language was tolerated by community members. While there was indeed a community promotion aspect present, it had less to do with a uniformity of views and more to do with civil discussion mores and the appropriate expression of differing viewpoints. There was less tolerance for off-topic and interpersonal conversation than was hypothesized, but only as far as positive rating of such commentary was concerned.

Specifically, this research found that not only is the Daily Kos an active online discussion group, it is a deliberative group as well. At the time of this research, or at least within the case studied, the community demonstrably responded affirmatively to communication that expressed disagreement with the previous comment, rather than valuing only communication that agreed with the previous comments. Rating allocations indicate that this group was more likely to promote discussion about difference of opinion than agreement. These discussions and disagreements were marked by the civility which was rewarded therein. The communications which received low ratings are those that contain a negative emotional component, such as anger or sarcasm. In the absence of negative emotional tone or off-color humor, profanity was not frequently sanctioned.

Agreement within conversation is not what gets rewarded, but comments that discuss civil behavior within the community (either as something that is missed, or something to be aspired to) are rewarded. The Daily Kos remains an active community, not without its differences of opinion, which has an awareness and appreciation of itself as a deliberative collective. The community has group mores, values and seeks to protect the site as a place where civil discussion can occur, and sees it also as a place that does have a reputation to worth protecting.

Deliberation

H1: The community will use the rating system to support a diverse discussion of views within comments threads.

The exploration of the relationship between comments which received a high number of positive member ratings, and the type of thread they were in yielded an encouraging result. The overwhelming majority of threads within the dataset contained a negative agreement factor instead of a positive agreement factor, indicating there was demonstrated diversity of viewpoints within comments threads. Regardless of the average thread rating, a thread was much more likely to contain commenters that disagree than agree, and those threads with the highest percentage of disagreement also contained the highest number of positive comment ratings, indicating support of deliberation of a diversity of views.

Although this was not explicitly predicted during the initial proposal period, these findings do correspond with more recent research on this community. Specifically, Soma (2007) found that, in spite of the purpose of comment ratings as designed to promote a certain type of well-reasoned comment, what actually seemed to occur was the use of a rating of a comment to indicate agreement. Rather than promulgate a string of "me too" comments in the face of a well-stated comment, community members were more likely to give a rating (of 4) to those comments with which they agreed, which were also "well-stated," while at the same time seeming to ignore (vis-à-vis ratings) or else responding directly to comments with which they

disagreed. Given the paucity of comments which received an average rating of less than 4 (8% of the entire dataset), it appears that community members chose to create a responding comment expressing their disagreement rather than use a low rating to express their disagreement. The result is an increase in new ideas being introduced to the conversation, resulting in more deliberation rather than the creation of an echo chamber.

Negative Communication

H2: The community will use the rating system to punish or diminish specific types of comments that hinder deliberation.

As predicted, comments in which negative modes of expression are used were more likely to receive a higher number of low/punitive ratings—these comments were deemed either marginal or unproductive to the service of good communication within the community. Regardless of content, disagreeably related commentary was more frequently given a negative rating than comments which indicated disagreement with previously expressed ideas or viewpoints. However, comments coded as being conveyed with a negative emotional tone were also more frequently given 3 ratings than any other type of comment in the dataset (that had a substantive number of comments). This could be due to the type of in-group communication that sometimes occurs within online communities, where what looks like verbal aggressiveness to one segment of the group can be understood by another as a strategy of "benign conflict"

designed to increase community cohesion via faux or mock aggression or sarcasm (Serfaty 2002).

<center>Deliberative and Pro-Group communication</center>

H3: The community will use the rating system to applaud or support specific types of comments that support conditions of deliberation.

For the most part, the hypothesized pro-group comments did receive a higher percentage of high ratings than the remainder of the dataset, as measured by the baseline ratings. Of special note was the extremely high percentage for comments that expressed dismay or concern about the tone of the discussion (the negative metacommunication coded comments) or about the effect of the Pie Fight or the ad on the reputation of the Daily Kos in the wider world.

Surprisingly, there were instances where comments received ratings at above the baseline in both high and low categories, comments containing profanity providing the most dramatic example. This is likely due to the fact that profanity is always an attention-getter, but likewise can be explained by the use of low ratings to punish crudeness and puerile commentary, as well as the use of high ratings to promote comments that used profanity to emphasize their point within communications which may have been written by emotional or deeply affected authors who were writing comments that also contained a pro-group orientation. A ratings-split behavior, where ratings of 4 seemed to be giving to mitigate the adverse effects of a concurrent low rating of 1 within the same comment, was also noted.

Future Research

The present research suggests two avenues of future research: one maintaining focus on the Daily Kos Pie Fight and its participants, and the other broadening the scope to look at Daily Kos or other online political discussion groups who have since employed a rating/moderation function.

Further Study: Daily Kos Pie Fight Dataset

Future research on the present dataset could allow for a more precise view of how ratings were allocated in a multivariate analysis. For example, evaluating the ratings that were given to the subset of comments coded as disagreeing with Markos, discussing the community as an entity, and calling out negative metacommunication could allow for a more targeted understanding of how ratings are used for a narrower range of comments.

A longitudinal analysis of participation by those community members whose comments were negatively rated would be of interest to measure the regulatory effects of the ratings system. If those members remained active, is there evidence that they learned from the ratings their comments received, and are now positively contributing members, or are they still participating in ways that garner only negative attention? If they decided to leave the community, do they consider their departure as the result of the ratings their comments received, or due to other factors? Do any of the members who chose to depart continue to read Daily Kos, are they still participating in other

online political communities, or have they opted out of participating in such discussions altogether?

Regarding the content of communication: Of those people whose comments were coded with disagreement or negative emotional tone codes, or who chose to respond or explain their viewpoints in the face of explicit disagreement, how many remained active in the community one year later? What are the statistics for those members whose comments were coded with agreement, positive metacommunication about the community's purpose, positive emotional tone, or humor codes?

An inductive content analysis of comments would enable several other questions to be asked, and additional studies to be undertaken. Of those members who were so angered or distressed by the Pie Fight or the communication about it, regardless of the ratings their comments received, how many chose to leave the community, why did they choose to do so, and where did they end up? Have any of them returned to Daily Kos, and if so, why? Finally, how many people chose to stay in spite of their disagreement with Markos or other community members, and why did they choose to do so?

With regard to ratings efficacy, an inductive content analysis of those comments which were coded as negative or not adding to the conversation would add to the understanding of which types of comments make it past the Trusted Member filter. Assuming that access to zero-rated comments could be procured, this could also measure the efficacy of the hidden comments convention. If any of the comments

which remained visible had ever received a rating of zero, then at least one additional Trusted Member rated that comment so that it could be seen. An analysis of those comments, and a survey of the trusted members in question, could give insight to the means by which the trusted members seek to regulate the community commentary.

Lastly, an evaluation of member behavior, correlating the types of comments that each member rated with the member's own position on the Pie Fight, could give an indication of whether or not individuals were in fact using ratings to promote deliberation versus merely supporting comments that mirrored their own point of view. In the case where members only rated comments but did not comment themselves, surveying them to determine whether or not they were rating comments that articulated points of view which they chose not to advance themselves, and if so, why that choice was made, would provide additional insight into how these "lurkers" chose to use comment ratings.

Further Study: Daily Kos Community

Change of the site moderation system versus evolution of the site: This research describes an earlier point in the lifecycle of the group, not only chronologically, but also with a different moderation scheme than the one currently employed. It is possible that at some point in their lifecycle, groups turn into echo chambers of opinion before cycling away again. Alternately, the change in the moderation system may have contributed to an alteration of the group itself.

In my previous research on the community (Soma 2007), people who disagreed with Markos or others in the community about the Pie Fight were asked, or in some cases told, to leave the site, though there was no record of how many actually did so. More recently, the widely publicized departure of "pro-Hillary Clinton Bloggers" which occurred during the 2008 Presidential Primary (Wheaton 2008), would seem to indicate that the appreciation of disparate viewpoints on the site has diminished. It may be that the modification of the ratings system in 2006 has removed an important tool for participation for those people who might not feel comfortable or even able to sanction disagreeable or sexist commentary, by requiring them to write a response to express exactly why a comment is disagreeable to them. The removal of a previously useful tool to moderate the discussion in the community may have affected the community's deliberative identity more substantially and adversely than numerical measures of community membership or thread depth suggest. The new requirement that a member gain Mojo before they can downrate a comment may have raised the bar on who is actually given a voice in the moderation of commentary, which could have broadened the range of uncivil communications that go unchallenged.

I would like to use the same coding scheme to evaluate comments on the current Daily Kos site. Now that the moderation scheme has been changed from the 0-4 ratings to +s and –s, I would be interested in seeing whether or not there is a difference in comment rating frequency correlated with the percentage of comments that agree versus disagree with the previous comment. As well, I would be interested

in evaluating the community measurements in conjunction with the number (and percentage) of positive ratings those comments get relative to other comments in a discussion thread.

Further Study: Spiral of Silence

Earlier research predicted that online communities would be less affected by the Spiral of Silence, due to anonymity providing the cover necessary to promote an unpopular view (McDevitt, Kiousis, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2003). I would be interested to examine whether or not a member's longevity in a community increases or decreases their willingness to take an unpopular stance within the community. Does an online persona eventually become a personal identity that is worth protecting? Additionally, as online communities grow and change, the possibility that members might choose to meet face-to-face increases as well. What might be the impacts of these offline meetings on a members' online participation in the community? Does the experience of one's online community in an offline space change an individual's willingness to espouse unpopular views?

People who are conflict avoidant are less likely to express a strong interest in political affairs (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Computer-mediated communication may be able to limit the adverse effects of conflict by depersonalizing the sting of disapproval, allowing users to focus on the message instead of the person sending or receiving it, and using moderation to reduce the burden on people who would like to express disapproval. Given the ability of computer-mediated communications to support

deliberation, as this research shows, could moderated computer-mediated communication provide enough protection for the conflict-avoidant to consider increasing their political participation, either as informed citizens or as voters?

Further Study: Moderation Schemes

Regarding comment moderation itself, comparing the member experience of multi-labeled moderation (such as that used in Slashdot) with a purely numerical moderation scheme could help determine which would be more useful for deliberation. Specifically, do labels influence the moderation that occurs, and if so, in what way? Do people react more strongly to numbers than to labels, and in which case do people receiving lower ratings feel the need to defend their comment versus re-stating it to make their own intention clearer? What type of moderation is more likely to cause members who have written comments that get down-rated respond positively and productively, instead of negatively?

Conclusion

The present research indicates that a community comment moderation system can be used to support the conditions of deliberation in an online community. As people become more habituated to the requirements for clear communication within CMC, it is likely that the Internet can be more successfully used as a legitimate venue for political deliberation, either formally under the auspices of local, state, or national governments, or informally, via online communities such as the one under study. Of course, no matter where the communication occurs, the neutrality and good faith of the

moderators, and the discussants, is the most important factor that will determine

whether a truly deliberative conversation is going to occur. This research shows that

providing community members with the tools to moderate the conversation as it

occurs offers an effective means of supporting community-wide deliberation, and

indicates that real-time comment moderation can be successfully used to allow a broad

range of views to be deliberated.

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APPENDIX A: CONTENT CODING MATRIX

Variable Title	Topic Centeredness	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Is message off topic or unrelated to previous message?	
Relation to Hypothesis	1 and 3	
Operationalize	Messages that receive this designation do not discuss the Pie Fight or the ad, or they otherwise move the discussion away from its earlier point. Includes Recipes, "larger issues" of sexism or gender, discussions of personal experience, jokes, etc.	
Unit of Analysis	Single message	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
On topic	0= no selection	Message discusses the pie fight or the ad.
Off topic	1= OFFTOPIC	Messages that receive this designation do not discuss the pie fight or the ad, or they otherwise move the discussion away from its earlier point.
		Includes Recipes, "larger issues" of sexism or gender, discussions of personal experience, etc.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Not applicable.	
Relation to other variables	If message is On topic, skip to variable #2	
	If message is Off topic, skip to variable #3 (Agree/Disagree)	

Variable Title	Position on Markos or Ad	
Content Analysis Descriptor	What is the stated or implied position of the commenter on the ad or Markos' response to its critics?	
Relation to Hypothesis	This code was not used for this research, but could be used to identify comments for future research.	
Operationalize	These comments include some discussion of Markos or the Pie Fight Ad	
Unit of Analysis	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
Indeterminate	0 = INDE	Indeterminate – rarely used – consider recoding if at all possible.
Pro-Markos	1 = PRO	Indicates support of Markos or of his right to run the ad.
Anti-Markos	2 = ANTI	Indicates disagreement with Markos, or states that ad is a negative indicator about community, or that Markos' response was rude.
Neutral	3 = NEUT	Indicates that ad is "not a big deal," that community has "more important things" to discuss. Can coexist with #2, but is most frequently encountered alone.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	If multiple views held, choose predominate view (e.g. comment 226 in diary 1) 605 - "it's not about the ad" is still anti-Markos	
Relation to other variables	This variable was used to determine whether the comment agreed or disagreed with previous on-topic comments.	

Variable Title	Position on previous post	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does the commenter agree or disagree with the previous poster's statement or viewpoint?	
Relation to Hypothesis	1	
Operationalize	Comment expresses an opinion or position about the previous comment.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
Agree	1 = AGRE	Comment indicates agreement with person/content in immediately preceding post. Self-response comments are coded as agree.
Disagree	2 = DISAG	Comments indicates disagreement with person/content in immediately preceding post. Questions and recipes are coded as disagree.
Indeterminate	3 = INDE	Neither agreement or disagreement can be determined.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Not applicable.	
Relation to other variables	This variable was used in conjunction with Position on Markos or Ad to determine whether the current comment agreed or disagreed with the previous on-topic comments.	

Variable Title	Reserve	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message request quelling of discussion or deletion of comments.?	
Relation to Hypothesis	1	
Operationalize	Commenter urges cessation of discussion as either of no value or else harmful to the community.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
Reserve	1 = RESERV	Comment includes a request to stop talking about pie fight ad/conflict or advocate deletion of comments regarding it?
		Examples: Markos should not have mentioned it. Also includes "dead horse" dead cat" get over themselves.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Not applicable.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Profanity	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message includes coarse language commonly accepted as profanity?	
Relation to Hypothesis	2, 3	
Operationalize	Comment includes language commonly accepted as profanity, slang, and associated acronyms.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
Profanity Present	1 = PROFAN	Comment includes commonly accepted profanity, slang terms for genitalia, acronyms known to denote profanity, such as WTF.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Not applicable	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Emotional Tone
Content Analysis Descriptor	What is the emotional tone of the message?
Relation to Hypothesis	2
Operationalize	Message includes language specifically denoting commenter's emotional state, or is conveyed either positively or negatively as described below.

Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
Indeterminate Emotional Tone	0 = EMOIND	Message tone is neither positive nor negative, or both equally. Factual. Can include agreement or disagreement.
Positive Emotional Tone	1 = EMO+	Message tone is positive: complimentary, calming, or agreeing, conciliatory, or contains an apology. 822 for "compliment"
Negative Emotional Tone	2 = EMO-	Message tone is negative: contains angry, sarcastic, or insulting communication. Includes ALLCAPS "yelling" name calling, hyperbole, *ad hominem*, and obviously "bad faith" communication (I'll assume …)
Decision rule when more than one category fits	If poster says "I agree" or "I disagree" but rest of tone is neutral, then code as indeterminate. Emo+ and Emo- are the predominant emotions – but if a comment has slight references to both, or is predominantly neutral, code as Indeterminate.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Interpersonal	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message content include personal self-disclosure about author's personal experience, emotions, or offline life?	
Relation to Hypothesis	3	
Operationalize	Message includes first-person disclosure about offline life or explanation for response to Pie Fight.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
Interpersonal	1 = INTERP	Comment includes I, me, or my in reference to bulk of comment and tells a personal narrative. Message may be related to Pie Fight.
		Examples: What upset me, I was aroused by it, my mother once told me, etc.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Interpersonal does not include all mentions of I, me or my. For example, "I think X about Y," is not coded as Interpersonal, but "When I experienced X" is coded as Interpersonal.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Community as Entity	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message contain use of first-person plural pronouns ("us", "we") about the group?	
Relation to Hypothesis	3	
Operationalize	Message includes discussion about the community itself.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
We / Us	1 = WE/US	Comment includes information about the current and past configuration of the group, as well as predictions of the future of the group.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Comments that talk about "our party" but not Daily Kos are not coded as WE/US.	
	Comments about improving site are WE/US. Also includes talk about community being worth more than the present brouhaha, imprecations to specific users to "stick around", that the community is bigger than Markos, or better than one person. Comments referring to change in the community (such as "jumping the shark") are also coded as WE/US.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Humor	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message contain attempts at humor?	
Relation to Hypothesis	3	
Operationalize	Comment contains wordplay, teasing, puns on pie, the acronym LOL, smileys, or is designed to lighten the mood.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
No humor in comment	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
Humor	1 = HUMOR	Comment contains wordplay, teasing, puns on pie, the acronym LOL, smileys, or is obviously designed to lighten the mood.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Humor in conjunction with EMO- denotes sarcasm or snark. Humor in conjunction with EMO+ denotes friendly teasing. Humor may be only a couple of lines in a long post, and may be in an off topic post; if it exists at all, code comment as HUMOR.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Metacommunication	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message contain meta communication about the talk in the diary or community?	
Relation to Hypothesis	3	
Operationalize	Comment references behavior of community members, as member of the community. Talk in comments, comment content. Discussion of others – not "you" or "me."	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
No discussion of metacommunication in comment	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
Positive Metacommunication	1 = META+	Compliments or praise for conversation in Pie Fight, or about Markos' comments.
Negative Metacommunication	2 = META-	Complaints about conversation in Pie Fight, or about Markos' comments.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	A discussion of the group communication behavior within diary or comments is this category. Also includes "quoting" of previous words used to back up a behavior claim, but not general conversational quoting. META comments are about the tone of the discussion in general, rather than comments to a person about their comment. Comments directed to Markos about his diary are coded as META.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Group Reputation	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message contain discussion about how the group is behaving, or will be represented?	
Relation to Hypothesis	3	
Operationalize	Comment references the group reputation, includes indication of "famous visitors" or candidates, discussion of external interpretation of group behavior, or references a media source referring to Daily Kos.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
No discussion of Group Reputation	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
Positive Group Reputation	1 = GROUP+	Comment discusses the reputation of the group as something that is valuable, worthy of being protected, esteemed or otherwise representative of Progressives.
Negative Group Reputation	2 = GROUP-	Comment discusses the reputation of the group as something that has been tarnished or diminished by either the Pie Fight ad or the discussions about it. References community being "laughed at" or derisively talked about.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	Not applicable.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

Variable Title	Ratings Discussion	
Content Analysis Descriptor	Does message reference ratings (either giving or receiving a rating)?	
Relation to Hypothesis	3	
Operationalize	Can also include the number four in subject line.	
Category Descriptions and examples	SPSS value Var. on Code sheet	Operationalize
No discussion of Rating	0 = no selection	Variable not present in comment.
Positive Rating	1 = RATING+	Comment includes reference to giving a high rating to a different comment or author, or an expression of thanks for the receipt of a high rating.
Negative Rating	2 = RATING-	Comment includes complaint about a low rating received by the author, or given to a different author.
Decision rule when more than one category fits	If comment expressly mentions giving a high rating to offset a low rating, code as RATING- because it is a complaint about the rating system.	
Relation to other variables	Independent	

APPENDIX B: MACHINE CODES

Code Type	Visible during Coding	Code Purpose
Comment Date	Yes	Used to temporally locate comment in context of discussion
Comment Depth in Thread	Yes	Used to locate comment for coding display and later analysis
Comment Number in Diary	Yes	Used to locate comment for coding display and later analysis
Comment Number in Thread	Yes	Used to locate comment for coding display and later analysis
Comment Time	Yes	Temporally locate comment in context of discussion
Parent Comment Number	Yes	Used to contextualize comment content and locate comment for later analysis
Author # of ratings in Diary	No	Used to measure author's participation, for interactivity measurements (not used)
Author # of ratings in thread	No	Used to measure author's participation, for interactivity measurements (not used)
Author ID Number	No	Attached automatically from website – identifies author's seniority in community (not used)
Author Number of comments in Diary	No	Used to measure author's participation, for interactivity measurements (not used)
Author Number of comments in Thread	No	Used to measure author's participation, for interactivity measurements (not used)
Average Rating Value	No	Attached automatically from website, not used in research
Number of Ratings	No	Used to measure comment's popularity, for interactivity measurements (not used)
Value of Ratings	No	Used in conjunction with hand codes for statistical analysis

APPENDIX C: CORPUS CODING STATISTICS

		Comments matching code		Ratings of 1			Ratings of 2		
		#	% of total	#	per	vs. all	#	per	vs. all
All comments		1459	100.00%	452	0.31		157	0.11	
OFFTOP	no (0)	814	55.79%	254	0.31	1.00	101	0.12	1.12
	yes (1)	645	44.21%	198	0.31	1.00	56	0.09	0.84
MARKOS	none (0)	633	43.39%	196	0.31	1.00	51	0.08	0.74
	anti (1)	333	22.82%	115	0.35	1.13	72	0.22	2.04
	pro (2)	189	12.95%	94	0.50	1.61	26	0.14	1.30
	neut (3)	170	11.65%	29	0.17	0.55	8	0.05	0.46
	inde (4)	134	9.18%	18	0.13	0.42	0	0.00	0.00
AGREE	agree (1)	473	32.42%	139	0.29	0.94	34	0.07	0.65
	disagree (2)	784	53.74%	265	0.34	1.10	105	0.13	1.21
	indete (3)	202	13.85%	48	0.24	0.77	18	0.09	0.84
RESERV	no (0)	1428	97.88%	445	0.31	1.00	156	0.11	1.02
	yes (1)	31	2.12%	7	0.23	0.74	1	0.03	0.28
PROFAN	no (0)	1244	85.26%	330	0.27	0.87	117	0.09	0.84
	yes (1)	215	14.74%	122	0.57	1.84	40	0.19	1.77
EMOTONE	positive (1)	312	21.38%	44	0.14	0.45	8	0.03	0.28
	negative (2)	332	22.76%	277	0.83	2.68	93	0.28	2.60
	indete (3)	815	55.86%	131	0.16	0.52	56	0.07	0.65
INTERP	no (0)	1350	92.53%	437	0.32	1.03	153	0.11	1.02
	yes (1)	109	7.47%	15	0.14	0.45	4	0.04	0.37
WE/US	no (0)	1273	87.25%	428	0.34	1.10	145	0.11	1.02
	yes (1)	186	12.75%	24	0.13	0.42	12	0.06	0.56
HUMOR	no (0)	1250	85.68%	352	0.28	0.90	140	0.11	1.02
	yes (1)	209	14.32%	100	0.48	1.55	17	0.08	0.74
METACOM	no value (0)	1134	77.72%	353	0.31	1.00	111	0.10	0.93
	M_pos (1)	28	1.92%	11	0.39	1.26	1	0.04	0.37
	M_neg (2)	297	20.36%	88	0.30	0.97	45	0.15	1.39
GROUP	no value (0)	1428	97.88%	445	0.31	1.00	147	0.10	0.93
	G_pos (1)	5	0.34%	0	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
	G_neg (2)	26	1.78%	7	0.27	0.87	10	0.38	3.53
RATING	no value (0)	1367	93.69%	412	0.30	0.97	147	0.11	1.02
	R_pos (1)	38	2.60%	13	0.34	1.10	5	0.13	1.21
	R_neg (2)	54	3.70%	27	0.50	1.61	5	0.09	0.84
INTERP+OFFTOP		62	4.25%	11	0.18	0.58	2	0.03	0.28
PROFAN+HUMOR		30	2.06%	33	1.10	3.55	6	0.20	1.86
OFFTOP+HUMOR		144	9.87%	61	0.42	1.36	13	0.09	0.84
EMOTONE(neg)+ METACOM(neg)		89	6.10%	53	0.60	1.94	24	0.27	2.51
EMOTONE(pos)+ METACOM(neg)		40	2.74%	0	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
EMOTONE(neg)+ RATING(neg)		22	1.51%	23	1.05	3.39	5	0.23	2.14
EMOTONE(neg)+WE/US		28	1.92%	16	0.57	1.84	4	0.14	1.30
EMOTONE(pos)+WE/US		47	3.22%	1	0.02	0.06	2	0.04	0.37
METACOM(neg)+WE/US		54	3.70%	7	0.13	0.42	7	0.13	1.21

Continued on next page.

		Comments matching code		Ratings of 3			Ratings of 4		
		#	% of total	#	per	vs. all	#	per	vs. all
All comments		1459	100.00%	452	0.31		157	0.11	
OFFTOP	no (0)	814	55.79%	81	0.10	1.20	3888	4.78	1.42
	yes (1)	645	44.21%	41	0.06	0.72	1036	1.61	0.48
MARKOS	none (0)	633	43.39%	41	0.06	0.72	960	1.52	0.45
	anti (1)	333	22.82%	54	0.16	1.91	2643	7.94	2.35
	pro (2)	189	12.95%	11	0.06	0.72	563	2.98	0.88
	neut (3)	170	11.65%	9	0.05	0.60	488	2.87	0.85
	inde (4)	134	9.18%	7	0.05	0.60	270	2.01	0.60
AGREE	agree (1)	473	32.42%	28	0.06	0.72	1345	2.84	0.84
	disagree (2)	784	53.74%	81	0.10	1.20	3336	4.26	1.26
	indete (3)	202	13.85%	13	0.06	0.72	243	1.20	0.36
RESERV	no (0)	1428	97.88%	120	0.08	0.96	4827	3.38	1.00
	yes (1)	31	2.12%	2	0.06	0.72	97	3.13	0.93
PROFAN	no (0)	1244	85.26%	92	0.07	0.84	3716	2.99	0.89
	yes (1)	215	14.74%	30	0.14	1.67	1208	5.62	1.67
EMOTONE	positive (1)	312	21.38%	18	0.06	0.72	713	2.29	0.68
	negative (2)	332	22.76%	52	0.16	1.91	1420	4.28	1.27
	indete (3)	815	55.86%	52	0.06	0.72	2791	3.42	1.01
INTERP	no (0)	1350	92.53%	114	0.08	0.96	4507	3.34	0.99
	yes (1)	109	7.47%	8	0.07	0.84	417	3.83	1.13
WE/US	no (0)	1273	87.25%	100	0.08	0.96	4147	3.26	0.97
	yes (1)	186	12.75%	22	0.12	1.44	777	4.18	1.24
HUMOR	no (0)	1250	85.68%	103	0.08	0.96	4547	3.64	1.08
	yes (1)	209	14.32%	19	0.09	1.08	377	1.80	0.53
METACOM	no value (0)	1134	77.72%	93	0.08	0.96	2701	2.38	0.71
	M_pos (1)	28	1.92%	0	0.00	0.00	37	1.32	0.39
	M_neg (2)	297	20.36%	29	0.10	1.20	2186	7.36	2.18
GROUP	no value (0)	1428	97.88%	118	0.08	0.96	4666	3.27	0.97
	G_pos (1)	5	0.34%	1	0.20	2.39	26	5.20	1.54
	G_neg (2)	26	1.78%	3	0.12	1.44	232	8.92	2.64
RATING	no value (0)	1367	93.69%	111	0.08	0.96	4672	3.42	1.01
	R_pos (1)	38	2.60%	3	0.08	0.96	84	2.21	0.65
	R_neg (2)	54	3.70%	8	0.15	1.79	168	3.11	0.92
INTERP+OFFTOP		62	4.25%	2	0.03	0.36	106	1.71	0.51
PROFAN+HUMOR		30	2.06%	2	0.07	0.84	74	2.47	0.73
OFFTOP+HUMOR		144	9.87%	16	0.11	1.32	185	1.28	0.38
EMOTONE(neg)+ METACOM(neg)		89	6.10%	14	0.16	1.91	681	7.65	2.27
EMOTONE(pos)+ METACOM(neg)		40	2.74%	2	0.05	0.60	183	4.58	1.36
EMOTONE(neg)+ RATING(neg)		22	1.51%	4	0.18	2.15	106	4.82	1.43
EMOTONE(neg)+WE/US		28	1.92%	6	0.21	2.51	179	6.39	1.89
EMOTONE(pos)+WE/US		47	3.22%	5	0.11	1.32	177	3.77	1.12
METACOM(neg)+WE/US		54	3.70%	5	0.09	1.08	410	7.59	2.25