

Summer 7-15-2014

The Wounds of the Wild West: Analysis of the Online Debate about Guns at the Local and National Level

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THE WOUNDS OF THE WILD WEST:
ANALYSIS OF THE ONLINE DEBATE ABOUT GUNS AT THE LOCAL
AND NATIONAL LEVEL

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A dissertation submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

2014

This dissertation entitled:
The Wounds of the Wild West: Analysis of the Online Debate about Guns at the Local
and National Level
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The final copy of this dissertation has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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The Wounds of the Wild West: Analysis of the Online Debate about Guns at the Local and National Level

Dissertation directed by Assistant Professor J. Richard Stevens, Ph.D.

Informal talk between citizens could be considered the glue that holds a deliberative democracy together. In everyday political talk, opinions are formed, formal institutions are criticized so they can be improved, and social change is initiated and advanced. But even informal conversation can be difficult or unproductive when the issue being discussed is heated or controversial, such as debates over gun rights and gun control.

National debates over gun issues increased after the elementary school shooting in 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut, and residents of Colorado recalled lingering emotional wounds acquired after the 1999 Columbine school shooting in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado and the 2012 theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado. Colorado has been the site of multiple mass shootings in recent decades, and most Coloradans have historically ascribed to a libertarian philosophy that favors individual gun rights over gun control. The tensions between these two facts make Colorado an intriguing case study in the gun debate.

This project was designed to examine online discussion of the gun debate to determine if and which elements of deliberation this discussion contained, whether the amount of those elements of deliberation differed whether discussion happened on a local or national level, and how discussion participants were using and framing expertise. This study employs both content analysis and textual analysis of comments on gun issues in the online

comments forums of three Colorado newspapers from July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013.

Though commenting did not amount to actual deliberation, some elements of deliberation, such as respect and the discussion of solutions to problems, were present more often when commenters were discussing issues on a local rather than a national level. Commenters rejected the legitimacy of experts in favor of technological populism, and the only form of expertise pro-gun-rights commenters considered relevant to the debate was personal knowledge and experience with firearms. Wild West mythology informed the gun debate in Colorado, as many commenters tied guns to a Western American Monomythic fantasy, while others insisted that lingering Wild West fantasies were hindering a rational, contemporary conversation about guns.

DEDICATION

To my father,
Stephen A. Sindorf

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Dr. Rick Stevens, my advisor and dissertation chair. In addition to being a rigorous scholar and inspiring teacher, he has been everything that an advisor and mentor should be in helping me navigate the journey from student to scholar. As his teaching assistant, I learned to be a teacher; as his research assistant, I learned to be a researcher; and as his advisee, I learned to be a productive academic. He was essential in helping me bring my research interests and passion for scholarship together to create this work. I am honored to call him a mentor, a friend, and now a colleague.

I also owe a great deal of thanks to the other members of my committee: Dr. Mike McDevitt, Dr. Elizabeth Skewes, Dr. John P. Jackson, and Dr. Leah Sprain. All have been invaluable teachers and advisors, helping make this work better and helping me grow as a scholar throughout my doctoral career.

My doctoral cohort has been crucial in supporting me throughout this journey. My cohort members Brooke Edge and John Lumpkin have helped me be strong, stay sane, and have provided intellectual engagement and extraordinary friendship. I am honored to be among such wonderful, brilliant people and scholars.

I want to thank all of the other doctoral students who have provided support and friendship, both in the Journalism and Mass Communication program and in the Communication department. Special thanks to Samira Rajabi, Marc Rich, and Caitlin Ring. I also want to thank my dear friend, Dr. R. Lila Steinberg. We began and ended this journey together, though separated by academic discipline and 1,000 miles. I have kept her close in my thoughts even when we did not talk for months.

Another thank-you is due to John Lumpkin, who assisted me with intercoder reliability on this dissertation.

I also want to personally thank Martha LaForge, our Graduate Coordinator, for providing essential support and help in navigating these waters.

I thank Jason Harmon for assisting with my knowledge and experience in firearms, which added to the depth of this project.

I want to thank all of my family and friends for their love and support over the last four years and while I was writing this dissertation. Neal Thurston,

my husband, has been my greatest love, my pillar of strength, my copy editor, and my biggest cheerleader. I could not have done this without him. My father, Stephen A. Sindorf, and my mother, Marie A. Walker, have been an incredible source of love and support. Thank you all so much.

And last but certainly not least, I want to thank my daughter, Piper Thurston, for being such a joy and an inspiration. I do it all for you, Sweet Bean.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Informal conversation that takes place between citizens is vital in a large democracy. While citizens are unlikely to talk informally until they can all agree on the direction that society should take, informal talk could be considered the glue that holds the system together to a certain extent. In everyday political talk, opinions are formed, formal institutions are criticized so they can be improved, and social change is initiated and advanced (Chambers, 2003; Coleman & Blumler, 2009, Mansbridge, 2012). Though deliberation is often given as the justification for having online discussion forums that are informal and largely unrestricted, such as the commenting sections below articles on newspapers' websites, the commenting that happens in such forums does not usually amount to actual deliberation. Deliberation is a process in which people come together to carefully consider a problem and its various solutions while remaining open to revising their preferences and changing their minds (Chambers, 2003; Gastil & Black, 2008; Dryzek, 2010). Most online discussion amounts to informal talk that does not equate to, or even resemble, actual deliberation, but even political discussion that does not qualify as deliberation supports the democratic process by increasing political engagement and encouraging opinion formation (Jacobs, Cook & Delli Carpini, 2009).

But even informal conversation can be difficult or unproductive when the issue being discussed is particularly heated or controversial, such as the debates that are conducted over issues of gun rights and gun control. Gun issues tend to be highly polarized, with gun control proponents and advocates organized into two distinct, opposing sides, with little middle ground (Jones, 2008).

National debates over gun issues became more frequent in the wake of the school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, in which 20 children and six adults were killed (Barron, 2012). The residents of Colorado were forced to revisit lingering emotional wounds acquired after the 1999 Columbine school shooting deep in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado, which resulted in 15 deaths (Verhovek, 1999), and the 2012 shooting in which 12 people were killed and 58 were injured in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado (Brown, 2012).

1.1 Columbine shooting

Perhaps because 15 years have passed since the Columbine shooting, and perhaps because the event was so publicized and left such an impression in the public mind, the shooting (generally referred to simply as “Columbine”) has been extensively investigated and reported on, as in the book *Columbine* by Dave Cullen (2009), from which the history of the events recounted here has been taken.

The planners of Columbine did not intend it as a school shooting. It was instead a failed bombing. The perpetrators were both seniors at Columbine High School. Eric Harris, who had just turned 18, was cold, calm, calculating, and the leader of the operation, and was later determined to be a psychopath by mental health professionals. Dylan Klebold, 17, was shy, emotional, depressed, and prone to snap. Columbine was planned by Harris and Klebold (though Harris did most of the planning) to be bigger than the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995. On April 20, 1999, seven propane bombs were set and supposed to detonate in the high school and a nearby park. The bombs in the high school were set in the cafeteria at its busiest, and were supposed to kill hundreds. Harris and Klebold had planned to be in the parking lot to shoot those fleeing from the bomb's carnage. They had semiautomatic rifles, handguns, shotguns, and homemade portable explosives. Their cars, parked in the school parking lot, were loaded with more bombs meant to kill journalists and first responders to the disaster. Ultimately, Harris and Klebold hoped to kill thousands. When the bombs set in the school failed to detonate, Harris and Klebold entered the school, shooting people and throwing pipe bombs before shooting themselves. Besides taking their own lives, they killed 12 students and one teacher.

Columbine riveted the nation. Local and national broadcast news coverage began a half hour after the shooting began and remained trained on the story. Many students trapped inside the building, watching the coverage on

televisions that were installed in every classroom, called news stations and were interviewed on-air. Television coverage was fragmented, misleading, lagged behind events, and was unable to explain what was happening or what had happened. Many rumors that were started by the media—that the shooters were goths and outcasts angry at school jocks, members of a group of students called the Trench Coat Mafia, and were shooting certain students selectively—turned out to be false, but were never publicly debunked.

Harris and Klebold purchased all four guns illegally. One was purchased with cash through a connection through a friend, and three were purchased at a Denver gun show when the two boys, still underage, went to a gun show with an 18-year-old friend and gave her cash to purchase the three guns, which at the time she could without a background check through what is known as the Gun Show Loophole (a loophole that has since been closed in Colorado as a result of Columbine).

In the aftermath of Columbine, guns (or access to them) were only one of many culprits blamed for the attacks. Also blamed were poor parenting, bullies, violent movies and videogames, goth culture, antidepressants, Satan, and many more. Columbine sparked many national conversations about the social problems that were named as causes for the shooting, and moral outrages ensued surrounding violent media, what many described as a bullying epidemic, teenagers in trenchcoats, psychotropic medications, and the availability of guns. The gun debate was intensified when the National

Rifle Association refused to cancel their annual convention, which was held in Denver shortly after the shooting. Thousands protested the convention.

The killers had extensively documented their preparations for the attacks and their stated reasons for them in journals and a collection of videos taped up until the day of the attacks. The Basement Tapes, as they came to be known, were made with the knowledge that the videos would be discovered after the attacks, so they served as performances, to be seen by a worldwide audience after-the-fact. Eric Harris had also documented his rage against humanity on his personal website beginning in 1997. Columbine occurred perhaps at the beginning of the digital network era. Had the killers been able to post videos to YouTube or social media, they likely would have done so.

1.2 Aurora Theater shooting

Another mass shooting in the Denver suburbs caught national attention thirteen years after Columbine. On July 21, 2012, 24-year-old James Holmes bought a ticket to a midnight premiere of a new Batman movie, propped open an emergency exit, and entered the theater during the film's showing (Brown, 2012). Wearing a gas mask and body armor, Holmes set off a gas canister and fired on the crowd in the theater, prompting many to think the performance was a planned part of the show until they realized people were being shot (Bustillo, Banjo, & Audi, 2012). Holmes had a shotgun, a semiautomatic rifle, and a pistol, and his shooting killed 12 people and wounded 58 (Brown, 2012) before he was arrested in a parking lot behind the theater (Bustillo, Banjo, &

Audi, 2012). His Aurora apartment was also booby-trapped with explosives, probably intended to explode when police entered the apartment, but they were discovered before they could detonate (Brown, 2012). Holmes had been enrolled in a graduate program in neuroscience at the University of Colorado in Denver, but he had withdrawn in June of 2012 (Eligon, Kovalski, & Santara, 2012). His firearms were purchased legally from local gun stores, and over 6,000 rounds of ammunition were purchased legally online (Brown, 2012).

After the Aurora shooting, much of the national conversation about the attack turned to guns, both from those arguing the attack proved guns were necessary to have in public for protection and from those arguing for increased gun control. Immediately after the Aurora shooting, gun sales and interest in firearms training for concealed-carry permits spiked, perhaps out of a sudden fear among people that they are not safe (Burnett, 2012). Despite some increased public talk of guns, a survey by Pew Research (2012) found no change in public attitudes about gun rights and gun control following the Aurora theater shooting, and the American public remained almost evenly divided on the issue: 45% of those surveyed said it was more important to control gun ownership, while 46% said it was more important to protect gun rights. Pew also found that 67% of survey respondents believed shootings like Aurora are the isolated acts of troubled individuals and not signs of broader social problems.

1.3 Newtown school shooting

Unlike in Columbine and the Aurora theater shooting, there were no explosives involved in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. On December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed his mother in their home, drove to Sandy Hook Elementary School, shot his way inside, and opened fire, killing 20 children ages five to seven and six adults before shooting himself (Barron, 2012). Only one person was shot without being killed (Barron, 2012). He had taken the guns, a semiautomatic rifle and two handguns, from his mother, who had bought them legally and registered them (Flegenheimer & Somaiya, 2012).

Though in the aftermath of the Newtown shooting, people also voiced concerns about violent media and the country's health system, the national conversation turned almost immediately to a debate about guns and gun control. Democratic lawmakers called for a ban on "military-style assault weapons," by which they meant mainly semiautomatic .223 caliber rifles in the style of the AR-15 rifle, while some gun-rights politicians argued that the Newtown shooting showed not that more gun control was necessary, but rather that school employees themselves should be armed in case of an attack (Flaherty, 2012). Wayne LaPierre, Vice President of the National Rifle Association, publicly argued in favor of the placing of an armed security officer in every school, a proposal that was decried by some school

administrators and even some conservative politicians (Lichtblau & Rich, 2012).

The outrage and heated debate over gun control that followed the Newtown shooting likely reflected a sense among the American public that something must be done about gun violence when 20 young children could be brutally gunned down in their school. After the Columbine shooting, the national conversation turned to many things as the potential culprits, though the lack of Internet commenting at the time makes it more difficult to analyze public reaction. After the Aurora Theater shooting, a national debate over gun control was sparked, but it did not reach nearly the intensity of the gun debate that the Newtown shooting initiated.

1.4 The gun debate in Colorado

Polling after the Newtown shooting showed that the mass shootings in Colorado began to chip away at Colorado's traditionally staunch support for gun rights, carving a potential opening for a nuanced discussion of how some gun ownership rights might be limited in the name of public safety (Lee, 2013). In March 2013, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper achieved what was once unthinkable in a state long considered as the heart of the Wild West: he signed three new gun-control measures into law (Bartels & Lee, 2013). The bills were met with controversy, with businesses threatening to leave Colorado over the new regulations (Raabe, 2013) and more than half of

Colorado sheriffs initiating a lawsuit to challenge the laws (McGhee, 2013), a lawsuit that was thrown out of court in November 2013 (Moreno, 2013).

Despite the passage of new gun-control legislation in a state traditionally supportive of gun rights, new national gun-control laws did not fare as well in the wake of the high-profile mass shootings. United States Senate bills that would have expanded background checks and limited the capacity of gun magazines (similar to the bills that successfully passed in Colorado), as well as one that would have banned assault weapons, all failed to pass in the U. S. Senate in April 2013 (Weisman, 2013), despite a 91% approval for universal background checks in a poll of American voters released on April 4, 2013 (Quinnipiac, 2013). Gun-rights supporters proposed other policies and legislation as an alternative to gun control measures, such as laws that would have allowed employees to carry concealed weapons in schools, and their proposals did not fare any better than new gun control measures (Wyatt, 2013). Despite a great deal of national discussion of gun issues, perhaps because of a general sense that something must be done about gun violence in the wake of multiple high-profile mass shootings, new national gun-control measures, or any measures directed at curbing gun violence, failed to pass. The failure of the Senate bill at the height of the concern over gun violence may highlight a disconnect between the attitudes of the public and the work of their representatives, but it may also point to a U. S. public that is sharply divided on the solution to the problem (or perhaps whether gun violence is a

problem in the first place), and could suggest that the national conversation about gun rights and gun control is not a very productive one, as it cannot produce collectively agreed-upon solutions.

Colorado has been the site of multiple mass shootings in the last couple of decades, and the majority of the state's residents have historically ascribed to a libertarian philosophy that favors individual gun rights over gun control. The tensions between these two facts make Colorado an intriguing case study in the gun debate. For the same reasons, the gun debate in Colorado is also a fitting setting in which to examine differences in local and national discussion, as there is evidence that people are more calm and respectful when discussing political issues at a local as opposed to a national level (Perrin & Vaisey, 2008; Sindorf, 2013a). This phenomenon may be due to a distinction between the audience or imagined community a participant in a political discussion envisions he or she is interacting with and within, especially in anonymous online interaction. In much online communication, the audience to whom one is speaking must be imagined based on few or no cues to the makeup of its members. Colorado, as a Western state, is also the heir to the legacy of both Western history and mythology, and discussions about guns in Colorado are informed by myths of the Wild West.

Another factor affecting the gun debate is a difference between who different parties in the debate consider to be an expert with rights to speak authoritatively on the topic. People on opposing sides of the gun debate often

disagree upon what qualifies as legitimate expertise that is relevant to the debate; in the gun debate, the evidence and expertise offered by social scientists is often discounted in favor of an alternative form of expertise, one that arises from personal experience with guns and knowledge about weapons (Kahan & Braman, 2003).

1.5 Online discussion of the gun debate

Online comments sections provide people with an opportunity to discuss events such as mass shootings and try to make sense of them, explain them, and debate what should be done to prevent them. Online comments may seem to some to be rather inconsequential and not worthy of attention, but informal political talk is an important element in a deliberative democracy, as it contributes to citizens' political engagement and encourages opinion formation and exchange around social and cultural issues. If citizens' debates (even informal ones) surrounding important issues are unproductive in that people cannot have reasoned conversations about solutions to problems or the directions their country should take, it affects a democracy's ability to function and govern itself.

This research project was designed to examine asynchronous, computer-mediated communication through online discussion of a heated political issue on both a local and a national level to determine if and which elements of deliberation this discussion contained, whether the amount of those elements of deliberation differed whether discussion was taking place on a local or a

national level, and how discussion participants were using and framing expertise. The answers to these questions provide clues as to why the gun debate may be unproductive and may suggest ways discussion can be improved.

The study's findings indicate that an increasing cultural focus on the individual affects the online debate about guns in Colorado in multiple ways, as the fight over prioritizing gun rights versus gun control highlights a person's vision of the individual's role in society. People were more deliberative when discussing issues on a local level rather than a broader, national level. The closer the locus of discussion to the individual, the more respectful he or she was in discussion. This finding may be due to a heightened feeling of investment in problem solving when discussing issues as they affect their communities rather than the nation as a whole. It may be easier to be disrespectful toward ideological opponents who are thought to be distant from one's self and one's community.

Other findings support the idea that individualism, especially a rugged individualism associated with Wild West and American Monomyth narratives, is a particularly relevant factor in the online debate over guns and gun control in Colorado. The hero of the American Western, itself a variation of an American Monomythic narrative, acts alone, talks little, and solves problems through action, especially with a gun. This study found that many pro-gun-rights commenters expressed a disdain for what they saw as

endless and pointless talking about guns in Washington politics, preferring to maintain access to guns in case it became necessary to use them in solitary action to defend themselves and their communities from some sort of evil. At heart may be a lack of faith in collective solutions to social problems in favor of valiant action by a selfless individual.

Connected to this narrative of individual action is a lack of legitimacy given to institutional expertise and the evidence offered by scientists, social scientists, politicians, and others who have traditionally been considered experts, who are granted little cultural authority in the gun debate by pro-gun-rights commenters. Most pro-gun-rights commenters viewed personal experience with firearms as the only legitimate form of expertise in the gun debate. This emphasis on personal knowledge and experience could arise from a growing emphasis on the individual rather than the social. When a person does not trust institutional experts, hands-on experience that derives from personal knowledge and action may be the only expertise on which to safely rely. The distrust of experts may also be related to the local/national divide in that traditional experts may be associated with institutions that are distant to one's local community and hence less likely to be relevant or reliable. Expertise has become an individual possession, rather than a phenomenon arising from institutional education or credentialing. Related to a reliance on personal experience over institutional expertise was an

adherence to “technological populism,” the belief that no expert knowledge was better than the knowledge of any ordinary citizen.

1.6 Research questions and hypothesis

This project is not directed toward concluding anything about guns themselves, but is instead designed to examine how Americans talk about guns, providing some insight into how political discourse is conducted in this country. This study employs both content analysis and textual analysis of comments on gun issues that were made to the online comments forums of three different Colorado newspapers from July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013. The comments were examined in order to address the following research questions and hypothesis:

RQ1: Does online discourse about gun issues qualify as deliberation about those issues?

H1: Comments made during discussions of gun issues will be more respectful when participants are discussing issues at a local rather than national level.

RQ2: How is expertise both used and framed in discussion of gun issues?

Following this introduction, Chapter Two reviews previous scholarship and research that is relevant to this project. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used in this study. Chapter Four reports this study’s findings. Chapter Five interprets those findings and suggests their possible implications. Chapter Six makes some final conclusions about this project.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This project is informed by and builds upon the scholarship of many different disciplines, including communication, media studies, cultural studies, Internet studies, political theory, computer-mediated communication, science and technology studies, studies of expertise and experience, among others.

2.1 Online discussion: The hope and the reality

Conversations that are truly national in scope and that are facilitated by Internet technologies provide easy and frictionless connection between strangers. People who never would otherwise have the opportunity to meet offline can conduct an involved exchange with the click of a “comment” button. However, cheap and easy connections do not necessarily produce good conversation. Online discourse exposes the clash between utopian hopes for what the Internet would contribute to democracy (Rheingold, 1993; Rash, 1997; Becker & Slaton, 2000) and horror at the attacks and hostility contained in actual online communication (Benson, 1996; Coffey & Woolworth, 2004; Carlin, Schill, Levasseur, & King, 2005; Hlavach & Frievoegel, 2011; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2012). Merely focusing on civility in online discussion, however, may hinder the potential of such discussion to facilitate a healthy democracy. An emphasis on politeness in conversation may overlook the democratic contribution that a heated discussion between highly engaged participants can provide (Papacharissi,

2004). Further, the viciousness that characterizes some political debates certainly did not begin with the use of the Internet as a venue for public discussion. The gun debate was filled with emotion, abuse, and fallacious argumentation long before the invention of online forums (McClurg, 1992). Public policy is often formed and evaluated based on emotion rather than facts or statistics (Welch, 1997), so purging emotion from public discourse may not only be unrealistic, but misguided; better quality debate may result when the emotions involved in heated public discourse are acknowledged and addressed.

2.2 Deliberation and deliberative democratic theory

Deliberation has often been cited as the justification for providing the public with online spaces in which they can conduct open discussion (Freelon, 2010). Discussion and deliberation are not interchangeable terms. Definitions of deliberation vary, but most deliberation theorists describe a process in which citizens carefully consider a problem and its various approaches and solutions, all while being open to revising their preferences and changing their minds (Chambers, 2003; Gastil & Black, 2008; Dryzek, 2010).

Deliberative democratic theory considers deliberation to be central to democracy, as it is through deliberation that citizens reason through common issues and form opinions before voting (Chambers, 2003; Mansbridge, 2012).

A deliberative democracy is one that embeds public deliberation in all institutions and practices (Nabatchi, 2012). In a deliberative democracy,

citizens are visible in every step, from formal policy-making decisions to the informal conversations in which they make up their minds about how they want to steer their society. Informal, online discussion, such as that found in the comments sections on newspaper websites, may or may not meet the standards of formal deliberation that have been outlined by deliberative theorists, but even political discussion that lacks the formal characteristics of deliberation supports the democratic process by increasing engagement and encouraging thought and opinion formation around issues (Jacobs, Cook & Delli Carpini, 2009).

Mansbridge (2012) detailed the place everyday talk has in a deliberative democracy. According to Mansbridge, everyday talk in a deliberative system is not always deliberative – it often consists mainly of expression of one's own views without respect for or consideration of those of others, but such talk is necessary in a deliberative system. Everyday talk plays a part in how some ideas are legitimated and advanced over others, as those expressions aggregate into social movements of various kinds, and ultimately social change. Everyday political talk may be considered a prerequisite for voting and other governmental decisions that reflect the will of those they affect.

2.3 Deliberation in a democratic system

What happens on such online forums is political talk that is not necessarily deliberative, but is an essential element in a larger deliberative system. Comments on newspaper forums fall into what Jacobs, Cook, and

Delli Carpini (2009) call “discursive participation,” or discourse with other citizens, conducted in a variety of settings and formats, including very informal ones, such as Internet forums. Citizens’ discursive participation most often falls short of deliberative ideals, they argue, but such discussion still has political effects.

Before describing the role of user comments in a deliberative democratic system, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by a deliberative system generally and what “deliberation” refers to more specifically. Definitions of deliberation vary, though they tend to have certain features in common. Deliberation is a specific kind of talk between people that is usually centered on a specific problem, issue, or goal in which participants carefully consider multiple perspectives and pieces of information with the willingness to revise their positions and preferences.

Gastil and Black’s (2008) definition of deliberation is designed to be applied to many forms of deliberative discourse, both formal and informal.

“When people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view” (Gastil & Black, 2008, p. 2, emphasis in original).

Gastil and Black identify nine measurable elements of deliberation including five analytic aspects (creating a solid information base, identifying and prioritizing key values, identifying solutions, weighing the pros and cons of solutions, and making the best decision possible) and four social elements

(ensuring all an adequate opportunity to speak, comprehension of the points made by others, consideration of the views of others, and demonstration of respect for others).

The Gastil and Black definition requires a specific goal or problem to solve. Some conceptions of deliberation are missing the “goal” element, such as the Chambers (2003) deliberation definition, which sees the end of deliberation as the formation of opinion:

Generally speaking, we can say that deliberation is debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants. (Chambers, 2003, p. 309)

The focus of the Chambers definition of deliberation on the formation of opinion rather than the solving of a problem reflects a tension within deliberative democratic theory over the purposes of deliberation: Is deliberation a tool for solving problems, a broader social process, or both? Deliberative democratic theory conceives of deliberation at a broader social level. A deliberative democracy is one that embeds public deliberation in all institutions and practices (Nabatchi, 2012), and can be opposed to aggregative democracy, which centers on the act of voting. “In contrast [to voting-centric or aggregative theories], deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede voting” (Chambers, 2003, p. 308).

2.4 Online newspaper comments

Online newspaper comments are one element in a larger deliberative system. Comments made to online newspaper forums may or may not contain the elements that have been cited by deliberative theorists as important characteristics of deliberation. Newspaper comments are limited in their ability to achieve the respect, reciprocity, equality, and consequentiality that have been cited as important elements of deliberation. They are, however, a form of everyday political talk, a crucial, supportive element in a deliberative system.

Newspaper comments boards are places on a newspaper's website that allow readers to make comments in response to articles and conduct discussions with other readers. Newspapers invite interactivity from readers through comments boards to increase site traffic and to encourage reader participation and engagement (Paskin, 2010). A study by Pew Research Center (2013a) found that 20% of American adults have posted at least one online comment on political or social issues. They also found that people are more likely to post online comments if they have higher income or education levels, although the income gap in online political participation is smaller online than when it comes to offline political participation. Younger Americans (18- to 24-year-olds) are more likely to conduct online political engagement activities than are older Americans.

2.5 Moderation

Newspapers employ moderation in their commenting systems out of a desire to maintain “quality” discussion in their comments sections (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011, p. 1); they want to maintain the benefits of user engagement on their websites without hosting comments or debate they find unproductive or unacceptable. The kind of moderation differs from site to site and depends on many factors, such as the resources a website can afford to devote to moderation and the policies and goals of the forum. A website can employ formal moderators to delete comments that are considered unacceptable, making such deletions known or leaving no trace of them. A moderator can also require approval of comments before they are posted.

Many websites employ a reactive moderation system in which users can flag a comment they find offensive for review by moderators (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). It is difficult to know the extent to which a forum is moderated since many moderator actions, such as the deleting of comments, occur outside the view of the user. Moderation of comments on online forums, especially moderation actions that are invisible and leave no trace that a comment was deleted, limits researchers’ ability to analyze and evaluate public discourse because pieces of conversations are missing and cannot be included in analysis. (An exception is a user-managed forum such as *Wikipedia*, which logs all additions and deletions in an audit trail.) By removing potentially offensive comments and in effect sanitizing

conversations, it may appear that some social issues are no longer a problem; for example, if a website quietly removes racist comments, an observer of the forum may be misled into thinking that racism no longer exists in the general public (Hughey & Daniels, 2013).

Many online forums have moved toward a user-based or “distributed” moderating system, in which users can rate the value of each comment (Lampe et al., 2014). These ratings are visible beside each comment, and in more complex ratings systems, users can sort comments by rating or make comments with certain ratings more or less visible. Lampe et al. (2014) studied the website *Slashdot*’s distributed ratings system and found that moderation patterns indicated that the distributed moderation system did restrain trolling and flaming behaviors. “Therefore, the design of the moderation system, which gives moderator privileges to users who are actively involved in online forums and have positive reputations, can encourage the users to participate in reasoned online conversations” (Lampe et al., 2014, p. 7). They also found that “an unintended consequence of the design of the system is that the comments of newcomers are systematically less likely to be part of the conversation” (Lampe et al., 2014, p. 6), so a user-based moderating system, depending on how it is deployed, can work toward restricting discussion to established participants. Lampe et al. also found that moderators often rate comments based not on the quality of their contribution but on the moderator’s ideological agreement with the content,

which limits a user-moderation system's potential to facilitate dialog in a democratic manner.

2.6 Deliberation in online newspaper forums

Online discussion is a form of discursive participation in a deliberative system, but does it in itself qualify as deliberation? This question has been addressed by researchers of Internet talk, and the results have been mixed. Some elements of deliberation cited by deliberative theorists have been found to some extent in online discussion. Online deliberation is perhaps easiest to spot in forums that are goal-oriented and designed for deliberative purposes. For example, Black, Welser, Cosley and DeGroot (2011) analyzed *Wikipedia* discussions about their “no personal attacks” policy to see if these comments contained the Gastil and Black (2008) elements of deliberation and found some presence of all of the analytic and social aspects of deliberation. Janssen and Kies (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of deliberation research on online discussions and found that the research literature contains such variation regarding the quality of online deliberation that it is impossible to derive any overarching conclusions. They argued that qualitative analysis of deliberative quality would be more meaningful than quantitative measurement against an ideal, largely because differences in definitions, methods, and operationalization make it difficult to compare or combine findings. However, there remain some elements of deliberation that have been consistently identified and measured in Internet political discussion. The particular forms

of Internet discussion studied (email discussion groups, newspaper forums) have varied as technology has changed, but the research discussed below has all considered some form of online political discussion.

2.6.1 Respect

Not all deliberative theorists provide a definition of deliberation that is as easily operationalized as Gastil and Black's (2008), with its nine measurable elements, but many theorists identify important aspects of deliberation that can be applied to the talk found online, such as in the discussion in the comments forums of newspaper websites. Perhaps the most controversy surrounding online comments, both in academic research and in more popular discussion, has been over their stated lack of civility and respect. Online forums have been found to be full of disrespectful comments (Coffey and Woolworth, 2004; Carlin, Schill, Levasseur, and King, 2005; Hlavach and Frievoegel, 2011; Richardson and Stanyer, 2011; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab, 2012), Respect for others and their positions is commonly cited by deliberative theorists as necessary for deliberation to occur (Hicks, 2002; Dryzek, 2010; Nabatchi, 2012).

In research, "disrespect" and "incivility" have at times been used to refer to the same concept of speech that does not meet accepted standards of politeness. Politeness research and other fields that take a discourse analysis approach tend to analyze language at a close level, looking at particulars of speech, and are specific about which kinds of speech count as "impolite."

Studies arising from these fields tend to define impoliteness as those speech acts that work to threaten another's face, or his or her positive social value or self-image (see Locher & Watts, 2005; Graham, 2007; Limberg, 2009). A face attack can be thought of as a speech act that attempts to make its target look bad in the eyes of others, and the concept of impoliteness that grows out of the concept of "face attack" defines impoliteness as "the use of communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony" (Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann, 2003, p. 1545).

Politeness theory has become more socio-cultural over time, focusing more on how politeness and impoliteness are understood in context than on the speaker's intention or the pragmatics of the speech act. Culpeper (2011) ties this move to a postmodern or "discursive" turn in understandings of politeness and impoliteness, including an emphasis on context and individual relativism rather than universal understandings, as well as a reduction of attention to the role of intention on the part of the speaker. As a result, scholars of impoliteness tend to consider the presence of impolite speech to depend on context in the sense that a speech act must be either intended to be and/or received as a face attack in order to be considered impolite. For example, Bousfield (2010) argues that both intent and interpretation must be present for a speech act to count as impoliteness.

In computer-mediated communication (CMC) research, the speaker's intent may be difficult or impossible to gauge, so impoliteness research looks

at the taken intent of the speaker, not the actual intent; a speech act must have been perceived to be impolite regardless of the intention of the speaker (Haugh, 2010). For example, Angouri and Tseliga (2010) looked at how the other participants reacted to an utterance in order to determine if it qualified as impolite. For the purposes of measuring impoliteness, however, determining how a comment or speech act was taken by others can be nearly as difficult as determining a speaker's intent, since others hardly react uniformly to comments, if they leave evidence of their reaction at all.

A more measurable definition of impoliteness would need to categorize certain speech acts as inherently impolite rather than depend on the intent of the speaker or the reaction by others to the act, despite Culpeper's (1996) warning that treating acts as inherently impolite is problematic because acts must always be understood in context. But comments can be evaluated for the presence of impoliteness without taking into account intent or reaction. Neurauter-Kessels (2011), for example, used a "face-attack" conception of impoliteness to analyze online newspaper comments, focusing on how commenters were impolite to journalists. She found that commenters were being impolite, for example, if they accused a journalist of lacking originality, accuracy, balance, judgment, or for being out of touch with reality.

Some researchers would call this kind of comment "uncivil" rather than "impolite." Mutz and Reeves (2005), for example, analyzed "incivility" in political television. They considered incivility to be that which "violates the

typical norms governing face-to-face political conflict” (Mutz & Reeves, 2005, p. 4). In their experiment, candidates were directed to be polite, calm and respectful in the civil condition. In the uncivil condition, they raised their voices, used “gratuitous asides,” and used nonverbal cues such as eye rolling. Eisinger (2011) measured incivility on news and political websites. He considered incivility to be “(a) insulting language, (b) name calling, (c) verbal fighting/sparring, (d) character assassination, (e) conflagration, (f) belittling, and (g) obscene language” (Eisinger, 2011, p. 9).

Some research has been conceptualizing “incivility” as something separate from “politeness,” positioning civility as something that refers to behaviors that further democratic ideals. In his analysis of online newspaper comments, Reader (2012) notes the subjective nature of what constitutes “civility,” and notes that one of the reasons is its two commonly understood meanings—it can mean either “politeness” or “that which relates to civil life.” This change has likely risen out of the belief that speech that contradicts etiquette can be important from a “civic” point of view (Benson, 1996; Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009; Massaro & Stryker, 2012). Much research that separates incivility from politeness (see Hurrell, 2005; Borah, 2012; Zhang et al., 2012) builds on the work of Papacharissi (2004), who conceptualized civility as “respect for the collective traditions of democracy” and politeness as “adherence to proper manners” (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 260), recognizing that heated discussion can be both impolite and a contribution to democracy.

Benson (1996), addressing concerns that an open online forum would inevitably “collapse into a shouting match,” (Benson, 1996, p. 359), conducted a rhetorical analysis of Usenet discussion groups to determine if such discussions could be characterized as democratic dialogue. He found that discussions were characterized by “hostility, ideological rigidity, name-calling, and obscenity” (Benson, 1996, p. 373). More respectful discussion has typically been found in more regulated online discussion. In a formal, highly moderated online deliberation forum in Hamburg, Germany, aimed at generating ideas for future development of the city, Albrecht (2006) found that discussion remained respectful, productive, and rarely hostile. In a study specifically of comments made to lightly moderated newspaper forums, Paskin (2010) found that commenters often voice little more than opinion and personal attacks, but still contribute to democratic discourse and free speech.

Research has consistently found that both disrespect and politically valuable conversation frequently coexist in online discussion. Even when discussions are characterized by hostility and insults, as Benson (1996) found, they still contained politically substantive arguments:

These debates are often characterized by aggressiveness, certainty, angry assertion, insult, ideological abstraction, and the attempt to humiliate opponents. On the other hand, the debates might, even admitting these faults, be characterized as displaying a high degree of formal regularity, as robust exercises in free speech, as closely attentive (if unsympathetic) to opposing arguments, as performing virtuosity in argument and language, and as a rare opportunity for free participation in a political forum where one may meet widely divergent views. (Benson, 1996, p. 375)

In fact, as Mansbridge (2012) argues, sometimes disrespect is necessary for such talk to be democratically valuable. Mansbridge gives the example of calling someone a “male chauvinist.” Calling someone a “male chauvinist” is not respectful, but it is designed to draw attention to a social problem and to change both one person’s behavior and ultimately, social relationships in general. That is what Mansbridge calls “everyday activism.” It has indirect social effects as such actions can build into social changes. Disrespect in everyday talk, Mansbridge argues, can be aimed at producing a more free and equal society in the long term.

The Gastil and Black (2008) definition of deliberation used in this study defines “respect” as more in line with Papacharissi’s (2004) definition of “civility”: “Deliberation embodies respect when participants recognize one another as private individuals with unique hopes and fears and members of the larger group or society. Respect also means treating all others as sincere, competent participants, at least so long as they do not themselves reject these principles” (Gastil & Black, 2008, p. 4). The current study, however, uses a more measurable definition of “disrespect” similar to Eisinger’s (2011) operationalization of what he considered “incivility” as cited above. Though Eisinger referred to disrespect as “incivility,” this conceptualization leverages the more straightforward concept of “face attack” (such as used by impoliteness theorists) without the tricky requirement that it be intended or received as such, but by calling it “disrespect” rather than “incivility,” it

leaves open the possibility that even speech that qualifies as disrespectful can be civil, or valuable from a democratic point of view.

2.6.2 Reciprocity and consideration

The element of “reciprocity” was cited by both Gutmann and Thompson (2004) and Mansbridge (2012) as a characteristic of deliberation. Though similar to respect, “reciprocity” is closer to “consideration.” Gutmann and Thompson consider the reciprocity of deliberation to be mutual respect, a recognition of differences, and presenting the justification of reasons to others in ways that require each party to consider the others to whom they are talking. In order to be considered reciprocal, participants in conversations must consider the arguments and positions of other parties.

Gastil and Black’s (2008) element of consideration is similar to reciprocity. Adhering to the Gastil and Black (2008) definition of deliberation, Black et al. (2011) see consideration as carefully listening to others. “Consideration measured the extent to which a post demonstrated that the participant was considering others’ views” (Black et al., 2011, 609).

Similar to respect, reciprocity tends to be found more often in online forums that are more formally structured and designed for deliberation than in unmoderated discussion. In an analysis of the Minnesota E-Democracy online deliberation system, Dahlberg (2001) found a great deal of reciprocal exchange. “The initiative shows how online discourse can be structured so as to stimulate reflexivity, foster respectful listening and participant

commitment to ongoing dialogue, achieve open and honest exchange, provide equal opportunity for all voices to be heard, and maximize autonomy from state and corporate interests” (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 627). In contrast, on Usenet, a much less moderated form of political Internet-based discussion, Janssen and Kies (2005) found a great deal of opinion expression, but not much reciprocal exchange.

2.6.3 Discussion of values

Values are abstract principles about ideal personal or social goals or behaviors that one considers to be preferable to opposite goals or behaviors (Rokeach, 1973). Values transcend specific events and situations. Dryzek and Braithwaite (2000) describe values as preferred standards of behavior or guidelines for society that are used to justify actions. A value is not necessarily held by some and not others, but values are rather ranked or prioritized differently by different people. Examples Dryzek and Braithwaite give of values are security and social harmony.

Gastil and Black (2008) list the identifying and prioritizing of key values as one of the analytic components of deliberation:

Second, participants identify and *prioritize the key values* at stake in an issue. This prioritizing ought to take a wide range of values into account in order to fully grasp the values and interests of different people affected by the issue being deliberated. (Gastil & Black, 2008, p. 3, emphasis in original)

In order to include discussion of values in deliberation, participants would discuss their “core needs, desires, and aspirations” (Gastil &

Black, 2008, p. 27). An example of prioritizing values would be deciding whether the public good is more important than individual self-interest. In their operationalization of the Gastil and Black definition of deliberation, Black et al. (2011) measure discussion of values by noting “the extent to which a discussion post commented on the participant’s values or values shared by the group” (Black et al., 2011, p. 608).

Dryzek and Niemeyer (2010) argue that deliberation need not end in consensus or agreement on a final decision to be productive, but deliberation should strive to achieve what they term “meta-consensus,” which is agreement on underlying values, beliefs, preferences, and discourses. Online discussion about gun issues may be unproductive because the parties involved lack meta-consensus. Both scholarship and public sentiment surrounding gun issues tend to fall into two camps: those who prioritize the guaranteed right to possess weapons courtesy of the Second Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, and those who prioritize public safety above individual gun rights (Celinska, 2007).

Consistent with the idea that a lack of meta-consensus is to blame for stagnation in the debate about guns in the United States, Braman and Kahan (2006) found that the gun debate is not productive largely because those on opposing sides do not agree on fundamental values. According to Braman and Kahan, no amount of facts or statistics will solve this problem,

because the introduction of any amount of information is not a cure for differences in values or worldview.

2.6.4 Equality

Other elements that deliberative theorists have cited as important characteristics of deliberation are easier to theorize than measure in online discussion. The equality factor of deliberation has been cited as one important characteristic—in ideal deliberation, all groups or viewpoints of those who would be affected by an issue should be represented (Hicks, 2002). Equality involves equality of access, resources, and capabilities. Online discussions are usually open to all, so theoretically, equality should be a given. In reality, the ability to achieve equal participation in online discussion is limited by the self-selection of participants and access obstacles such as the digital divide.

Those who design formal deliberative events tend to pay a great deal of attention to how participants are selected in order to ensure the representation of affected parties. Online, no such attention is given to determining those who participate, and online discussions usually give voice to only a very vocal few, especially in larger discussion groups (Schultz, 2000; Himelboim, 2011; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). The digital divide has often been conceptualized as the divide between who has access to the Internet and who does not, but in reality, the digital divide is between not only those who do and do not have access to the technology, but also between those who do

and do not have the technological skills and digital literacy necessary to use it and use it effectively (Selwyn, 2004). As a result of the digital divide, those who do not have Internet access or skills are excluded from participation in online discussion.

Both theory and empirical research seem to support the idea that the ability of online discussion to achieve deliberation is limited by the fact that much of it is unregulated and unstructured. The more formal and the more moderated online discussion is, the more it seems able to approach a deliberative ideal. But even if it does not qualify as deliberation, many researchers have determined that political talk is essential to the functioning of democracy.

2.6.5 Consequentiality

Another element of deliberation often cited by deliberative theorists as an important characteristic of deliberation is its level of consequentiality, or the extent of authority or direct impact the deliberative outcome has in the outside world. For example, a deliberative event could be organized by a municipality and aimed at deciding how certain city funds should be allocated. If the city adopts the decisions made by participants, their decision has consequentiality or authority. When considering Internet discussion, people usually refer to the kind of online talk, such as that hosted on online newspaper forums, that has no consequentiality. Some deliberative theorists (Dryzek, 2010; Gastil, Knobloch, & Kelly, 2012) cite consequentiality as a

vital component of deliberation, while others (Mansbridge, 2012; Pincock, 2012) warn against placing too much emphasis on this element because the effects of deliberative talk are broader than those offered by the direct impact of a decision; restricting “effects” to authority or consequentiality risks missing what is most valuable about everyday deliberative talk.

Consequentiality in deliberation is tied to the idea of consensus, the idea that participants in deliberation should eventually come to an agreement on a decision or a course of action, is in many cases a prerequisite for consequentiality: if a decision is to have authority or policy impact, there has to be a decision at which participants arrive. But consensus has been charged by some as representing an unreasonable expectation of deliberation, something either impossible to reach or inevitably achieved on the backs of power inequities between participants. Consensus, these arguments suggest, is the privilege of the powerful. Problems with the feasibility and desirability of rational-critical argument and consensus led some, such as Mouffe (1999), Sanders (1997), and Young (1996), to declare that deliberation was not the solution to the problems of self-government that deliberative democrats claimed. Their arguments led to a broadening and loosening of the requirements of “deliberation” to include talk that does not have to be oriented toward consensus on an action or a decision in order to be deliberative. That broadening of the definition of deliberation allowed

recognition of wider forms of communicative expression as democratically important.

2.7 The role of the citizen in a deliberative democracy

The recognition of a wider range of voices and forms of expression is a positive development in deliberative theory. But something important may have been lost when much deliberative democratic theory abandoned an insistence on consensus. Shifting the heart of deliberation from consensus to talk may risk losing many of the benefits provided by a deliberative democracy.

To illustrate this point, consider the conception of deliberation offered by Gutmann and Thompson (2004). To Gutmann and Thompson, deliberation is about reason-giving and justification, not outcomes. “Most fundamentally, deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3). For them, a deliberative democracy is one in which the citizen’s job is not to participate in decision-making but to consider whether the decisions made by those in power are reasonable. This puts the citizen in a passive position as target of reason-giving rather than an agent with a say in the direction of his or her society.

This conception of a deliberative democracy could be seen as part of a wider shift from contractual to permanent representation, as Coleman (2005) describes: “The electorate becomes more like a standing jury, reviewing the

ongoing performance of government; and representatives become more like advocates, seeking to connect with citizens via a range of tools, including polls, focus groups, media management and interest-group networking” (Coleman, 2005, p. 181). So in a system in which the relationship between governors and the governed is one of justification of decisions, the focus becomes on image over substance—the decisions made must appear to be just. Permanent representation is more compatible with Guttman and Thompson’s idea that a deliberative democracy is characterized by reason-giving on the part of the people in power, and that those official decision-makers have to justify decisions to the public. This limits the citizen’s role in a deliberative democracy to deciding whether the actions of those in power are just.

2.8 Deliberative talk is not a deliberative system

In this conception of deliberation, the public’s job is to deliberate not in order to make decisions, but to deliberate over whether the decisions made on their behalf are justified. That involves some element of power on the part of the public, but less so than if they were making those decisions themselves. In this model of democracy, the power of the public is indirect and after-the-fact: to talk about decisions, not make them. Viewing that citizen talk as essential to a democratic system is not the same thing as the assumption that talk *is* the deliberative system. A belief that political talk constitutes deliberation and is not merely one element in a deliberative system (other

elements being formal deliberative events, either online or face-to-face, which are regulated, moderated, and designed to be respectful, reciprocal, equitable, and consequential) may lead to a mistaken belief that power in a democratic system is increasingly placed in the hands of the citizenry when this may not actually be the case.

In a survey of British citizens, Murton, Adams, and Millard (2010) found evidence of this trend. They found that a belief that engagement in political talk, or the “virtual soapbox” provided by the Internet, is interchangeable with democratic participation leads to a dangerous illusion that not only distracts from more effective forms of political engagement, but creates the feeling that people are taking effective, change-creating action when they are not. Murton, Adams, and Millard found that a large share of the blame for this problem is attributed to the assumption that Internet forms of political participation are at the heart of democracy:

The lack of a secured role in real world politics could even make eDemocracy a danger to democracy. If eDemocracy gives the illusion of participation, while, in actual fact, the opinions given by the population are effectively ignored, it could create an even more independent and self-referencing government which is further removed from the individual citizen. (Murton, Adams, & Millard, 2010, p. 8)

Internet conversation has demonstrated its potential to be a check on powerful interests, as did the 17th and 18th century public sphere that Habermas (1991) famously described. Political rumblings on the Internet have grown into informal movements that have brought down politicians.

The Internet can be a tool of citizen power, one that should be taken seriously for its role in a deliberative democracy. But this kind of power should not be confused with the direct decision-making power that deliberative processes can hold for the citizen. It is this confusion that led Mansbridge (2012) to argue that we should not hold everyday talk to the same standards as formal deliberation. Mansbridge argued that judging political talk by looser versions of the same standards as formal, binding deliberation risks losing sight of the fact that the two serve different roles in a democratic system, though both are vital to a democracy. When we focus on political talk, such as that found in comments made to online newspaper forums, for whether it qualifies as deliberation or not, that is the line that is blurred—online political talk becomes not an important element in a deliberative system, but is confused with the system itself.

Schudson (1997) warned of the risks of the common belief that conversation has an almost magical role in a democracy. It is “deliberation” that has recently begun to claim the role of God term, a role Tracy (2010) argued the term “democracy” held in her analysis of public school board meetings. She found that “democracy” was commonly invoked in order to justify actions, to criticize the actions of or reproach others, and to advocate for certain actions without any explanation on the part of those who wielded the term as to why; democracy was frequently invoked but never examined, a powerful tool used by all parties to justify their positions and actions. This

left the concept of “democracy” so loaded as a term that it was meaningless as a concept. “Deliberation” may have begun to move into that space, rendering it a rhetorical tool rather than a powerful and meaningful democratic concept.

In a critique of a dialogical model of public deliberation, Hicks (2002) explained the dangers of allowing the language of democratic processes to become tools of power:

Dialogue, civility, teamwork, and collaboration are the current buzzwords of industry. These processes have been co-opted by powerful governing agents to describe their working procedures for managing disagreement and resolving problems, procedures designed to reproduce institutional power and to manage radical challenges to that power. (Hicks, 2002, p. 251)

Schudson (1997) argued that for conversation to be supportive of democracy, it needs to be guided by rules that ensure its inclusion, its direction, its substantive contribution. His point was reinforced by much of the empirical research that has been conducted on online conversation—comments most resemble productive conversation when online talk is moderated and facilitated much in the way formal deliberative events are conducted. At the same time, the Internet has the most power when it is unrestricted (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Internet discussion can offer the best of both worlds if allowed to serve both purposes—both regulated, facilitated, goal-oriented, problem-solving deliberation and free, unharnessed political expression, but in order for it to do so, those using it should be clear

on the difference. Before entering into any online deliberative enterprise, be it formal and goal-oriented or informal conversation, we should be clear on which process it is in which we are engaged. We can have the best of both worlds as long as we do not confuse the two.

2.9 Using a measure of deliberation to analyze informal political talk

After concluding that it is dangerous to conflate informal talk in a deliberative democracy with actual deliberation, it may seem a contradiction to design an empirical study (such as the present project) that operationalizes a definition of deliberation (Gastil & Black, 2008) and uses it to analyze the informal talk found in online comments forums. But the Gastil and Black (2008) definition of deliberation breaks deliberation down into smaller components that can be democratically supportive processes on their own even if they do not add up to a formal deliberative process.

For example, Gastil and Black identify nine measurable elements of deliberation including five analytic aspects (creating a solid information base, identifying and prioritizing key values, identifying solutions, weighing the pros and cons of solutions, and making the best decision possible) and four social elements (ensuring all an adequate opportunity to speak, comprehension of the points made by others, consideration of the views of others, and showing respect for others). If it is found that some of these components of deliberation are present and not others (for example, participants may work toward the creation of an information base, identify

possible solutions to a problem, and exhibit consideration of the points of others, but they may not identify values that are at stake or demonstrate respect for others), their discussion may not constitute actual deliberation, but they would be engaging in processes that have been noted as having value in facilitating democratically supportive discussion. A measure of deliberation can serve to produce a clearer picture of what happens in discussion in newspaper comments and lead to theory explaining how the informal political talk they contain potentially supports a broader deliberative system.

2.10 Limitations of online discussion

There are some processes that may be found in online communication that may hinder the deliberative potential of informal online discussion. The dynamics of group polarization and self-selection of information, though not initially theorized as relating to computer-mediated communication (CMC), have been noted to be potentially problematic aspects of online communication.

2.10.1 Group polarization

According to the law of group polarization, when people with similar views meet in discussion, their views will tend to become more extreme versions of the position they initially held and individual differences among group members' positions will decrease (Sunstein, 2002). The law of group polarization declares, "members of a deliberating group predictably move

toward a more extreme point in the direction indicated by the members' predeliberation tendencies" (Sunstein, 2002, p. 176). Sunstein focuses on what he calls "enclave deliberation," which is when like-minded people meet and discuss an issue without exposure to opposing views.

Though not specifically formulated to apply to online environments, many, including Sunstein himself, have argued that group polarization is characteristic of much Internet discussion. Evidence has been found that CMC contributes to group polarization (Yardi & boyd, 2010; Stroud, 2010), and disrespectful online comments may be especially likely to contribute toward a group polarization effect (Anderson et al., 2013).

2.10.2 Self-selection of information

The selective exposure theory posits that when people have the ability to tailor their media environments to their tastes and beliefs, they will do so. Selective exposure involves the idea that people consciously or unconsciously choose to expose themselves to information that supports their beliefs (Sears & Freedman, 1967). This was difficult in a mass media environment dominated by a handful of news sources, but in the fragmented digital media environment, selective exposure becomes easier. "The Internet is making it possible for people to design their own highly individuated communications packages, filtering out troublesome issues and disfavored voices" (Sunstein, 2002, p. 185).

The selective exposure thesis might seem like a given in a fragmented, online media environment, but it may be more difficult to accomplish than often assumed. Brundidge (2010) found that even if people do actively avoid information that conflicts with their beliefs, on the Internet they are exposed to political difference inadvertently, perhaps even more so than they would be face-to-face. So even if there is a selective exposure effect online, it is more than compensated for by inadvertent exposure to opposing views on the Internet, even if people tend to try to limit their exposure to information with which they do not agree; in other words, people might try to limit their exposure to opposing views, but they fail. Additionally, whether selective exposure works in the way that it is often assumed to is an open question. Garrett (2009) looked at information seeking in an online environment and found that people do seek out information that reinforces their existing beliefs, but that they do not avoid information that challenges those beliefs. According to both Brundidge and Garrett, the selective exposure effect may not have much of an impact on the range of information to which people are exposed.

2.11 The public debate about guns

The topic of gun control in the United States is a highly polarized topic (Jones, 2008). Both scholarship and public sentiment surrounding gun issues tend to fall into two camps: those who hold an individualist view that emphasizes the guaranteed right to possess weapons courtesy of the Second

Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, and those who hold a collectivist view that subsumes individual gun right arguments to those of public safety (Celinska, 2007).

According to Farmer (2005), the dominance of an individualist ideology in American culture explains the lack of regulation of firearms in the U.S. compared with other Western nations, as well as a tendency to resist gun control regulations. Gun regulations may be particularly difficult to pass in the U.S. because of cultural conditions that lead both sides of the issue to perceive themselves as the underdog in the fight over guns, and in the gun debate, policies based on scientific or criminological evidence are difficult to devise because each side treats the evidence presented by the other as suspect, and inevitably compromised by political interests (Edwards & Sheptycki, 2009). Gun laws in the U. S. tend to be made based on emotion and anecdote despite the fact that it is feasible to devise and evaluate gun policies based on empirical evidence (Fagan, 2003), suggesting that the hurdles to enacting common-sense policies surrounding firearms are ideological and not empirical. Indeed, Jones (2008) argued that both sides of the gun debate cite statistics and make legal arguments, but neither side will make headway with the other because differences in positions are due to vastly different cultural beliefs, and each participant interprets facts and arguments about the gun issue based on those deeply held beliefs. The collectivist camp tends to value social welfare, public safety, and statistics

that indicate gun control would protect them, while those who hold an individualist view often shun such statistics in favor of competing statistics that support the futility of gun control measures, as well as legal arguments that defend the individual right to own firearms.

At the heart of the suspicion of much scientific evidence may be a suspicion of experts and the idea that any group has or should have a monopoly on or authority over acceptable knowledge.

2.12 Expertise

Undergirding democracy is the idea that everyone is an expert; that citizens can and should be trusted to make decisions that decide the direction of their social and political lives. But there are many decisions that need to be made that require knowledge that is not necessarily accessible to most citizens. Perhaps for this reason, “expert” has become a politically loaded term, as expert knowledge is by definition knowledge that belongs to the realm of a special few (Schudson, 2006). Experts are for this reason alternately celebrated, distrusted, and even resented as something oppositional to rather than supportive of democracy.

According to Collins, Weinel, and Evans (2010), an expert is one who has “possession of tacit knowledge gained through participation in social communities” (p. 188). Experts include those who have specialized knowledge in many more fields than science. Hartelius (2010) provides a rhetorical definition of expertise; to Hartelius, expertise turns more on the ability to be

recognized by others as having mastery of an area of knowledge than on the knowledge or skills an expert possesses. For Hartelius, expertise:

...is not simply about one person's skills being different from another's. It is also fundamentally contingent on a struggle for ownership and legitimacy. Thus, expertise is rhetorical. Experts argue for the legitimacy of their expertise. To be an expert is to use persuasive strategies in order to gain sanctioned rights in a specific area of knowledge or experience. (Hartelius, 2010, p. 506)

Being an expert, according to Hartelius, is not just about knowledge or skills, but also involves the marking of boundaries around an area of knowledge and defining one's legitimacy as an expert based on his or her place within those boundaries.

Hikins and Cherwitz (2011) argue that expertise does have a rhetorical dimension, but it is not all rhetorical—expertise does refer to knowledge of a human-independent reality. For Hikins and Cherwitz, expertise is “the capacity to make specialized veridical judgments about some aspect of the largely human-independent world, but to reconstitute a theory of rhetoric that accommodates the subjectivity of human experience, the rhetorical dimensions of expertise, and our claim that intersubjectivity can lead to veridical descriptions of human-independent reality” (p. 292). This account of expertise maintains that experts have the ability to make specialized judgments about an objective world.

In his essay arguing for the relevance and necessity of experts in democracy, Schudson (2006) combined the rhetorical element of Hartelius'

definition with an insistence on an expert's mastery of knowledge relating to a human-independent reality: "An expert is someone in possession of specialized knowledge that is accepted by the wider society as legitimate. An expert's knowledge includes specific, technical skill based on some wider appreciation of the field of knowledge in question" (Schudson, 2006, p. 499). Expertise seems to involve both specific knowledge and the recognition of a legitimate claim to authority over that knowledge.

2.12.1 The tensions between democracy and expertise

There is a tension between expertise and democracy in social theory due to the belief that in a democracy, no issues should be out of reach of public scrutiny or decision-making (Turner, 2001).

Behind the distrust of experts is a worry that they are claiming too much authority, and that knowledge is becoming so specialized and technical that people are being shut out of democratic debate (Goodnight, 1999). Indeed, expertise is often seen as something elitist and in opposition to democratic values, and experts are increasingly distrusted (Schudson, 2006).

Democracy is more than a political system. "Democracy" is tied up in what Morone (1990) termed the "democratic wish," or a yearning for a "direct, communal democracy" (p. 1) that is contrasted with what is seen as a suspect government. Morone describes the democratic wish as "the direct participation of a united people pursuing a shared communal interest" (Morone, 1990, p. 5). There is an obvious contradiction here—people are

suspicious of “the government” while celebrating “democracy,” when the two are one and the same.

Perhaps this is part of the root of the distrust of experts—the government’s reliance on a separate class of experts becomes the anti-democratic element that is in the way of its ability to be beholden to the people it represents. People want control over their destinies—that could be at the heart of the problem of experts in a democracy. People yearn to not have to put their fate in the hands of others who are in a position of power or authority.

2.12.2 Lippmann and Dewey

Questions about the role of experts in society were famously debated by Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s. Lippmann’s argument positioned experts as serving a critical function in a democratic system, while Dewey warned of the dangers of giving them too much power.

Lippmann (1922/2010) argued that independent experts are needed because people need them to interpret information. People, he argued, know the world only indirectly, through second-hand accounts. “For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance” (Lippmann, 1922/2010, p. 13). Those second-hand accounts create mental pictures people hold in their heads, which he called pseudo-environments. People act as if those representations *are* the world when they are in fact only accounts of it provided by others. For Lippmann, people do

not seem to know the difference, a fact that renders them incapable of objectively interpreting the world, calling for independent experts to provide reliable and accurate information that is not filtered through their pseudo-environments.

For Lippmann, the primary problem seemed to be that the public was too easily swayed by outside interests to adequately decide its direction. Dewey (1927/1954) argued that the public could be capable of governing itself if provided access to information and the ability to openly communicate with one another, but the problem was rather that the public was disconnected from their governing institutions, which seemed to operate without their input or consent. The public, Dewey argued, felt politically impotent, confused, apathetic, and “eclipsed” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 121). Governing parties had no accountability to the public they represented, and elections were decided on the basis of irrelevancies. Part of the problem, Dewey believed, was the experts themselves, who decided and managed matters of public direction instead of the public.

Dewey wanted to take expert knowledge out of the realm of the expert and include it in the general public conversation, making it accessible to all. For Dewey, knowledge was not individual, it was social in nature, created not by separate experts, but rather generated through a communal conversation. Dewey wrote that science is not knowledge, but rather a “highly specialized language” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 163). People know how to use the fruits of

science, but the technical language of science puts it out of reach of understanding of most people, and because they do not understand how it works, they cannot control it. People could, however, understand it if they had “freedom of social inquiry and distribution of its conclusions” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 166). Release science from the grips of the scientific experts, argued Dewey, and it would be in service to the public. “Science is converted into knowledge in its honorable and emphatic sense *only* in application. Otherwise it is truncated, blind, distorted. When it is then applied, it is in ways which explain the unfavorable sense so often attached to ‘application’ and the ‘utilitarian’: namely, use for pecuniary ends to the profit of a few” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 174).

2.12.3 Who makes an expert?

To Schudson (2006), the professional community of the expert decides who legitimately holds expert status. According to Schudson, public demands for expert accountability often hinder the ability of experts to provide useful knowledge. Experts need a great deal of autonomy in order to be of most use to democracy. “Fawning experts are not useful experts. Fearful experts are not useful experts. In practical politics, too little expertise is more problematic, and more common, than too much” (Schudson, 2006, p. 499). Schudson argues that an expert’s position is derived from a “willingness to submit to the authority of a group of peers” (Schudson, 2006, p. 499). Those

professional communities exert control over the expert and work to ensure accountability, and according to Schudson, the public should trust those networks of professional knowledge to do so.

Hartelius (2011) argued that expertise in the political realm is granted expertise—the people decide who is deserving of it. The experts ultimately get their power from public consent. Though Schudson (2006) argued that expert authority was granted by professional communities, the public did have some power to revoke expert status. “If worse comes to worse and experts abuse their power, they are more easily dismissed than any other kind of cultural or political authority” (Schudson, 2006, p. 502).

Schudson argued that experts should be granted an important social role, and the public should keep deferring to experts, but also ensure that 1) their ranks are open to all who acquire the proper skills, knowledge, and training, 2) experts receive training in democratic values, and 3) measures should be in place to keep those experts accountable to the public. “These include not only a robust public discussion in which the work of experts can be criticized, but multiple institutional mechanisms to remind experts of the limits of their authority” (Schudson, 2006, p. 505).

Collins and Evans (2002) outlined two main problems that arise from the tensions between democracy and expertise. The first regards the legitimacy of decisions that involve expert knowledge—if technical decision-making in the public domain is to be seen as politically legitimate by the citizenry, it would

have to be democratized. But when the making of technical decisions is democratized, the problem of extension is encountered—how far should participation in technical decision-making that involves or affects the public be extended? If any citizen can have a say, despite his or her lack of specialized knowledge, the quality of those technical decisions may suffer.

A democratic society needs to decide how to balance legitimacy and extension. Some scholars and theorists place more emphasis on legitimacy and democratizing technical decision-making. Kinsella (2002) argued for a blurring of the distinction between lay and scientific expertise, involving the public more in the interest of democracy. According to Kinsella, a lack of citizen participation in technical decision-making erodes confidence and participation in the democratic process, and decreases the quality of technical decisions without local input by those affected. According to Backstrand (2004), the privileging of expert knowledge above the decision-making capability of the citizenry “implies that political and social issues are better resolved by technical expert systems than democratic deliberation” (Backstrand, 2004, p. 695). Backstrand outlines the concept of a civic expertise as an alternative. Civic expertise refers to the inclusion of citizen deliberation and participation in the scientific realm in order to advance a more transparent and democratic role of science in a democracy, as well as a self-reflexivity on the part of scientific practices and institutions that would ensure ongoing accountability to the public. “Society has to initiate a self-

confrontation and institutionalise self-reflexion” (Backstrand, 2004, p. 701). Reflexivity would open scientific conversations to a wider number of people and groups, and open science to self-critique.

Some have proposed that the problem of legitimacy can be solved by allowing experts and expert knowledge to be judged by nonexperts (Collins & Weinel, 2011; Gelfert, 2011). Kutrovatz (2012) examined Internet comments about the H1N1 flu virus and found that the public often looks to detect interests and biases on the part of the experts; that is how citizens often evaluate those experts. People, he argued, have no choice but to evaluate experts based on criteria outside the experts’ domains. Goodwin (2011) argued that the need to gain legitimacy from nonexpert audiences forces experts to be transparent and accountable.

There are dangers in allowing nonexperts to judge expert knowledge and decisions, however. Brewer (2006) argued that there is an inherent problem anytime nonexperts evaluate or choose between expert knowledge. American legal systems require judges and jurors to defer arbitrarily to expert testimony. Not being familiar with the practices and standards of science, people must rely on the reputation, credentials, and demeanor of the experts, which can be misleading or deceptive. John (2010) used the controversy over childhood vaccines as an example: “The MMR controversy is an instance of a general phenomenon: nonexpert failure to defer to expert testimony” (John, 2010, p. 497). Many citizens believed the results of studies published by one

scientist, which later proved to be substantially flawed and were ultimately disavowed by their publishers. A controversy was sparked over the safety of vaccines and many parents stopped vaccinating their children with the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine, leading to outbreaks of diseases that had been eradicated (John, 2010).

According to Collins and Evans (2002), one problem in attempting to balance legitimacy with extension in technical decision making is the fact that policy is made in the public sphere far more quickly than scientific consensus:

But decisions of public concern have to be made according to a timetable established within the political sphere, not the scientific or technical sphere; the decisions have to be made before the scientific dust has settled, because the pace of politics is faster than the pace of scientific consensus formation. Political decision-makers are, therefore, continually forced to define classes of expert before the dust has settled – before the judgments of history have been made. (Collins & Evans, 2002, p. 241)

It is easier for nonscientists to reach certainty about science, Collins and Evans argued. Only within the expert ranks of science discourse do debates become rich and nuanced.

The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1962) and his arguments that scientific knowledge is inevitably theory-laden and cannot be separated from cultural and political positions led to the question of whether any scientific enterprise was capable of describing reality objectively. Though Kuhn himself did not intend to attack the integrity of science, after Kuhn's arguments,

people beginning in the 1950s became concerned with the power given to scientists and experts in making policy, leading to the “technocracy debate” of the 1960s and ‘70s, in which people became worried that their democracy was being run by experts and not the citizenry (Weingart, 1999).

Now, many argue, when expertise is brought into and subjected to the judgment of the public, political sphere, it becomes politicized and its value is reduced. According to Limoges (1993), experts used to be seen as having the role of educating the public and in effect preventing controversies. The authority and credibility of the expert has been diminished to the point that experts now fuel controversies rather than prevent them. Now, scientific knowledge is contested and seen as politically motivated. At the same time, Limoges argued, the role of scientific knowledge in public debates is growing, and it is more relied upon than ever before.

Maasen and Weingart (2005) argued that as a result of concerns over technocracy, science has become politicized and expertise has become democratized. “The concept of expertise appears to be extended to the point of denoting almost any kind of knowledge” (Maasen & Weingart, 2005, p. 6). That knowledge can be partisan (for example, partisan think tanks that produce knowledge) is widely accepted, and knowledge has become a private commodity rather than a public good:

As expert knowledge has grown in importance as a political resource, actors in the political arena attempt to obtain and control the knowledge that is relevant to their objectives. This competition for knowledge, which

already represents ‘democratization by default,’ has resulted in the loss of science’s monopoly on pronouncing truths. At the same time, scientific knowledge has often been revealed to be uncertain, ambiguous and incomplete. (Maasen & Weingart, 2005, p. 7)

When boundaries blur around the concept of expertise, who is considered an “expert” can include almost any actor. Murphree and Aucoin (2010) described how during the oil crisis of the 1970s, the Mobil Oil Corporation launched a massive public relations effort designed to counter accusations that the oil industry was manufacturing and unfairly profiting from the oil shortage. Part of that largely successful campaign was the establishment of the company as an expert in the debate.

But ironically, the more information that exists in the public realm, the less knowledge people seem to have, as people distrust experts, existing procedures, and objective solutions to problems (Gaskins, 1992). “The spectacular growth of scientific and technical knowledge has ensured an expanding frontier of ignorance, paralleling the limits of science” (Gaskins, 1992, p. 106).

2.12.4 New models of expertise

Some citizens have formed an alternative, more democratic form of expertise. According to Hartelius (2010), the online, collaborative, user-edited encyclopedia *Wikipedia* is evidence of a new kind of expertise, one based on openness and collaboration. An open, collaborative expertise challenges

conventional forms of expert knowledge that are based in traditional structures of knowledge:

Wikipedia challenges fundamental assumptions about expertise by disrupting well-established conventions of knowledge and authority. In common usage, ‘expertise’ denotes mastery and specialization; conventional thinking assumes that those who are credentialed experts in a subject matter will speak and write about that subject. But *Wikipedia*’s ‘anyone can edit’ policy represents a radical departure from this logic. Its creators question the traditional ways in which information is managed and disseminated. Scholars and laypersons are indistinguishable; one edits the other’s work with no consideration for degrees or affiliation. (Hartelius, 2011, p. 135)

According to Hartelius, *Wikipedia*’s transparency of method and self-reflexivity are part of its case for its own expertise, and *Wikipedia*’s stance is that “truth emerges from dialog,” while expert discourses are usually monologues (Hartelius, 2011, p.144). According to Hartelius, personal and collaborative conceptions of expertise are evidence of a cultural shift to the personal, the individual, and the self.

2.12.5 The rise of the individual

Indeed, one outcome of the reaction against expertise and traditional institutions of expertise that has been noted is the rise of the individual as the center of concern. Nowotny (2000) described how expertise has lost cultural authority and become more context-dependent because decision-making is no longer seen as something tasked to a bureaucratic, expert class, but rather existing in the realm of the individual. Expertise, then, has

become an individual phenomenon or possession. The creation and possession of expertise moved from centralized, public knowledge production to more diffused knowledge production, accompanied by individualized judgment about that knowledge. Sovacool (2008) argued that public debate has become more personal because the increasing amount of knowledge available in the public sphere has made it harder for the average person to effect social change or know how to tackle public decisions. He argued that people take the form, tone, and rhetorical techniques of science to give themselves authority without practicing it. Adding to the personalization of public debate is a phenomenon noted by Goodnight (1999), who described how arguments that use personal experience as evidence seem most likely to sway a public audience, leading experts and politicians to use a sense of intimacy to persuade the public, contributing to the primacy of the individual.

Perhaps the growing suspicion of experts is another reason American culture privileges personal experience. Hartelius (2011) describes how Americans are increasingly prioritizing an entirely different kind of expertise that arises from personal testimony. Collins and Evans (2002) term this new type of expertise “experience-based expertise”: “...we will refer to members of the public who have special technical expertise in virtue of experience that is not recognized by degrees or other certificates as ‘experience-based experts’ ” (Collins & Evans, 2002, p. 238). To Collins and Evans, experience-based expertise refers to specialist skills and knowledge beyond the everyday social

abilities everyone has, not the ability of an everyday person to provide useful input in technical debates or decisions.

However, a result of the lowered status of the expert in society and the rise in prominence of the individual has been “technological populism,” or the belief that the views of ordinary people are equal to those with expert knowledge and education. According to Collins, Weinel, and Evans (2010):

Lay expertise originally referred to narrow groups of ordinary people who had specialized expertise. Unfortunately, the term came to refer to the idea that the knowledge of any ordinary person was just as good as that of any technical expert. That is what they call “technological populism,” which is the ideal-type opposite of technocracy. (Collins, Weinel, & Evans, 2010, p. 187).

The cultural reaction to technocracy came in the form of increased participation by the public in technical decision making, which led to a belief in technological populism, the idea that no expert knowledge should be privileged above that of any citizen (Collins, Weinel, & Evans, 2010).

This study examines the use and framing of expertise in comments made in the gun debate in light of the existence of a tendency toward technological populism in the United States public. What counts as expertise in the gun debate? Whose skills and knowledge are seen as legitimately “expert” in this debate?

2.13 Local and national imagined communities

The debate about guns and gun control in the United States is a national conversation, but it is also a local one. How and if guns should be regulated is

a discussion that may look very different when taking place in each state, or even in different communities within the same state depending on the histories of those communities and the backgrounds, beliefs, ideologies, and experiences of the people who reside in them. There is evidence that news coverage of issues and events can look different when reported in media outlets that are local to the area than in the national press (Castelló, 2010). There is also evidence that discussion of public issues can differ whether participants are discussing issues at a local as opposed to a national level (Perrin & Vaisey, 2008; Sindorf, 2013a). When analyzing commentary surrounding an incident in Jena, Louisiana, McCluskey and Hmielowski (2011) analyzed comments made to local rather than national newspapers because they reasoned that the commentary of local residents would reflect a different perspective due to their proximity to the events:

Since those living in and around Jena have a personal stake in the performance of local institutions and the climate of racial relations, many should be motivated to participate in the public discourse. In addition, those living in the area may have access to first-hand accounts of what happened and insights into the behavior of principal characters involved in the incidents that would add to the dialogue. (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011, p. 7)

Even if proximity and local culture affect how an event is discussed or even experienced by members of a community, “local” and “national” are not discrete categories when considering discourses surrounding events or issues. Discussion of local events frequently turns into broader debates in public

discussion, and people do not necessarily think of local and national issues as separate. Appleton (2002) found that people's national identities are filtered and articulated through a local scale. In fact, local identity is a vital component of the American identity; part of the American narrative celebrates local community. The local and the national are intertwined.

But they are not the same. Even if it may be difficult to separate the two conceptually, there is evidence that there are differences in the tone and level of respect used in discussion of local and national issues. Perrin and Vaisey (2008) analyzed all letters sent to the editor of a metropolitan newspaper over a three-month period. They found that letters that involved local issues were more reasoned and calm than those surrounding national topics, which tended to be more confrontational and emotional. The same trend can be found in online discussion as well. Sindorf (2013a) found that discussion in the online comments forum of a community newspaper was more respectful when discussing issues at a local rather than a national level.

One reason for this finding may be that people feel more of a sense of investment and agency in local rather than national issues. Eliasoph (1997) found that people's expressions of political apathy about the world beyond that which is close to them can be seen as a sense that they have some agency in local politics, while they feel they have no role in democracy on a national level. She reasoned that people feel they can affect local politics, so they express more interest in it. Macedo (2005) also found that citizens

identify more closely with local politics and institutions and may be more likely to participate in local politics.

The differences in discussion of local and national topics may have more to do with a commenter's imagined audience than their position as a member of an affected community. Perrin and Vaisey (2008) attributed the different tone used in local and national discussion to differences in who commenters were imagining they were talking to. They reasoned that citizens imagined separate audiences depending on the topic and tailored their tone and argumentative strategies to the particular group they imagined they were addressing:

Because we can assume that writers tailor their arguments to the audience they imagine reading their letters, we can infer that writers on different topics are imagining two parallel publics: one, a distant, combative public dealing with national and global affairs; the other, a more civil public dealing with concerns closer to home. (Perrin & Vaisey, 2008, p. 804)

The imagined audience that journalists have in mind when they write and report has been studied in sociology of news scholarship. In his extensive study of journalists for national broadcast and print news outlets, Herbert Gans (1979) found that journalists always construct an image of their audience, and it often does not resemble that actual audience. Gans found, for example, that many journalists imagined their audiences to be more affluent than they were. But commenting is a far different practice; a commenter is not writing to an audience, but is rather situated within it. The

difference between local and national discussion found by Perrin and Vaisey may arise from the speakers' imagined position; are they imagining that they are speaking to the community in which they are positioned, or rather to a separate community more distant from their own?

A "community," regardless of size, may be formed by relational ties as well as by geographical proximity. According to McMillan and George (1986), there are two major uses of the term "community." The term can refer to a territorial and geographical community in which people of a community are those who exist together in proximity. The other meaning of community is a relational concept—people of a community in this sense have a relationship or ties that have nothing to do with location or geography.

Anderson (1983/2006) wrote of how the idea of the nation itself is a community largely in the imagination of its citizens. To Anderson, a nation is an "imagined political community." People do not personally know most of the other members of this community, but they imagine them in the mold of the imagined identity. All communities in which one cannot know every member are imagined to an extent. Nations have boundaries, and those boundaries are created and defined as against those of other nations. "...the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 1983/2006, p. 224).

Imagined community can be a powerful force. Chavez (1994) studied undocumented immigrants and their intentions to stay in the United States

using Anderson's imagined community concept. He found that if immigrants thought of themselves as part of the American imagined community, they were more likely to want to stay in the U.S.

Anderson's description of how national identity is formed speaks to how political group identities are formed. Instead of national identities, however, people may also develop subnational identities that are formed along ideological lines, but they are still imagined communities in the way that Anderson described. According to Hall (2002), political community and a sense of political belonging are no longer determined by one's geography alone. People who live in the same place feel tied to a variety of different communities. People draw from and have loyalty to a variety of imagined communities; the conception of an imagined community as a nation state, or a "civic nationalism," (Hall, 2002, p. 28) as he called it, is too simplistic. Collins (2010) found that the idea of community itself has been politicized—it is a political construct.

2.13.1 Imagined communities online

Online, imagining the audience one is interacting with may be a necessity. Online, people interact with large and diverse audiences without knowing who they are. It is nearly impossible to know who the members of one's actual audience is in much computer-mediated communication, especially that which is anonymous. Because of this ignorance, users create an audience with whom they imagine they are interacting. According to Litt (2012), "The

less an actual audience is visible or known, the more individuals become dependent on their imagination. Therefore, people are typically more reliant on the imagined audience during mediated communication” (Litt, 2012, p. 331). Using Anderson (1983/2006) as a starting point for thinking about how communities are imagined and common identities are formed, Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) found that the social networking site Twitter is an example of how networked, digital communication technologies can lead community to be created along lines that have nothing to do with geography or physical proximity.

In another analysis of communication on Twitter, Marwick and boyd (2011) found that how one uses Twitter use depends on the kind of audience to whom the user imagines he or she is talking. “Technology complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other. We may understand that the Twitter or Facebook audience is potentially limitless, but we often act as if it were bounded” (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 115). On Twitter, they found, performance and self-presentation takes place through conversations; even if they are conversations in which the users themselves are the only ones talking, they have an imagined audience at the other end. At the same time, Marwick and boyd found, imagining an audience is perceived to be inauthentic and inappropriately strategic.

On Twitter, users' posts and identities are often attached to their offline identity. The concept of identity online is further complicated in anonymous interaction. Users may behave differently in anonymous forums and chatrooms than they do in nonymous situations, such as Facebook, in which online behavior and identity is most often anchored to one's physical-world persona (at least in theory—people often set up fake and parody accounts). In nonymous Internet environments, people tend to behave differently than they would in an anonymous setting, but also differently than they would face-to-face. Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) analyzed user behavior on Facebook (a nonymous online environment) and found that on Facebook, people forge a middle ground in which they present not who they are in person nor some secret, hidden, "true self," but rather a hoped-for, possible self. "The Facebook selves appeared to be highly socially desirable identities individuals aspire to have offline but have not yet been able to embody for one reason or another" (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1,830).

As Colorado has been the site of multiple gun-related events that have received national attention, online discussion spaces attached to Colorado newspapers are a fitting place to examine discussion of issues on both a local and a national level.

2.14 The legacy of the Wild West

The concept of an imagined community is associated with the idea of myth, not in the sense of an erroneous story, but rather "myths" as

underlying ideologies that explain life and experience in ways that make social structures appear natural (Barthes, 1957/1972). Myths are systems of meaning and value that shape “the life, thought, and politics of a nation (Slotkin, 1998, p. 4). “Myths are stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that societies ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness” (Slotkin, 1998, p. 5). Myths take complex realities and simplify them into simple yet powerful narratives.

The American nation called forth by the frontier myth is an imagined community in Benedict Anderson’s terms (Slotkin, 1998). Slotkin described how the frontier myth attached to the American West has been a part of American national identity. It has been used as a justification for the growth and spread of the nation. Colorado has been the most publicized of the Western states, and often the site of the myth of the American West in the nation’s imagination and popular culture (Abbott, 2012).

Myths, such as the myth of the American West, often have an element of history behind them, but they are largely figments of a collective imagination. For example, three of the central myths of the American West, rugged individualism, American exceptionalism and frontier violence, have been shown by scholars of the West to be largely historically inaccurate, though their general acceptance and allure allows them to be used by politicians and advertisers to sell policies and products (Slatta, 2010).

The components of the myth of the American West vary according to Western cultural scholars, but the myth seems to center on some variation of rugged individualism, self-reliance, rough justice, and the ability to settle one's own problems (Slatta, 2010). Myths are not stable or static. They are unstable concepts that are always changing and adapting, and one person's version of a myth may not look like anyone else's. For example, Western myth as articulated among Westerners themselves can be different from how it is imagined in the rest of the nation. Limerick (1987) described how for the resident of the pioneer West, the imagined independence, nobility, and adventure of the frontier existed alongside the Westerner's idea of himself or herself as an injured innocent. "Contrary to all of the West's associations with self-reliance and individual responsibility, misfortune has usually caused white Westerners to cast themselves in the role of innocent victim" (Limerick, 1987, p. 42). The entity the Westerner was a victim of, Limerick found, was often the federal government, and Western resentment of the federal government persists today.

Violence, especially gun violence, is usually cited as a central component of the myth of the American West (Tompkins, 1992; Slotkin, 1998; Hine & Faragher, 2000; Limerick, 1987). The image of the lone cowboy gunfighter enacting vigilante justice can be called forth easily to represent the Western myth (Slotkin, 1998; Slatta, 2010). The gun—the revolver, the shotgun, the rifle—has long been associated with the American West. The celebration of

violence, or at least its presence in so many versions of the Western myth, is strongly tied to sexism (Hine & Faragher, 2000). The hero of the Western narrative is almost always male, and women are peripheral to the story, if they are present at all (Tompkins, 1992). But the sexism of the Western myth is not found solely in the centrality of men and the exclusion of women, nor in the obvious symbolism of the gun for a penis (Tompkins, 1992). The Western story, as frequently told, with its violence, vigilante justice, and rugged solitude, often seems to celebrate qualities that are culturally associated with male character. “Traditional frontier myths’ focus has a decidedly masculine flavour – the mountain man, the intrepid explorer, the lone cowboy or gunman – rugged individualists all” (Slatta, 2010, p. 88).

Tompkins (1992) described how the rise of the Western-themed novel was a reaction against the sentimental, pious domesticity of the female-dominated style of novel that was popular before the Western’s introduction. Women in the home dominated the Victorian novel, while men on the prairie or in public places like the town square or the saloon were the protagonists and the setting of the Western (Tompkins, 1992). “The Western *answers* the domestic novel. It is the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture” (Tompkins, 1992, p. 39, emphasis in original). In domestic novels, women sat indoors with each other, praying, drinking tea, and talking about emotions. In Westerns, men do not talk much but rather act, usually alone, and often through violence that is shown to be necessary.

The Western's marginalization of women is no accident; the suppression of women and the traits associated with them is central to the Western genre, and is in fact what the Western and its hero defines itself against.

2.14.1 The American Monomyth

The hero of the Western can be seen as a kind of American Monomythic hero. The Monomyth is a kind of narrative that is found in stories worldwide. The classical monomythic narrative as outlined by Campbell (1949) usually consists of some version of the following:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell, 1949, p. 30)

Lawrence and Jewett (2002) outlined a distinctly American version of the classical monomyth outlined by Campbell. They described the American Monomyth as:

A community in harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence & Jewett, 2002, p. 6)

Lawrence and Jewett describe how *The Matrix*, *Rambo*, and *Star Wars* franchises are examples of the American Monomyth, one in which the emphasis on the hero's post-adventure service to community is absent.

According to Lawrence and Jewett, the classical monomyth centered on rites of initiation, while at the heart of the American Monomyth is a quest for redemption. The central battles, in American Monomyth texts, are often fought with guns, as we see in the *Matrix* and *Rambo* franchises. These stories are anti-democratic—instead of community problem-solving, the community is forced to subordinate itself and place itself in the hands of the lone hero, his strength, and his judgment.

The lone hero of the Western and the vigilante justice he practices are a type of American Monomyth narrative, according to Lawrence and Jewett. The Western's roots as a reaction against the feminized, domestic institutions associated with Victorian-era novels (Tompkins, 1992) add to the genre's position as an illustration of an American Monomythic narrative. The mythology of the American West is a kind of monomythic fantasy in which a lone, selfless hero contends with evil in order to protect and redeem those who are subject to the very institutions who failed them.

He does this, of course, with his gun in hand.

2.15 Research questions and hypotheses

Online discussion is a form of discursive participation in a deliberative system, but whether it qualifies as deliberation is a question that has been addressed by researchers of online political talk, and the results have been mixed. Some elements of deliberation have been found to some extent in online discussion, especially in forums that are goal-oriented and designed for

deliberative purposes. For example, Black, Welser, Cosley, and DeGroot (2011) analyzed discussions on *Wikipedia's* policies and found some presence of all of the elements of deliberation cited by Gastil and Black (2008).

Gastil and Black's (2008) definition of deliberation can be applied to many forms of deliberative discourse, both formal and informal. Gastil and Black identify nine measurable elements of deliberation including five analytic aspects (creating a solid information base, identifying and prioritizing key values, identifying solutions, weighing the pros and cons of solutions, and making the best decision possible) and four social elements (ensuring all an adequate opportunity to speak, comprehension of the points made by others, consideration of the views of others, and respect for others). Existing empirical research has resulted in mixed findings as to whether informal online discussion constitutes deliberation (Benson, 1996; Himelboim, 2011). RQ1 will apply the Gastil and Black elements of deliberation to online discussion, using an adapted version of its operationalization by Black et al. (2011):

RQ1: Does online discourse about gun issues qualify as deliberation about those issues?

Even if informal, online discussion is largely unregulated and does not in itself qualify as deliberation, some elements of deliberation may be present in online discussion, for example, participants may be contributing toward the creation of an information base on which citizens can base decisions, but they may not do so with a great deal of mutual respect. Using a measure of

deliberation that captures different aspects of discussion allowed the researcher to gauge not only whether such talk qualifies as deliberation, but if not, which elements may be present, and what kind of democratic contribution such discussion may be making.

One element of deliberation that is of particular interest in this study is the level of respect utilized by discussion participants. The Gastil and Black (2008) definition captures the amount of respect used by participants, which is another reason that the Gastil and Black definition of deliberation will be utilized in this research project. Previous research (Perrin & Vaisey, 2008; Sindorf, 2013a) has shown that the level of respect in discussion differs based on the local or national scope of the conversation. It is hypothesized that this finding will hold true specifically in online discussion of gun issues:

H1: Comments made during discussions of gun issues will be more respectful when participants are discussing issues at a local rather than national level.

As participants on different sides of the gun debate tend to prioritize different kinds of evidence and forms of expertise (Jones, 2008; Edwards & Sheptycki, 2009), it is possible that commenters will cite different kinds of evidence and different experts based on their ideological position. RQ2 will explore this possibility:

RQ2: How is expertise both used and framed in discussion of gun issues?

Participants in the online gun debate may disagree upon what qualifies as legitimate expertise for the purpose of authority in claims-making, so people on different sides of the issue may have a hard time moving past what

appears to be the Internet version of shouting at each other, often becoming more polarized in opposition to each others' positions rather than exploring compromises or middle ground (Sunstein, 2002). Research has found that in the gun debate, social scientists and the evidence and expertise they offer are often distrusted and discarded in favor of an alternative form of expertise, one that arises from personal experience with guns and knowledge about weapons (Kahan & Braman, 2003).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Content analysis and textual analysis

This research project utilized both content analysis and textual analysis methods. Content analysis (a quantitative method) and textual analysis (a qualitative method) are different research techniques that are aimed at interpreting or finding patterns in texts. “Content analysis may be briefly defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf, 2002, p.1). Content analysis is deductive in nature, in which hypotheses, or testable relationships between two or more concepts are derived from theories or principles (Shoemaker, Tankard, Jr., & Lasorsa, 2004). Data is then gathered to test a hypothesis to determine if it was supported. The focus of the content analysis method is on its systematic nature. Texts are broken down into measurable units that are categorized into pieces, or codes, in order to enable those parts to be organized, counted, and compared to each other (Krippendorff, 1980).

Textual analysis is also aimed at the interpretation of messages, and is often used to analyze media messages, but it operates differently from content analysis. Inductive rather than deductive, data are gathered and interpreted and then theoretical principles are introduced to explain them. Textual analysis is a method for the analysis of texts in which the text is read in close detail, attending to patterns found in the text as well as ideological or cultural assumptions (Fursich, 2009).

This study was designed with the underlying view that content analysis and textual analysis can be complementary methods. The method used to address each research question and hypothesis was chosen because content analysis and textual analysis each have strengths and weaknesses. Content analysis is powerful, systematic, and replicable, while textual analysis describes texts in rich detail and uncovers underlying patterns and ideological assumptions. Both methods have the goal of describing texts and identifying patterns the texts contain. In this case, the “text” analyzed was the individual comment, and the comment was the unit of analysis.

3.2 Publications

The newspapers from which comments were retrieved were chosen because they represent three different types of Colorado newspapers; the *Denver Post* is a large metropolitan daily newspaper, the *Aurora Sentinel* is a community newspaper located in a suburb of Denver, and the *Craig Daily Press* is a small newspaper in a rural, mountain region of the state. Colorado newspapers were chosen because commenting in all of these papers addresses topics at both a local and a national level, regardless of the scope of the article, and because the focus of this research project was on Colorado and its unique position as a gun-rights-supportive state and the site of multiple high-profile mass shootings, including the Columbine school shooting and the Aurora theater shooting.

The *Denver Post* is a daily, major metropolitan newspaper with a total circulation of 393,028 (including print and digital editions) on weekdays and 508,231 on Sundays (Standard Rate & Data Service, 2014). The *Aurora Sentinel*'s print edition is published weekly on Thursdays, but online, it publishes daily. Its print edition has a circulation of 28,360 (Standard Rate & Data Service, 2014). The *Craig Daily Press* publishes daily and it has a print circulation of 3,550 (Standard Rate & Data Service, 2014).

Circulation figures and even the geographic locations of the newspapers are of limited use, however, when the newspapers' websites can be accessed and used (including the use of its commenting features) by anyone on the globe. Commenters in any location can register on any of these newspapers' websites and post comments, and though both the *Denver Post* and the *Craig Daily Press* encourage users to use their real names and identities when posting (*Denver Post*, 2011; *Craig Daily Press*, no date), all users are in effect anonymous. There is no way to know who the commenters are, where they live, or if a commenter uses one username consistently. A person can give no information or false information about who they are and where they live. One person can also have multiple identities and handles on an online forum by creating multiple accounts, a practice known as "sock puppetry."

3.3 Commenting and moderation policies

The *Craig Daily Press* uses the WorldWest service to manage activity on its website. WorldWest requires registration in order to comment, and

registered users can also give comments a “thumbs-up” and flag a post for review and removal by moderators (*Craig Daily Press*, no date). Moderators can remove content that violates WorldWest’s policies for acceptable content:

At any time and at its sole discretion, WorldWest can remove any User-Generated Content (as defined below in the Intellectual Property Policy) that it deems objectionable, including, but not limited to, User-Generated Content that is racist, sexist, potentially libelous, defamatory, malicious, profane, copyright protected or otherwise containing third-party intellectual property, off-topic, disrespectful or threatening to other users, consists of inflammatory attacks of a personal nature, factually incorrect, used to identify users, incendiary to violence or other criminal activity or commercial advertisements. In addition to removing your objectionable User-Generated Content, WorldWest also may ban or suspend you from accessing the Website. (*Craig Daily Press*, no date)

The *Aurora Sentinel* uses the Disqus service to manage comments. Disqus makes it clear that its system does not employ moderators, and its commenting policy that covers objectionable content is simple:

Disqus never moderates or censors. The rules on each community are its own.

Don't be a jerk or do anything illegal. Everything is easier that way. (Disqus, no date, emphasis in original)

Users can but are not required to register to post comments, and comments on the *Aurora Sentinel*’s Disqus system are threaded. Registered users can give each comment an “up” vote or a “down” vote. They can also flag a comment as inappropriate, suggesting the presence of a moderation system

for removing objectionable comments, despite Disqus’ insistence that they do not moderate discussions (Disqus, no date).

Like the *Craig Daily Press*, *Denver Post* commenters must be registered with the site to comment, and registered users can vote comments “up” or “down” or flag comments for review and possible removal by moderators. The *Denver Post*, however, has an extensive “Ground Rules” section in which they provide guidelines for writing comments that further their goal of providing “a space for civil, informative, and constructive conversations,” including tips for writing good comments and how to disagree respectfully (*Denver Post*, 2011). Their guidelines for comments involve being respectful; using “clean” language; avoiding making fun of the dead or injured; refraining from name-calling, personal attacks, threats, taunts, stereotyping, hate speech, intimidation, repeating oneself, posting off-topic posts, libel, self-promotion, typing in all capital letters, and invading others’ privacy. They include a suggestion to “be yourself, and be truthful.” It is not clear which of these guidelines are suggestions and which are rules, but commenters whose comments are deemed inappropriate can be issued a warning and have their objectionable comment removed. Those who receive multiple warnings can be banned from the site (*Denver Post*, 2011).

3.4 Data collection

The websites of each paper were searched for the terms “gun rights” and “gun control” (a separate search was conducted for each term) for articles that

appeared from July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013. This one-year time frame was chosen because it allowed the researcher to capture discussion sparked by both the July 2012 Aurora, Colorado theater shooting and the December 2012 Newtown, Connecticut elementary school shooting, as well as discussion leading up to and reacting to the passage of gun-control measures in Colorado in March 2013 and the failure of proposed gun control measures in the U. S. Senate in April 2013. Because the commenting in response to news articles often takes directions that have only a tenuous connection to the content of the article, limiting the search to certain kinds of gun articles may have excluded relevant commenting, so the search terms used were broad. The newspaper articles themselves were not analyzed for this project. News coverage of firearms issues and mass shootings warrants a great deal of scholarly study, and it may be that different kinds of articles spark differing amounts and types of commenting. However, this project was designed to analyze online political talk. Only the comments were included in analysis, leaving the articles for a future study that centers on analysis of news coverage of firearms.

During data collection, a list was made that included the titles, dates, and the number of comments for each article. Articles without comments were not collected. The search resulted in a total of 395 articles with 35,662 comments from the *Denver Post*, 85 articles with 4,342 comments from the *Aurora Sentinel*, and 22 articles with 98 comments from the *Craig Daily Press*.

3.5 Sampling

A mixed sampling strategy was employed. The *Denver Post* had by far the most number of comments per article. In order to include a manageable number of comments in the analysis while ensuring comments were included in the sample from both the beginning, middle, and bottom of the comments threads, the following strategy was employed: The average number of comments per article was 90. If the thread contained fewer than average (less than 45), the first 8 comments were included; if the article's number of comment was close to average (45 to 145), the first 8 and the last 8 comments were included; if the thread was longer than average (more than 145 comments), the first 8, the middle 8, and the last 8 comments were included. The articles were randomly sampled until an acceptable number of comments were included in the sample. Ultimately, 43 articles with 456 comments were included in the sample from the *Denver Post*.

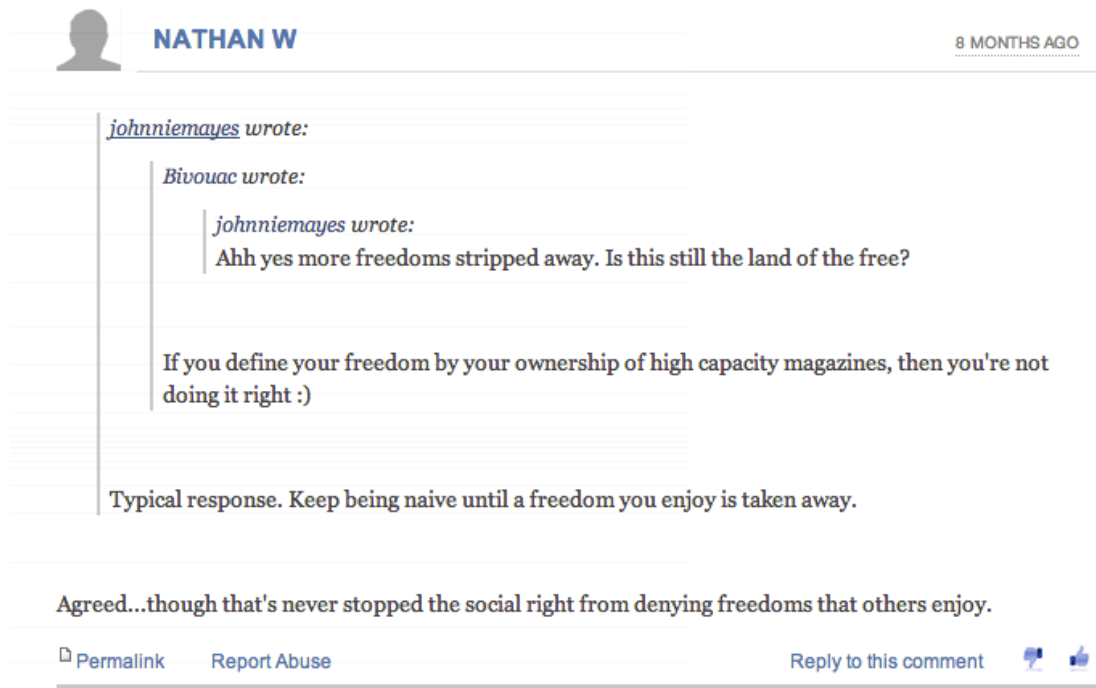
A total of 85 articles with 4,342 comments were initially retrieved from the *Aurora Sentinel*, but one editorial that went viral (Perry, 2013) was responsible for generating 3,904 of those comments. Without that article, there were 438 comments from the *Aurora Sentinel*. The mean number of comments for *Aurora Sentinel* articles was 5. All comments from this publication were included in the sample except for those from the article with 3,904 comments. For that article, the same strategy was employed as that of the *Denver Post*—the first 8, the last 8, and the middle 8 comments were

included. A total of 462 comments from the *Aurora Sentinel* were included in the sample.

Because there were far fewer comments from the *Craig Daily Press*, all 98 of them were included in the sample. A total of 1,016 comments were included in the sample from the three publications; 98 from the *Craig Daily Press*, 456 from the *Denver Post*, and 462 from the *Aurora Sentinel*.

The unit of analysis was the comment, but when analyzing the comment, context was taken into account. Often, surrounding comments had to be taken into account in order to analyze a comment. This was not difficult in the *Denver Post* even though comments were not threaded because each comment that was made included the posts to which it was in response (See Figure 1). When retrieving comments, they were entered into a database in a way that included all of the comments posted above the comment being analyzed, but they were given a different text color, so it was clear which comment was for analysis and which were there for supporting material to aid in understanding context.

Figure 1. Comments situated within conversations on the *Denver Post*



In the *Aurora Sentinel*, comments were threaded, so when they were retrieved, it was noted if a comment was in response to another. Comments in the *Craig Daily Press* were not threaded.

3.6 Variables

Detailed definitions, categories, and examples for each variable can be found in the codebook (Appendix A). Each article was assigned an Article ID number and each comment was assigned a Comment ID number. The article date and publication were noted. A *location* variable was created in which it was noted if the comment was made in the first third, second third, or bottom third of a thread, or if the comment was located in a thread with fewer than six comments.

The comment dates were not recorded because the publications were not consistent in how they recorded them. The specific date of each comment was not noted on the *Aurora Sentinel* website, so the article date was all that was noted for the comments.

A *position* variable was created to gauge the ideological orientation the commenter seemed to hold with respect to guns: pro-gun rights, pro-gun control, mixed position, or no position.

3.7 Research questions and hypothesis

3.7.1 Research question 1

RQ1: Does online discourse about gun issues qualify as deliberation about those issues?

This research question was addressed with content analysis. An adapted version of the operationalization of deliberation created by Black et al. (2011) and used in their analysis of policy making discussions on Wikipedia was employed. Deliberation variables included *create info base*, *prioritize key values*, *identify solutions*, *weigh solutions: pros and cons*, *comprehension: clarity*, *comprehension: demonstrates understanding*, *consideration*, *others' consideration*, *respect*, and *others' respect*.

The *create info base* variable represents commenter-contributed information about which people could have a discussion. It involved the presentation of facts, experiences, opinions, and beliefs. All comments that used evidence counted as contributing to an information base, as did those

that contributed the commenter's or another's opinions and beliefs. If the commenter included relevant facts and or personal experiences that could inform the discussion, the comment was coded as contributing toward the creation of an info base. The following comment is an example of a contribution toward an information base:

Racer: He also robo-called this "alert" to residents of his district. The calls created confusion and fear among people who thought it was some kind of reverse 911 warning them of criminals on the loose. It seems his supporters will do anything to keep the people from being heard. Hopefully the people have had enough of this kind of politics. And hopefully someone better will take his place...

Denver Post, DanDan, May 19, 2013

The *prioritize key values* variable gauged to what extent a comment discussed the commenters' own values, the values of others involved in the discussion, or the cultural values that they noted as coming to play in the issue. Categories included: making no explicit comment on values, commenting on values without using those values to support an argument or analyze positions, or clearly linking values to proposed solutions or positions. The following comment both prioritizes a value ("bravery" over "cowardice") and links it to his or her position:

Bravery always triumphs over cowardice.

The DP continues to lobby for cowardice. Unarmed victims in waiting are a tempting target for murderers.

Knowing that armed resistance is waiting for criminals who might seek to harm children is a very effective deterrent.

Denver Post, Leardriver, April 7, 2013

A comment was coded as *identifying possible solutions* if it included a recommendation or possible solution to a problem raised by the article or

another commenter. This could include both big-picture recommendations to the main problem facing an individual or community or suggestions about how to revise or clarify an existing law or policy. Two categories were used: no recommendation and included/advocated new solution and/or builds on or suggests revisions to previously posted solution. The following comment was coded as identifying possible solutions:

The problem at both the federal and state levels is the legislators are not happy with a small and simple bill that nearly all can approve of. It must be a complicated bill that gets as much as the majority can grab with a one vote advantage. The fringe radicals of the majority party seem to always drive the legislation rather than a focus on common interests by legislators regardless of party affiliation. Partisan writing of legislation is designed to peel off just enough of the opposition to get a one vote advantage (if needed) and usually via a pork add on for a particular district or state. If the vote is close, why not rewrite the bill to gain a broad consensus without the pork and without the thousands of pages? It is not hard and only the fringe radicals of the majority party may be lost on the vote.

Denver Post, just lurking, April 23, 2013

The *weigh solutions: pros and cons* variable determined whether a commenter weighed the pros and cons of at least one solution that had been proposed either by themselves, another commenter, the article, or a solution (such as gun control measures or the arming of teachers in schools) that had been proposed more generally in the gun debate. The categories of this variable were: no pros or cons discussed, raised only advantages of a proposal, raised only disadvantages of a proposal, or raised both advantages and disadvantages of the same proposed solution. The following comment is an example of a comment that was coded as weighing the pros of a proposed solution:

I wouldn't say that the NRA failed but those that live in a fantasy land where a sign that says "Gun Free Zone" is somehow enough to stop crazy criminals!!!! There is NOTHING wrong with having a plain closed individual walking the halls and the grounds. This with an active security system that can lock doors instantly to isolate a person can possibly keep mass killings from happening. So now that we have protected our children at school what about shopping centers, restaurants, parks, church and ANYWHERE else you can thing off!!! ¹

Denver Post, Jordan Riley, April 7, 2013

The *comprehension/clarity* variable determined whether a commenter asked another commenter for clarification, either of the way something was worded or of the argument being made. It could also include requesting clarification about the article itself. The categories of this variable were: asks for clarification with a sarcastic or antagonistic tone (meaning the request for clarification was not genuine and was made instead to belittle another), no request for clarification, or genuine request for clarification. The following comment was coded as a genuine request for clarification:

Just tell me what you want to do and exactly how this would have stopped what has happened or possibly what could happen in the future...some details please.

Aurora Sentinel, Tom Sanders, January 11, 2013

The following comment, on the other hand, contains a sarcastic or antagonistic request for clarification:

This is stupid! Can we sue GM, Ford, Chrysler, et. al. for making a car that a drunk driver was driving, which hit and killed a family or a school bus full of children? Or an aircraft manufacturer or airlines in an incident such as 9/11? It is the same principle and logic involved. Tina, do you write this drivel within the bounds of sobriety?

Aurora Sentinel, fishhunter, February 11, 2013

¹ No comments throughout this work that have been included as an example or an illustration of a point have been corrected for spelling or grammar. All spelling and grammar errors contained in comments should be considered [sic].

The *comprehension: demonstrates understanding* variable measured whether a comment included an explicit statement that he or she understood what someone else said in a previous post (not the article). Categories for this variable were: an explicit statement that the commenter did not understand something said by another commenter, no statement of understanding, or an explicit statement that the commenter did understand another's comment or point. The following comment was coded as an explicit statement that the commenter understood another's comment:

I know what you mean, Dave. I posted what I thought were pretty noncontroversial posts on Twitter about background checks during the state legislative debates and while I got some messages and dm's from some rational gun advocates (thank you, if you were one of them), many were scary and/or just unacceptable for civilized discussion. Bullies, really.

Aurora Sentinel, Jenny Davies-Schley, May 7, 2013

The *consideration* variable recorded whether a post contained evidence that a commenter was listening to and considering others. Consideration means being attentive to other commenters' words and perspectives and taking them seriously. Consideration is not the same as agreement, and consideration is not the same as respect. A commenter could be exhibiting consideration of another's positions while engaging in name-calling toward him or her. Categories for this variable included: a comment with no explicit evidence that speaker was "listening" to or ignoring others (neutral), explicit consideration, the presence of a request for other people's feedback or consideration, or the presence of both evidence of consideration and a request

for feedback or consideration from others. The following comment contains explicit consideration:

Patrick you are way too right! Its sad that we can no longer trust our government! Wazarepublican... how do you know your website is absolutly fact? It could be all a myth itself! I personally think John is right!

Craig Daily Press, nwco_prepper, July 14, 2012

The following comment was coded for the presence of a request for others' feedback:

Gov Hickenlooper along with many others were invited to express their opinions on assault weapons, gun control and how these weapons are getting into the wrong hands with VP Joe Biden.

One thing I was wondering, was Brian Terry's or Jaime Zapata's families invited to Joe Biden's committee meeting on "gun violence?" Anyone know?

Denver Post, Davek80514, January 11, 2013

The *others' consideration* variable measured whether a commenter remarked on whether a different commenter was considering and listening to others. Categories included: a statement that another commenter was not listening to or considering others, neutral (no statement about the consideration of another), or the commenter indicated that another commenter was listening to or considering others. The following comment contains a statement that another commenter was inconsiderate:

Of course I am.

As I've stated before, Colorado Free Militia awaiting call up when and if needed.

And I'm also well regulated, a militia regulating itself, through almost weekly training sessions at the range with other members.

Maybe you'd better start reading my posts before you criticize me with such an obviously ignorant accusation?

And again, no I don't mean the times have changed since 1787 (actually prior to that since the British moved on the American colonists militias in 1775) so you shouldn't make rather stupid statements like that either.

Denver Post, Sid, May 19, 2013

The *respect* variable did not concern whether a comment was taken by other commenters to be respectful or disrespectful. Whether a post contained respect or disrespect was rather determined by the contents of the comments themselves. Posts were coded as neutral unless they contained explicit demonstrations of either respect or disrespect. Respect and disrespect could be directed at another commenter or at any person or group outside the board, including the author of the article, people mentioned in the article, or public figures. Disrespect was considered to be the use of markedly negative behavior or face attacks, including any insulting language, name calling, character assassination, belittling or condescension, sarcasm directed toward another with the intent of insulting or belittling another, and obscene language. The following comment was coded as disrespectful:

Limiting magazines to just 15 rounds is draconian? That's laughable.

It's so obvious the gun industry is behind this and they have lots of clueless munchkins like you falling in line to help them defeat the will of the sensible majority. This is only about money - their money, not yours. The very last thing the gun industry cares about is your rights - or anyone elses.

Denver Post, Purple patriot, May 13, 2013

In order to be coded as a comment that contained a statement of respect, a comment had to include explicit positive acknowledgment for the perspectives or contributions of others (either other commenters or anyone outside the comments board). Expressions of thanks, "good point," or appreciation of

other commenters or public figures counted here.

The following comment contained an explicit statement of respect:

Thank you, many won't reward you for your common sense, but I will.

Aurora Sentinel, Gofastgo , July 31, 2012

Categories for the *respect* variable were: demonstrates lack of respect, neutral, or demonstrates respect.

The *others' respect* variable was similar to *others' consideration*. This variable gauges whether a commenter made a statement evaluating some other group member's behavior as respectful or disrespectful. Categories for this variable were: indicates that someone else was being disrespectful, neutral, or indicates that someone else was showing respect. The following comment contains a statement that another commenter was being disrespectful:

False dichotomy; no one on this board enjoys seeing kids killed.

FYI name-calling is disallowed by Forum rules.

Denver Post, vercingetorix, December 14, 2012

3.7.2 Hypothesis 1

H1: Comments made during discussions of gun issues will be more respectful when participants are discussing issues at a local rather than national level.

H1 was tested by determining whether there was a relationship between the *respect* variable above and *scope*, a variable designed to determine whether the comment discussed local, state, or national issues. If it was not apparent from the comment, the researcher defaulted to the topic of the

article: was it on a local community, state, or a national topic? If the comment discussed issues at multiple levels, it was determined what was the overall focus or point and scope was coded accordingly. For example, if a commenter in the *Aurora Sentinel* mentioned the Aurora theater shooting, but his or her ultimate point was a larger point about the futility of national gun regulations and the comment contained substantially more discussion of the national implications of such regulation, the comment would have been coded as national in scope. If equal meaningful attention was given to two levels of scope, the most local level was coded. Categories for this variable were: local community, state of Colorado, or national/international.

During analysis of H1, it was determined that textual analysis would provide a richer understanding of differences in discussion at the local and national level, and how the mythology of the Wild West both overtly and implicitly manifested in the comments. Textual analysis in this project drew from grounded theory methods of textual analysis, which are heavily inductive and allow categories and categorization structures to arise from the data themselves rather than adhering to any predetermined coding scheme (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). During coding for content analysis, common themes were identified beyond those that could have been accounted for in the coding scheme. Comments that demonstrated these themes were coded for content analysis categories and then copied into a separate file for later textual analysis. During textual analysis, these comments were read closely

and compared with and against each other, looking for common themes and narratives, word choices used, and assumptions that lay behind commenters' positions and points. Common themes were identified. Discussion and examples to illustrate each of those themes appear in the results chapter.

3.7.3 Research question 2

RQ2: How is expertise both used and framed in discussion of gun issues?

Rather than a content analysis approach to the treatment of expertise by the commenters, a purely textual method of analysis was employed to address this research question. The method used was the same as the grounded-theory-inspired textual analysis method described above, in which comments that somehow spoke to the concept of expertise were identified during coding and copied into a separate file for later textual analysis. Expertise comments were then read closely, looking for common patterns, themes, and assumptions. Those common themes were described with examples in the results section.

3.8 Intercoder reliability

Intercoder reliability on all content analysis variables was reached using two coders, with Scott's pi ranging from 0.72 for the *position* and *weigh solutions: pros and cons* variables to 1 for the *others' consideration* and *others' respect* variables (See **Table 1**).

Table 1. Intercoder reliability

Variable	% Agreement	Scott's pi
position	84	.72
scope	96	.73
evidence type	94	.92
create info base	98	.92
prioritize key values	98	.92
identify solutions	90	.79
weigh solutions	86	.72
comprehension: clarity	92	.73
comprehension: understanding	96	.73
consideration	92	.81
others' consideration	100	1
respect	88	.74
others' respect	100	1

4 RESULTS

The sample contained a total of 1,016 comments; 455 (44.8%) from the *Denver Post*, 463 (45.6%) from the *Aurora Sentinel*, and 98 (9.6%) from the *Craig Daily Press* (see **Table 2**). Most of the comments in the sample (324, or 31.9%) originated in the first third of a thread; 228, or 22.4% came from the middle third; 253, or 24.9% came from the bottom third of a thread; and 209 (20.6%) came from threads with a total of six or fewer comments. Most comments expressed a clear position on the gun control debate; the majority of comments (637, or 62.7%) expressed a pro-gun-rights position, while 220, or 21.7% expressed a pro-gun-control position. Fewer comments (128, or 12.6%) expressed no clear position. Only 31 comments (3.1%) expressed a mixed position on the gun control debate. These results do not match polling data; a Pew Research study found that nationally, as of May 1, 2013, 50% of the U.S. population feels gun rights are more important than gun control, while 48% feel the opposite, privileging gun control over gun rights (Pew Research Center, 2013b). Polls of Coloradans have reached similar findings. In January of 2013, the *Denver Post* conducted a poll and found that 50% of Coloradans (likely voters) felt it was more important to protect gun rights and 45% felt it was more important to control gun ownership (Lee, 2013).

Over half of the comments (522, or 51.4%) were made on issues at the national or international level. Fewer (325, or 32.0%) were made at the level

of the State of Colorado, and fewest (169, or 16.6%) were made at the local community level.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages for Publication, Location, Position, Scope, and Evidence Type (N=1,016).

	N	%
Publication		
<i>Denver Post</i>	455	44.8
<i>Aurora Sentinel</i>	463	45.6
<i>Craig Daily Press</i>	98	9.6
Total	1,016	100
Location		
First third	324	31.9
Second third	228	22.4
Last third	253	24.9
Less than 6 comments	209	20.6
Total	1,016	100
Position		
Pro-gun rights	637	62.7
Pro-gun control	220	21.7
Mixed position	31	3.1
No position	128	12.6
Total	1,016	100
Scope		
Local community	169	16.6
State of Colorado	325	32.0
National or international	522	51.4
Total	1,016	100

4.1 Research question 1

RQ1: Does online discourse about gun issues qualify as deliberation about those issues?

The first research question asked whether the discussion conducted in these comments qualified as deliberation according to the Gastil and Black (2008) definition. This is a question that does not have a clear “yes” or “no” answer, but the coding scheme and operationalization of this definition of deliberation (adapted from Black, Welser, Cosley, and DeGroot’s 2011 analysis of discussions on *Wikipedia*) allowed the quantification of previously noted elements of deliberation. **Table 3** lists frequencies and percentages of the analytic elements of deliberation and **Table 4** lists frequencies and percentages of the social elements of deliberation according to the Gastil and Black (2008) definition.

About three-fourths of the comments in the sample (780, or 76.8%) did make a contribution toward an information base on which to have a discussion. This was the only element of deliberation noted by Gastil and Black (2008) to be present more often than not in comments. No other element of deliberation was found in a majority of the comments in the sample. The discussion taking place in these comments sections did not constitute deliberation. In order to qualify as deliberation, a process must constitute a reasoned discussion of a problem and its potential solutions in which all participants have a chance to be heard and carefully consider the

contributions of other participants while treating each other with respect (Nabatchi, 2012).

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages for analytic elements of deliberation variables (N=1,016).

Variable	Total	
	N	%
Create info base		
no contribution	236	23.1
some contribution	780	76.8
	1,016	100
Prioritize key values		
no comment on values	808	79.5
states values but no link to positions	67	6.6
states values and links to positions	141	13.9
	1,016	100
Identify possible solutions		
no recommendation	836	82.3
makes or builds on recommendation	180	17.7
	1,016	100
Weigh solutions: pros/cons		
no pros or cons discussed	577	56.8
raises only advantages	124	12.2
raises only disadvantages	299	29.4
raises advantages and disadvantages of the same solution	16	1.6
	1,016	100

Most comments (808, or 79.5%) made no comment on values, whether to make reference to values on their own or to link them to particular positions or solutions. Most comments (836, or 82.3%) did not recommend solutions to problems or build upon solutions that had been proposed by others. The majority of comments (577, or 56.8%) did not discuss pros or cons of any solutions.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages for social elements of deliberation variables (N=1,016).

Variable	Total	
	N	%
Comprehension/clarity		
asks for clarification w/sarcasm or antagonism	56	5.5
neutral – no request for clarification	890	87.6
includes a request for clarification	69	6.8
	1,016	100
Demonstrates understanding		
explicitly does not understand	20	2.0
no explicit statement either way	937	92.2
explicitly does understand	58	5.7
	1,016	100
Consideration		
neutral – no evidence of listening	626	61.6
explicitly considers others' positions	317	31.2
request for consideration or feedback	36	3.5
evidence of consideration and request for feedback	37	3.6
	1,016	100
Others' consideration		
indicates another is not considering others	29	2.9
neutral – no comment on others' listening	984	96.9
indicates another is considering others	3	0.3
	1,016	100
Respect		
demonstrates disrespect	282	27.8
neutral – not explicitly respectful or disrespectful	637	62.7
demonstrates respect	97	9.5
	1,016	100
Others' respect		
someone else was disrespectful	38	3.7
neutral – no comment on others' respect	975	96.0
someone else was respectful	3	0.3
	1,016	100

The social dimensions of deliberation were even less likely to be present overall than the analytical dimensions. Most comments (890, or 87.6%) contained no request for clarification of other commenters. Most comments (937, or 92.2%) contained no explicit statement that the commenter did or did not understand the comments made by another. Most comments (626, or 61.6%) contained no explicit evidence that commenters were taking the comments of others into consideration. Most comments (637, or 62.7%) were neutral, or not overtly respectful or disrespectful, though comments were more likely to contain explicit disrespect (282, or 27.8%) than explicit respect (97, or 9.5%).

Under this coding scheme, there are a few categories that could be noted as particularly important moments of actual deliberation. A comment that would have been coded as having a mixed ideological position, or one that was coded as having raised both advantages and disadvantages of the same solution would indicate that those commenters were seriously taking multiple sides of the issue into account. Those moments were rare, however. Only 31 comments (3.1%) were coded as expressing a mixed position on the gun control issue, and only 16 comments (1.6%) raised both advantages and disadvantages of the same solution.

Respect and consideration, frequently noted as important elements of deliberation in multiple definitions of the concept (Hicks, 2002; Gastil and Black, 2008; Dryzek, 2010; Nabatchi, 2012) were more often found in

comments. Explicit consideration was found in 317 comments, or 31.2%.

Explicit respect for others was present in 97, or 9.5% of comments.

Despite the controversial nature of the debate, the strong opinions and disagreements, and the informal nature of online forums, some elements of deliberation that have been noted as democratically valuable forms of discussion were found in varying numbers in this sample of comments.

Despite the common view that internet comments forums are wastelands of vile frothing insults, many comments were intelligent and creative contributions to the gun control debate. The following comment is an example of a calm, intelligent, creative comment:

I beg to differ with Representative Fields.

The ancient Romans to solve drunkenness, and violence that caused deaths at dinner parties created a master of drinking, and required a Master of Drinking to be at every Roman dinner party. A common sense approach.

Horace describes the duties of the Master of Drinking. The Drinking Master not only told every guest at the dinner party how much they had to drink, he also made sure everyone drank the same amount of wine. The end result wast that those who had been abstemious now became as dipsomaniac as the drunkards.

These new gun laws will be as effective at curbing gun violance as the Master of Drinking was in curbing drunkenness at Roman dinner parties.

Aurora Sentinel, Capite censi, March 20, 2013

This comment uses an anecdote from Roman history as an analogy to demonstrate the inevitable futility of gun control legislation.

However, references to history could become excessive and irrelevant to the topic, according to discussion participants. After a string of comments

debating the history of the Nazi militia, one commenter attempted to take the discussion in a different direction, even if it meant the end of the thread:

This Nazi militia deiscussion had worn out it's welcome. Can we return to the actual article with a meaningful conversation or perhaps the DP could close this thread?

Denver Post, justlurking, December 14, 2012

Despite occasional lack of consideration, overt disrespect and insults, and irrelevant commentary, commenters often expressed an awareness of the democratic value of discussing the issue:

So... please do talk about it. Feel it out. I do support what I hear so far but would love many more details. While I have moved away from Craig, Co (we enlisted active duty 2003) we do hope to return there when we are done serving our country and it would be great to know our firearms would not be an issue once we return.

Craig Daily Press, sevendeadlies, April 13, 2013

Commenters seemed to believe that their discussion mattered. They imagined themselves to be participating in democratically valuable conversation, whether it qualified as actual deliberation or not.

Certain elements of deliberation were more likely to be present depending on other factors, such as the location of the comment within the thread and the ideological position expressed in the comment.

4.1.1 Location

As shown in **Table 5** ($X^2 = 127.601$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$), explicit consideration was most often found in comments in the middle third or bottom third of a thread. When requests for feedback were present, they were more often found

in the first third of comments threads. When evidence of consideration and a request for feedback were present in the same comment, the comment was most often found in the second third.

Table 5. Crosstabulations of commenter's consideration by location (N=1,016).

	Location			
	First third %	Second third %	Last third %	Less than 6 comments %
Consideration (commenter)				
neutral – no evidence of listening	67.0	48.7	44.7	88.0
explicitly considers others' positions	24.7	42.1	47.0	10.0
request for consideration or feedback	5.9	2.6	3.6	1.0
evidence of consideration and request for feedback	2.5	6.6	4.7	1.0
Total %	100	100	100	100

$X^2 = 127.601$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$

As shown in **Table 6** ($X^2 = 15.183$, $df = 6$, $p < .05$), disrespect was more often found in comments in the second third of the thread. Explicit respect was most often found in threads with six or fewer comments, but in longer threads, respect was most often found in comments in the first third of the thread. Comments in the first third and last third of threads were more likely to be disrespectful than those in the middle of the thread.

Table 6. Crosstabulations of commenter's respect by location (N=1,016).

Respect (commenter)	Location			
	First third %	Second third %	Last third %	Less than 6 comments %
demonstrates disrespect	23.8	32.5	29.2	26.8
neutral – not explicitly respectful or disrespectful	64.8	60.5	64.8	59.3
demonstrates respect	11.4	7.0	5.9	13.9
Total %	100	100	100	100

$X^2 = 15.183$, $df = 6$, $p < .05$

As **Table 7** ($X^2 = 18.550$, $df = 9$, $p < .05$) illustrates, pro-gun rights comments were more likely to be found in the first third of comments and threads with fewer than six comments, while pro-gun control comments were most often found in comments in the last third of the thread. Comments that were made with no discernible position were most likely to appear in the bottom third of threads.

Table 7. Crosstabulations of commenter's position by location (N=1,016).

Position	Location			
	First third %	Second third %	Last third %	Less than 6 comments %
Pro-gun rights	66.4	60.5	54.5	68.9
Pro-gun control	19.4	22.4	27.7	17.2
Mixed position	2.5	3.9	2.0	4.3
No position	11.7	13.2	15.8	9.6
Total %	100	100	100	100

$X^2 = 18.550$, $df = 9$, $p < .05$

4.1.2 Position

Some categories varied depending on the ideological position expressed by the commenter. As shown in **Table 8** ($X^2 = 33.488$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$), commenters who expressed no position on the gun control debate were least likely to make reference to values. Commenters who expressed a mixed position were most likely to make reference to values both with and without linking them to a position or a solution. Commenters who expressed a pro-gun-rights position were more likely to make reference to values both with and without linking them to a position or a solution than were pro-gun-control commenters. Comments made with a pro-gun-control position were less likely to comment on values than were pro-gun-rights commenters.

Table 8. Crosstabulations of reference to values by commenter's position (N=1,016).

	Position			
	Pro-gun rights %	Pro-gun control %	Mixed position %	No position %
Prioritize key values				
no comment on values	76.6	85.0	64.5	88.3
states values but no link to positions	6.6	3.2	16.1	10.2
states values and links to positions	16.8	11.8	19.4	1.6
Total %	100	100	100	100

$X^2 = 33.488$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$

Table 9 ($X^2 = 13.535$, $df = 3$, $p < .01$) shows that commenters who expressed a mixed position on the gun control issue were most likely to

identify possible solutions or build on solutions that were proposed by others. Commenters who expressed no position were least likely to comment on possible solutions.

Table 9. Crosstabulations of identification of possible solutions by commenter's position (N=1,016).

	Position			
	Pro-gun rights %	Pro-gun control %	Mixed position %	No position %
Identify possible solutions				
no recommendation	82.3	81.4	61.3	89.1
makes or builds on recommendation	17.7	18.6	38.7	10.9
Total %	100	100	100	100

$X^2 = 13.535$, $df = 3$, $p < .01$

As seen in **Table 10** ($X^2 = 36.285$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$), commenters who expressed a pro-gun-control position were more likely to express explicit consideration for the points made by others. Commenters who expressed a mixed position were most likely to request feedback from or the consideration of others.

Table 10. Crosstabulations of commenter's consideration by commenter's position (N=1,016).

	Position			
	Pro-gun rights %	Pro-gun control %	Mixed position %	No position %
Consideration (commenter)				
neutral – no evidence of listening	66.2	48.6	54.8	62.5
explicitly considers others' positions	27.9	43.2	29.0	27.3
request for consideration or feedback	3.3	2.7	12.9	3.9
evidence of consideration and request for feedback	2.5	5.5	3.2	6.3
Total %	100	100	100	100

$X^2 = 36.285$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$

Table 11 ($X^2 = 23.669$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$) shows that commenters who expressed a pro-gun-rights position were most likely to demonstrate disrespect, though pro-gun-rights commenters and pro-gun-control commenters were equally likely to demonstrate explicit respect.

Table 11. Crosstabulations of commenter's respect by commenter's position (N=1,016).

	Position			
	Pro-gun rights %	Pro-gun control %	Mixed position %	No position %
Respect (commenter)				
demonstrates disrespect	32.2	23.2	16.1	16.4
neutral – not explicitly respectful or disrespectful	57.8	66.8	80.6	75.8
demonstrates respect	10.0	10.0	3.2	7.8
Total %	100	100	100	100

$X^2 = 23.669$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$

4.1.3 Scope

Some elements of deliberation were found in different amounts depending on the scope of the comment, or whether the comment discussed issues at a local community, State of Colorado, or national/international level. As **Table 12** ($X^2 = 17.384$, $df = 6$, $p < .01$) shows, pro-gun-rights comments were more likely to be made at the local community or state level, while comments made at the national level were more likely to be pro-gun control. Comments that expressed a mixed position on the gun control debate were made more often at the national or international level. Comments that expressed no particular position on the debate were most often made at the local community level.

Table 12. Crosstabulations of commenter's position by scope of comment (N=1,016).

	Scope		
	Local community %	State of Colorado %	National or international %
Position			
Pro-gun rights	31.4	39.1	27.7
Pro-gun control	20.1	16.3	27.1
Mixed position	13.6	24.6	28.8
No position	34.9	20.0	16.3
Total %	100	100	100

$X^2 = 17.384$, $df = 6$, $p < .01$

As for the location of the comments within threads, **Table 13** ($X^2 = .52.334$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$) shows that comments made in the top third of threads were most likely to be at the state level, while comments in the

middle third or bottom third of a thread were most likely to be made at the national or international level. Threads with fewer than six total comments were more likely to contain comments made at the local community level.

Table 13. Crosstabulations of location of comment by scope of comment (N=1,016).

	Scope		
	Local community %	State of Colorado %	National or international %
Location			
First third	31.4	39.1	27.7
Second third	20.1	16.3	27.1
Last third	13.6	24.6	28.8
Less than six comments in thread	34.9	20.0	16.3
Total %	100	100	100

$X^2 = .52.334$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$

As **Table 14** shows ($X^2 = 10.126$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$), comments made at the national/international level were most likely to make reference to values that come to play in the debate, both with and without linking those values to possible solutions or positions. Comments made at the state level were least likely to comment on values.

Table 14. Crosstabulations of reference to values by scope of comment (N=1,016).

	Scope		
	Local community %	State of Colorado %	National or international %
Prioritize key values			
no comment on values	80.5	84.6	76.1
states values but no link to positions	5.3	5.8	7.5
states values and links to positions	14.2	9.5	16.5
Total %	100	100	100

$X^2 = 10.126$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$

Discussion of potential solutions to the problem of gun violence, as seen in **Table 15** ($X^2 = 15.094$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$), was more likely to be found in discussion of issues at a local level. Comments made on issues at a local community level were most likely to identify possible solutions or build on solutions that were proposed by others, while comments made at the state level were least likely to.

Table 15. Crosstabulations of identification of possible solutions by scope of comment (N=1,016).

	Scope		
	Local community %	State of Colorado %	National or international %
Identify possible solutions			
no recommendation	75.7	88.6	80.5
makes or builds on recommendation	24.3	11.4	19.5
Total %	100	100	100

$X^2 = 15.094$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$

4.2 Hypothesis 1

H1: Comments made during discussions of gun issues will be more respectful when participants are discussing issues at a local rather than national level.

H1 predicted that when commenters were discussing the gun control issue at a local level, they would be more respectful than when they were commenting at a national level. The scope measure was operationalized into three categories: the local community level, the State of Colorado level, and the national or international level in order to capture a greater level of nuance and detail in how discussion was conducted.

As we see in **Table 16** ($X^2 = 42.557$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$), H1 was supported. The local community comments were the most likely to demonstrate explicit respect for others, while comments made at the state level were least likely to demonstrate explicit respect. Comments made at the local level were least likely to demonstrate explicit disrespect for others. The most disrespectful comments were found at the national/international level.

Table 16. Crosstabulations of commenter's respect by scope of comment (N=1,016).

	Scope		
	Local community %	State of Colorado %	National or international %
Respect (commenter)			
demonstrates disrespect	14.2	26.8	32.8
neutral – not explicitly respectful or disrespectful	66.3	67.7	58.4
demonstrates respect	19.5	5.5	8.8
Total %	100	100	100

$X^2 = 42.557$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$

4.2.1 Textual analysis

Results of textual analysis find further support for differences in discussion of issues at a local as opposed to national level. Through textual analysis, it was found that many commenters appeared to imagine two different communities involved in the gun control debate. Many pro-gun-rights commenters seemed to imagine their pro-gun-control opponents as being of an elite class of the East Coast, or being beholden to or swayed by elitist politicians:

Sadly, we are one state. I would like to make the Western Slope of Colorado a separate state from the socialist Eastern Slope. I know this won't happen but I can hope! If you do just a little research, you will discover that Hickenlooper is part of Bloombergs' conclave of Mayors against illegal guns. He is just another displaced easterner doing the wishes of someone else.

Aurora Sentinel, fishhunter, March 21, 2013

This commenter imagined the State of Colorado to be divided along ideological lines, with much of the state politically and/or culturally distinct from the elites of Washington or New York.

The West Coast, especially California, was also imagined to be a place ideologically different from Colorado, and yet with interests in swaying Colorado politics:

An article for the sheeple by the sheeple. Go back to Cali and stop trying to impose your will on people who just don't want you here.

Aurora Sentinel, Jeff, May 23, 2013

The imagining of Western territories and states as aggrieved victims of the federal government is a component of the mythology of the West as outlined by Limerick (1987). Most explicit references to Western mythology, usually through reference to the “Wild West,” were made by proponents of gun control in order to imply that the arguments of their opponents against gun control arose from a Wild West fantasy:

Good for Obama. It's about time our leaders showed some gumption. I just hope our senators and congresspeople listen to someone other than the NRA. There are other opinions out there. Who wants to relive the old wild west? It's insane.

Denver Post, DenverDixie, January 17, 2013

Such comments often pointed to the inapplicability of the Wild West mythology to contemporary times or the current gun control debate:

Do you mean the real old west where guns were prohibited in most frontier towns? Do you mean the old west that required you to check your guns with the town sheriff before entering the town? Do you mean the old west where places like Denver, Laramie, Wichita and Dodge City had

strict gun control ordinances? That sounds like an old west we can learn something from.

There is another old west of course. It is the west of myth and fantasy. The west created by Buffalo Bill, Hollywood and John Wayne. It is a west that never existed but lives only in the minds of a vocal minority. This minority has been duped into believing that the daily gunfight up at Buckskin Joe's is historically accurate. Fortunately that vocal minority is dwindling demographically and within a few decades (maybe not even that long) will have gone the way of those dusty myths they so love.

Denver Post, Dave II, January 17, 2013

This commenter clearly outlines the difference between the “real old west” of history in which guns were often highly regulated in towns and the other “old west” of “myth and fantasy” that was created by popular culture.

That fantasy, many commenters alleged, had no relation to the current debate over guns in which the U.S. and Colorado were now engaged:

Last but not least, Rummel's statement, “This is about more than just guns, this is about protecting our economy ...” is misguided & ill-advised. This is not the wild west. Civilized people do not resolve their differences by shooting each other.

Craig Daily Press, Serena1313, April 13, 2013

The idea that those opposing gun control were doing so out of a desire to relive a Wild West fantasy was denied by gun-rights advocates. One pro-gun-rights commenter countered that accusation by arguing that the anti-gun-control position (in this case, arming security guards as an alternate solution to gun violence in schools) was not, at heart, a Wild West fantasy, and was instead a rational solution to the problem:

How many of the parents of the Newtown victims wish there could have been an armed guard in the lobby of Sandy Hook the morning that Adam Lanza forced his way into the school? Seems like a reasonable, not perfect, solution to a vexing problem. I don't see these armed guards getting into Old West shoot-outs with crazed child killers like the critics imagine, but

rather the would-be killers avoiding the schools in the first place, where armed guards are posted. And that's entirely the purpose.

Denver Post, GreasyBrian, December 22, 2012

However, some pro-gun-rights commenters betrayed a position that could have arisen directly from Wild West mythology:

I tell you, just after Sandy Hook, we TeaPublicans and our NRA were really worried because so many people got on the band wagon of gun control! But Wayne LaPierre, our NRA leader, was not going to put his tail between his legs and run away and hide. Within in week after the shootings he came out and told America that we would NOT support any type of gun control and also said we better arm teachers and have armed guards patrolling the buildings and groundsand then you liberal fools laughed at us and made fun of us! Yes, we TeaPublicans remember that day very well...how you treated us! And after we went through all of those attacks against us, all you ended up with is a water downed background check? Hahahaha! Saturday Night Live was 100% RIGHT when they said "The Senate has agreed to THINK about talking about gun control". And you fools think YOU won because you got us to think about talking? Hahahaha! Now it's we TeaPublicans and our NRA thats getting the last laugh! Bahahaha! You smell that? Do you smell that? Victory, son. Nothing else in the world smells like that. We TeaPublicans love the smell of Victory in the morning!

Denver Post, TeaPublican, April 14, 2013

This commenter implies that real men, like Wayne LaPierre, “our NRA leader,” do not hide but face a threat with action. In this comment, LaPierre sounds reminiscent of a wronged monomythic hero who endured the ineffectual actions of cultural and political institutions and their attempts to contend with a (real or perceived) social problem before he said it like it is, laid down the law, and brought true wisdom to the people. Here, gun-control proponents are portrayed as all talk, no action, reminiscent of the black-and-white, act-rather-than-talk hero of the Western film (Tompkins, 1992). The reference to the Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now* and the line (“I love the

smell of napalm in the morning”) spoken by Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (played by Robert Duvall) while American soldiers attacked a Vietnamese village with guns and bombs fired from helicopters could be seen as a celebration of a pro-war mentality. In the film, Kilgore said napalm “smelled like victory,” as he lamented the inevitable end of the Vietnam War.

One commenter attacked gun-rights backers not on the logic of their arguments, but on a lack of evidence of their willingness to back up their words with action:

Yet not one of the defenders of the second amendment in all cases at all times returned fire. Not one. It's all good to pound your chests, but when seconds counted, the gun lobby was cringing under their chair like everyone else. IT IS the guns and keeping assault weapons out of the hands of lunatics is not an infringement on a "right" none of you had the guts to exercise. Case Closed.

Aurora Sentinel, chickenshots, September 16, 2012

This commenter exposes this particular anti-gun-control position as one arising from a monomythic fantasy that believers do not live out even when they have the chance.

4.3 Research question 2

RQ2: How is expertise both used and framed in discussion of gun issues?

Though they disagreed on what kind of experts had legitimacy in the gun control debate and what form of expertise should be taken into account when making decisions about policy, commenters seemed to agree that experts (of some kind) are important. The following commenter argued that one obstacle

to solving the problem of gun violence was the fact that politicians in Washington, D.C. were more beholden to lobbyists than experts:

Our House of Representative and Senate are corrupt. They do not care what any expert may say and if jobs will be lost. They act more like children when mom and dad are away and they do anything they want. Sounds just like Washington. While our Vice President lobbied them for gun control and NYC mayor poured \$1,000,000.00 into a lobby against gun control we should have had journalist in Denver to expose the facts. More money came in to change our voting laws so that Republicans will have a hard time in 2014.”

Craig Daily Press, RonRoesener, May 19, 2013

This commenter argues that politicians should be listening to experts when making decisions about policy.

That Washington was more beholden to money than expert advice was a common theme, though often “expertise” was at times conflated with “science”:

Yeah, but there's lot of money to be made by putting and keeping people in the criminal "justice" system. In part, it's how courts and cops are funded and their budget concerns trump science, due process, and justice.

Denver Post, GeauxTigers, May 19, 2013

Here, “science, due process, and justice” should be guiding values that trump financial concerns rather than the other way around.

Many commenters attacked traditional “experts” for a lack of legitimacy:

To date, the restrictions on gun ownership (age limitations, background checks, denial of gun ownership to anyone with a felony conviction - violent or not, denial of gun ownership to REPORTED people with a form of mental illness which makes them a danger to themselves or others, unlike the "mental health expert" who refused to report the shooter at Virginia Tech either because of client/patient confidentiality or because of a belief that the 2nd Amendment outweighed reporting imminent danger) have withstood challenges. ALL that Obama is recommending is reinstating the ban on assault weapons and mandatory background

checks on all sales (and I believe making "straw sales" purchasing a felony - for instance, the person female who bought the guns for Klebold and Harris would have been charged with a felony). Ironically, the NRA has come out in FAVOR of those background checks, so I wonder which one would prevent you from getting another gun?

Denver Post, mrfxx, January 18, 2013

The above commenter points out that the traditionally defined expert does not necessarily have legitimacy. He or she makes that point by putting “mental health expert” in quotation marks, indicating that though this person was considered an expert by traditional institutions, he did not perform his expert role because he let someone dangerous slip past him, endangering society. This commenter suggests that an expert has a vital social role that this particular person failed to perform. Hence, this expert’s claim to legitimacy was not found in his mastery of an area of knowledge, but on his ability to act to utilize that knowledge to society’s benefit.

These traditional experts who lacked legitimacy were often attacked by pro-gun-rights commenters. They were often imagined to be aligned with entrenched interests and institutions that were incompetent at effectively governing:

‘we must take steps to make sure this never happens again’. How many times have you listened or read those words? Thousands of times in my life. The funny part about this article is that 'teams of experts' were formed to prevent this type of behavior, look how well it worked. As far as gun control, it doesn't work and won't work, please just stop with the 'gun control' talk. We are already regulated to the point of ridiculousness, and you want more 'checks and pat downs'? I'll pass.

Aurora Sentinel, Gofastgo, August 3, 2012

This commenter points to the ineffectiveness of the “teams of experts” that were formed to prevent gun violence, and argues that the solutions that were

enacted as a result of those experts (gun control regulations) do not work and only lead to a society “regulated to the point of ridiculousness.”

Many pro-gun-control comments contained attacks on politicians for proving a lack of expertise relevant to the gun control debate due to a failure to understand firearms:

These politicians have no knowledge of what firearms are, the functionality of specific firearms or the accessories related to any firearm. How can they be qualified to create legislation regulating firearms? They are, in fact, only legislators groping around in the dark. My five year old son knows more about firearms than these politicians.

Craig Daily Press, GreyStone, March 19, 2013

According to this commenter, politicians are not qualified to create laws on guns unless they have knowledge of how they work. Whether or not this is correct, it was a point made repeatedly by commenters in order to discount attempts at gun control legislation:

Primarily because those who speak of banning "assault" weapons and those authoring similar legislation make it glaringly evident through the language that they have no knowledge of firearms. Yet they are attempting to legislate. Thumb-hole stocks? Really? It's like them attempting to write technical publications for gas turbines and informing themselves by reading an airline pamphlet.

And FYI the AR-15 is NOT a high-powered weapon.

Aurora Sentinel, WeatherbyMarkV, December 18, 2012

One notable incident involving a local politician occurred when Rep. Diana DeGette, the Democratic U.S. Congressional representative for Colorado’s 1st District, which includes the city and county of Denver, mistakenly implied at a forum on gun control hosted by the *Denver Post* that gun magazines cannot be reloaded (Sherry, 2013). Her quote was circulated

in social media, and DeGette was attacked for her gaffe in comments in the sample:

if you had heard her talk...she should be embarrassed and dismissed from any regulations concerning guns....she don't know her A__ from a hole in the ground....and these are the idiots you elect....smart as a whip those democrats are.

Aurora Sentinel, Tom Sanders, April 4, 2013

I watched DeGette on TV and it is clear that she does not have a clue. If the rest of her legislation is similar to her gun control measures, she should be relieved from her position, NOW!

Aurora Sentinel, fishhunter, April 4, 2013

Commenters made it clear that DeGette's lack of knowledge of firearms discounted her from legislating on gun issues.

Commenters attacked also supporters of gun control for an apparent lack of knowledge of firearms. The following commenter states exactly what it is that gun-control supporters are missing:

Who is this woman (Muir or Muri-spelling differed in article), is she an expert in anything? What is her pedigree relating to guns, other than she does not like them. Maybe I don't like liver or democrats but I can't say to take them away. The politicians have for too long danced only to their own music, and not perhaps they will pay some attention to the citizens.

Don't any of these people recognize the Constitution of the United States?

Aurora Sentinel, fishhunter, May 28, 2013

Joan Muir was a retiree mentioned in the article being commented on who said she supports gun control because she does not like guns. This commenter implies that her views are not relevant to the gun-control conversation because she appears to have no "pedigree relating to guns," meaning that she

does not have demonstrable knowledge of firearms, so her views are not relevant to the gun control debate.

Commenters frequently used the term “expert” in this way; the voices of many individuals and groups were said to be irrelevant to the gun control debate because they were not “experts” on the topic. Politicians, everyday citizens, schoolteachers, college professors, and those personally affected by gun violence were all noted to be among those who did not hold legitimate expertise related to the gun debate. In the following comment, the American Federation of Teachers was deemed lacking of legitimate expertise on the topic:

What does the American Federation of Teachers know about gun control? Perhaps they should concentrate on curricula and making lesson plans. According to national test scores the teachers are not doing a very good job of teaching. (I include school administration)

Aurora Sentinel, fishhunter, April 4, 2013

The following comment was made in response to an article about a pro-gun-control speech made by the mother of one of the child victims of the Newtown school shooting:

Feel for her but having a child killed doesn't make her an expert on the subject of gun control or crime issues. Another case of Obama and the Liberals trying to make political hey on the blood of others.

Denver Post, Quite Frankly, April 13, 2013

This commenter claims that this woman’s experience having a child killed by gun violence does not “make her an expert on the subject of gun control or crime issues.” Implied is that only people who are deemed “experts” on the topic should have a voice in the debate. There is a rhetorical component to

expertise; an individual must secure the right to be seen as having a special mastery of an area of knowledge in order to be seen as an expert (Hartelius, 2010), and these commenters argue over who can legitimately claim the honor, though they also use the term “expert” as a tool to exclude certain voices from the conversation by delegitimizing them.

In response, another commenter states that many other voices that are given weight in this debate do not qualify as experts, either, but their views are still relevant to the conversation:

Neither are the NRA or the militia-type gun fanatics. Nor all of the self-taught constitutional scholars. But we've heard them howling non-stop and loudly since the debate began. It's good to hear the other points of view for a change. We need some more of that.

Denver Post, locke-1, April 13, 2013

This commenter argues that not only those who qualify as “experts” have valid input in this public debate.

A significant amount of argument appeared suggesting that certain kinds of expertise and experts were not legitimate to the gun control discussion. What commenters did consider relevant expertise was less explicit and often had to be implied. It seemed that knowledge of firearms was considered by gun-rights supporters to be the only relevant form of expertise:

--we of the firearms community have been trying for about twenty years - obviously with little success-- to educate the chattering classes on details of firearms but through either mendacity or ignorance they continue to misrepresent or deny basic facts.

--as another example, NYC Mayor Bloomberg (who, btw, is now going to try to ban most painkillers in emergency rooms) displayed this ignorance several days ago on network TV ---he apparently doesn't realize that the so-called weapons he wants to ban don't "go brrrrrrppp" as he foolishly demonstrated...

Denver Post, rellimpank, January 11, 2013

In the second paragraph, this commenter states that knowledge of firearms is what politicians are lacking, and in the first, he states what kind of knowledge is required: "details of firearms," knowledge that is held by "we of the firearms community."

Commenters often demonstrated their own knowledge of guns in order to point out weaknesses in pro-gun-control arguments:

I have a .22 rifle which can be fitted with a few plastic parts to be made to look like an "assault" rifle (whatever that is). Do you want to take that away from me?"

Denver Post, carpaDM, April 13, 2013

Protip: A 30-round magazine is a standard-capacity magazine, as they ship with many modern sporting rifles. In this case, "high-capacity" is a misnomer."

Denver Post, eCurmudgeon, February 15, 2013

Which one of the different AR 15 rifles sold are you talking about with AR 15. Comes with a 30 round magazine, but is considered a low-penetration weapon with different loads. Sold as a varmint rifle in 1940s-50s, bolt action or lever action to shoot varmints such as squirrels, rats, groundhogs, and bullet is not much larger than 22 LR. With larger case and longer, faster, more accurate, but not a large caliber. AR16 looks same, but with different bullet that does not discinigrate on impact, and used by military to make clean wound. Use in Urban or closed buildings and need more rounds to do job of a larger caliber gun.

Aurora Sentinel, Frank25, January 16, 2013

Implied in these comments is an argument that their opponents do not have the knowledge necessary to legislate or even comment on guns, but they

themselves do. Knowledge of firearms was considered by many of those who opposed gun control to be the only expertise that mattered.

A related kind of expertise commenters highlighted as relevant involved not only detailed knowledge of guns but experience using them:

Larry, I bought my first rifle (.22) from Sears as a teenager, and my first shotgun by mail order. I've had both for about 45 years now, and neither has attempted mass murder. Both have been used to train my sons, and some other kids, as well as hours and hours of plinking and the harvesting of numerous rabbits, quail, pheasants sand one raccoon (won't do that again, tasted terrible). So its not the age, or the source of the weapon that is the problem. Its the user. We need criminal control and crazy control, not gun control. Criminals and crazies are easier (not easy, mind you, just easier) to identify than guns, and as a bonus, they don't have their own Amendment to the Constitution.

Denver Post, Duncanhill, January 18, 2013

Personal experience using firearms is a separate kind of expertise than knowledge of them, but it is used to make a similar point. One could acquire knowledge of firearms from reading books or from hands-on experience. Though this commenter does not use the terms “expert” or “expertise,” he offers up his own personal experience with shooting guns as evidence to make his point. This is an example of what Collins and Evans (2002) term “experience-based expertise.”

Perhaps commenters offered their own knowledge and experience as legitimate expertise so frequently because the knowledge offered by other sources could be and was often deemed suspicious, and able to be used differently depending on the political motivations of those who wielded it:

This article is biased. It is quoting numbers that have been proven to be made up. The percentage that actually support these background checks is 49%, not the 95% these liberal media rags want you to believe.

Denver Post, homekey1, April 25, 2013

This commenter offers no proof for his or her allegations that the numbers given in the poll referenced were made up, but this was another frequent tactic to discount the evidence offered by the opposing side: attack their facts as tainted by their political position.

Though they were arguing for the privileging of a certain kind of expertise (one arising from knowledge of guns or experience using them) while arguing that the monological expertise of traditionally sanctioned experts was insufficient, the commenters were not contributing toward the creation of an alternate expertise or knowledge base, such as the dialogical expertise that Hartelius (2012) described. They were not working together to create a record of expert knowledge. In fact, how they used information other than their own experience was limited.

They did at times try to contribute toward a knowledge base:

<http://i.imgur.com/mEDZk.png>

The above is an interesting map.

After looking at it, I would have to say that a real association is how areas are doing economically. The worst that they are, the higher the rate.

Denver Post, windbourne, June 28, 2103

During a discussion about the reasons behind gun violence, this commenter provided a link to a map of the U.S. that listed per capita murder rates per state. Windbourne provides an explanation for the variations between states, interpreting the data for him- or herself.

But overall, the way the commenters used information was limited. They did not often quote to scientific findings other than polls or demographic or historical data, such as crime statistics reports gathered by the FBI. This debate could have been opened up to many more kinds of evidence, but these commenters maintained a limited idea of what expertise and evidence were relevant to the debate.

When commenters did reference a wider range of information that was relevant to the debate, they usually did not point others to an actual study, so it was impossible to know what the study was, whether it was made up or not, whether the methodology was sound, and so on, and these are things most people do not have time or the knowledge to dig into:

A report recently released confirms that psychotropic drugs have been involved in 9 out of 10 school shootings.

Disarming an entire society because big-pharma wants to dope us all up with SSRI's is about as nutty as it gets.

Aurora Sentinel, Anotha Texan, January 23, 2013

This commenter uses the results of a “report recently released” as evidence to back up his or her point, but does not tell fellow commenters which study this was or where it can be found. Commenters often referenced scientific studies in this way. If these commenters were contributing toward a knowledge base of some kind, they would have sourced their information.

When commenters did discuss the studies on which they were commenting, it was usually to discount the results of the study:

Actually these are very skewed facts where even the researchers admit it is not accurate. The studies are flawed because they don't take into account the number of times guns are not fired in self defense but merely drawn. Guns are used in self defense in this manner over 2.5 million times per year.

The researcher Dr. Arthur Keller refused to release his data he used to come to the conclusion. It invalidates his study.

Aurora Sentinel, Jason, April 3, 2013

This commenter's scrutiny of the study being discussed and his conclusion that its results are invalid and amount to "skewed facts" recall an above example that falls into the same main theme:

This article is biased. It is quoting numbers that have been proven to be made up. The percentage that actually support these background checks is 49%, not the 95% these liberal media rags want you to believe.

Denver Post, homekey1, April 25, 2013

The knowledge of institutional experts, such as scientists, university researchers, polling firms, and others, was frequently attacked as "biased." There was no source of information that was always necessarily taken as accurate on its face. All facts could be questioned, and were often accused to be reflective not of any objective reality but only of the political interests of those who found them or quoted them.

4.4 Summary of main findings

This study used both quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis to examine comments made to the online forums of Colorado newspapers, looking specifically for evidence of deliberative processes, how

discussion was conducted on local topics as opposed to national ones, and for treatment and framing of expertise by commenters.

Almost two-thirds of comments in the sample expressed a pro-gun-rights position, while fewer than a third expressed a pro-gun-control position. Over half of the comments were made on issues at the national or international level; almost one-third were made at the level of the State of Colorado, and only 16.6% were made at the local community level.

RQ1: Does online discourse about gun issues qualify as deliberation about those issues?

Despite a lack of consideration, overt disrespect and insults, and irrelevant commentary at times, many comments constituted intelligent and creative contributions to the gun control debate, and commenters often expressed an awareness of the democratic value of their discussion. Despite the controversial nature of the debate, the strong opinions and disagreements, and the informal nature of online forums, some elements of deliberation were found, though the amount of each varied, and the presence of elements of deliberation often varied based on other variables.

About three-fourths of the comments in the sample made a contribution toward an information base on which the issue could be discussed.

Commenters who expressed a pro-gun-rights position were more likely to make reference to values than were pro-gun-control commenters.

Commenters who expressed a mixed position on the gun control issue were

most likely to identify possible solutions or build on solutions that were proposed by others. Commenters who expressed a pro-gun-control position were more likely to express explicit consideration for the points made by others. Commenters who expressed a mixed position were most likely to request feedback from or the consideration of others. Commenters who expressed a pro-gun-rights position were most likely to demonstrate disrespect, though pro-gun-rights commenters and pro-gun-control commenters were equally likely to demonstrate explicit respect.

Pro-gun-rights comments were more likely to be made at the local community or state level, while comments made at the national level were more likely to be pro-gun control. Comments made at the national/international level were most likely to make reference to values that come to play in the debate. Comments made on issues at a local community level were most likely to identify possible solutions or build on solutions that were proposed by others, while comments made at the state level were least likely to do so.

H1: Comments made during discussions of gun issues will be more respectful when participants are discussing issues at a local rather than national level.

H1 was supported. The local community comments were the most likely to demonstrate explicit respect for others, while comments made at the state level were least likely to demonstrate explicit respect. Comments made at the

local level were least likely to demonstrate explicit disrespect for others. The most disrespectful comments were found at the national/international level.

Through textual analysis, it was found that many commenters appeared to imagine two different communities involved in the gun control debate. Many pro-gun-rights commenters seemed to imagine their pro-gun-control opponents as being of an elite class of the East or West Coast, or being beholden to or swayed by elitist politicians outside of Colorado. They sometimes expressed the belief, long a component of the mythology of the American West, that the people of Colorado are aggrieved victims of the federal government.

Proponents of gun control often accused their opponents of holding their position on guns as a result of a desire to relive a Wild West fantasy, an accusation denied by gun-rights advocates. Some pro-gun-rights commenters did betray a position that could have arisen directly from Wild West mythology or an American monomythic narrative, portraying gun-control proponents as all talk and no action, while gun-rights supporters were people who were willing to take necessary action.

RQ2: How is expertise both used and framed in discussion of gun issues?

A common theme in comments was that politicians in Washington were more beholden to money than expert advice, though many commenters argued that the traditionally defined expert should not be granted legitimacy

in influencing policy about guns. Traditional experts were often imagined to be aligned with entrenched interests and institutions that were incompetent at effectively governing. Many pro-gun-control comments contained attacks on politicians and gun-control supporters as lacking expertise relevant to the gun control debate due to a failure to understand firearms. It seemed that knowledge of firearms was considered by gun-rights supporters to be the only relevant form of expertise. The word “expert” was frequently used as a tool to attempt to exclude voices from the debate; by claiming that someone was not an “expert” on this topic, a commenter discounted his or her contributions.

The commenters were often suspicious of the facts presented as evidence by others. All facts were subject to challenge, and were often judged to be reflective not of any objective reality but only of the political interests of those who found them or quoted them.

5 DISCUSSION

RQ1: Does online discourse about gun issues qualify as deliberation about those issues?

Some amount of each element of deliberation was found in the sample, especially a contribution to an information base (780 comments, or 76.8%), but no other element of deliberation was found in more than half of the comments in the sample. This sample of online discussion does qualify as democratically supporting political talk, but does not qualify as deliberation in itself.

Deliberation is a process in which citizens carefully consider a problem and its various approaches and solutions, all while being open to revising their preferences and changing their minds (Chambers, 2003; Gastil & Black, 2008; Dryzek, 2010). There was little evidence that participants considered the pros and cons of different solutions and positions and were open to changing their minds, but they rather had their minds set before entering into discussion. Only 3% of comments expressed a mixed position, and less than 2% raised both pros and cons of the same solution. Those who held a mixed position, meaning they were not solidly on one side of the gun control issue but rather held a more nuanced view of the problem, were more likely to identify or propose revisions to solutions than were those who appeared solidly in the pro-gun-rights or pro-gun-control camp, suggesting that the

state of being open to multiple points of view was associated with an increased willingness to find solutions to problems.

What happened in these comments sections was not deliberation—participants rarely appeared to consider the positions of others while remaining open to changing their own positions. Those who participate in newspaper comments boards are self-selected and their views are hardly representative of all of the groups who are affected by choices made in the gun debate. In order to make the discussion in these comments boards resemble deliberative processes, an online facilitator could be employed to ask questions of commenters, guiding them to address each others' points and find potential areas of commonality or compromise. In addition, some attention could be given to recruiting participants from various stakeholding groups and encouraging members of all affected groups to participate in discussion.

Another important aspect to note is that these are public posts and public conversations, able to be read by anyone. Presumably (though there is no way to know for sure) many more people were reading the posts than participating visibly in conversation. Lurking activities are difficult to measure, but Davis (2005) found through use of a survey that three quarters of visitors to many discussion forums read but do not post comments. This makes the forums' contribution to an information base on which to discuss gun issues especially important. Also, those lurkers who were reading and

not posting may have been swayed by the arguments and evidence posted by forum participants. It may be that the culture of online discussion encourages the posting of opinions while discouraging nuanced discussion of issues and evidence of changing one's mind. In an environment full of strongly worded assertions of opinion, uncertainty may appear as weakness.

Even though 27.8% of the comments included disrespect, we should not dismiss these spaces as being wastelands of vile attacks. Many comments were intelligent, creative, thoughtful, and substantive contributions to the gun control debate. Even speech filled with vitriol and disrespect for others can be democratically significant (Benson, 1996; Papacharissi, 2004; Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009; Massaro & Stryker, 2012). The fact that so many comments contributed to an information base indicated that they were substantive from a civic point of view. Many commenters expressed a belief in the democratic value of their discussion, even if they disagreed with each other.

Pro-gun-rights comments were more often found in the first third of comments threads, while pro-gun-control comments were more likely to be found in the bottom third of threads. Perhaps this finding is due to the fact that the gun-rights position was more prevalent on the boards, so it may have appeared to dominate the boards overall, so pro-gun-control commenters may have felt more comfortable commenting later in the thread, either because they felt compelled to after so much discussion with which they disagreed, or

perhaps the heightened tone of commenting softened with time and posters who held the less dominant position perceived an environment more open to alternative points of view. There is evidence in these findings that discussion did become more considerate over time (consideration was found more often in the middle or bottom third of threads), but consideration of the positions of others may have been found later in threads mostly because there were no alternative positions to consider at the beginning, when threads were dominated by one position. Pro-gun-control commenters did show more consideration than pro-gun-rights commenters, and pro-gun-rights commenters were most likely to exhibit disrespect, so perhaps the comments boards did feel more hostile when they seemed to be dominated by pro-gun-rights commenters.

Also, it may have been that the initial comments were made by people who disagreed with the articles, but as more comments were made and conversation began to discuss gun issues rather than the article, commenters became more considerate of each other's contributions. It is possible that initial commenters were reacting to what they believed to be biased or unfair media coverage with which they could not have a conversation—news content is one-way and not interactive—and when they began discussing the issue with other citizens, commenting became more considerate because they were reacting to each other in a dynamic conversation rather than reacting to a static news product.

Pro-gun-rights commenters were more likely to reference values in their comments. This project did not record the specific values prioritized by commenters, but values that were held as important by pro-gun-rights commenters were freedom and individual rights, such as the right of the individual to bear arms and the value of justice. Pro-gun-control commenters, on the other hand, seemed to prioritize safety and social welfare. The fact that pro-gun-control commenters were more likely to mention values in their arguments might indicate that values, such as individual rights, are a key component of the pro-gun-rights position and arguments. Pro-gun-control commenters relied less heavily on values such as safety and social welfare in their arguments. Any talk of “rights,” such as the right to bear arms or the right to public safety, would have been captured under the *values* variable, so the findings of this study indicate that the debate over gun control did not fall easily into what Glendon (1991) described as “rights talk,” or the tendency for all social controversies in the U. S. to be framed as one right pitted against another. If the gun debate had been couched in the language of rights in these comments, both sides would have framed their arguments in terms of rights; for example, the right of the individual to possess firearms on one hand, and the right of the individual to safety in public on the other. More research would be needed to identify the specific argument strategies employed by commenters, but it is clear from these findings that this debate was not framed in comments as a clash of rights.

Comments made at the local community and the state level were more likely to be pro-gun-rights, while comments made on a national level were more likely to be pro-gun-control. This may indicate that people in Colorado, who were more likely to talk about gun issues at a local or state level, were more likely to hold a pro-gun-rights position. Or it may suggest the presence of a kind of third-person effect (Davison, 1983) in which people imagine themselves and their neighbors to be responsible gun owners, but on a broader state or national level, they do not trust their fellow citizens and they feel the need for some gun regulation. Though the third-person effect hypothesis was originally formulated as a media theory, theorizing that people imagined media to have a stronger effect on others than on themselves, it can be seen here to potentially relate to firearms; when discussing gun issues on a local level, in ways that relate more immediately to people's everyday lives, people were more likely to argue for their own rights to weapons because they knew themselves to be responsible enough to own and use them safely, but distant others were potentially dangerous with a gun in hand. This possible explanation for this finding assumes the same commenters are pro-gun-rights when it comes to local issues and pro-gun-control on national issues, which is not likely the case, but it could be that different commenters would be more likely to speak up, voicing their opinions depending on the scope of discussion.

H1: Comments made during discussions of gun issues will be more respectful when participants are discussing issues at a local rather than national level.

H1 was supported: Comments made during discussions of gun issues were more respectful when participants were discussing issues at a local rather than a national level. Local community comments were most likely to contain explicit respect and least likely to exhibit explicit disrespect for others, both other commenters and public figures or others discussed in the articles on which they were commenting. Comments made at a national or international level were most likely to contain disrespect for others. The hostility that commenting can contain is more likely to be present in national discussion. It may be that when people are discussing local issues, at least online, they are imagining that they are participating in conversations about the direction of their communities, while when discussing the gun issue at a national level, they may feel more removed from the consequences of decisions made about gun control, so the comments they make and the opinions they voice may be more of an assertion of their identity associated with their position on this particular topic. In Benedict Anderson's (1983/2006) terms, commenters may be imagining different communities when they discuss local as opposed to national topics; when discussing issues at a local level, they may imagine their audience and fellow discussion participants to be members of their community, while discussion of national topics may evoke an entirely different imagined community, one more distant, more ideologically diverse, and one that a commenter is less likely to identify with. This finding may

suggest that both truly deliberative discussion and even political action may be easier to inspire and achieve on local rather than national issues.

Local discussion was more deliberative in other ways: Comments made at a local community level were most likely to recommend or build on solutions than were comments made at the state or national level. This finding contributes toward the theory that when participating in discussion of gun issues at a local level, commenters feel they are participating in a discussion about the direction of their communities—they are more likely to discuss potential solutions to the gun violence problem when discussing the issue at a local level. This is compatible with Eliasoph's (1997) finding that people feel more of a sense of investment and agency in local rather than national issues.

One interesting finding was that though the most respectful comments were made in local community discussion, the fewest comments that demonstrated explicit respect were made at the State of Colorado level, not the national or international level. This may suggest that state concerns and discussion are especially contentious because the state lies in between the local community issues that are part of people's everyday experience and the national debates that may feel too distant to affect. Debates that occur at the state level may feel close enough to have a say in, but distant enough that people do not feel a sense of community when they participate in discussion about state issues. The state level may also be a particularly passionate arena for discussion because it may be that when discussing issues at a state

level, people feel they are arguing for what it means to be a Coloradan. Gun-rights commenters may have a different vision for their state than gun-control supporters, and when discussing state policies or regulations about guns, commenters feel the stakes are particularly high because the state level is where identity meets community. Through textual analysis of the comments, it was found that pro-gun-rights commenters imagined their opponents as East or West Coast elites trying to impose their political will on Coloradans, or as Coloradans who had been influenced by the politicians of the coasts. Commenters may have seen debates over gun control at the state level to be a site of conflict between the Colorado with which they identified and the out-of-state politicians they viewed as attempting to influence their own home state.

5.1 Imagined communities and the Wild West

Textual analysis of the comments found that Colorado was often linked to the mythology of the Wild West. When discussing gun issues as they relate to Colorado, the image of the Wild West may be easily invoked, as the gun is one of its central components. According to Limerick (1987), the imagined independence, nobility, and adventure of the frontier, and the idea of tough men in a tough land, are concepts that inform how people think about the West, though that particular Western mythology is not based in any contemporary reality. Gun-control commenters sometimes accused their opponents of wanting to relive a Wild West fantasy, and despite gun-rights

commenters' insistence that their position on guns had nothing to do with a desire to relive the Wild West, there were elements of the Wild West mythology found in some gun-rights commenters' arguments, including the belief that gun-control proponents were willing to engage in all talk and no action, while gun-rights proponents had the willingness to take action and get things done.

This finding is compatible with Tompkins' (1992) analysis of the Western genre of literature, from which the Wild West mythology originates. Tompkins described how the Western novels were narratives of male violence that arose as a reaction against the female-driven, sentimental, domestic novels that were popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Those novels, Tompkins describes, were full of women sitting in parlors talking about emotions. The Western, by contrast, is led by a male hero who acts alone, talks little, and solves problems through action, especially with a gun. Many pro-gun-rights commenters expressed a disdain for what they saw as endless and pointless talking about guns in Washington politics.

Limerick (1987) wrote of how the Westerner's own identity in frontier times included a belief that he or she was an injured innocent, a victim of the federal government. This blaming of the federal government for the woes of the Westerner was seen repeatedly in comments, as the commenters accused the federal government of trying to impose its wishes and values (in the form of gun legislation) on the unwilling people of Colorado. This element of

Western mythology, a belief that the West is being victimized by the federal government, persists still.

RQ2: How is expertise both used and framed in discussion of gun issues?

A distrust of experts and expert knowledge, such as that outlined by Weingart (1999), was a common theme in comments. An individual commenter may have held a certain expert or groups of experts to be legitimate, but without a shared sense that any expert or source of knowledge had legitimacy and was able to be deferred to in resolving disputes, there was no such thing as a “fact.” No facts were considered objective or accurate, and all were potentially treated as reflective of the political motivations of others. When presented with a scientific study that bolstered their opponents’ case, a commenter would discount the results of the study by accusing the researchers to have been motivated by politics, or they might attack the study’s methodology. The commenters as a group did not trust scientific knowledge.

Without the ability to rely on technical expertise, be it scientific, sociological, educational, or of any number of fields in which training and knowledge bestow an epistemological license to make veridical statements about an area of the world, people risk making very bad decisions about how society should be directed. Participants may have seemed to agree with Hartelius (2011) that expertise is rhetorical, and revolves more around the ability to achieve recognition of expert status by others than the actual

knowledge one holds. But ultimately, commenters as a group bestowed the mantle of “expert” on no one.

The dangers of failing to defer to expert knowledge have been documented (see John, 2010 for a discussion of the MMR vaccine controversy). It is not the case, of course, that experts are always right. There are cases of failed expertise in which expert knowledge about the world was wrong and there were consequences, but that fact only proves that there is an objective reality to which expertise is tied (Hikins & Cherwitz, 2011). Expert knowledge that lies beyond the realm to which average citizens have access helps people navigate and make informed decisions about that objective reality and where societies want to position themselves within it.

When considering the gun debate, potential sources of expert knowledge are social science studies about the effects guns have on crime rates and behavior, polling data that describe opinions of U.S. citizens about guns and gun regulations, teachers’ associations and their members’ experiences of and belief about guns in classrooms, and many other potential sources. By discounting the expertise of all of these groups, commenters betrayed an adherence to “technological populism,” the belief that no expert knowledge was better than the knowledge of any ordinary citizen (Collins, Weinel, & Evans, 2010). Expertise has lost cultural authority and become more context-dependent because decision-making is no longer seen as something tasked to a bureaucratic, expert class, but rather in the realm of the individual

(Nowotny, 2000). Expertise, then, has become an individual phenomenon or possession (private expertise), and the individual has become an “expert” on his or her own concerns. Returning to John Dewey (1927/1954) and Walter Lippmann (1922/2010), commenters’ technological populism is in line with Dewey’s belief that if provided free access to information, the public could collectively discuss issues and make even technical decisions, and experts were usually an obstacle to this process. Lippmann’s insistence that experts are necessary to provide guidance and interpretation of information for citizens seems to have been rejected by commenters. With a lack of trust in traditional experts and institutions of expertise, commenters seemed to fight to be seen as experts themselves. Perhaps comments sections can be so full of vitriol because commenters use them to fight over the rights to legitimate expert authority and knowledge, now that knowledge is contested and expert authority is diffused.

Collins and Evans (2002) argued that one way to bridge the problem of extension (how far should participation in technical decision-making be extended without compromising its quality?) with the problem of legitimacy (how do we make technical decision-making appear legitimate to the public?) is to recognize new forms of expertise, such as the knowledge held by non-professional specialists who have relevant, specialized knowledge of an area but do not have the formal education, training, or certification to qualify as traditional experts. Many of the commenters in this sample put forth the

knowledge of those who have a great deal of hands-on experience with firearms as that sort of non-professional specialist whose knowledge should be deferred to in the gun debate.

Though many commenters treated hands-on firearm knowledge as the only relevant knowledge, and the dangers of discarding all other technical and scientific expertise in the gun debate would likely prove unwise, there may be promise in the recognition of knowledge of firearms as one valid form of expertise in the gun debate. Gun-rights commenters frequently attacked gun-control commenters and politicians for a lack of expertise on firearms due to an unfamiliarity with guns and how they operate. They may have a point—it may be hard for politicians to make rational gun control laws, or have people knowledgeable about firearms give a politician any credibility on gun issues, if they confuse automatic with semi-automatic weapons, or call a magazine a "clip," or do not realize that a magazine can be switched out, as did U.S. congressional representative Diana DeGette in a 2013 forum, after which she was widely ridiculed in social media and on comments boards (Sherry, 2013).

It may be easy for gun-rights commenters to attack gun-control proponents on terminology and gun facts and then discount their credibility as lawmakers on the topic, and then conclude that all gun control is rubbish. The unstated, other side of that argument is that if legislators knew what they were talking about when it comes to guns, a reasonable

conversation about gun control could be achieved. So what if gun laws were proposed by people who had knowledge of guns, who were versed in the technical details and operations of firearms?

Without stating it outright, many of these pro-gun-rights commenters have implied a potential solution to the gun-control-debate impasse. These days, political expertise on its own does not count as legitimate. The rules for what counts as an expert and expertise have changed from institution-based and -granted to a more personal form. If they want to persuade their opponents, politicians should consider changing their approach and relying not only on what appears to them as common sense or on statistics from sociologists. Perhaps they need to incorporate hands-on knowledge in their arguments, too, in order to sell them, at least when making national laws that affect people from all over the country who are coming from such different places. The possibility of debate expanding to include experience-based expertise may be limited to national conversations about guns, but perhaps it is not. People may have a desire to feel that their experiences and viewpoints are included in a wide range of technical decisions, such as in transportation policy or environmental regulations.

This study found that the commenters were not working together to contribute toward the creation of a dialogical expertise or alternate knowledge base, such as Hartelius (2012) described *Wikipedia's* function. *Wikipedia* operates on the belief that truth emerges from dialog, and

Wikipedia is often pointed to as an example of model Internet discussion, but it is important to note that the main difference between *Wikipedia* discussions and informal comments boards is one of goals: *Wikipedia* has the creation of a record of knowledge as its mission and members ban those who do not act on that mission. Participants on comments boards surely have individual goals, but there is no overarching common goal that commenters are working toward, which may help explain the free-for-all sense that they often contain.

Returning to the concept of imagined communities, many comments suggest that the pro-gun-rights opposition to gun control is often associated with a belief that the pro-gun-control position is a characteristic of East and West Coast elites and arises from a lack of understanding of and even a contempt for the culture of the rest of the country. This cultural divide, similar to that described by Frank (2007), is an imagined class divide that revolves around differences not in income so much as in tastes. The fact that commenting was the least respectful on the state level suggests that this imagined divide between the elites of the coasts and Westerners is not strictly geographical, either. Anderson (1983/2006) described imagined communities as being more about identity than geography, which was reflected in these findings. Many pro-gun-rights commenters identified with an imagined community of Westerners that was defined against an imagined community of East and West Coast elites. Debates at the state level may be

venues for arguments over the state's identity—what does it mean to be a Coloradan?

Opportunities for a productive national conversation about guns may be found in using language to bridge this cultural divide. When politicians hoping to advance gun control measures make technical and terminological errors about firearms, it may trigger a reaction against perceived elitism in which it seems that the elite, powerful, latte-drinking castes of the coasts look down on Westerners, their guns, and their culture. When politicians make such errors, they betray themselves as outsiders, whether in Colorado or not. If they were Colorado politicians, they were accused in comments of being beholden to or swayed by the politicians of the coasts. Legislators need knowledge of the topic at hand in order to avoid triggering that reaction. If they learned enough about firearms to demonstrate knowledge of the topic, they might avoid being perceived as not knowing what they were talking about, and gun-rights proponents might be more likely to listen to their arguments. They may still disagree, and gun use by many politicians may evoke ridicule and the suspicion of inauthenticity, but it is possible that a conversation about gun violence and potential solutions to the problem may be more likely to happen.

5.2 The rise of the individual

When considering the potential for productive discussion about issues of public importance, the growing emphasis on the individual as the locus of

concern could explain many of the findings of this study. People may have been more respectful when discussing issues on a local level because they feel more invested in problem solving when discussing issues as they affect their communities rather than the nation as a whole. It may be easier to level insults at ideological opponents who are thought to be outside one's immediate sphere.

The emphasis on personal experience with firearms as a legitimate form of expertise in the gun debate could arise from a growing emphasis on the individual rather than the social. Findings of this study indicate that people do not trust institutional experts, as they suspect them to be motivated by or beholden to political goals, so hands-on experience may be the only expertise on which to safely rely. The distrust of experts may also be related to the local/national divide in that traditional experts may be associated with institutions that are distant to one's local community and hence less likely to be relevant or reliable.

The Western mythology that informs the gun debate in Colorado could be tied to the rise of the individual as well. It could be that many commenters imagined a need for lone American monomyth heroes who may need to act outside social institutions in order to protect their families and communities, perhaps with vigilante justice using guns. In this mindset, if guns are heavily regulated, that might affect the ability of the individual to do what needs to be done.

6 CONCLUSION

This project analyzed online discussion on the gun control debate in order to explore the ways in which people conduct informal online communication about a heated political issue. The gun debate intensified in the U.S. in 2012 and 2013 following the Aurora theater shooting in Colorado and the school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, but despite more conversation of the issue and a sense that gun violence was a growing problem that needed a solution, no legislation was passed or policy was forwarded on a national level as a result of the shooting. Colorado has traditionally been an individualistic, gun-rights-supporting state, but with the Columbine and Aurora shootings, Colorado has also suffered some highly public wounds from gun violence. The tensions between these two characteristics of Colorado made the gun debate conducted in Colorado newspaper forums a fitting place to explore the discussion of a political issue on both a local and a national level. Findings indicated that local discussion was more respectful and contained more elements of deliberation than discussion of gun issues at a national level. Perhaps a more productive public conversation about guns at a local or state level helped contribute to the increased gun regulations that were passed in Colorado in March 2013.

Informal political discussion is one place where people exchange ideas and potential solutions to social problems, where opinions are formed and

articulated, and where citizens talk about how to make their institutions better. Such discussion does not amount to any formal deliberative process but is an important component in a deliberative democracy, and this study used deliberation theory and measures of deliberation to characterize informal political discussion to determine what democracy-supporting processes may be taking place in online discussion forums. This study also analyzed differences in the scope of discussion and the participants' uses and framings of expertise. Findings indicated that discussion was more deliberative and respectful when discussion was conducted on a local rather than national level, that in the gun debate, traditional institutions of expertise lacked legitimacy in favor of technological populism, and that the Wild West mythology informs the gun debate in Colorado.

When considering the potential for productive discussion about issues of public importance, the growing cultural emphasis on the individual as the locus of concern could explain many of the findings of this study.

Contributing to an increasing emphasis on the individual in the U.S. may be a fragmented digital media landscape in which people increasingly consume narrowcasted media and communicate within self-chosen digital networks. It may be that without a common cultural base, it makes it harder for people to relate to people they imagine to be different from themselves, so people may be more likely to deliberate on political issues, treating each other with

respect and consideration, and exploring solutions to problems when discussing those issues on a local level.

These findings suggest a changing conception of citizenship, one increasingly based on individual rights than on a sense of social responsibility, civic obligation, or the common good. The more removed the scope of the discussion is from a person, or when someone imagines the people he or she is talking to be different from them, online discussion begins to involve the equivalent of people yelling at each other and not listening, and not having consideration for each other's positions and views. The U.S. is a big, diverse country, and it is hard to imagine how a democracy can govern itself when people can only deliberate about issues as they relate to themselves and their communities.

It may be, however, that this emphasis on the individual is not necessarily entirely negative in its implications for democracy. Perhaps civic engagement takes different forms in a digital era than it did in decades past, and the focus on the individual may not be as bad for a sense of the common good as it may seem. For example, it may be possible to have a "rights" discourse that focuses not just on a person's own rights, but on everyone's rights: on each individual's rights to safety, or privacy, or property, no matter who a person imagines those individuals are or how different from themselves they are imagined to be. This might resemble a discourse of fairness, of equality, and of tolerance instead of a discourse of social responsibility.

6.1 Practical implications

These findings may suggest a need in public political debates to acknowledge personal experience as a valid form of expertise in a way that does not diminish the importance of expertise derived from technical training and education. They may also suggest that for those seeking to inspire social change, solutions to public problems may be easier to forge when issues, even national issues, are framed in ways that relate them to people's immediate lives and communities. People were more deliberative when discussing issues at a local level, treating others with more respect and identifying solutions to problems more frequently.

Given the large, diverse nature of the U.S., these findings do not hold much immediate promise for the potential for productive national conversations that find solutions to problems that affect the country as a whole. They do, however, highlight the need for a greater understanding of how people's individual lives relate to those around them, even those who are distant both geographically and culturally. A sense of political investment and efficacy at the local level is undoubtedly positive, but in order for a large democracy such as the U.S. to function effectively, people may need to have a sense of a collective investment in a common good for national solutions to be found. The fact that more deliberative discussion was found in informal, online political talk is encouraging, but barriers obviously exist to extending a willingness to engage in collective problem solving to the national arena.

One practical implication of these findings may be that for those who work with groups or communities to inspire social change, civic engagement or political action may hold more potential for success on a local level. It may be that even when considering national political issues, if politicians or deliberation practitioners frame issues in terms of how those issues relate to a person or his or her community, a citizen may be more likely to engage in actual deliberative discussion. Appealing to one's sense of civic obligation or the common good may not be as effective at inspiring civic engagement as emphasizing a person's individual stake in an issue. One possible way for online commenting forums to take advantage of this finding in attempts to foster more deliberative discussion would be to segment discussion by region. National outlets could have different comments boards for different regions, as well as a national board, while local news outlets could have separate boards for commenters to discuss issues at a local, state, or national level. There would likely be some bleed—local conversations, for example, might frequently turn into national ones—but it might be that more productive, deliberative discussions might take place in the local forums.

6.2 Limitations

The use of an operationalization of deliberation to measure informal online discussion could be misleading. Measuring elements of deliberation in a non-deliberative arena was not meant to imply that the discussion contained in these online forums is or even should be deliberation.

The corporate ownership of newspaper forums may have had an effect on the scope or content of the discussions. There are problems associated with expecting discussion that is important to democracy to take place in a forum in which the discussion is treated as a lure for page views. When online commenting spaces are owned and run by private corporations, a vibrant public debate may not be the primary purpose of the forum, even if that is its stated goal. Corporations have financial interests and shareholders to whom they are ultimately accountable, and it may be a mistake to assume they have free public expression at heart when they host online forums alongside their content. Commenting drives page hits, and it drives interest, but only to a point. The newspapers' owners and editors may not want commenting to get out of hand, to be too critical, or to make them look bad. Discussions that take place on newspaper forums may be moderated with these goals in mind, and forums can be shut down when the tone or content of commenting takes a turn that editors dislike (Sindorf, 2013b).

Further, each of the newspapers studied had different stated moderation policies, and these results may have been affected by the deletion of comments, though there is no way to know whether and which comments were deleted. Measuring respect in a moderated forum can be tricky, as many comments could have been made that were deleted by moderators before the sample was collected.

Limiting this analysis to Colorado newspaper forums may have missed patterns that took place in national discussions of gun-related issues. Had this study included analysis of comments made to a national newspaper, or perhaps a Connecticut newspaper after the school shooting in Newtown, the findings may have differed. These findings are not generalizable outside of Colorado because this project was designed to examine the local/national divide in commenting in Colorado, considering its unique history with gun ideology and gun violence, and its position as a state with the legacy of the Wild West.

Even if the findings of this study are difficult to generalize to public debates about different issues or to discussion outside of Colorado, the finding that people discuss political issues in terms of how they relate to their own lives has interesting implications for the public debates that surround other political issues. Many participants in the online gun debate in Colorado invoked, either directly or indirectly, the mythologies of the Wild West and the American Monomyth, either to accuse others of a desire to live out those fantasies or to betray their own adherence to an American Monomythic fantasy in which gun control would inhibit a man's ability to act alone to protect his family and/or community. If some people's political beliefs are tied to their imagined position not only within a community, but their imagined position within a story or narrative, it is important to recognize which myths are informing or animating different political issues.

One example may be issues that involve taxes. This research suggests that the closer or more similar another person is imagined to be, the more someone imagines themselves to be in the same imagined community, and the more deliberative they will be. When people are debating taxes, if people imagine that themselves and those close to them will benefit, they may be more likely to advocate in favor of certain taxes, or at least to debate them respectfully. On the other hand, people may react against the idea of paying taxes that they imagine would benefit only distant others.

An additional potential limitation was the fact that this study looked at discussions of gun issues during a particularly heated, polarized period in which the gun debate was attracting a great deal of national attention. People may be more likely to be considerate, respectful, and/or deliberative when discussing issues that are not front-and-center in the national conversation, even if those issues are controversial.

6.3 Future research

An in-depth analysis of the social and cultural values commenters referenced and how those values were prioritized might be an insightful future project. This project recorded whether commenters referenced values in their comments, but not specifically which values. Values that did seem to come to play most often were liberty, justice, safety for gun-rights commenters, and safety for gun-control supporters. A future study could take a closer look at the values referenced in the gun-control debate: How are

participants prioritizing and referencing values, and how do they link them to certain positions?

Future research should examine online political discussion of topics that are less controversial and polarized than the gun debate to see if the same patterns and differences in the scope of discussion are present. Gun rights and gun control are very hot-button issues, and it may be that other issues that people relate to at both a local and a national level, such as debates over transportation or media ownership rules, are less likely to evoke participants' identities in the same way as the gun debate, and so may be less likely to become heated.

Turning expertise into a quantitative measure would have allowed for the exploration of statistical relationships between different forms of expertise and other variables, such as position or scope. This project's textual analysis of expertise could be seen as an initial, exploratory study that suggests categories for a quantitative measure of expertise that could be used in content analysis. An *expertise* variable would code for references to different kinds of experts, such as scientists, university researchers, politicians, or professional associations. One difficulty that could arise with a measurement of expertise is that references to expertise are intertwined with commenters' use of evidence. For example, if a commenter uses his or her own experience with the use of firearms as evidence to back up claims, does that equate to putting himself or herself forth as an experience-based expert? In order to

study these questions further, definitions and categories would need to be developed and refined.

This study analyzed informal, online political discussion of gun issues. Future research should examine actual deliberative events surrounding the gun debate, both those that are organized online and in-person, to see if people deliberate differently on local as opposed to national issues.

The lines between fictional popular culture and political discourse can be blurry. This study has found that traces of the American monomyth narrative and its underlying ideology (involving a lone, selfless hero who must protect and save a community from evil after existing institutions have failed) informs political discussions, and not only in popular culture like Westerns and action films. There might be a need for a greater recognition that the narratives and lessons of fictional popular culture works do not end when the credits roll, but continue to inform how people imagine and discuss political issues.

These findings indicate that a version of conservative masculinity similar to that found in Western films and novels informs many of the pro-gun-rights arguments found in informal talk surrounding the gun control debate. Many of the gun-rights arguments could be seen to be rooted in the idea that individuals need access to guns because they need to be able to handle problems in a masculine as opposed to a feminine way: through heroic action rather than talk or rules. Deliberation is a specific form of discussion, and

through the lens of the Western could be seen as a feminine way to solve problems through talk, while gun-rights proponents, celebrating the Western value of proving manliness by solving problems with violence, were reacting against East and West Coast elitism and progressive city life, a world symbolized by the female politicians Hilary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi. In American monomyth narratives, including the Western, society is a feminized order the lone hero is forced to leave and fight to save. The American monomyth suggests that the lone vigilante savior is needed to enforce justice because politics and the system of justice have failed; good social policy is not the solution, but the actions of good individuals are needed for justice to occur. It is possible that those who see gun rights as necessary because they must be available to the lone savior to protect his or her community as a last resort will never accept regulation and social policy because they see it as ultimately antithetical to, or in the way of, true justice. Laws and policies may be seen as the domain of polite, feminized society that the masculine hero cannot be subject to because he must be able to act outside their confines in order to be their savior. An in-depth analysis of masculinity and how it informs the gun debate was beyond the reach of this project, but it remains a promising area for future research.

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APPENDIX A -- CODEBOOK

On all variables, the comment is the unit of analysis.

1) Comment ID

This is the number that has been assigned to each comment in the sample by the researcher.

2) Article ID

This is the number that has been assigned to each article in the sample by the researcher.

3) Article date

4) Publication: (1) Denver Post/(2) Aurora Sentinel/(3) Craig Daily Press

5) Comment date

This is the date of the comment, which may be different from that of the article. This may or may not be provided.

6) Commenter user ID/handle

This is the identifying name or number associated with a commenter's identity. This can be used to track multiple comments that have been made by the same poster.

7) Comment location: (1) first third/(2) second third/(3) last third/(4) less than 6 total comments

This is the location of the comment within the entire body of comments underneath the article. If there are less than six comments total, the code should be (4).

8) Position: (1) pro-gun rights/(2) pro-gun control/(3) mixed position/(4) no position

The position of the commenter is the ideological orientation he or she seems to hold with respect to guns, the one behind their points or arguments. Here, look for the end point--is their main or ending point one of gun rights or gun control?

(1) pro-gun rights

Gun-rights proponents argue that regulation of the use and availability of firearms should be minimal or nonexistent, and/or that the rights of individuals to own and use guns are the most important consideration in the gun control debate. This category includes those expressing general anti-government views.

(2) pro-gun control

Gun-control proponents argue for regulations on the possession, use, and availability of firearms. This category includes people advocating for pro-gun control policies or expressing views that are anti-gun or emphasize negative aspects or consequences of guns themselves.

(3) mixed position

If the commenter is making points or arguments and it is hard to tell what their ultimate position is, or what they are doing is raising multiple points for the sake of debate without ultimately supporting one side, then that should be coded as "mixed."

This is a situation in which "mixed" is an important category and not one chosen because the post lies in between "pro-gun rights" and "pro-gun control." If the comment is mixed, it means the commenter is considering multiple positions or points.

(4) no position

Some comments will not be advocating or seeming to arise from a position relating to the gun debate. This is different from "mixed" because instead of raising points on multiple sides of the debate, the commenter will be refraining from making points or arguments that relate to any position relating to the gun debate.

As someone who has almost always voted for Democrats, I intend to vote for Republicans in 2014 and 2016, but the gun laws have nothing to do with this. The Democrats have just completely turned me off with their out-of-control spending and their pandering to illegal residents and welfare recipients, and so I will cheer for almost anything that will remove the out-of-control spenders from power!

9) Scope: (1) local community/(2) state of Colorado/(3) national or international

Is the comment discussing local, state, or national issues? If it is not apparent from the comment, default to the topic of the article: is it on a local community, state, or a national topic? If the comment refers to a mix, determine what is the overall focus or point and code scope accordingly. If equal meaningful attention is given to two levels of scope, use the most local as the tiebreaker.

(1) Local community

If the comment refers to local or community issues, code 1.

The lawmakers used the Aurora shooting as justification to pass these laws. They never could explain exactly what these laws would have done to prevent that tragedy. Perhaps you could.

Why don't you explain how these laws that were just passed here in CO, not laws that were passed in Australia, would have prevented the Aurora shooting.

(2) state of Colorado

If the comment discusses issues at a state of Colorado level, code 2.

Ignorance by the left raises its ugly head in Colorado. Sheriffs say no. Voters will say no. This is going to change the landscape of Colorado political elections. These laws are wrong on every count and accomplish nothing positive for the state other than wake up the gun owners and their supporters. I have never seen freedom lovers so angry as they are now in this country and in this state.

(3) national or international

Then Koolaid needs to be banned. The largest mass murder of Americans was conducted with a bowl of fruit punch. Remember Jonestown?

It's funny, isn't it. The gun control zealots are the best salesmen the firearms industry has ever seen. Every time an anti-gun politician jumps on a soapbox and starts squawking about banning this or restricting that, it drives people in masses to the gun stores.

Deliberation measures

Analytic components of deliberation

10) Create an Information Base: (0) no information/(1) some information

Creating an information base involves providing information about which people can have a discussion. It involves the presentation of facts, experiences, opinions, beliefs. All comments that use evidence will be contributing to an information base, but so will those who are contributing their opinions and beliefs. Did the discussion post include relevant facts and/or personal experiences that could inform the discussion? If someone clarifies an argument by providing additional information and/or making their reasoning more clear, that also counts as creating an information base.

(0) contributed no information

A commenter might make a comment that contributes nothing to the discussion. This would include comments that are blatantly irrelevant ("My cat just had kittens!") or contribute nothing about which to discuss or make no statement on any other contribution to an information base. ("Thanks") or ("you're an idiot") would count as "no contribution."

Two words Dems: Jacked Up!

Anyone over the age of 12 who uses the word "wuss" in a sentence isn't to be taken seriously.

(1) contributed some information

If a comment does make a contribution to an information base or elaborates or comments on that of another, code (1).

Exactly the point, Ryan. Stupid, touchy-feelie laws like these will not prevent people from obtaining guns (legally or illegally) and they won't prevent evil people from using guns to inflict harm on others. Why is that so hard for people of your ilk to understand?

11) Prioritize Key Values: (0) no comment on values/(1) comments on values/(2) clearly links values to solutions or positions

To what extent did the discussion post comment on the commenters' own values, the values of others involved in the discussion, or the cultural values that come to play in the issue? Values are abstract principles about ideal personal or social goals or behaviors that one considers to be preferable to opposite goals or behaviors. They transcend specific events and situations. Values are preferred standards of behavior or guidelines for society and are used to justify actions. They are not necessarily held by some and not others, but are rather ranked or prioritized differently by different people. Examples of values might be social progress, human dignity, international cooperation, equality for all, rule by the people, the rule of law, reward for individual effort, national security, or national greatness. Values must be explicitly stated (i.e. truthfulness is "good") rather than simply implied.

(0) makes no explicit comment on values

Many commenters will state positions or opinions and/or offer evidence without making any statement as to the values behind their positions or any values that might come into play.

I can understand what the Dems are up to, but by going after these weapons/accessory, they are focused on the exception, not the rule.
So little original thought.

(1) comments on values, but does not use those values to support an argument or analyze positions

A commenter might mention values ("the safety of the public is important!") without linking those values to their positions or claims.

I guess it's obvious who the good American citizens are in this debate, and it isn't the NRA supporters. It's also obvious who the adults are here. After all, the hallmark of childhood is selfishness. Having the ability to look beyond your own wants and desires is

part of what it means to become an adult. From all appearances, the gun rights libertarians in our midst haven't successfully made the transition to adulthood.

(2) clearly links values to proposed solutions or positions

A commenter might mention values while linking those values to their positions or claims ("the safety of the public is important, so we need to have strict regulations on guns!")

Get it now? We are a free country based on liberty, respect and laws which are designed to punish bad people. Me owning a 30 round magazine does not make me a bad person. And in fact, putting me in a category of gun owners with 'evil' magazines is very much discrimination. Ever been called a bigot before?

12) Identifies possible solutions: (0) no recommendation/(1) includes or advocates a new solution or builds on or suggests revisions to a previously posed solution

Did the discussion post include a recommendation or possible solution to a problem raised by the article or another commenter? This includes both big-picture recommendations to the main problem facing an individual or community and also suggestions about how to revise or clarify an existing law or policy.

(0) no recommendation

A commenter can comment on events that happened or social problems without offering or commenting on any possible solution to those problems.

Why don't you poor suffering souls go stock up on magazines and ammo this weekend, and then turn your righteous indignation to something useful - like helping your buddies build the 21st century version of the Iron Curtain on our southern border.

1) includes or advocates a new solution or builds on or suggests revisions to a previously posed solution

Here, a commenter would either propose a new solution to a problem or comment on one that had already been raised or discussed, either on or off the comments board. Even discounting another potential solution would count here.

Yes, something does have to be tried. New gun laws aren't the answer, but how about enforcement of existing ones. People will acclimate to the add'l background checks, but banning high cap mags effectively bans the gun as well, something Americans have a right to possess. I agree, something has to be tried, but not a new layer of laws.

13) Weigh solutions, pros/cons: (0) no pros or cons discussed/(1) raises only advantages of a proposal/(2) raises only disadvantages of a proposal/(3) raises both advantages and disadvantages of a proposed solution

Did the discussion post weigh the pros and cons of at least one solution proposed? Here, a commenter would take a solution proposed (as in the previous category) and further elaborate on it by discussing pros or cons of implementing or not implementing a specific solution.

(0) no pros or cons discussed

Here, a commenter would not discuss the pros or cons of any proposed solution. This includes stating a preference (agree/disagree) without providing any reasons.

Just so I understand... It's ok for the republic to be well armed in the name of defense but an individuals right to defend themselves is not? Righteous indignation indeed!

(1) raises only advantages of a proposal

Here, a commenter might raise only the pros of a proposed solution.

This law makes it so that high capacity magazines cannot legally be purchased, and a person like James Holmes -- with no connection to a black market -- would not be able to purchase a magazine so large he could shoot 70+ people in a theatre. One would hope, that with internet monitoring, he would eventually be discovered before he eventually found the tools necessary to complete his mission.

(2) raises only disadvantages of a proposal

Here, a commenter might raise only the cons of a proposed solution.

The irony of this whole situation is that the liberals like Obama, Bloomberg and Hickenlooper have done more to put more firearms, ammunition and standard capacity magazines in the hands of law abiding citizens than the NRA EVER has!! Yet you think your laws are so meaningful, so effective and you just cant get over your naivety to the point where I almost pity you. Like the criminals will suddenly see the light and give up their evil ways just because 30 round mags are illegal to buy in Colorado.

I am not presuming to correlate the ban with higher crime rates. However, it is fallacy to presume that banning gun magazines of 15 rounds will cause any drop in crime rates when banning magazines of ten rounds had, at best, no effect.

(3) raises both advantages and disadvantages of a proposed solution

Here, a commenter would discuss or weigh both pros and cons of implementing a proposed solution.

Social components of deliberation

14) Comprehension/clarity: (-1) asks for clarification with a sarcastic or antagonistic tone/(0) no request for clarification/(1) genuine request for clarification

This variable measures whether a post includes a request for clarification, either of the way something is worded or of the argument being made. It also includes requesting clarification about the article itself.

(-1) asks for clarification but does so with a sarcastic or antagonistic tone

Here, a commenter will ask for clarification in an insincere manner meant to insult or discredit a previous commenter or the author of the article being discussed rather than to genuinely seek clarification. This includes rhetorical questions posed to discredit a previous speaker or point out problems with a proposal.

Who the hell do you think you are? Do you honestly think I am going to let some pinko dictate to me where to live or where to go?

(0) neutral –does not include a request for clarification

Here, a post will contain no requests for clarification.

And Monday I can drive to Wyoming, Kansas or New Mexico and buy all the mags I want and there is absolutely no way the Demonazis in Denver can prove I haven't owned them for years. Even if you support a limit on magazine capacity you should understand this law is useless.

(1) includes a genuine request for clarification

A post containing a genuine request for clarification, either of a point made by a commenter or of something contained in the article being discussed, would be coded here.

Please cite an occurrence where 15 or more assailants descended upon one's house and an entirely innocent individual defended himself with a high capacity magazine-equipped rifle.

15) Comprehension/demonstrates understanding: (-1) explicit demonstration that participant does not understand/(0) no explicit statement demonstrating understanding/(1) explicit demonstration of understanding

This variable measures whether a commenter explicitly demonstrates that s/he understands what someone else has said in a previous post (not the article). This must be explicitly stated.

(-1) explicit demonstration that participant does not understand something said by another participant

Here, a commenter would explicitly state that he or she did not understand something in the article or a point someone else posted.

It is difficult for me to understand the arguments the NRA and its supporters are trying to make against this legislation. It requires background checks to eliminate felons from legal gun purchases, and it limits magazine size to something reasonable. What's wrong with this? It seems a mindless knee-jerk reaction by gun advocates. And before you leap, let me say that I am a supporter of the 2nd Amendment and believe all Americans should have the right to possess guns. However, checking backgrounds and limiting magazine size seems eminently reasonable to me.

(0) no explicit statement demonstrating understanding

Use this code if a post contains no explicit statement of understanding or misunderstanding.

Meanwhile the Federal government can't stop pushing weapons en masse into the hands of Islamic militants and any other militants they can find to keep the war racketeering machine moving.

(1) explicit demonstration of understanding

Use this code if a commenter explicitly states that they understand something in the article or a point someone else posted. The statement of understanding must be explicitly made.

I understand your argument, I just don't agree.

16) Consideration: (0) neutral –no explicit evidence that speaker is “listening” to or ignoring others/(1) explicit consideration/(2) request for other people’s feedback or consideration/(3) post contains both evidence of consideration and a request for feedback or consideration from others

Consideration concerns whether a post contains evidence that participant is listening to and considering others. Consideration means being attentive to group members’ words and perspectives and taking them seriously. Consideration is not the same as agreement. Consideration is not the same as respect. A commenter can be exhibiting consideration of another’s positions while engaging in name-calling toward him or her.

(0) neutral –no explicit evidence that speaker is “listening” to or ignoring others

Mere statements of opinion or offering of evidence without reference to another's points counts here.

The Marlin model 1893 39a Original golden is the longest running production rifle in the world. It is a lever action, tubular magazine, .22 calibre small game and target firearm. Annie Oakley used one during her performances with Wild Bill. It is no longer available for sale in Colorado because the factory magazine holds 19 cartridges.

(1) post contains explicit statements that demonstrate participant is considering others' positions

This includes comments that are made in direct response to the content of a previous post, as long as it is clear that they are being considered or taken seriously, even if they are being disagreed with.

No, Rich. I'd say this act was very much the will of the people, who voted for both the governor and house assembly, and supported these measures overwhelmingly in polling. They may not conform to YOUR will, but it's not about you -- it's about our collective will.

wrong. none of the elected officials ran on gun control platform. they decided to act like a tyrant after the elections. and they will pay for it when they get into the unemployment line.

YES. You will still be able to buy them in surrounding states. You can make a trip to Wyoming, New Mexico, Texas, or Oklahoma and pretty much get what you want. Yes was because it shows support to our gun dealers in this state.

(2) post contains a request for other people's feedback or consideration

A commenter might include a request for others' thoughts on what they or another posted. They might make a point and follow it with, "What do you think?"

(3) post contains both evidence of consideration and a request for feedback or consideration from others

Use this code if a comment both exhibits consideration of others' comments or points **AND** requests thoughts or consideration from others.

That's a good idea. Does anyone else have thoughts on that?

17) Others' consideration: (-1) another commenter was not listening to or considering others/(0) neutral/(1) speaker indicates that another commenter was listening to or considering others

This variable measures whether a commenter remarks on whether or not a different commenter is considering and listening to others.

(-1) speaker indicates that a different commenter was not listening to or considering others

Here, a commenter would point out that another commenter did not have consideration for their own or others' contributions.

You aren't listening to me! Did you read my post?

(0) neutral: post does not contain any comment on how well another commenter was listening or considering others' perspectives

Most posts will make no comment as to the consideration of other commenters.

(1) speaker indicates that another commenter did a good job of listening or considering the speaker's (or a third group members') perspective

Here, a commenter would state that another commenter was considering others' or their own contributions to the discussion.

That was a great summary of JimmyB's argument.

18) Respect: (-1) demonstrates lack of respect/(0) neutral/(1) demonstrates respect

Though what is considered respectful or disrespectful is dependent on context, because of the nature of the online forum, it is impossible to know whether any comment was taken as respectful or disrespectful. We are not looking for the reaction of other commenters to determine what they considered to be respectful or disrespectful since there is no way to know if all pertinent reactions were posted. Here, we will determine respect and disrespect by looking at the content of the posts themselves.

Posts will be coded as neutral unless they contain explicit demonstrations of either respect or disrespect. Disrespect and disrespect can be directed at another commenter or at any person or group outside the board, including the author of the article, people mentioned in the article, or public figures.

(-1) demonstrates lack of respect--commenter disregards or dismisses others' perspectives or experiences, makes personal insults, etc.

Disrespect here is the use of markedly negative behavior or face attacks, including any insulting language, name calling, character assassination, belittling/condescension, sarcasm directed toward another with the intent of insulting or belittling another, and obscene language. Disagreement or disapproval does not count unless accompanied by one of the markers of disrespect listed above. Sarcasm alone does not count unless its purpose was to insult or belittle.

Marks of emotion or emphasis alone do not lead a comment to count as disrespectful. The use of all caps or excessive punctuation would have to be accompanied by one of the other behaviors listed above to count as disrespect under this coding scheme.

People suffering real tyranny throughout the world think you're a spoiled, whiny brat who just got his toys taken away.

Typical response. Keep being naive until a freedom you enjoy is taken away.

Hard to tell who's madder, the criminals who use guns to commit mass murder or the poli-tricking politicians who exploit the incidents for their own agenda of madness!

(0) neutral—not clearly respectful or disrespectful

A comment should be coded as neutral unless it contains contain an explicit demonstration of either respect or disrespect.

Is so cute that you think a criminal intent on murder will obey your silly magazine law! How precious!

Dropping magazines out of the air LOL. Sounds like an episode of WKRP in Cincinnati.

(1) demonstrates respect—explicitly positively acknowledges others and their contributions, even if disagreeing with them

In order to be coded here, a demonstration of respect should be explicit positive acknowledgment for the perspectives or contributions of others, whether other commenters or anyone outside the comments board. Expressions of thanks, “good point,” or appreciation of other commenters or public figures would count here.

Slow Clap for Monday. Thank you, John Morse, for being brave enough to lead this legislation to completion despite the political consequences.

19) Others’ respect: (-1) indicates that someone else was being disrespectful/(0) neutral/(1) indicates that someone else was showing respect

Similar to “others’ consideration,” this variable measures whether a commenter evaluates some other group member’s behavior as respectful or disrespectful.

(-1) indicates that someone else was being disrespectful

To be coded here, a commenter would point out that another commenter had been or was being disrespectful.

Respectfully, a few things to consider. First, I do not think these gun regulations that have passed are reasonable. They are not effective. They are not enforceable. And no, I am not a moron, as your post implied. So perhaps we can leave personal attacks out of this and stick to rational, civilized debate. That would be refreshing.

(0) neutral--no comment about whether someone else's behavior is respectful

Many comments will make no reference to whether the behavior of others was respectful or disrespectful. If so, code the comment as "neutral."

With that silly logic, then the right to free speech should only be recognized when actually speaking or newspapers and magazines. The internet, radio, and TV should not be upheld by the 1st. Great liberal minds. They can come up with the 1st and last scene of a movie, but the middle is just too hard.

(1) indicates that someone else was showing respect

Here, a commenter would state that another commenter was being respectful of others.

Thank you for respecting my views.