From Coffee Houses to Internet Speech: Civility and Moderation within The Contemporary Public Sphere

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From Coffee Houses to Internet Speech:
Civility and Moderation within The Contemporary Public Sphere

By
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Abstract

From Coffee Houses to Internet Speech:
Civility within The Contemporary Public Sphere

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Swarthmore College, 2023
Under the Supervision of Professor Michael Mullan

This thesis explores the ways in which discourse occurring in online discussion forums can become toxic and fail as spaces that create public opinion within the contemporary public sphere. After a literature review of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere and other scholars who connect the bourgeois sphere to our current iteration of the public sphere on the internet, an ideal type of a contemporary public sphere is constructed. Using this ideal type, the ways in which multiple online discussion spaces fall short of realizing the potential of the public sphere and the culture of discussion that has been cultivated within them are analyzed. Afterwards, an analysis of select subreddits from Reddit.com are studied as alternative examples of spaces that more closely adhere to the ideal type, focusing on the moderation of these subreddits and the promotion of civility and good-faith engagement as cultural pillars to be practiced. Finally, this thesis considers whether the ideal type of the public sphere can be realized within contemporary society as Habermas originally described.
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Ch. 1: The Bourgeois Public Sphere and Other Publics

Introduction

With the creation of the internet, discourse between human beings has never been easier. Communication can now be accomplished by humans on opposite ends of the world virtually instantaneously. This has the potential to lead to an unprecedented ability for humanity to cooperate with each other to discuss issues and create change. However, what any person journeying through the internet will find is that discourse in online spaces is often less than optimal and can be hostile. The purpose of this thesis is to study this discourse and attempt to describe the ways that it can break down and become suboptimal. Specifically, how do differences in moderating online discussion forums effect the quality of discourse within them and their ability to be effective spaces of the contemporary public sphere? To do address this question, Habermas’ conception of the public sphere is used as a framework. The purpose of this first chapter is to review the relevant literature necessary to undertake this endeavor.

In the work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas details the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere. According to him this sphere was to be a space of rational discussion and discourse and would function as a way for the bourgeoisie to make known any grievances to the state. For Habermas (1991), the public sphere is the realm of society that “put the state in touch with the needs of society.” (p. 31) It allowed members of the bourgeoisie to communicate their demands as a class to the state and be heard:

“A political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which, in opposition to absolute sovereignty, articulated the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws and which ultimately came to assert itself as the only legitimate source of this law.” (p. 54)

The public sphere was an area separate from the private sphere or civil society which he defines as “the realm of the commodity exchange and social labor.” (p. 3) It is where matters of the family, social life, and commodity exchange occurred. The public sphere was meant as a place where men of differing social status could come and discuss
the common good as equals. Within the public sphere, all that was supposed to matter was the rationality of your arguments.

**Discourse in the Salons**

Habermas (1991) details how with the beginning of early capitalism and trade finance in the Renaissance trade hubs began to form throughout Europe. Along with the trading of a plethora of commodities came the trading of news from many different places. (p. 16) This news then came to be consolidated into newsletters that were consumed by private hands; this news could not be said to be public in any sense. By the middle of the 17th century, important occurrences from around Europe were being consolidated into weekly and then daily publications called “political journals”. (p. 20) These journals held an interesting task in making public the private correspondence of individuals, which was of no interest to these private individuals. These journals were then commoditized and formed what could be called a press of sorts.

Toward the end of the 17th century came the creation of periodicals which offered criticisms and critiques of various subjects. However, these publications did not yet contain criticism of the state itself as Habermas (1991) notes “In a rescript of Frederick II from 1784 one reads: ‘A private person has no right to pass public and perhaps even disapproving judgement on the actions, procedures, laws, regulations, and ordinances of sovereigns and courts, their officials, assemblies, and courts of law.’” (p. 25) The public sphere came about and gained its political orientation once this barrier had been surpassed. Once private members came together and discussed the matters of the state, they then expressed an opinion on it and distributed it publicly.

In addition to these crucial developments regarding the creation of a press of sorts came the creation of salons and coffee houses. These became spaces where intellectuals, or rather educated bourgeois men, could come and discuss literature with members of the Aristocracy. These debates over literature and art would often develop into discussions of economic and political disputes. (p. 33) Within the salon, specifically, all were treated as equal in social status. The members of the court mingled and discussed with members of merchant companies and the like. This was key since the dissolution of social status is key for the existence of the public sphere. (p. 36) With this
as a requirement the strength of one's argument did not come from their rank within any sort of social hierarchy, but from the strength of their rational argument, and the more convincing argument would be successful.

It is from these institutions, in addition to the press, that the public sphere took form and from here expressed the opinion publique. The distinction between this and public opinion was the use of reason. As Habermas (1991) states “Only when the physiocrats ascribed it to the publique eclaire itself did opinion publique receive the strict meaning of an opinion purified through critical discussion in the public sphere to constitute a true opinion.” (p. 95)

The structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere occurred when the norms governing who could participate were changed. As republican revolution swept through France in the late 18th century the public sphere was cemented as an institution within France with the establishment of the right to a free press, to free speech, and to assembly. Habermas (1991) states that in this way the state came to be beholden to the opinion publique, by making the rights of speech, press, and assembly enshrined within the supreme law of the nation-state. (p. 83)

This allowed for competing interests to penetrate into the public sphere. “The public Sphere, which now had to deal with these demands, became an arena of competing interests fought out in the coarser forms of violent conflict. Laws passed under the ‘pressure of the street’ could hardly be understood any longer as embodying the reasonable consensus of publicly debating private persons.” (p. 132) Thus the public sphere lost one of its key features, that the deliberation within it was to be free of private interests and to only discuss the common good of the public. Habermas says “This was because the unreconciled interests which, with the broadening of the public, flooded the public sphere were represented in a divided public opinion and turned public opinion into a coercive force, whereas it had once been supposed to dissolve any kind of coercion into the compulsion of reason.” (p. 133) In opening up the public sphere different groups of society that were unequal within the market sought to use the public sphere to equalize the playing field and secure for themselves a portion of the economic gains that were occurring at the time.
Today the contemporary public sphere is quite different from how Habermas originally conceptualized the bourgeois sphere. With the creation of what he refers to as the welfare state, the bourgeois public sphere has all but been destroyed. (pp. 145-146) It had collapsed under the demands of competing groups. All of these groups are fighting to have their issues that had developed in the private sphere of the home and market resolved by the state through the public sphere.

Instead of being participants within the public sphere, citizens were now simply spectators as the debates were carried out for them by the mass media. Habermas (1991) himself describes how today's sphere is one not of deliberation, but of cultural consumption: “Today the conversation itself is administered. Professional dialogues from the podium, panel discussions, and round table shows—the rational debate of private people becomes one of the production numbers of the stars in radio and television a salable package ready for the box office; it even assumes commodity form even at ‘conferences’ where anyone can ‘participate.’” (p. 164) The public sphere, in Habermas' view, no longer deliberates the common good of the public, but merely creates the spectacle, through the mass media, of deliberation.

**Counter Publics and The Digital Public**

Fraser (1992) agrees with Habermas' general framework of the public sphere but refines it to allow for other features to be apparent. First, and arguably most importantly, she argues that the bourgeois public sphere is not the only sphere to be considered. (p. 58) It is the dominant public sphere since it contains within it those with both rising economic and political power at the time of its inception. Fraser (1992) states “Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech.” (p. 59) These counterpublics contained discourse from many other groups within a society that were not part of the male bourgeoisie.

Fraser (1992) argues that in time these counterpublics and the bourgeois public came to contest each other for publicity. When the public sphere transformed and allowed private interests to be discussed, it allowed for the redefinition of what the common good meant. The bourgeois sphere “limits deliberation to talk framed from the
standpoint of a single, all-encompassing we.” (p. 72) This framing limited understandably what could be discussed as the common good since it was defined as something which would affect all. As a result, issues that affected groups not within the bourgeois sphere were ignored by the bourgeois sphere.

Fraser (1992) also argues that by allowing this view to persist within the bourgeois sphere it made determining the common good more difficult. She states “this works against one of the principal aims of deliberation, namely, helping participants clarify their interests even when those interests turn out to conflict.” (p. 72) By not allowing the deliberation of private interests the common good could not be fully determined, since any commonly held private interests were not discussed.

Finally, Fraser (1992) argues that publics and counterpublics do have very real differences aside from who could participate in them. She argues for categorizing publics as either “strong” or “weak” publics. Deliberation occurs in both cases, but the strong public contained the ability of decision making. This could be said to be the critical difference between the bourgeois sphere and the counterpublics. Through the rights of speech, press, and assembly and the use of popular sovereignty the bourgeois sphere could influence the decision making bodies of the state, while counterpublics could not. (pp. 75-76)

Dahlberg (2001a) discusses how the internet has the potential to revive the public sphere to one where citizens are participating in deliberation and not merely consuming the discourse that the mass media creates. He starts off by admitting that large parts of the internet “are corporate owned and profit oriented. They offer free space to virtual communities but sell space to advertisers attempting to target certain communities of interest.” (p. 617) However, he argues that there are groups free of this domination of economic interests. These areas include email lists, chat groups, and web boards.

Within these groups, Dahlberg (2001b) argues that there is what he calls a “deliberative model of democracy”, which he contends allows for a revitalization of the public sphere. (P. 167) The deliberative model:

“promotes the internet as the means for an expansion of the public sphere of rational-critical citizen discourse – discourse autonomous from state and corporate
power through which public opinion may be formed that can hold official decision makers accountable.” (Dahlberg 2001a)

As evidence, he cites the Minnesota E-democracy initiative, which allows for participants to engage in discourse over a range of issues relevant to Minnesota politics. This has become a model for a number of other initiatives from Iowa to the United Kingdom.

In order to ensure that these communities are true publics, Dahlberg creates criteria so that these internet spheres can be judged using Habermas’ framework. He argues that these communities must have: reflexivity—where participants critically examine cultural values, assumptions and interests, ideal role taking—where participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other’s perspective, sincerity—each participant must make a sincere effort to provide all information relevant to the particular problem under consideration, discourse inclusion and equality—every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever, and autonomy from state and economic power—discourse must be driven by the concerns of publicly-oriented citizens rather than by money or administrative power. (Dahlberg 2001) When these criteria are fulfilled it can be said that a public is present and carrying out critical debate.

The next chapter will explore the discourse occurring in publics that exist and contrast it with an ideal public. Specifically, it will be focusing on how deliberation occurs within comment sections of news sites with regards to US foreign aid and how these discussions fall short. Doing so will allow for an analysis of the efficacy of these spaces as part of the public sphere.
Ch 2: The Ideal Public Sphere and The Observed Public Sphere

This chapter explores the current of iteration public sphere and the discourse that occurs within it. To do so, an ideal type of the public sphere based on Habermas’ original conception was constructed. This ideal type of discourse is then compared to discussions found in online comment sections of prominent news sites such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Fox News*. The topic that is discussed within these spaces is non-military foreign aid from the US. What is found is that the public sphere may still not exist in these spaces due largely to poor deliberation practices from multiple parties involved.

The Ideal Public Sphere

To begin our investigation of the contemporary public sphere, it would be prudent to build a model of the public sphere using Weber’s ideal type. In constructing this model one cannot assume that it will resemble the reality of our current public sphere at all, as Weber (1978) himself states, “it is probably seldom if ever that a real phenomenon can be found which corresponds exactly to one of these ideally constructed pure types.” (p. 20) However, using an ideal type as a tool of comparison can help us understand “the extent to which this ideal construct approximates to or diverges from reality.” (Weber, 1999) Doing so will allow the research to be more focused and allow more confident exploration as to how and why the contemporary public sphere fails to adhere to Habermas’ ideal. In Weber's (1999) words, “it is no "hypothesis" but it offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description." (p. 247)

For the purposes of this thesis, the ideal construct will be Habermas’ public sphere as he hoped it would operate before its collapse. In order to create such a model one must ask, what are the features of a public sphere? Who is allowed to participate? What are the norms for participation, and how are participants expected to behave and engage with one another? Who sets and enforces these norms and expectations? Is there any enforcement mechanism at all? All of these questions must be answered.

In its most basic structure, a public sphere would have similar features as expressed in the original sphere. Any citizen would be able to participate in critical
debate regardless of social class or status. Regardless of whether one was a student, corporate executive, or minimum wage worker, all are welcome to participate. Instead of salons and coffee shops of the 17th century, debate would now take place on the internet among members who could be on opposite ends of the globe. Within chat rooms, message boards, forums, and comment sections would be where these discussions would occur. Discussions focus on matters of the public good and what is best for the public as an inclusive whole. Very importantly, private interests, meaning those interests of specific exclusionary groups, would not skew debate. “An ‘ideal speech situation’ presupposes symmetry and impartiality among the participants of interaction, unlimited access to the debate, equal opportunity to make a contribution, unlimited amount of time to discuss the issues and that all participants are treated as equals, irrespective of their social status.” (Skerlep 2014, p. 28)

While the structure of the public sphere is important, the most important feature of a public sphere arguably is the behavior of its participants especially with regard to each other. In an ideal sphere, members would come to discuss the public good and the interests of the nation as a whole, private interests would be left aside to prevent the creation of possible factions. Members would argue in good faith, treating other members with respect and their respective arguments as well. Fallacies and personal attacks would not be tolerated and considered uncritical and unhelpful for debate. Misrepresentation of arguments, appeals to authority or majority would be challenged. Repeat offenders of such transgressions would be shunned and ignored. The public sphere must be a place of reason to function ideally; any and all attempts to sway it from this ideal would be dealt with by the members.

The usage of information and evidence would reign supreme. Generalizations would be challenged and failure to address them would result in dismissals of arguments. “In other words, if participants respect the force of better argument, they are motivated to rationally accept the best argument, so under ideal conditions the process ends with rational consensus and mutual recognition.” (Skerlep 2014, p. 27) Information that is cited as evidence is presented from credible sources and information that is not is corrected by the sphere-at-large. The sphere ideally does not
allow for the continued usage of incorrect information, since such information does nothing to allow for deliberation of the public sphere to occur.

The above is a basic outline or set of requirements rather than necessary for the public sphere to first exist and then deliberate about the common good. It included:

- Participation regardless of class or social status
- Discussions focus on matters of the public good
- Private interests do not skew debate
- Citations and evidence are scrutinized and respected
- Participants behave in a civil manner
- Generalizations and fallacies would be challenged
- Bad faith actors/ repeat civility violators are ignored

However, what must be taken into consideration of any public sphere especially after the fall of the original bourgeois sphere is the role of mass media and the process of culture consumption. Habermas (1991) described the media as part of the culture industry which allowed citizens to consume the culture that was created for them but never to actually engage with it. The public is therefore reduced from discussing the public good to merely consuming the discussion that is curated for it by the media. (pp. 176-178) For example, the numerous political pundits who create talking points which are copied and repeated ad nauseam by the public.

This is important since as Feinstein (2015) states “Yet, as Lippmann (1922) astutely pointed out, people instinctively embed news in familiar social narratives.” (p. 148) This means that if a public is culture consuming then the social narratives that are discussed in the public sphere have the news, and thus the perspectives of mass media embedded within it, before such information can be subjected to the critical apparatus of the public sphere to determine their validity. Feinstein (2015) also says “What matters, in his view, isn’t just that we bring our own filter to every learning experience, but rather that the filters we apply aren’t really ours, rather they are the filters of mass media itself.” In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world,” he wrote, “we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.” (p. 150)
reasoning and understanding of information by the public can be influenced and controlled through the social narratives provided to it by the culture industry, which can, in turn, shape public opinion and thus any discussion of the public good.

The democratizing nature of the internet offers us a way to combat the filters of mass media. Through the increase in the number of news sources and the ease of access to information that is brought with internet, ideally the influence of mass media can be mitigated. While it cannot be completely removed of its ability to influence, mass media and the narratives it provides can be challenged by an inquisitive online public willing to challenge these narratives and other media perspectives that are in increasing demand by said online public to provide alternative filters to mass mediated narratives. Though this can lead to the problem of areas of the internet providing false narratives to the public ideally a public with the use of its reason should be able to identify and avoid falling prey to such narratives through extensive discussion of the claims, evidence, and consequences provided by such narratives and alternative narratives.

Methodology

To study the contemporary public sphere, several articles from multiple new sites across the web were compiled. Sites were used from across the political spectrum in order to gain as broad a sample as possible to analyze discussions in a variety of spaces. These sites included: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, Slate, Mother Jones, Salon, Forbes, The Wall Street Journal, Fox News, Breitbart, and Cybercast News Service. Articles were selected based on the number of comments that had been posted. In total 27 articles were used in this study. The size of the comment sections ranged from 30 comments in some articles to over 800 in others. At the very least, articles were used so long as the comments contained a thread or series of replies from other members to an original comment by one single member rather than single comments. This was done to ensure that what was being studied was the interaction between members of these publics and not merely people shouting into a void.

To analyze the comments sections Atlas.ti was used to code comments into categories showing the various ways for civility to be violated. To do so, civility itself must be defined. For the purposes of this thesis, civility means to behave in a manner
that is courteous and invites constructive deliberation. Civility involves attempting to discuss arguments in good faith, by being charitable and open-minded towards others' viewpoints and beliefs. It involves asking clarifying questions and seeking mutual understanding. It does not involve assumption or presumption of others' thoughts, attitudes, or opinions, nor does it involve insult, accusations or threats.

This analysis will borrow the categories on incivility from Papacharissi’s (2004) study on Usenet groups. The main categories being insult, aspersion, stereotype, hyperbole, accusation, threat to democracy or another’s civil rights, and non-cooperation. (pp. 273-275) The main objective of this investigation was to see whether or not members were participating in deliberation that could be said to be on par with the ideal type that we have constructed. While deliberation did occur within plenty of these comments and involved the use of reason, there were plenty of occurrences where members would become hostile in tone, outright insult each other, accuse each other of lying, and repeat all manner of vitriol towards one another and groups others were assumed to be a part of. It was at this point that our ideal type abstracted from reality since the discussion was no longer about the public good, but instead had devolved into juvenile mudslinging. In order to capture the authenticity of these discussions all cited comments have been left in the vernacular of the participants without grammatical or spelling corrections.

Illustrating Excerpts

The results of the study show clearly that while not all comment sections demonstrated an equal usage of each category no article was perfect. The following quotes are examples to demonstrate these categories of incivility. For the category of accusation there is the quote: “I get the feeling that you are quite happy with the body count the way it is. Hamas is itself a product of Israel. Created as a counterweight to the Palestinian Authority. See how that worked out for them.” from Salon. (Norton, 2016b) This comment demonstrates an unnecessary accusatory tone towards another participant that is likely to receive a defensive reply in return or a retaliatory accusation.

From Slate we have the comment: “Rand Paul is a lair and a fraud, just like his old man. Anyone supporting him is an idiot. End of story”, to represent aspersion.
Here the reputation of Senator Rand Paul is attacked and anyone supporting him is labeled an idiot by a participant. Responses to such an aspersion will be defensive and will not focus on the subject of the article.

The quote: "Talk of "hard working, tax paying undocumented immigrants" comes from the mouths of those who have never seen public schools torn apart by violence. Hospitals bankrupted and closed because of thousands of illegal immigrants stormed the emergency rooms and there was no money to pay for them." from The Guardian is an example of Hyperbole. (Gallagher & Koleski 2011) This participant provides no evidence of "public schools torn apart by violence" or "hospitals bankrupted" and is provided with little context such that it comes across as hyperbole. Responses to comments of this nature are usually followed by calls for evidence or dismissed due to their exaggerated nature, regardless of whether or not the statement has any truth to it.

This comment from a separate article from The Guardian: “Grow up and drop the anti British rhetoric you bigot”, demonstrates the category of insult. (Larsson 2015) These comments represent direct attacks upon the character, intelligence, morality, loyalty, and value of participants. These comments degrade the target and in doing so discourage a rational response which only leads to further breakdown of discourse and tend to be met with more insults.

The next category, non-cooperation, is demonstrated succinctly by this quote from a Fox News article, “Dumb.” (Fox News 2016) This flatly made assertion provides no argument to engage with and signals the participant is unlikely open to discussion with others. This signals to others to either agree with the comment or ignore it which defeats the purpose of discourse within the public sphere as it disallows agreement at best and discourages any discussion at worst.

This quote: “what many racist, islamophobic fascists have been saying for decades. Climate change, corrupt and lazy Africa and violent invaders who come to make Europe an islamic state, the truth is seeping out and the cultural Marxist myth unraveling. This should be fun.”, from the comments of a Breitbart article demonstrates the stereotype category. (Hallet 2015) Stereotyping Africans as lazy, corrupt, and violent shows a lack
of nuance in the participant’s viewpoint, as they appear uninterested in considering the possibility that Africans could be anything else. Comments such as this one will be met with responses accusing them of bigotry and/or stereotyping and thus the discussion is no longer focused on matters of the public sphere and are now focused on whether the participant is a bigot or whether the stereotypes are accurate.

The final two categories are the most dangerous as they represent direct threats to either democracy as an institution or to the civil and/or human rights of other participants or of the people who are being discussed. Firstly, we have threats to democracy, demonstrated by this quote: “2nd amendment remedy.” (Jeffrey 2012a) From the Cybercast News Service, in reference as to how participants can solve their issues with the then Obama government. With such context, it is plain to see that this participant is advocating for some form of armed confrontation with the federal government to ensure that their grievances are addressed. Their solution completely forgoes the possibility of consensus building within the contemporary public sphere and instead opts for direct violent confrontation. Such an opinion does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the public as a governing construct and seeks to enforce itself in spite of the public. Such an opinion is contradictory to the very idea of the public sphere.

Finally this comment:

“Please, please, put those people out of their suffering, Israelis and Arabs. It’s for the good of humanity and Google News. Send in the B52s. It will take a while and money, but please relieve us from those people. PLEASE! A "hard reset" (neutron bombs" is being called for. We’re tired of being held hostage by Jews and Arabs, who are in the end, just the same. Different tribes but just the same.” (DeYoung & Cunningham 2016)

From a Washington Post article, represents a threat to civil/human rights. This comment essentially advocates for committing genocide against all peoples within Israel and Palestine as a solution to the conflict between the two. Such comments represent direct threats to peoples’ right to life and other inalienable rights. Such commentary runs contradictory to the purpose of a public sphere as it operates as exclusionary to
said attacked groups. Additionally, such calls for actions are likely to be met by equally strong rebukes from others, again degrading the discussion into insults and accusations.

In regard to these comments, the perspective of Zamith and Lewis (2014) rings true: “The discussion forums of online news sites are often poorly organized, dominated by loud and obnoxious minorities, and riddled with venomous dialogue.” (p. 559) It is in this sense that these spaces fail to become public spheres and violate the ideal type. Zamith and Lewis (2014) give several reasons as to why this is. First the digital divide, the fact that not everyone has access to high-speed internet and those who do, therefore, have a greater “efficacy” in these spaces. Second is incivility which is combative behavior intended to provoke others. Third is anonymity which makes it difficult for people to be held accountable for their actions. Ramifications against a user could cause the user to create a new account without any change in behavior. Fourth, fragmentation in which discourse becomes unorganized due to the plethora of “irrelevant” posts. Selective exposure is fifth in which participants seek and select information and ideas consistent with one’s own. And sixth is homogenization which makes it difficult for people to be held accountable for their actions. Ramifications against a user could cause the user to create a new account without any change in behavior. Fourth, fragmentation in which discourse becomes unorganized due to the plethora of “irrelevant” posts. Selective exposure is fifth in which participants seek and select information and ideas consistent with one’s own. And sixth is homogenization where select groups of users are very active and push others out of discussions thus homogenizing any deliberation. (pp. 562-563)

In this regard rather than resemble the deliberative spaces that Dahlberg (2001a/b) discusses, some of these comment sections more accurately represent communitarian spaces, which “stresses the possibility of the internet enhancing communal spirit and values.” (p. 616) Effectively these spaces are echo chambers where the same opinion is reiterated. In such spaces, deliberation does not occur unless it is over minute details. As Dahlberg (2001a/b) says, this allows communities to fragment into tiny communities of homogeneity, nothing like our ideal type. (p. 618)

Conclusion

In conclusion, when constructing an ideal type of the public sphere as Habermas describes it, we find that it does not correspond with the contemporary public sphere as it currently exists. Regardless of the democratizing power of the internet, the lack of civility within comment sections reveals their differentiation from the ideal type we have built. It is this differentiation which demonstrates their shortcomings as spaces of the contemporary public sphere. The next chapter will more carefully dissect select
interactions between participants in these spaces to better understand their
differentiation from the ideal type. From this, we may be able to begin to understand
what is currently missing from either the structure or culture of these spaces that leads
to said differentiation.
This chapter will take a deeper dive into the discourse that occurs within these comment sections. This chapter will feature analysis of specific comment chains of positive and negative discourse outcomes. Positive outcomes can be defined as those in which the conversation between participants remains on topic, respectful, and professional. Negative outcomes are those in which the conversation veers off topic, becomes aggressive and/or derisive in tone, and does not lead to substantive discussion. Through interrogation of these differences, it is hoped that the differences between spaces that foster these positive outcomes vs spaces that don't, can be identified, whether that be a factor of moderation, forum culture and values, or simply a factor of the target audiences that are being catered to in these spaces.

To perform this analysis, several comment chains from various articles have been selected. These chains are comments that begin with a single comment and continue as replies to the original comment and other replies. In these exchanges, breakdowns in civility between participants were sought. Some exchanges started without civility, some took longer to develop. The common theme, however, was that once civility was violated, it rarely returned. The moment that insults were thrown the discussion always veered to insulting retorts. These discussions ended up adding very little in terms of information, even though some of them contained links to information or solidly reasoned arguments. The problem always remained the same; once civility was violated the purpose of the discourse was not to inform or discuss it was to defeat supposed partisan opponents, typically through bullying.

As stated in the previous chapter, in an ideal space participants would be rational and adhere to rules around civility and rhetoric. Evidence would beat no evidence and better data would beat poor data, consensus would be reached, eventually, and all would exit the discourse with similar thinking. Unfortunately, that is not what occurs in these spaces. Civility is almost immediately violated in some form and is then continuously violated moving forward. And instead of discussing better data or evidence, participants often accuse others of bad faith or incompetence/idiocy. No consensus is usually found, and everyone appears to leave discussions in more foul moods than when they entered.

Community and Familiarity

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For example, take this exchange from a *Wall Street Journal* article titled “Your Tax Dollars Fund Palestinian Terror” by David Feith from August 11, 2016. In the article Mr. Feith argues that the discovery of the transfer of funds from the global charity World Vision to Hamas should spark a larger conversation about the transfer of aid dollars to the Palestinian government. He then goes on to craft a narrative in which the United States knowingly sends aid dollars to the Palestinian government which then uses said dollars to pay Hamas members. This is a sample of the comments that responded to Mr. Feith’s article. (Feith, 2016)

The opening comment asks, to paraphrase: “do the ends justify the means”, questioning whether the suppression of violent elements in Palestinian territories is worth it when there is excessive collateral damage and death to regular citizens.¹

“What you seem to be alluding to is the proposition that if a country utilizes highly sophisticated weaponry to kill innocents the end result is morally acceptable "collateral damage". If you utilize crude weaponry to defend your right to exist as a human being, it's considered straight forward "terrorism".” (Feith, 2016)

The above statement is the premise of this comment chain. It is where this line of discourse begins. It is a rocky place to start at best. The comment makes no mention of aid dollars funding terrorism. It makes no mention of foreign aid policy. Instead, it starts by essentially accusing the author of handwaving Palestinian deaths as “collateral damage” while maintaining that Israeli deaths are the result of terrorism. This comment makes no attempt to even engage with the content of the article; all responses to it will also ignore the subject matter of the article, and instead focus on responding to or defending the above accusation.

This is the response to this opening comment:

“Right. What is the relevance of this argument to a story exposing how our tax dollars sponsors the terroristic murder of innocent human beings?

¹¹ Usernames are not used in order to maintain anonymity of participants. Many contain first and last names. However, names are left in direct quotes of comments.
Or maybe this was just a good opportunity for you to hide your shallow moral relativism behind a façade of smug self-righteousness.” (Feith, 2016)

Rightfully, it questions how the starter comment is relevant to what is being discussed in the article. However, it follows up this well-meaning question with an entirely unnecessary attack on the original participant’s character. The tone is accusatory and combative, not at all conducive to a constructive dialogue.

This responder then follows up their first response with another. They walk back their previous accusation, only to then unleash an even more aggressive and demeaning accusation:

“Maybe it's not moral relativism. Maybe you're the sort of gullible Westerner that psychopaths like the Hamas commanders that deploy their missile launchers in their own people’s residential neighborhoods depend upon to weave the storyline that Israel murders innocents.

Or maybe you just personally are comfortable with the blood libel that Jews murder innocents & will jump on any opportunity to spew it out. Either way, stop posting.” (Feith, 2016)

With this we can now assume that there will be no productive discussion between these two people. Without any response from the original participant, we can see that this responder is fully intentioned on being bellicose and degrading, at least towards the original participant and their view.

Another participant chimes in. Still responding to the original comment:

“If you use any weapon explicitly against civilians to achieve some political goals that us called terrorism regardless to all the slogans about "defending the right to exist". If you attack enemy combatants entrenched in densely populated area it is called warfare regardless to "collateral damage" involved. But why should mere facts bother you?” (Feith, 2016)
Again, we can see that the comment begins benign enough. Disagreeing with the original post and attempting to draw a distinction between “terrorism” and “collateral damage”. Unfortunately, again they seem unable to resist ending their response with an accusation, essentially implying that the original participant is simply avoiding and/or failing to acknowledge “mere facts.”

At this juncture we receive our first response to a response, as someone responds to the first responders second attack:

“So, Ms. Coane, this is how it works? No criticism of Israel is to be spoken? If it occurs, it is followed by accusations of blood libel?

I don't know you and I don't know your actions. But I do know your rhetoric does damage to your cause and leads to the conclusion that your radicalism and bigotry is little different from those Palestinians you hate so much.” (Feith, 2016)

Here we can see a pattern firmly established. Comments begin nicely enough with serious questions and honest engagement with the contents of other’s words which is then quickly followed by unnecessary accusations and implications of other people’s character and opinions.

This 3rd participant continues and addresses the 2nd participant:

“Serge, I knew you would show up eventually. How are things going in the new Soviet Union known as Israel? Are you and all your old Russian buddies doing well?” (Feith, 2016)

Now even constructive dialogue is eschewed entirely. This comment goes straight to implication and accusation. Implying that the 2nd participant is a Russian and therefore ex-Soviet and then continuing to accuse Israel of being the new Soviet Union.

The 2nd participant responds:
“Why should I bother to answer your silly questions if you do not want to answer mine? Anyway, I see no point to argue with a gutless ignoramus who is unable even to acknowledge his errors.” (Feith, 2016)

And now we see a complete departure of the discourse entirely. This conversation is not about the contents of the article. It is not even about the comment that began this chain of comments. This conversation between these two is completely personal. It contains no discussion of matters of the contemporary public sphere. It doesn’t mention foreign aid to Palestine. It doesn’t engage with politics at all. It has devolved into mudslinging. People trading insult for insult. Nothing is learned and nothing is gained. Such a discussion cannot show or demonstrate anything about public opinion. This exchange which began with pointing out one participant’s hypocrisy, had no chance of developing further since its response essentially accused the initial comment of irrelevancy to the topic being discussed in the article. Such an accusation is likely not and was not taken with kindness and began a spiral away from any form of substantive discourse.

With this example we can see in several areas where this portion of the contemporary public sphere fails to mirror our ideal type. Mainly failing by allowing the initial accusation in the responding comment to stand without consequence or intervention either by other participants or moderators. There was no correction toward a norm of civility, no punishment for breaking community rules. By allowing said comment the initial participant was then primed to respond to what they had been accused of rather than continue discussing the truthfulness of their initial statement and thus continuing a conversation on a matter of public interest. Instead, they must now defend their character that has been attacked by a response, and so begins a discussion of private interest, the character of a particular participant. This is no longer a discussion about issues that the public at-large must address but is now a discussion about a private issue between two people. At such a point this discussion is no longer part of our ideal type of the public sphere.
Yet, these two responses are eye-opening, mainly because they reveal that these two participants have interacted before and regularly enough to be able to anticipate each other’s responses. These people have a relationship with each other, albeit a confrontational one. They will probably continue to interact with each other, never meeting face to face. Both feeling animosity for the other for what was said in a comment under a news/opinion piece.

The same could be assumed for several participants in these spaces. Some, undoubtedly, come and go and don’t return. Some only comment once and leave. But others stay and come back again and again, interacting with each other in their little corner of the contemporary public sphere. This is their community. This is where they discuss matters pertaining to the public. This is their discourse.

**Mudslinging and Accusations**

To further demonstrate this sense of community and familiarity that participants have with each other it would be prudent to discuss an article from *Salon* from 2016. The titled, “U.S. boosts military aid to Israel to $3.8 billion per year in largest package in U.S. history” by Ben Norton from September 15th 2016. In this article Norton criticizes the Obama administration for its increase in military aid to Israel and the apparent contradiction in rhetoric and policy as the author notes the Administration’s commitment to providing a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. The following is a sampling of comments from participants. (Norton, 2016b)

This is the opening comment:

“Of course, it makes sense to omit any discussion of the technological, tactical and strategic benefits the US derives from its relationship with Israel and the military aid it provides if your objective is the elimination of Israel. The members of Congress who see Israel as a key ally and a thriving democracy in a region riven by conflict and sectarian hatreds have another perspective.” (Norton, 2016b)
Our first participant begins by accusing the author of purposely omitting additional context to make the increase in aid appear worse than it is, citing the “technological, tactical and strategic benefits” that come from the US and Israel’s partnership. They then imply that the author’s goal is the “elimination of Israel.”

This is the response:

“And so it only costs a couple of thousand innocent lives a year, right? What price genocide, Frankie?” (Norton, 2016b)

The second commenter responds, sarcastically, by saying that such benefits only cost “a couple of thousand innocent lives a year, right” and refer to the participant with the nickname “frankie”, expressing a coy familiarity with them.

The original commenter responds:

“I get the feeling you would not be especially disturbed if the asymmetry in body counts were reversed. Or perhaps you are one of those geniuses who expects to see peace and love break out all over if the Israelis can somehow be relieved of the ability to defend themselves from those nice boys in Hamas and Hezbollah.”
(Norton, 2016b)

The first commenter questions the second’s concern over “body count” and accuses them of being accepting of a reversal in said body count. Frank then assumes that Messy expects the conflict to be resolved if Israel is disarmed.

At this point a new participant arrives and states:

“I get the feeling that you are quite happy with the body count the way it is. Hamas is itself a product of Israel. Created as a counterweight to the Palestinian Authority. See how that worked out for them.” (Norton, 2016b)
Again, accusing the first commenter of being happy at the number of dead Palestinians, and then also claims that Hamas is a product of Israel and was created as a counter to the Palestinian Authority.

The second commenter also responds to the first’s response:

“How’s that cranial rectal inversion going for you, Frankie?” (Norton, 2016b)

Dropping any pretense of discussion and moves directly to claiming that Frank has his head up his ass.

Again, we see these participants interact with each other with a certain level of familiarity. In another comment chain the first commenter will feign incredulity over the third’s objection to a source that the first references in their comment, stating:

“How since the FAS account of military aid to Israel is not embedded in a BDS rant, I’m not surprised that you doubt the political acumen of the authors.” (Norton, 2016b)

These people are as familiar with each other as any other group of humans interacting socially. The only distinction is that their interactions are limited to those surrounding political topics. These are not friends or family members catching up with each other or hanging out, but this is a normal interaction for them. Conversations are expected and anticipated to progress a certain way. They know what they are getting from participating in this space. They know the level of discourse and/or vitriol they may receive. They have accepted it and return to it continuously. This again violates our ideal type since such personal attacks are tolerated and appear to be even expected. No corrective actions from other participants or moderators are seen. And so, the conversation again derails into a discussion about private issues between participants rather than a discussion about matters that concern the public. In such an environment it is impossible to have any sort of constructive discourse about matters pertaining to the public.

There will be no consensus building in these communities. There will be debate, but about whose character failings are more glaring and offensive. As a result, people will
rarely admit to changing their minds or of being convinced of something. Insults and witty one-liners, not dissimilar from our formal presidential debates, are the norm. Policy may be discussed in these spaces, but understanding and consensus is banished, and soon such discussion is replaced by mere mudslinging.

Echo-Chambers and Hostility

An article from Cybercast News Service will be the final example of the communication ethics taking place in these comment sections. The article titled “Obama: ‘I Stand Up for Foreign Aid’ to Answer ‘Biblical Call’” by its editor Terence P. Jeffrey on September 13, 2012, opines on then President Obama’s justification for the usage of foreign aid. Obama cites a “biblical call to care for the least of these, for the poor for those at the margins of our society.” Jeffrey disagrees with this sentiment by calling attention to the aid given to the United Nations Population Fund, China, and Egypt. His objections to supporting these entities vary from an incident where Egyptian security forces killed 25 people after firing into a crowd of mostly Coptic Christians, to China’s family planning program which involves, “Female infanticide, sex-selective abortions, and the abandonment and neglect of baby girls,” to the UNFPA’s support of China’s family planning program. The following comments are a sample from the broader discourse surrounding the article. (Jeffrey, 2012a)

To begin the first participant declares:

“Why doesn’t this surprise me. Let’s borrow money from China to give away. This administration is a joke.” (Jeffrey, 2012a)

Accusing the administration of borrowing money from China simply to give it away to others.

This is responded to by the second commenter declaring that Obama is “He’s intentionally and systematically bankrupting our country.” If not, they declare him to be “wildly irresponsible” and “not fit for President”. (Jeffrey, 2012a)
The next few comments agree in kind. Offering opinions and ideas ranging from Obama’s campaign slogans being modeled off those used by Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales of Venezuela and Bolivia respectively and accusing Obama of being a socialist as a result, to accusations of voter fraud being carried out by Acorn and SEIU, to conspiracy theories regarding George Soros, voter fraud, and socialism. These continue for several comments until our first dissenter arrives.

This participant, challenges a comment that claims that George Soros is behind “open borders among everything else anti-American” and that “o is a commie but some Americans still worship this liar.” They respond to this comment, saying:

“Put your money where your mouth is -- let’s see some supporting journalistic evidence for any of the uneducated white trash crap you just posted.” (Jeffrey, 2012a)

Here it is important to remember that despite one’s opinion of the claims that the other participant made, this participant’s tone and attitude are immediately combative, demeaning, and not the slightest bit conducive to reaching any sort of understanding between their viewpoint and another’s.

The only response given to this comment is one of agreement from a fourth commenter, declaring the other participants to be “too stupid to do this because they are too stupid to realize the POTUS does not have the authority to spend.” Both comments are ignored despite the abrasive and combative tone that seems to frequently elicit a response. (Jeffrey, 2012a)

Continuing down the thread we have more accusations of voter fraud with another participant suggesting a “2nd amendment remedy.” The dissenter also responds to this comment encouraging the participant to “Use that for yourself” and stating that “we need to rid the country of some of you ignorant fools.” Again, these comments receive no response. It seems that the community at large knows to simply ignore them. (Jeffrey, 2012a)
The dissenter makes one last comment in response to one of the previous accusations of voter fraud, declaring it “Another absolutely clueless, paranoid projection.” This time this dissenter does get a response from another participant, who states:

“Rick, you are the fool here not head honch. You are the clueless idiot who will give Obama another 4 years. I don't know who I despise more, YOU or Obama.” (Jeffrey, 2012a)

Essentially declaring their hatred of this dissenter simply for voting for a politician and daring to have a different opinion. The issue this participant has with the dissenter is not that the dissenter’s comments lack civility towards other users, it’s that they disagree politically. At least according to this participant. It would not have mattered how considerate, empathetic, or kind the dissenter was in their disagreement, according to this participant the simple act of voting for Obama justifies them despising the dissenter.

This example violates our ideal type beyond just simple matters of civility and rationality. In our ideal type it is necessary for all participants to be allowed to comment regardless of background. From this exchange it is clear that anyone who has supported or voted for Obama is not welcome and will not be received with any patience or compassion. The participants in this space wear their partisan bona fides with pride and seek to maintain their space as one that is free from the other that they are quite willing to vilify.

Without free and equal access to the space for all interested, any discussion will be myopic and incomplete, as alternative perspectives and understandings are lost or ignored. As a result, the public has become fractured and segregated into many enclaves based on agreeing with the popular talking points of any particular space. To go against them is to risk harassment and bullying, which as we can see from this example is an accepted reality. Because of this no consensus can be reached between the segregated groups and without consensus Democratic governance becomes antagonistic as these
separate factions seek to dominate the others in the electoral space, as that is the only avenue left available to see their preferred policies implemented.

**Conclusion**

All these examples demonstrate a failure to maintain an ideal public sphere. The most basic principle of civility is repeatedly violated, not just toward participants, but also toward people and groups that are being discussed. President Obama is regularly derided with a multitude of insults and accusations. Both Israel and Palestine are maligned in various ways. Participants often lack the intention of reaching an understanding with each other, instead opting to malign and degrade each other in attempts to bully others into silence. Often the expectation from participants is that their views will be praised and accepted, and that any disagreement or resistance is responded to with hostility.

While discussions do initially center around the matters of the public good and national interest, with many participants wondering if providing foreign aid contributes to such concepts, the discussions quickly degrade. Participants do not seek consensus or attempt to even discuss what could be best for the nation, on the contrary, they appear ready to assert what is best and disregard and malign any disagreement. Any challenge to a viewpoint is usually met with dismissive tone if not outright hostility and disparagement. Only comments that echo the sentiments of other participants or praise such sentiments are treated with respect and enthusiasm. These discussions in some cases more closely resemble “echo chambers” rather than an ideal public sphere.

On the chance that participants do engage in discussion, participants often misrepresent each other’s views and positions. Evidence and data that are offered by participants are disregarded and treated as biased representations of reality. When a participant does refer to an authoritative source, the source is scrutinized for any bias as well. Participants do not “respect the force of better argument” as Skerlep (2014) mentioned earlier. (p.27) They are interested in silencing and denigrating their opposition. The “rational consensus and mutual recognition” that Skerlep (2014) discussed never appears. (p. 27)
Without any moderation mechanisms in place to correct for such behavior these spaces will continue as they are. Offenders of civility are never punished or removed. Those who are more interested in their view being validated rather than expanded will remain. They shall continue to maintain the culture that has been produced in these spaces. The final chapter will explore several spaces that exist in stark contrast to the comment sections from these articles. One’s that, with a more heavy-handed moderation effort, more closely resemble an ideal public sphere. These spaces being the Subreddits Change My View, Political Discussion, and Neutral Politics. While these three spaces are not the same in quality of discussion and have differing cultures and objectives, they all, with considerable effort on the part of their moderators and communities, much more closely align with the concept of an ideal public sphere.
Ch. 4: A Better Model

Intro

This chapter will present examples of other spaces meant for political discourse that adhere more closely to the ideal type of discursive spaces. Specifically, the communicative culture in three subreddits from Reddit.com that focus on discussion of contentious topics were studied. Those three subreddits being Political Discussion, Neutral Politics, and Change My View. All three have different rule sets for how participants are to engage with each other, all are moderated differently by their moderation teams, however it was found during this investigation that they provide a more civil, informative, and complete discursive experience in comparison to the previously investigated comment sections. This may be due to the specific culture of communicative norms that their communities uphold and the continuous efforts of their moderation teams to provide a robust and civil experience.

To begin my investigation of these spaces, the rules and norms that govern them were first investigated. During said investigation a plethora of discussions within these communities on best practices to enhance participant experience was discovered. They were discussions on old rules, new rules, current rules, and the small changes to them and whether they were useful. Discussions about moderator practices and if more could be done, discussions about norms and behavior that while not necessarily codified in each subreddits' rules sidebar, were none the less discouraged and frowned upon. These discussions were and continue to be a regular part of the discourse that occurs in these spaces and ensures that the spaces are being constructed to liking of the majority of their participant base. These spaces, from their inception, have been very clear about what their purpose and identity were and if there was dissent from individual participants over these purposes and identities, they were encouraged to find other spaces to inhabit.

Beyond simply investigating their rules and norms, the performance of them by participants was also sought. This was done to make a proper comparison with the comment sections previously discussed. In an effort to make sure the comparisons are
useful, discussions that were about the US foreign aid and the spending of aid dollars were sought out, finding four discussions and again tagging them using Atlas.TI and then performing a deeper analysis on a select few excerpts of both civil discourse and finding examples of unhelpful discourse. During this investigation it was found that these spaces tend to be far superior in terms of discourse quality, and they at the very least maintained a higher standard of civility with Political Discussion and Neutral Politics providing a high degree of informative discourse due to the type of participants who participated in these spaces and for Neutral Politics specifically due to the rigorous requirements for participation placed upon participants.

Introducing Select Subreddits

Reddit is a social media site that aggregates content and news and collects them in participant generated communities that allow participants to interact with each other and discuss the aggregated content/news. These participant generated communities are known as subreddits and can range from tens of millions of participants to single digit concentrations. Participants interact using accounts that are linked to an email address. Subreddits are moderated on a volunteer basis by teams or sometimes individual participant-moderators who enforce generic site-wide rules that are determined by Reddit proper and more specific subreddit rules that are determined by the moderators. Moderators have the ability to remove comments and ban participants who break the rules and if such participants break the broader site-wide rules their account can be banned from the site completely by Reddit itself. Moderators are not democratically chosen but are chosen at the discretion of other moderators. Such a reality has been known to cause friction amongst participants as they have little recourse to remove moderators who fail to act or abuse their powers. However, the three subreddits that will be discussed attempted to be responsive to participant criticism and feature fairly large moderation teams ranging from 16-28 moderators.

Change My View

Change My View is a subreddit dedicated to being a space for challenging one’s viewpoints. All posts are views that must be personally held by the submitter that they are looking to or willing to have changed. In this sense Change My View is a special
place, where the intention of discourse is explicitly to challenge one’s viewpoints and biases about the world. It is not a space for validation or approval. Submitters are meant to approach the discussion with an open mind and a listening ear. (Ansuz07 2014)

The rules for the subreddit reflect the subreddit’s commitment to such a goal. Submissions must be specific and targeted and cannot be generalized views about the world. For example, a submission about a specific government policy is acceptable while a submission about whether a political ideology is good or bad would not be. A submitter must also respond to any responses to their viewpoint within three hours to ensure that those who are having the view challenged are engaging with those challenges. If a submitter’s view is changed, even if the view is slightly altered or shifted, then they are to award the participant who changed their view a delta ($\Delta$) to signify that their view has been changed. Additionally, multiple deltas may be awarded in a single submission, if the submitter has their view altered or changed in different ways. (Ansuz07 2023)

All comments that directly respond to a submission are required to challenge it. They are not allowed to agree with the submission as doing so would defeat the purpose of attempting to change another’s view. “Hostility” and “rudeness” are disallowed and are identified according to moderator discretion. Additionally, all comments must be constructive and contribute toward the discussion at hand. This disallows jokes, slogans, and sarcasm to ensure that participants are engaging in good faith. Finally, accusing another participant of engaging in bad faith, whether it is the submitter or anyone else, is forbidden. Participants are instead encouraged to report such comments and submissions since accusations of bad faith cannot prevent others from engaging in bad faith and can cause others to react negatively and defensively over such an accusation. (Ansuz07 2023)

**Political Discussion**

Political Discussion is a subreddit dedicated to discussing policy, political events, and theory in an informed and polite space. It is both similar and different in comparison to the other two subreddits that were investigated. As with the others it is committed to informative and civil discussion of politics but is not as stringent with its
moderation and rules as Neutral Politics, nor is it geared towards the changing of viewpoints like Change My View. It is the oldest of the three subreddits being a direct offshoot of one of Reddit’s largest subreddits r/Politics.

It asks that submissions be framed in a neutral manner, so as to not incite or inflame opposing viewpoints against each other. It also asks participants to assume good faith participation from other participants. It asks that participants upvote comments and submissions with quality sources and reasoning and downvote low-effort comments that are akin to slogans and memes. These spaces are committed to long-form discourse and not cheap “gotcha” style engagement that can be reflective of other internet political discussions. These spaces take pride in having participants actually talk to each other rather than trade jabs, quips, and memes that do little to expand the understanding of all participants and instead simply antagonize those with differing viewpoints. To ensure this neutral framing of discourse all submissions, like Neutral Politics, are moderator approved. Additionally, a civility rule disallows insults, sarcasm, inflammatory language, and antagonizing other participants. As in the other spaces what defines civility is at each moderator’s discretion. (Starreyeyedsky 2016)

Neutral Politics

Neutral Politics is a subreddit dedicated to “to respectful, empirical discussion of political issues.” (Neutral Politics 2012) Currently it has 605,000 subscribers and usually has between three to four submissions per week. Despite its high subscription numbers, it has the lowest activity of any of the three subreddits I will be discussing. This is due to the stringent moderation rules and communication norms that are adhered to in the subreddit.

The most stringent of these rules is the requirement that any claim made by any participant, whether they are making an original submission, responding to a submission, or responding to a response to a submission must contain an appropriately sourced citation for that claim. Such an onerous requirement alone makes participation in the subreddit difficult and time consuming. It also makes any discourse present highly technical and robust. Submissions regularly contain citations to scholarly articles and government memos, policies, and court filings. These submissions also contain
many messages stating that a comment has been removed for not providing a proper 
citation or for some other rule violation. It should not be surprising that the type of 
person who engages in this subreddit tend to be educated and know how to access and 
digest such information, as well as discuss it in the time-consuming manner that is 
required to participate. (Ummmbacon 2020)

However, beyond Neutral Politics stringent citation requirement is an adherence 
to civil discourse. Their sidebar, which contains a brief outline of the rules, asks 
participants to respond to a participant’s argument and not the person. To refrain from 
the use of “you” statements and to use “your comment” or “this comment” instead. With 
reference to downvote and upvote buttons, used to typically denote approval or 
disapproval, the sidebar asks participants to use them to denote well-argued points and 
poorly argued points rather than signal agreement or approval. The intent is clear. 
Neutral Politics is more interested in dispassionate argumentation rather than seeing 
which viewpoint is more popular. (Ummmbacon 2020)

Additionally, insults, sarcasm, accusatory language, language that could be seen 
as attacking a person or group of people is also disallowed. Low effort contributions 
such as jokes or slogans that do not add to the discourse are disallowed as well. 
(Ummmbacon 2020)

Despite these draconian standards of discourse, the moderation team is always 
willing to work with participants to bring submissions and comments in line with 
Neutral Politics’ ruleset. In fact, before a submission is even published it is reviewed by a 
moderator to ensure that it complies with the subreddit’s rules. Many of those 
comments that are removed for a rule violation are followed by a discussion between the 
participant and a moderator as the two work to bring the participant’s contribution into 
compliance. These discussions are not always productive, but again the intent is clear, 
Neutral Politics wants people to participate, but it wants it done according to its rules. 
(Ummmbacon 2020)

Curiosity and Growth
In the first example from Change My View participants are discussing the view of Dildoodlid who believes that the United States could do more to alleviate poverty by increasing its foreign aid spending. Py1123 presents their argument that foreign aid does not cause economic growth according to economists. They then present their reasoning addressing corruption, government reliance on aid as a funding source, and stigmas stemming from the legacy of colonialism. They also present a nice citation from the Washington Post. Dildoodlid responds, complimenting them on their argument, but says that they have reservations. They disagree that there is no appropriate way to give foreign aid, just that the manner in which we have done so in the past has been ineffective. They then ask what is wrong with providing funding to NGOs as a form of aid and express that it is irresponsible to let poorer countries suffer due to what they call preventable causes. Py1123 responds, saying that some NGOs have triggered a backlash due to their work, that has then resulted in restrictions to aid flowing into a country due to certain governments wanting to prevent outside influence on their populations. They then reiterate that foreign aid decreases incentives to generate local revenue and that doing so causes NGOs to adopt foreign interests rather than local ones and undermining their stated goal. They also point out that some NGOs are known to be scams or fabrications. They finish stating that sub-Saharan Africa receives 130 billion in aid and is still not improving. Dildoodlid responds that they could not find a citation for the 130 billion statistic but admits that py1123’s concerns have shown that giving aid is not so straightforward. They do still maintain, however, that it is possible for the US to make the world better with its vast resources.

This exchange exemplifies the culture of CMV and is an ideal interaction. The original poster or OP states their view, someone challenges it, the two discuss and either the OP is convinced of an alternative viewpoint or not. Both participants are courteous and conciliatory and regularly applaud the other for their contributions, demonstrating their good faith interaction with each other and encouraging the other to continue to respond. Even when disagreement occurs the participants work toward understanding

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2 Usernames are anonymized and contain no identifying information and are used to provide ease of understanding.

3 The following conversation was paraphrased from the subreddit Change My View, in a post titled: “CMV: The United States should drastically increase foreign aid,” by Dildoodlid from 2016.
each other’s perspectives rather than maligning them. There are no accusations levied or stereotypes assigned. There is no insulting or name-calling and both participants refrain from hyperbole. When the Op does give out a delta it is not for a complete change of mind or heart, but a simple shift in perspective, a small move toward consensus. The core of their belief is the same, but their understanding of alternative interpretations is stronger. This allows them to refine their viewpoint and make a more informed and therefore stronger argument.

Even though no consensus is reached, it appears evident that through continued discussion a satisfactory agreement could be made between the two positions. What would be required would be an increasing level of nuance and specificity so as to address the reservations of both participants. What may be required is an outlining of an alternative paradigm to disperse aid to communities that need it. Maybe trial runs of experimental interventions are required. What is needed to reach between these two viewpoints is unknown, however the path to that point is significantly shorter compared to examples in the previous chapter. This can be attributed, at least partially, to the norms and rules that governed the conversation with one side at least entertaining the possibility of being incorrect and thus seeking alternative viewpoints in an effort to construct a more robust and thorough viewpoint. With such actions being repeated across this space we can begin to see consensus arise from the public.

**Isolating Negative Interactions**

In the second example from Change My View, participants are discussing if the United States should give foreign aid to nations who appear to dislike us. The first participant, whose account has since been deleted, argues that foreign citizens should be punished for living under regimes that have antagonistic relationships with the US which can influence the population’s perception of the US and that some foreign anger at the US is justified due to past US actions.⁴ They further argue that aid is used for

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⁴ The following conversation was paraphrased from the subreddit Change My View in a post titled, “CMV: Trump refusing foreign aid to countries who hate us isn’t a bad thing,” by AViolatedCashew from 2018.
strategic reasons and as a method of negotiation to get something that the US wants and that reducing aid reduces the US ability to negotiate.

Ironcoldiron responds questioning why one would assume that a population is getting foreign aid if they live under an authoritarian regime, implying that the regime will simply reroute the aid for its own purposes. They continue by correcting the previous participant’s statement about Iraqi citizen’s opinions of the US by saying the US killed Saddam who was oppressive to Iraq. They conclude by saying that incentives are only effective if there is a threat of removing the incentive. The first participant responds, citing Uganda as an example of how foreign aid even if a regime is hostile to the US can benefit that regime. They then disagree with ironcoldiron’s correction about Iraq, stating that it is less safe today than before the war. They then finish by pointing out that removing foreign aid can be seen as bad from both a humanitarian and strategic viewpoint.

Ironcoldiron first disagrees with characterizing Uganda as authoritarian and then sarcastically suggest that the participant stop assuming things and start researching them. They then address their point about Iraq’s safety and label said point as “complete nonsense” and then, in reference to their opinion about the start of the Iraq war, state that they’ve “demonstrated that you know absolutely nothing about American domestic politics, American military spending, or foreign affairs.” (AViolatedCashew 2018) The first participant responds point by point. They end their retort by saying that Iron comes off as rather “aggressive” and “angry.” (AViolatedCashew 2018) They tell them to “take it down a notch,” and to take the discussion less seriously. (AViolatedCashew 2018) Iron retorts that this participant should stop assuming things and start researching them in order to stop making demonstrably false claims. Further comments are removed as the conversation has devolved from productive discourse.

Although this is a negative interaction, it is important to show its effect, or rather lack of effect on the rest of the thread. Eventually as this interaction spirals out of control the moderators step in and begin removing comments from the participants and giving out warnings. Neither participant is present in any other discussion within the post and their discussion is, on the whole, drowned out by better and more positive
interactions. This contrasts with the threads from the previous chapter, where such negative interactions characterize the entire comment section or can become highly visible to others since comments with lots of replies or older comments can be prioritized by other participants unlike reddit which prioritizes comments that are highly upvoted and thus participant approved. However just because a comment is highly upvoted doesn’t mean it will adhere to the norms of our ideal type. Across other spaces on reddit they’re comments that are highly upvoted, and thus given viewing priority, that violate our ideal type.

This is where the rules of and culture of Change My View become crucial. By encouraging others to upvote comments that adhere to the norms the comments that are prioritized are the ones that adhere to the norms of the subreddit. By enforcing their rules, the moderators of Change My View are specifically constructing a space that will be more driven toward consensus building and good faith interaction. Research from Han, Brazeal, and Pennington (2018) has shown the importance of modeling civility in online discussions, showing that participants are likely to remain on topic and provide their own perspectives if they see others modeling civil behavior. This contrasts with those who observe uncivil behavior who are likely to voice their dissatisfaction with the uncivil discourse rather than contribute to the discussion. (Han et al 2018) We can then understand why it is critical that these reddit spaces maintain the norms and cultures they do through stringent moderation. Without such moderation they might devolve into a similar state as the newspaper comment sections.

**Confusion and Clarification**

In the next example from Political Discussion, participants are discussing a statement made jointly by Ron Paul and Jesse Ventura stating that foreign aid is forcing the American poor to give money to the rich of other countries. Robelius begins stating that foreign aid is 1% of the federal budget and that providing such aid has knock-on effects that benefit the US in other ways. AlanX nitpicks, claiming that foreign aid is 2% of taxes and that there is a high cost to US meddling and cites 9/11. Robelius does not

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5 The following conversation was paraphrased from the subreddit Political Discussion in a post titled, “Foreign aid is Americas poor people being forced to give other countries rich people money,” from 2012.

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understand what AlanX means by just taxes and then argues that 9/11 was the result of military presence not foreign aid. AlanX responds citing total tax revenue for the federal government and argues that the Middle East is not ignorant of the aid that is provided from the US in the form of military aid, however they acquiesce to Robelius’ point regarding 9/11, but they maintain that US military presence should be considered foreign aid since there are no “direct defense issues” that justify foreign US bases. Robelius still does not understand what is meant by 2% of taxes. (Foreign Aid 2012) AlanX spells out the math, “53 billion is 1.96 percent of 2.7 trillion.” (Foreign Aid 2012) Robelius now understands but thinks that just a perspective is confusing and states that “then you would have to say we paid 154% of the budget even though we paid 100%.” (Foreign Aid 2012) AlanX says they mean that foreign aid could be cut and therefore so could taxes by 2%. They then say that reducing taxes 2% would be more beneficial to Americans than spending on foreign aid. Robelius now fully understands their point of view and characterizes it as considering opportunity costs for spent foreign aid dollars. AlanX agrees with this assessment.

This interaction demonstrates a near excessive level of pedantry. However, crucially such pedantry does not lead to annoyance and insult, but continued discourse until both participants understand each other. This is yet another sterling example of the discourse norms at work in these spaces. Robelius assumes that whoever they are conversing with is doing so in good faith and is simply trying to present as accurate a picture of reality as possible and not simply trying to correct them. The other participant is happy to oblige this show of faith by continuing to explain themselves in full until a consensus is reached. This interaction is relatively meaningless in the grand scope of the contemporary public sphere, but it is emblematic of what makes spaces such as PD so functional. No shift in policy perspectives have been achieved, not change in opinion or politics, just simple pedantic correction. And yet these participants were able to have this conversation without name calling, insults, strawmanning, assumptions, or any other number of pitfalls that have befallen other spaces. And at the end of the discussion understanding and consensus was reached. And this is what matters for our ideal type public sphere. Consensus is not required to be achieved in every interaction, it is not necessary for the different participants to completely agree with each other. However,
through continued interaction and increasing understanding among participants eventually a course of action can be decided upon that is agreeable and satisfying to as many members of the public as possible, which can then provide clear direction for state power to be wielded.

**Disagreement without Insults**

In this example participants are discussing whether foreign aid sent to Central America reduces the flow of migrants attempting to cross the US-Mexico border. GTFErinyes begins stating that foreign aid can increase emigration (with citations). Crazyguzza responds wondering if rising income leads to emigration would falling income lead to the opposite. They also state that the reason for economic migration is unemployment and a wealth disparity from their departing nation with their arrival nation (with citation). GTFErinyes responds saying that rising wealth can still end with a large disparity between nations, but the rising incomes give citizens the means to migrate to the higher wealth nation, citing Chinese migration to the US in the late 20th century. CQME responds saying that the previous participant’s discussion of Chinese migration to the US ignores the existence of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese migration until its repeal in 1965. GTFErinyes agrees with the previous comment and then cites Taiwan as an alternative. CQME responds saying that they do not understand the previous point of GTFErinyes.

This interaction is similar to the one from Political Discussion. Again, it is a discussion of pedantry and specificity. It actually appears to that these participants aren’t even really disagreeing with each other. However, the tone of the discussion does imply some sort of disagreement, and yet that disagreement does not lead to accusations of bad faith or insults. Both participants continue to discuss their point in an effort to help the other understand their viewpoint. Unlike the above discussion, no consensus is reached, but that cannot be expected in every interaction between participants. Both sides, despite not fully understanding each other and slightly talking past each other,

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6 The following conversation was paraphrased from the Subreddit Neutral Politics in a post titled, “Does U.S. foreign aid to Central America and Southern Mexico reduce the flow of migrants to the United States?” from 2018.
continued to earnestly and civilly discuss their disagreement in the hopes of reaching a consensus position. The fact that that occurred as opposed to a much more insult laden alternative demonstrates a clear distinction between this space and the others we have explored.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion these subreddits appear to be more robust spaces for discourse and therefore closer to meeting our ideal type for how a public sphere should operate. The, at times, stringent moderation of these spaces is key for reinforcing the cultural norms that have been displayed despite the occasional outcry from the participant base. At the same time such moderation limits the amount of name-calling and insults that were found in abundance in the newspaper comment sections. These spaces’ commitment to good faith interactions and the assumption that others are participating in a similar fashion are also key in making the spaces fruitful in their discourse. In assuming the noblest of intentions in others, participants were primed to not make the heinous accusations that were seen in the newspaper comment sections. The tone in these subreddits is very distinct from those present in the comments sections. While debate could be heated it rarely appears to escalate into displays of hatred that occasionally typified the newspaper comment sections. These spaces truly feel like spaces meant for discussion and learning, while the newspaper comments feel closer to spaces meant for whipping a crowd into a frenzy.
Ch. 5: Conclusion

Tensions within the Digital Public Sphere

While our contemporary public sphere may not resemble the bourgeois sphere that Habermas described in his original work, it is still a valuable resource in relaying public opinion to state institutions. Despite the commercialization of the public sphere due to private interests, the internet has had a democratizing effect that has allowed for more participants in crafting public opinion than ever before. This democratization is a powerful element that if channeled appropriately can allow for more robust discussion on how we organize contemporary society to serve the needs of as many people as possible. It is the internet that can allow for the fulfillment of enlightenment ideals of free speech for all. As Wood (1992) states in The Radicalism of the American Revolution,

"arguments in favor of freedom of speech rested on the assumption that opinions about politics, like opinions about other subjects, were no longer the monopoly of the educated and aristocratic few...Truth was actually the creation of many voices and many minds, no one of which was more important than another and each made its own separate and equally significant contribution to the whole...they became what Americans obsessively labeled ‘public opinion.’" (p. 230)

The online potential of equitable discourse and communication could be harnessed to stand in contrast to the current model of society which serves the narrowly defined desires of the of an “educated and aristocratic few.”

However, in spite of this democratizing element, the contemporary public sphere, which occurs increasingly online, is still rife with the issues that plagued Habermas’ bourgeois sphere. Private interests in the form of corporate groups, mass media, and special interest groups influence the information that is disseminated into the sphere and the conversations that occur within it. As a result, the contemporary sphere fails to live up to the Habermas’ ideal public sphere as it is lacking in rational discourse and civility and is rife with private interests.
And yet, in finding the open forum of the internet lacking in these qualities it seems that we may expect too much from the public at large. Habermas' original sphere grew from coffee houses and salons of 18th and 19th century Europe, amongst a growing class of elites, the bourgeoisie, commensurate with their expanding commercial networks. While education in rhetoric and philosophy is not guaranteed to this group of people, access to such education would have been readily available, and the topics of rhetoric and philosophy would have been greatly discussed and debated in these spheres. This is unlike the contemporary digital sphere where there is no guarantee that participants will have any familiarity with rhetoric or argumentation or any philosophy at all. This is not necessarily a negative trait of the contemporary sphere, but it is something that must be kept in mind. When talking about the original public sphere and the contemporary sphere, the participants are not the same.

The Impossibility of Informed Discourse

Again, a key feature of the contemporary sphere and its democratization is that anyone can participate. Anyone, of course, means anyone. Regardless of education, knowledge, or familiarity with the topics being discussed any random human with access to a computer and the internet can participate in our contemporary digital sphere. This fact, in my opinion, presents a unique issue toward the desired outcomes of the contemporary public sphere, that many participants who would discuss what is best for society have almost no training in how to even ascertain such a thing.

This is no fault of their own, the topics discussed in the contemporary sphere are diverse and multitudinous, ranging from immigration and healthcare policy to trade and education policy. When the public discusses the actions and policies of a contemporary state they are horrifically ill-equipped to do so. They are not experts in these topics. The simple reality is that no singular citizen is well versed in every facet of policy and action that a contemporary state could be involved in. It seems like a cruel trick to expect citizens to discuss all of these topics with any sort of accuracy or understanding when the experts themselves must devote an enormous amount of time to understand just one. This is not to say that the public is unintelligent or stupid; the most intelligent of all citizens could not even accurately engage with the diversity and complexity of topics that
a state engages in. Quite frankly it is simply a matter of time. No human has the time and resources to effectively discuss all these topics and then discuss what is the best course of action for a state to take, all while attempting to provide food and shelter for themselves and their families.

With this understanding I find that contemporary discussions of policy by the public to be complete folly. It is impossible for the public to discuss what is best for society because it is impossible for the public to even know. Their knowledge is so fractured between different perspectives, that to begin to even form a consensus amongst them would be a seismic undertaking.

A Return to Virtues

However, this does not make the public sphere, as a concept useless. Despite the public’s shortcomings in discussing policy and specific state action, it seems that focusing on such things is missing the point of the sphere at all. What the contemporary sphere should strive for is instead a discussion of values. Each citizen should ask themselves what cultural/moral values they would like their government to uphold. It is these values and their utility that should be discussed in the sphere, not specifics on policy. Participants should essentially construct ideal types of how they would like their governments to act and argue for them to act in such a way within the contemporary public sphere. This discussion will give rise to a public opinion of values rather than a public opinion of policy.

I think that each member of the public will more easily engage with such discussions and such discussions will be more fruitful since they do not require any specialized knowledge of state policy other than what state policy actually is. If participants can know the actions and policies of their governments and then discuss whether such actions and policy align with their values, it will allow the discourse in the contemporary public sphere to better reflect what participants believe to be the greater good of society and how we are currently falling short of such a standard. Through participation, citizens might also question themselves as they enter our contemporary communicative network on the needs and goals of the society at large and how their voice would contribute to such a project.
Such a shift in discourse will not perfectly save the contemporary public sphere, but it will, in my opinion, improve it. By narrowing the discussion from one of policy to one of values allows for the public to more easily engage with state actions without having to fully understand each and every specific action. This would bypass the issue of the public being unable to fully comprehend and thus fully engage with policy. It would still be possible for the public to be led astray since the public and its participants would need to understand if and how a policy or action violates their values, which can still be a challenge. This also does not guarantee that discourse in such a sphere would be more civil than currently since differences in values between members of the public would still be hotly contested and debated. In order to ensure that civil discourse is ensured I find it important to make use of the lessons that have been learned from observing the subreddits.

Civility Matters

In particular a culture of civility must be present and continuously modeled through participant behavior and stringent rule enforcement. The key for maintaining a healthy and productive discourse in the subreddit spaces were robust cultures that championed good faith engagement, addressing arguments over other participants, and charitable interpretation of others’ arguments. This culture was modeled by the communities at large which encouraged newcomers to act accordingly as a form of prosocial behavior. And when participants broke those rules and violated these cultural norms they were punished accordingly. First by having their arguments downvoted to demonstrate disapproval and decrease their visibility and thus the likelihood of continued engagement. This served as a first step in punishing such actions. However, if this proved to be insufficient then extra correction was handed down by the moderation team in the form of removing comments, warnings, and eventually bans from participation. These actions have proven useful in fostering the cultural norms we have discussed, and I believe are critical for maintaining a more productive and welcoming discussion space for all participants. It is these norms that I believe should be expanded to the greater contemporary public sphere in order to improve public digital discourse everywhere.
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