

Roles of Structures-in-Use in the Outcomes of Online Political Talk

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Abstract

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Deliberative democratic theorists propose guidelines to ensure that political discussion produces just outcomes; however, they seldom describe the material structures that would encourage participants to take up these procedures. As more interactions are mediated by Internet communication technologies, it is more important that researchers consider how digital design could influence the quality and outcomes of online political debate. I compared two online forums, Reddit and the BioWare Social Network. These sites were selected for their significant differences in site ethos, moderation style, and information architecture. From Reddit, 1,854 comments were analyzed from three posts, each from a different sub-community at the site. From the BioWare Social Network, 1,392 comments were analyzed from three posts in the Dragon Age 2 General Discussion Forum. Comment data were subject to content-analysis and frame analysis. In addition, comment data were used to perform thematic analysis of structures-in-use at each site. Users at the BioWare Social Network were more likely to provide reasons for their arguments versus users at Reddit; however, no users in either group lessened their commitments to their political judgments or formed new political judgments, suggesting that the design of each forum encouraged conservation of judgment and strategic interactions between participants rather than openness to persuasion.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Your civilization is based on the technology of the mass relays, our technology. By using it, your society develops along the paths we desire.

Sovereign, Mass Effect

The year is 2183. Three decades ago, human researchers discovered the remains of an ancient spacefaring civilization on Mars. Their technology led to the discovery of an extant network of space stations known as mass relays that create tunnels in spacetime through which objects can travel at faster-than-light speeds. Once humans activated a mass relay for the first time, they came into contact with other galactic races and discovered the Citadel, the seat of galactic government, the Council. A decade later, humans began establishing off-world colonies, including Eden Prime, an Earth-like planet at the edge of Council space. When Eden Prime is attacked by a mysterious machine race known as the Geth, Commander Shepard, a human marine in Earth's Systems Alliance military, is asked to investigate. What she discovers is that the Geth have been recruited by a mythical genocidal race of machine beings known to galactic civilization as the Reapers. Shepard and his crew encounter one of these beings, Sovereign, who, we find out, is using the Geth to find a portal into the galaxy so that the Reapers can begin harvesting all of the advanced organic life there, as they have done every 50,000 years throughout galactic history. During this conversation we also discover that it was the Reapers who created the Mass Relay technology that has allowed for organic life to traverse the galaxy in a timely and economical fashion as well as the Citadel. By designing this technology, the Reapers claim to have guided the sociocultural and political development of organic life to serve their purposes. Mass relay technology and the Citadel space station are put to use by organics before any of them fully understands their origin or come to any conclusions about the positive

as well as negative consequences for the development of civilization. However, if Sovereign were correct, playing the games would be supremely depressing and the series probably wouldn't have been as popular and successful as they are. Read in a certain light, one could argue that the triumph of organics over the Reapers is the narrative's rebuke of the technological determinism that informs Sovereign's claims.

I chose to begin this chapter with a discussion of the Reapers and their technology because I see in this element of the story a metaphor for the non-neutrality of contemporary Internet technologies. Speculative fiction can be viewed as place for cultures to work through contemporary anxieties. No, I do not believe that there are sentient, genocidal robots intent on using the Internet to wipe out civilization; however, as Langdon Winner has written: "To our accustomed way of thinking, technologies are seen as neutral tools that can be used well or poorly, for good, evil, or something in between. But we usually do not stop to inquire whether a given device might have been designed and built in such a way that it produces a set of consequences logically and temporally *prior* to any of its professed uses" (1980, p. 125). More recently, Ganaele Langlois and Greg Elmer (2013) argued that social networking sites like Facebook control the ways users can relate to each other via the way their system is coded.

Purpose and Overview of this Study

I could have chosen to study the influence of technology on any "pathway" our society has traveled down; my particular interest was the intersubjective formation of political judgments as outcomes of online deliberative activity and the possible influence of forum design upon these outcomes. The Pew Research Foundation has found that Internet use is pervasive, with younger people showing greater participation in this technology and in online discussions. My belief is that, in the coming years, a greater portion of our interpersonal interactions, including political

discussions, will be mediated by Internet communication technologies (ICTs). Thus, it is crucial that we understand the influence of design upon the outcomes of these conversations, including the political judgments that are formed (or, in many cases, reified). Is it possible that the spaces within which these discussions are situated—the spaces that mediate these interactions, that is to say, that not only facilitate these interactions but literally give them their shape and structure—affect the content of these judgments? And if so, how and to what degree? In a society that claims to base its public policies on the will of the people, what are the consequences of these effects?

In order to answer these questions, I analyzed political discussions at two popular online forums, Reddit.com and the BioWare Social Network (BSN), using Ronald Beiner's (1980) definition of political judgment as my guide for identifying political discussion. In order to better ascertain the influence of design on these discussions, I created my study as a comparative case analysis, choosing the two sites for their very different structures: whereas Reddit fashions itself as a *laissez-faire* space where individual moderators of the various subcommunities have the leeway to create and enforce their own local policies, BSN exerts much greater control over the actions of the community and, in some cases, punishes delinquent behavior with harsh penalties. In addition, whereas Reddit organizes conversations hierarchically, threading replies into clusters, BSN presents comments chronologically, so that moves in the conversation are spread throughout the entirety of the comment chain. I speculated when choosing these sites that these differences would be salient and possibly lead to greater or lesser engagement in deliberation as well as differences in discussion behavior.

Thus, my study had to consider both the design of these spaces as well as the users' contributions to the discussions taking place there. This included not only a study of the

affordances and information architecture at the sites, relevant to user activity (“structures-in-use”), but also a rhetorical analysis of the documentation that imagined the ethos of each site for users and provided norms for user behavior. This provided me with an understanding of the environment within which users discussed with each other. I coupled this with an analysis of user discussion, first as a content analysis using codes modified from Todd Graham (2008) which he based on deliberative democratic theory, followed by a thematic analysis of how users used structural features, concluding with a topical analysis of discussions. I found that neither site appeared to influence more deliberative forms of political discussion between users; on the contrary, the conversations at each site were very similar when it came to how people argued. Rather than observing deliberative behavior, I observed primarily battles over how to frame the issues. In other words, users traded messages attempting to reframe the issue in terms favorable to their side, rather than engaging with evidence in order to reason through the issue and arrive at a conclusion. My conclusions raise the possibility that social media, or perhaps the Internet itself, may at best be a poor medium for political discussion, and at its very worst, may actually be driving the polarization of the polis.

While there are many studies of public opinion and online arguments, to my knowledge there are no contrastive studies of online argumentation in multiple digital environments from this structural perspective. Of course, my study is limited by the small amount of data I sampled and by my approach. I am not able to generalize to other users at other sites, nor even to generalize to other users in other communities or threads at Reddit or BSN. That said, my study points to the challenge of overcoming what some theorists refer to as motivated reason. Though I do not regard persuasion to be impossible, it does appear that it is quite difficult to achieve, and requires significant intervention to control discussion. The controls leveraged at these sites,

coupled with site descriptions and affordances, were not enough to influence user discussion. My study raises the question of how to structure the places within which we discuss—both the physical spaces we bodily inhabit with others as well as the digital spaces that mediate and give form to our debates.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of theoretical approaches and scholarship on deliberation and internet structure. I will begin with an overview of literature on the non-neutrality of technology and the rhetorical effects of Internet design. My purpose here is to show the potential for the design of Internet spaces to contribute to the rhetorical activity and, more importantly, judgment formation of users. These spaces give form to what users express. Public sphere theorists have often used metaphors for the spaces in which people debate—the public sphere is itself one such metaphor—but there is little research on how these spaces influence people, particularly in online spaces. Following this section, I will review theories and scholarship pertaining to political judgment formation as an outcome of discussion, beginning with deliberative democratic theory and then moving on to alternatives that are more skeptical about the possibility for persuasion resulting from deliberative activity. This includes the theory of motivated reason, to which I referred above, and to studies of framing. The latter suggests that a person's judgment about an issue could be dependent upon how it is presented or contextualized; the former suggests that people use argument to reinforce group identification and reason to defend judgments they already hold. Both phenomena suggest that the ideals of deliberative democrats are entirely out of reach. In spite of these possibilities, I believe we can get close these ideals if we carefully design spaces and interactions, which I hope to show later in this chapter.

The non-neutrality of digital spaces

In Winner's essay, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?," the author warns us that "[c]onsciously or not, deliberately or inadvertently, societies choose structures for technologies that influence how people are going to work, communicate, travel, consume, and so forth over a very long time" (p. 127) and that it is entirely possible that "a given device might have been designed and built in such a way that it produces a set of consequences logically and temporally *prior* to any of its professed uses" (p. 125). These technologies could be as simple as a bridge or as complex as the Internet. But Winner is quick to remind us that people play a role in how these technologies are designed and developed, people who "are differently situated and possess unequal degrees of power as well as unequal levels of awareness" (p. 127). Winner's point is not to demonize technology but rather to dispel the notion that it is neutral and to describe ways of thinking about technology to help us understand its effects on our lives. Darin Barney (2007) shares Winner's concerns about technology and worries that technologies like the Internet share values inherent in the technology. Consider that most basic political value, the definition of the good life: "Under the liberal dispensation, the good life is understood as individual autonomy and self-realization achieved through free exertion of the will, an account that comports well with a technological society's promises of freedom, mastery, convenience and choice" (p. 51). Because of this basic agreement between liberalism and technological society, Barney is skeptical that the Internet offers much promises for radical democrats, primarily because liberalism, in Barney's view, excludes moral and ethical judgment from the public sphere. In doing so, conversations about the good life cannot question the values that govern our way of living (e.g., that capitalism is the best economic system). For Barney, technology is itself an "ethical claim" (p. 51) and must itself become the object, and not just the medium, of citizenship because "it is intimately bound up in the establishment and enforcement of prohibitions and permissions, the distribution of

power and resources, and the structure of human practices and relationships” (p. 48). Here we see Barney’s fundamental agreement with Winner as the foundation for his demand that technology be more than just the setting or medium for a radical democratic movement. Barney situates his concerns not in Winner’s argument but in Martin Heidegger’s, from his essay, “The Question Concerning Technology.” Thus for Barney, “[t]he prospects for radical democracy in relation to the Internet are thus contained within the broader horizon of the question of radical citizenship in relation to technology more generally. And it is a question not only of what we do with this particular technology, but also of what technology more generally makes of us” (p. 38). What might it make of us? Barney gives us the answer in his reading of Heidegger: “If, however, we approach discrete technologies *simply* as instruments, either to be used or even to be mastered, we give ourselves over to the enframing essence of technology, to be enframed as technological beings” (p. 37) and to adopt the kind of instrumental reasoning common to computing and technology more generally. Barney’s concerns are anticipated by Gina Neff and David Stark (2004). In their report on how the organization of economic life has been influenced by technological design cycles (p. 173), they write that “[t]he coding of software and information technologies has the potential to extend beyond the economic implications for particular products to the rewriting of social codes and patterns of behavior, influencing not only what activities happen online but also the ways in which things are done offline” (p. 174). These authors point to a skepticism about the neutrality of technology as a medium for political discussion.

The commonality of Internet usage

This matters because, at least in the developed world, the Internet is everywhere. The Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life (2012) project reports that as of December 2010, 77% of all adults use the Internet, and 50% of all adults report using it for sending or

receiving emails, researching and purchasing products, using search engines, or reading the news. On the one hand, this shows that the Internet is no longer the province of a small cadre of hackers, but rather a fact of daily life for three-quarters of Americans.

Furthermore, although Internet users are still, by and large, young, educated, middle class, and white (at least in America), this may be changing. Consider that, men and women are roughly equally present online: 78% of men are online, compared to 76% of women. In 2019, 63% of those who reported an annual income of less than \$30,000 were online. 69% of people self-identifying as Black and 66% of those self-identifying as Hispanic were online. And 46% of those aged 65 and older were online, according to Pew (2012). These numbers suggest that, at least in the United States, the Internet is a pervasive phenomenon and that it is more inclusive than it has ever been. Certainly, from a global perspective, the Internet excludes the majority of the globe's population, but this will change. And with the new generation of ICTs, the interpenetration of the Internet into everyday life will most likely only grow.

The Pew Research Center's study frames the Internet as a resource to facilitate consumption, and as a result it does not provide any insight into how many people actively participate in discussion-based activity online. For instance, the Pew report tells us that almost 30% of adults use a social networking site, but that can entail a wide variety of activities from playing games to commenting on a friend's profile. About 25% of all adults read someone else's blog, but we have no reporting on how many of those people leave comments. And almost 10% of adults use a service like Twitter, but it's not clear whether they follow others and post updates or just read them. According to data from September 2009, 8% of *adult Internet users* report “[posting] comments to an online news group, website, blog or photo site” on a typical day.

That is not a large percentage of users; however, teenagers—those ages 12-17—are a different matter (Lenhart, 2009). 66% of teenagers report posting comments on a friend's blog, 77% report posting messages to a friend's page or wall, and 83% report posting comments on a friend's picture online. Interestingly, race/ethnicity and income were not significant predictors within this data set. 93% of all teens in America use the Internet (Rainie 2009).

On the one hand, we can speculate that as these teens get older, their comfort with the Internet will mean that they may participate as much as, or more than, adults in posting comments online. Considering that Amanda Lenhart (2010) found that mobile phones are becoming the central communications hub for teens, we should expect participation to grow.

My point with these statistics is to indicate that not only is the Internet a pervasive social and economic platform that mediates our interactions with corporations as well as colleagues (and complete strangers), but that this will only continue. But this does not mean there is cause for optimism. The structures that mediate our interactions are themselves determined by the companies who design these technologies and influenced by our historical moment, as well as by the structures of society that shape it, and therefore impact how we interact with each other online. While I doubt that face to face contact will ever cease entirely, the truth is that the Internet is social. But the way that we communicate online seldom represents ideal forms of communication. For those invested in some form of discourse ethics, the Internet has failed to live up to the optimistic representations of the early nineties, when Mosaic inaugurated the era of the World Wide Web.

Interface and Invention

One of the places we could look to study the effects of a site's code on social behavior would be the interface. ComputerUser.com defines "interface" as:

A shared boundary where two or more systems meet; or the means by which communication is achieved at this boundary. An interface can be between hardware and hardware (such as sockets and plugs, or electrical signals), hardware and software, software and software, human and computer (such as a mouse or keyboard and display screen).

Thus, Lev Manovich (2001) argues that “we may be tempted to think of a new media artwork as also possessing two separate levels: content and interface. Thus, the old dichotomies content-form and content-medium can be rewritten as content-interface” (p. 66). Form—that is, style—becomes interface, basically underscoring Per F. V. Hasle’s (2006) move of identifying interface with verba (p. 7, 9). If our definition of “interface” is as broad as ComputerUser’s, then it includes the way that users interact with websites like Facebook and MySpace and how they write and publish blog entries at Blogger, TypePad, WordPress, and so on. While users may have more control over their content online, the design elements of what they write, and the interface that mediates online interactions between users and publishing, are often outside of user control. However, these latter elements—design and interface—are aspects of the rhetorical situation that construe rhetorical agency, invention, and subjectivity.

That interfaces are inherently ideological or persuasive is not a new idea. Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe argued (1994) that “[w]ithin the virtual space represented by these interfaces, and elsewhere within computer systems, the values of our culture—ideological, political, economic, educational—are mapped both implicitly and explicitly” (p. 485), forming a “landscape [that] we have created and that, in turn, creates us and the students in our classes” (p. 486). Anne Francis Wysocki and Julia I. Jasken note how interfaces are intended to function in such a way as to drop out of the awareness of their users—to be invisible (p. 32)—but this

supposed neutrality of form obscures the fact that “[t]he design of software is thus also the design of users” (p. 35). On this point we must be careful, though; Wysocki and Jasken, and Selfe and Selfe, are not talking about simply influencing users into voluntarily accepting behavior change. The latter describes the sense in which B. J. Fogg (2003) conceives of computer technology’s “persuasion,” which he defines as “an attempt to change attitudes or behaviors or both” (p. 15), by which he means overt gestures programmed into software that seek to get the user to do something or accept a belief, for example, “to exercise, buy more products, donate to charity, stay in touch with family members, or pursue a new career” (p. 32). What theorists of interface are describing is something that is not overt. It does function rhetorically but not in the form of an appeal; rather, it behaves like part of the rhetorical situation, or, if you will, the ecology of the situation. To say that interface is persuasive would be misleading if we define persuasion as marked by an overt gesture that calls attention to itself.

According to Mizuko Ito (1997), “users are ‘hailed’ (in the Althusserian sense) through the interface. We recognize our own subject position (and tacitly agree to its formulation)” (qtd. in Massanari, 2010, p. 410). Kristen Arola (2010) underscores Ito’s claim: “Though textbooks and handbooks often describe ‘good’ interface design as invisible, in that it shouldn’t impede the user from performing tasks, this does not mean, as Wysocki, Jasken, and others before them have argued, that it is absent of ideology” (p. 7). In addition to design elements like colors and fonts, the interface—how users are compelled to interact with the website if they wish to publish writing online—is also a constraint that is outside of user control. The design elements outside of the user’s control become a part of the user’s discourse, discourse that bears the traces of the interface as well as the site’s locked-in design elements. “If we are to critically engage with the rhetoric of the interface and critically engage with Web 2.0, we must pay attention to how Web

2.0 interfaces are shaping our interactions and ourselves” (p. 7). If Bradley Dilger (2010) is correct that “the language of Web 2.0 often portrays the weak ties foundational to its network as strong ties” (p. 23)—where weak ties are understood less powerful ties between two people in a network (think of an acquaintance versus a friend)—then in essence the language of Web 2.0, on sites like YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook, privileges a rationalized engagement with other actors in the network. This certainly looks like some versions of “the public”—I would call it a “thin” public—and, as the protests sweeping the Arab world indicate, this kind of publicity can play a role in social change—but it does not seem reflective of the kind of publicity desired by Jürgen Habermas and other scholars in his tradition.

Expanding outward again, the interface—for instance, the desktop on a computer with a Macintosh or Windows operating system—is just one kind of tool or template people use when interacting with computers. The Web 2.0 model, which privileges user contributions and collaborations, also privileges forms and templates that constrain user choice and control over design elements in order to increase access to those without the technological knowledge to write code. While the Web 2.0 approach has been hailed as a revolutionary set of tools to facilitate social uses of technology and enable communities on an unprecedented scale, the interfaces that facilitate these communities and collaborations are not neutral. As such, one must wonder what kinds of rhetorical subjectivities they easily produce and what kinds of subjectivities they make it difficult—or impossible—to produce, particularly given the ideological underpinnings of Web 2.0 environments and other digital environments attempting to mimic some of the features of Web 2.0, which is, after all, best thought of as a “business model” and not a “particular technology” (Harrison and Barthel, 2009, p. 159). “Thus, Web 2.0 is founded on a radical reconceptualization of the user, from consumer of online products and information produced by

companies to producer of online products and information that they share with others, including companies” (p. 160), and, according to David Beer and Roger Burrows (2007), the user profiles is the “fundamental commodity of Web 2.0” (qtd. in Harrison and Barthel, 2009, p. 160).

Perhaps this is why we have yet to see the kinds of behaviors Habermas associates with publicity within digital spaces. Teresa M. Harrison and Brea Barthel (2009) find that “Web 2.0 content construction has an especially personal expressive and aesthetic component [...] which cannot be subsumed fully under either of the concepts of radical, oppositional or community media” (p. 175). Perhaps this is due to the fact that affluent teenagers use the internet for content creation larger percentages than adults, or perhaps this is an effect of the ideology of Web 2.0.

Manovich (2001) suggests that the

communication between the larger social world and software use and design is a two-way process. As we work with software and use the operations embedded in it, these operations become part of how we understand ourselves, others, and the world.

Strategies of working with computer data become our general cognitive strategies. At the same time, the design of software and the human-computer interface reflects a larger social logic, ideology, and imaginary of the contemporary society. So if we find particular operations dominating software programs, we may also expect to find them at work in the culture at large. (p. 118)

This should be no surprise. Online environments are part of doxa, hence they, like rhetors’ discourse and subjectivities, emerge from and merge with doxa. But the scope of the World Wide Web suggests a homogenizing influence similar to what Benjamin Barber (1984) argued happened when we exported Coca-Cola and the Cosby Show. The question remains, however,

what rhetorical behaviors are made possible by interfaces and whether or not these behaviors are compatible with a form of democratic publicity.

Ito implies that our subjectivity is an outcome of the interface. If we accept that interfaces are inherently rhetorical (see Hasle 2006), then we can think of interfaces as one of the elements of the rhetorical situation, along with more traditional features such as audience, occasion, subject matter, and so on. If the user is engaged with a writing task online then we can extend the argument further and say that a rhetor's subjectivity and their rhetorical agency is construed in part by the interface itself. This claim is based in part on Ito's observation as well as on work that has been done on the subject of rhetorical invention by Debra Hawhee (2003, p. 17), Karen Burke LeFevre (1987, p. 119), Barbara Biesecker (1989, p. 112), and Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee (2005). Crowley and Hawhee would argue that the rhetor's subjectivity comes into being rhetorically as a result of the confluence of factors that make up the rhetorical situation, and limited by doxa, or the "current and local beliefs that circulate communally" (p. 47), such that the rhetor's discourse "merges with and emerges from doxa" (p. 51). Notice that the structure of their observation about the rhetor's discourse echoes what Selfe and Selfe have to say about the "landscape [that] we have created and that, in turn, creates us and the students in our classes." Just like the rhetor's discourse, that merges with and emerges from doxa, the online rhetor's discourse (and subjectivity) merges with and emerges out of the interface.

This potential linkage between interface and rhetorical invention lights the way for my investigation. Interface is but one of the background elements out of which the rhetor's subjectivity emerges when she is finding arguments. Although Habermas would reject the contention that rhetoric has any role to play in discourse, later deliberative theorists open a space

for rhetoric in political discourse. Thus, interface and invention are the observable elements for my study, particularly where these two elements come into contact—the user post.

Habermas' work on publics brings to bear three key considerations: who gets to participate, the tenor between participants, and the process that participants follow as they discuss the matter at hand. It's also important for us to remember the spatial history from which Habermas' public sphere theory emerges: small groups of people gathered in pubs or coffee shops: particular kinds of spaces granting certain affordances and certain impossibilities. Public sphere scholars tend to focus on issues of power that make achieving true consensus impossible or investigating how structures influence access to publics—either socioeconomic structures that create barriers to accessing the Internet and the Web, digital structures that contribute to the production of enclaves online, or filtering technologies that make it easy for people online to avoid exposure to points of view they do not agree with. These are all important paths to explore but we must also attend to another dimension of structures, namely how spaces mediate our interactions with each other. Given what Langlois and Elmer (2013)—and others—have argued about the potential for a social network site's code to regulate interaction, as well as the growing number of interactions mediated in some way by the Internet (I am writing this in September of 2020, a year that has seen online services like Zoom, Skype, and Teams become the standard way for employees to go to work during the global Covid-19 pandemic), I believe it's vital that researchers explore how the design of these spaces may influence our online interactions, particularly when and if these interactions could influence the formation of political judgments.

Political Judgment and Political Discourse

Before discussing how political judgments are formed, we must define what a political judgment *is*. Beiner (1984) argues that all “political judgments are—implicitly at least—

judgments about the form of collective life that is desirable for us to pursue within a given context of possibilities” (p. 38). Collective life here includes our “form of being-together” (p. 139). Beiner argues that it is the act of political judgment that constitutes political discourse, because it is via the “exercise of reflective judgment in applying general concepts like right, justice, and responsibility to particular situations” that political discourse and political life in general are woven and take shape. Political judgments are thus “constituted by appeals to shared criteria and grounds of judgment *embedded in common forms of life*” (p. 147-8 emphasis mine). So political judgment implies a form of life held in common, this common form of life manifests shared concepts of right, justice, and responsibility, and the application of these concepts through a process of reflective judgment about situations that affect our collective life is political judgment and potentially political discourse as well.

Rhetoricians will immediately recognize that Beiner is taking advantage of a topological theory of invention in his representation of political discourse as the outcome of the process of judgment in which shared criteria (such as right, justice, responsibility) that are available to us as a result of our common forms of life are applied to particular situations. These *topoi* are part of what Habermas would refer to as the background consensus—more on Habermas in a moment—but Beiner describes them as “embedded” in common “forms” of life. Let us consider the word “form” literally: the formal characteristics of common life, or, in other words, its traceable, observable patterns. Here we see considerable overlap between Beiner’s view of what grounds political discourse and the views of Habermas as well as David Fleming’s (2008) take on the relationship between common places and inhabiting a *common place*. I will say more about this in a moment when I turn to the question of how we would hope political judgments are formed and what research suggests for how they are *actually* formed.

What kinds of questions fall within the boundaries of political judgment? Beiner says only that the judgment must apply to the form of collective life that we find desirable. How might this apply to the sites of my research, Reddit and the BioWare Social Network? I draw upon Jane Mansbridge's (1980) discussion of interests to flesh this part of my definition out. For Mansbridge, a person's interest is her enlightened preference. To illustrate what she means, she gives an example of a cafeteria deciding what kind of cake to serve. Imagine that you were able to taste all of the possible cakes—not just the cakes that the cafeteria regularly offers its patrons, but *all of the possible types of cake*. After tasting every kind of cake, you determined that your favorite kind was orange cake. This would be your enlightened preference. We might not be used to thinking about something like cake preferences as political judgments, but imagine that this same cafeteria needs to cut expenses and its owners decided to cut back their offerings from three kinds of cake to just one (see pp. 25-6 for this example). How they determine their response to the situation and how they decide what their dessert offering will be is, in a sense, a political judgment, as it reflects a decision about how we choose to live our lives given a limited number of possibilities. We could further elaborate on the forms of collective life embedded within this example, for instance, the entire socioeconomic system embedded in how resources are allocated to particular food items, how those food items are distributed, the structure within which the business operates that place constraints upon their decision making, the distribution of power between owners and labor that authorizes the owners to make decisions about how to respond to low revenue without consulting staff, and so on. I believe this rationale applies as well to the discussions I will analyze in chapters 3 and 4 of this project. My chapter on Reddit focuses on arguments amongst users about the limits on permissible expression on the site, clearly an example of the form of life users wish to share. At BSN, I analyzed arguments about the number

of characters in the game Dragon Age 2 available as homosexual romance options. Though this controversy may not seem like it fits the label of political discourse as Beiner defines it, consider that in making decisions about how to design characters in a game, the game developer has limited resources to spend. It has to decide not what the ideal product would be, but rather, what is the best game that can be made given the available resources. This version of the good reflects decisions about the ideal form of collective life. Players certainly came to the discussion with interests and made their case for the route they wanted to BioWare to take.

Returning to the example of the cafeteria, recall that this is just one person's interest. Beiner's definition of political judgment demands a collective—a political judgment concerns the form of *collective* life desirable for *us* to pursue. The collective requires a mechanism for creating norms that all will live by.

Thus far I have only defined political judgment and private interests. The core question at the heart of this project is, what influence does the design of an online space have on the formation of political judgments in that space? To answer that question, we must move beyond the individual to the process by which judgments are formed.

In this section, I will first describe some of the efforts to describe an ideal process for democratic will formation, beginning with Habermas' discourse ethics, then discussing deliberative democratic approaches that grew out of Habermas' work. After that I will discuss alternative approaches.

The principle behind discourse ethics is a revision of Kant's categorical imperative. Where Kant argued that one's judgment had to be generalizable universally to be considered a moral imperative, Habermas (1990) argues that a norm must be agreed upon by all who would be subject to it to be considered a legitimate norm. This shifts the problem onto the process by

which agreement is secured. In other words, if the validity of a norm is now based on an intersubjective process, instead of appealing to a transcendent ethics to provide the validity of the norm we must now appeal to a transcendent ethics to provide the validity for the process.

Habermas locates the source of validity not in a transcendent ethics but in the pragmatics of everyday language. It is from the universal pragmatics of everyday language that Habermas derives the ideal speech situation (1975, 1984, 1990). The ideal speech situation is a counterfactual construct that defines a set of circumstances that would have to be in place to allow for a group of people to arrive freely at a rational consensus about a norm under which all would live. Discussions that take place within the circumstances of an ideal speech situation are called discourse, and are distinct from strategic forms of communication (which includes rhetoric). Habermas' definition of discourse is also the definition of the ideal speech situation:

Discourse can be understood as that form of communication that is removed from contexts of experience and action and whose structure assures us: that the bracketed validity claims of assertions, recommendations, or warnings are the exclusive object of discussion; that participants, themes and contributions are not restricted except with reference to the goal of testing the validity claims in questions; that no force except that of the better argument is exercised; and that, as a result, all motives except that of the cooperative search for truth are excluded. (Habermas 1975, pp. 107-8)

Norm testing, not explicitly stated as debating the common good but rather thematizing part of the lifeworld, testing the validity of norms together until, through a rational process, all who would be subject to the norm arrive at consensus.

Joshua Cohen (1997a) builds a theory of deliberative democracy based in the work of Rawls, but the fundamental principles of his proposal echo Habermas' demands in discourse

ethics, including the expectation that interlocutors approach the process with a sincere interest in deliberation, rather than a strategic interest. It is here that we see the expectation that one's individual interests will give way to a desire to intersubjectively create a vision of the common good. In this way, the deliberative democratic process is *epistemic* and generative. Unlike Habermas, Cohen allows for the possibility that consensus will not be achieved, at which point a vote is acceptable. Cohen (1997b) also allows for forms of communication outside of rational argument (p. 419).

Deliberative democracy is offered as an alternative proposal to the liberal-democratic process of public political judgment formation. Where the liberal-democratic process is viewed as one that merely tallies everyone's individual, private interests and awards the highest vote-getter to be the "public's" opinion, deliberative democratic approaches take from Habermas the belief that private interests must be transformed into redeemable, public reasons for supporting a particular norm or policy decision. Furthermore, as Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004) observe, deliberative democracy is not a method for eliminating disagreement from politics or of achieving consensus. In fact, they argue that deliberative democracy requires other methods of decision making in order to determine policy (p. 18), such as voting. However, they do claim that it offers us the best chance at making just decisions, and that in situations where there is no shared concept of justice, the deliberative framework gives a group a way of talking through what justice demands—what John Dryzek calls "meta-deliberation" (2010; p. 12).

Although Gutmann and Thompson state that just outcomes take priority over those outcomes produced by a deliberative process, they also state that

In the face of controversy about what justice itself entails, deliberative democrats ask citizens to engage with one another under conditions that manifest mutual respect, and

with the aim of finding terms of fair cooperation. Deliberative democracy gives justice priority when citizens have good reason to know what justice requires, but they do not acquire sufficient reason to believe they know what it requires for society as a whole without having engaged in reasoned deliberation with their fellow citizens. (pp. 41-2)

In other words, “manifest mutual respect” and “fair cooperation” are formal and procedural components of their philosophy that transcend even determinations of what justice entails. It is also clear that even under conditions where there is no commonly held concept of justice, unless people have engaged in reasoned deliberation with each other. What this seems to suggest, in practice, is that deliberative democracy gives priority to justice in situations where a process of deliberation has produced a definition of justice and its requirements, for without having thematized justice and deliberated over it, one has no legitimate claim to know what justice is. Finally, this makes it clear that public conceptions of justice and the good take precedence over individual notions of the same. Thus, although Gutmann and Thompson do claim that just decisions are more important than decisions made as a result of deliberation, it is clear that there are requirements in place for determining the legitimacy of said concept of justice, seemingly grounding the entire enterprise in a particular conception of just deliberation that cannot be disputed. Elsewhere, they claim that “the deliberative conception relies on explicitly moral principles rather than the seemingly neutral ones of aggregative conceptions. Reciprocity is an explicitly moral principle. Deliberation therefore invokes substantive moral claims that may be independent of the preferences citizens put forward” (p. 18-19).

Gutmann and Thompson claim that there are four key characteristics of deliberative democracy. These are: its reason-giving requirement; the accessibility of reasons given to all to whom they are addressed; its intention to influence or generate a norm or other decision that will

be in place for some time; and that decisions produced as a result of deliberation may be reopened and reconsidered at another time. Accessibility refers not only to the public nature of the deliberative process itself, which must take place in public, but also to the comprehensibility of the reasons offered. Appeals to one's own credibility or authority are insufficient—at least, reasons should be explained in language that can be understood by all involved by someone whose credentials can be evaluated by the group. Regarding the reason-giving requirement, the authors say:

The reasons that deliberative democracy asks citizens and their representatives to give should appeal to principles that individuals who are trying to find fair terms of cooperation cannot reasonably reject. The reasons are neither merely procedural (“because the majority favors the war”) nor purely substantive (“because the war promotes the national interest or world peace”). They are reasons that should be accepted by free and equal persons seeking fair terms of cooperation. (p. 3)

The reason-giving requirement, as stated here, is reminiscent of some features of discourse ethics. Like Habermas' conception of “rational” and “discursive,” Gutmann and Thompson require that reasons given should be acceptable to a public. These reasons cannot be strictly self-serving, since they must be acceptable to a group outside of the self. Indeed, they argue that “In giving reasons for their decisions, citizens and their representatives should try to find justifications that minimize their differences with their opponents” (p. 7). Note also that these reasons should be accepted by “free and equal” persons who are “seeking fair terms of cooperation.” As in the ideal speech situation, participants in deliberation are imagined to be equal, although the authors recognize that in practice monetary and other disparities carry over into a deliberative setting, potentially leading to unjust outcomes (p. 48). Like the ideal speech

situation, the deliberative setting must be inclusive: “But here the point to keep in mind is that the democratic element in deliberative democracy should turn not on how purely procedural the conception is but on how fully inclusive the process is” (p. 9). An aspect of this inclusivity would be the inclusion of those who hold diverging beliefs about the good. Here, the authors assert that coming to an agreement on moral philosophy is not necessary in a deliberative setting, and that insistence upon coming to an agreement regarding the good undermines the legitimacy of moral disagreement in a pluralist society (p. 91). However, Gutmann and Thompson also claim that “[t]he background conditions in which the deliberation takes place are critical. Deliberation is more likely to succeed to the extent that the deliberators are well informed, have relatively equal resources, and take seriously their opponents’ views” (p. 11). In practice, therefore, to produce a just outcome, the rhetorical situation of deliberation requires people who are oriented towards finding terms of fair cooperation; a representative group of all those who will be affected by the outcome, if not the entire group of those affected by the outcome; socioeconomic conditions to be relatively equal amongst the general population outside of the deliberative setting, to ensure interlocutors are free and equal; interlocutors who are well-informed. Once in the setting, this iteration of deliberative democracy requires that individuals provide reasons that are likely to be comprehensible to and considered reasonable by the group present, using information that is publicly available and accessible to all, with the expectation that at the end of the process the group will have created a norm or policy that all of them will live under. Lastly: they require open-mindedness towards opposing viewpoints, stating that we should “cultivate a disposition toward openness” and “try to break personal and institutional habits that discourage the chance that we might accept the position of our opponents at some

time in the future, or at least modify our own position in the direction of that of our opponents” (p. 84).

Iris Marion Young (1996) takes Cohen’s concern for communication style one step further, arguing that some cultures communicate their ideas in ways that would not be permissible in Habermas’ ideal speech situation—and for that reason, among others, the ideal speech situation does not adequately facilitate truly democratic participation. Young (2011) critiques Habermas on two other points: the first, that discourse asks the individual to universalize his particular interests, omitting the social perspectives of marginalized others; the second, that it demands reason and excludes affect and the body from consideration. Young argues that these two elements of discourse ethics make it impossible for the norms generated within the ideal speech situation to enable marginalized others to attain justice through this process. She proposes that the process must allow for groups to form their own perspective on their relationship to society as a whole and to be able to veto proposals that strike them as unjust. Later, Young (1997) will argue that deliberative settings focus not on individual interests but on appeals to justice. This reorients the ideal deliberative setting proposed by Cohen; though I would argue that an intersubjectively constructed vision of the common good is still the objective, there is a more concentrated focus on justice and not on the transformation of individual interests. This corrects what she believes is the overly-liberal approach inherent within traditional discourse ethics, which she argues overlooks matters of justice for African-Americans, homosexuals, and other groups systemically marginalized.

Young’s view is at odds with Habermas’ on another fundamental point that is at the root of her critique: she does not believe that difference is reducible to consensus due to systemic factors that yield divergent perspectives that must be given space in any truly democratic public.

Dryzek (1990) strikes a middle ground between skeptics who would argue that our history makes any rational consensus impossible – or disagreement irreducible – while also acknowledging that history cannot be bracketed. Like Young, Dryzek argues that it cannot be set aside. But he does believe that rational consensus is possible, particularly when a high degree of background is already shared.

Another modification to Habermas' theory is the institutionalization of the ideal speech situation as a "discursive design," which is a social institution separated from the state within which mechanisms are in place to allow for education of participants, if necessary, to render them competent to discuss the issues knowledgably. As with Habermas' notion of the public sphere, here again we see a spatial metaphor. These implicit metaphors demonstrate the importance of spatial design to public sphere and deliberative democratic theory, a fact underscored by Gutmann and Thompson's proposals.

In sum, there are two areas of disagreement: the first, whether (and for what reasons) consensus is possible; the second, what forms of communication are permissible. There are also broad areas of agreement regarding inclusivity, familiarity with the issue at hand, and an orientation towards communicative action rather than strategic communication. Public sphere researchers have noted how online publics have multiplied, fragmenting into enclaves. This is not always thought to be a bad thing; some believe that there are positives to this fragmentation (in agreement, I believe, with Young (2011), who proposed that democratic publics needed to allow for marginalized groups to self-determine). Cass Sunstein (2007) concisely articulates the argument for why fragmentation, or balkanization, is dangerous for a pluralistic democracy: "Without shared experiences, a heterogeneous society will have a much more difficult time in addressing social problems. People may even find it hard to understand one another. Common

experiences, emphatically including the common experiences made possible by the media, provide a form of social glue. A system of communications that radically diminishes the number of such experiences will create a number of problems, not least because of the increase in social fragmentation” (p. 6). Sunstein’s concern, and the concern of many public sphere theorists who study ICTs, is that the Internet is in fact such a system that promotes fragmentation by failing to expose people “to materials that they would not have chosen in advance” (p. 5), agreeing with the concerns expressed by Chadly Stern and Peter Ondish (2018). That said, he does acknowledge the potential benefits of enclaves, small like-minded groups, claiming that “deliberating enclaves ensure that positions that would otherwise be silenced or squelched have a chance to develop” (p. 214). Lincoln Dahlberg (2007) would agree with Sunstein that because enclaves allow positions to come into being that would otherwise never be articulated or constructed, they can be beneficial for certain forms of democracies. Dahlberg argues that in order to take full advantage of enclaves we have to reframe the public sphere so that contestation is valorized over consensus. “What *could* be seen as an ‘enclave’ state, where counter-discourse largely circulates within closed spaces,” he argues, “provides an important step in building alternative visions of life before contributing to opening the boundary of dominant discourse through more explicit forms of contestation (publicity, protest, activism, etc.)” (p. 837). In other words, it is only because theorists privilege what Dahlberg calls the “liberal-rationalist” view of the public sphere that they would want to eliminate enclaves in favor of a broad public that sought broad consensus; when we get beyond this view, we can see the democratic potential of enclaves, *if* the resulting perspectives can ultimately challenge those produced in dominant discourses. This shift demands that those researching internet publics ask a different question: “to what extent is the internet facilitating the development and expansion of counter-discourses

and the contestation between discourses?” (p. 838). Some research finds that in spite of this balkanization, the Internet remains by-and-large homogeneous. Jürgen Gerhards and Mike S. Schafer (2010) compare old and new media in the United States and Germany to determine if the Internet is a better public sphere than newspapers and if there is a difference between German media coverage and U.S. media coverage, finding that with respect to both diversity of actors and diversity of frames, the Internet is more one-sided and less inclusive than print media.

Slavko Splichal (2009) situates his work on internet publics within a transnational perspective. He argues that as national boundaries weaken and as governments of the people allow institutions and other NGOs to govern (a phenomenon he refers to as “governance”), there is need for a kind of global public sphere that would perform the kinds of functions that Habermas envisioned for it. Rather than “a new interpretation of the (transnational) public sphere and public opinion,” Splichal calls for “an attempt to change them in the way that would allow of publicity in its original ‘three-dimensional design’: personal right to communicate in public, surveillance of the public over government (governance), and mediation between the state and civil society” (p. 404). These three dimensions capture the form of publicity Habermas (1989) describes, especially the role that the bourgeois public sphere and its literary counterpart played as the space within which its participants could construct a consciousness that could be leveraged meaningfully against government. Splichal leaves out of this characterization Habermas’s (1975) description of the counterfactual requirements placed upon interlocutors in the ideal speech situation, but I believe it is implied, for reasons I will get into in just a moment. Splichal’s work is an aberration in the sense that his call is not about participation or engagement but about a more robust role for online publics. He laments the dilution of “publicity,” which he claims once referred to “reasoned debates” but now refers to generating a great deal of interest or

attention (p. 403). While he clearly embraces the liberal-rationalist and consensus-driven model of publicity that Dahlberg and Young reject, he does agree with both Dahlberg and Sunstein regarding participation. Splichal argues that

A true democratization of communication [...] should eliminate major sources of distorted communication and external sources of inequalities, such as class ownership privileges, gender and racial discrimination, age grade exclusion, and political or professional elitism. This implies not only an increase in the number of active participants in the communication process, but also expansion of social bases of communication by inclusion of formerly excluded or socially, economically, or politically deprived individuals and groups. (p. 392)

We can see from the above exactly where Splichal parts ways with Dahlberg. While both would agree that we should have, as a goal, an increase in the number of participants, Splichal, like Young, imagines a public sphere within which individuals across asymmetrical lines of power are able to be a part of the same public. Dahlberg certainly does not, preferring that these groups generate their perspectives in enclaves and then rejoin the conversation. As such, Splichal's take on enclaves is extremely negative (p. 393). However, in Splichal's defense, it also seems clear that his democratic public sphere is itself counterfactual. Furthermore, his arguments appear motivated by a concern about the growth of governance over government within a world in which national governments matter less than they have before, creating a situation where "global governance rests on very limited consent of those affected by the consequences of transactions in which they cannot participate" (p. 397).

Deliberative democratic theory suggests achievable goals for making the outcomes of political discourse more just. Research into how people form political judgments reveals that

deliberation is seldom part of the process due to cognitive limitations and social factors.

According to this research, argument is a social phenomenon: Dale Hample, Yiwen Dai, and Mengqi Zhan (2016) argue that people have motives to argue and some of them have to do with relationship maintenance and construction of an identity through argument, which could be what's driving a large part of the online arguments as well – creation of a persona. There are social goals for arguing. The point of a Habermasian or deliberative democratic approach is to get people to create some distance between the social objectives, identification factors, and try to focus more on epistemic or moral goals (like justice).

There is also the matter of elite cuing or differences between systematic versus heuristic opinion formation. It requires a lot of time and energy to go carefully through sources to arrive at an opinion. It is far easier to rely upon others to form opinions for you. Hugo Mercier (2016) argues that reason is not very good at generating arguments for a person's position, though it is very good at poking holes in an opponent's position and defending one's own position. But you won't engage in this effort until you're forced to because this requires a lot of energy. Here (Cavari and Freedman, 2019) argue that if elite cues are not available, people will choose to forego having an opinion. Even when people have access to the materials needed to create their own position on an issue, Amnon Cavari and Guy Freedman argue that people would rather rely upon judgments from elites.

The role of affect cannot be overlooked. In her study on how emotions affect attitudes towards transitional justice, Joan Barceló (2019) finds evidence that people who feel anger or fear over incidents in the past are more likely to support transitional justice measures. These emotions were a stronger influence than a person's ideology or history of victimization by the regime. Such a finding suggests that strong emotions play a role in judgment formation.

In a similar vein, how an issue is framed may elicit political judgments from an audience. Indeed, this may be one of the major mechanisms of attempts at persuasion in online forums. Shanto Iyengar (1990) draws the concept of framing from psychological research, observing that “the specific concepts and terms used to present choice or decision options” influence decision-making (p. 20). Applying it to news coverage of poverty, Iyengar finds that how the issue is framed changes who subjects hold responsible for it. Robert M. Entman (1993) describes framing as the use of language to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). They do this by activating culturally circulating schema. I want to point out that the four functions Entman ascribes to frames correspond to the four stases of stasis theory; thus, frames could be influential during debate from any of the stases. I consider this important because, as I will show in my discussions of Reddit and the BioWare Social Network, users frequently invoked alternate frames and in so doing did not allow conversations to get past the stasis of definition.

In their study of framing effects on attitudes towards transnational surrogacy, Rafael Ventura, Xosé Ramón Rodríguez-Polo, and Carles Roca-Cuberes (2019) found that focus group audiences had negative opinions about the practice of homosexual couples hiring Indian women as surrogates after viewing media coverage that framed the practice as exploitative, though they refrain from making any causal claims about the relationship between framing and judgment. This may help us understand why some online debates focus so heavily on the metaphors used to characterize the issue. For example, was violentacrez “doxed” or was his identity revealed by a journalist in an article on a newsworthy event? Ventura, Rodríguez-Polo, and Roca-Cuberes’

claim is that framing the act as exploitative encouraged the audience to view it as such.

Essentially, media framed the act in such a way as to associate it with exploitation, something the audience already viewed negatively. Similarly, in some of the debates I analyzed for this study, the most controversial aspect was how the actions would be framed. This effect seems to function like source cuing: once you know how you define the action, you know what you think of it.

Can we elicit epistemic or deliberative discussion? Katharina Zimmermann, Jan-Ocko Heuer, and Steffen Mau (2018) studied the effect of deliberative forums on opinions towards welfare policy in Germany. Using a pre- and post-survey, they found that some of their participants did change their positions on various approaches to welfare in Germany. This is encouraging, as it suggests that political judgment is changeable; however, we must also take into consideration the environment within which these changes occurred. Participants were asked to attend two eight-hour Saturday sessions, for which they were financially compensated. Although there were 35 participants, they were split up into groups of four and matched with a moderator who was knowledgeable on welfare policy. The moderator's responsibility was to engage participants in discussion and encourage them to defend their positions. Deliberative democrats and other theorists imagine ideal structures, including ideal practices, to ensure that decisions that are produced are just. What may not receive enough attention from deliberative democrats is, what structures must be in place to elicit actual deliberation instead of the repetition of heuristically derived opinions?

If the question is, how do people form political judgments, then Stern and Ondish's answer is, they rely on thought leaders within their political party, or people close to them (such as parents and friends). Maintaining consistency with the beliefs of these groups is so important

that, according to the authors, “people will forgo consistency in their personal values for the sake of maintaining shared reality” (Stern and Ondish, 2018, p. 11-12). Changing these views is difficult because of the power of their identification with these groups. In fact, Stern and Ondish observe what is obvious to many of us, that people are strongly identifying with their political groups and viewing opposing viewpoints as “inaccurate representations of reality” (p. 12) and “strongly biased and hostile” (p. 12). Others support this finding; see, for instance, Jiyoung Han and Christopher M. Federico (2018). Candice C. Howarth and Amelia G. Sharman (2015), in a literature review of articles on climate opinion labels, find that the labels used to characterize the sides in the debate on climate change prevent constructive dialogue by excluding others from the discussion. These rhetorical constructs emerge from the debate and work to solidify in-groups and out-groups, serving to inform members of each group whom to listen to and whom to ignore. This has obvious consequences for how online users shape their social networks. Itai Himelboim, Stephen McCreery, and Marc Smith (2013) found that Twitter users are seldom exposed to opposing viewpoints because they follow, and are followed by, people with similar views as their own. In sum, according Stern and Ondish, group identification is a powerful influence on people’s political judgments due to their desire to maintain a shared reality with those groups. Losing this shared reality, I infer, is costly because it would mean sacrificing one’s social network and, perhaps, one’s sense of self and world. The consequence of such a powerful association between worldview, social network, and political beliefs is that opposing views are threatening, which, I infer, makes any political discussion emotionally fraught. This creates a serious challenge to transforming one’s political judgments through dialogue and adds weight to Robert Asen’s (2013) observation that “[t]he risk of deliberation is that participants may change their minds on issues that are important to them” (p. 8).

We can see how factors outside of the ability to reason affect the ability to deliberate with others in Mansbridge's (1980) account of direct democracy in Selby. Although the goal of town meetings in Selby is to make political decisions based on consensus, it's also clear that fear and intimidation keep people silent during meetings or keep them from going to meetings altogether. From her interviews with residents of the town, it is clear that there is an affective dimension to political discussion.

Sharon Crowley's (2006) observations in her book-length analysis of fundamentalist discourse are supported by Stern and Ondish (2018). She argues that people are committed to their judgments ideologically and emotionally, and will refuse to engage opponents under conditions where reason could be a viable strategy for persuasion (2006, p. 196). Rhetors, she claims, should use emotional appeals if they wish to persuade others. Hample, Dai and Zhan's (2016) study of the importance of argument stakes for arguers supports Crowley's claims. They conclude that people argue when an issue has personal importance to them; deliberative or epistemic goals are less of a priority.

Others point to the influence of political factors. For example, Sebastian Fietkau and Kasper M. Hansen (2018) argue that judgments about immigrants are influenced both by level of education and size of the welfare state. Their findings suggest that our judgments are influenced, not by deliberation, but by contextual factors.

Would this still be true in an online environment, as opposed to the face-to-face settings Mansbridge investigates? Yonghwan Kim and Youngju Kim's (2019) small experimental study found that when someone read uncivil comments that they disagreed with, their willingness to read more comments was reduced when compared to reading civil comments, regardless of whether commenters provided evidence in support of their statements. Although this was a

small-n study, it suggests that the tone of the discussion could potentially impact people's willingness to expose themselves to opposing points of view—impacting their willingness to shift their judgments. Based on their work, one could suggest that uncivil comments could reify “teams” in on-line forums, in effect conserving political judgements against any change.

That tone could affect one's willingness to read opposing points of view is an important possibility to investigate further when we consider the fact that dialogue with opponents may be the best way to construct good arguments. This does not necessarily mean that one's perspective will shift, but it does mean that one's arguments will be better thought out. Mercier (2016) notes that people are much better at analyzing counterarguments than they are at producing arguments in defense of their own positions. This is due to the brain's miserly approach to energy use. It is more efficient for a person to generate a lazy argument and refine it upon discovering what argumentative strategies will be most successful than to plan for all of the possible counterarguments. However, when one's position is being attacked, that person is motivated to destroy the opposing argument. Thus, people are typically much better at evaluating counterarguments than they are at arguing for their own perspectives. The best setting for producing good arguments is, therefore, dialogue with people who have opposing views, since that setting takes advantage of this asymmetry. As Mercier observes: “the back and forth of dialog enables improvements in argument quality by letting people address successive rounds of counterarguments” (2016, p. 696).

Unfortunately, the consequences of Stern and Ondish's argument mean that people are less and less likely to be able to engage in such dialogue, given the antipathy people have towards opposing points of view. The upshot of these two arguments is that not only is it difficult for people to discuss political issues with those on opposite sides of an issue, but also that the

arguments that get circulated among those with similar views are going to be poorly thought out. “Contexts in which argument production strongly dominates over argument evaluation—that is, in the absence of dialog and of conflict between views—often lead to epistemically and practically deleterious outcomes,” notes Mercier (2016, p. 697).

Deliberative democrats argue that under the right conditions, deliberation can take place in spite of empirical evidence that people’s political judgments seldom follow from a deliberative process. While they often describe a process for judgment formation, I want to emphasize that there are also material constraints that help participants adhere to that process. That is to say, place, and the design of that place, plays a role in the success of a deliberative process (among other elements). It follows from Crowley and Hawhee (2005) and Mansbridge (1980) that place matters for deliberation, as Ray Oldenburg (1999) and Scott Wright (2012) argue in their articulations of a “third place” and a “third space,” respectively.

Findings about the role that framing or tone may influence political judgment, and arguments for the inclusion of other communication techniques outside of rational discourse, open the door for the consideration of rhetorical approaches to democratic publics. Gerard Hauser (2008) reconceptualizes deliberative democracy as rhetorical democracy and reimagines the public sphere as a reticulate public sphere (1999; 2008) that is made up of a multitude of smaller publics that together contribute to the production of civil society. Hauser’s approach trades the critical rationality of Habermasian deliberation for a rhetorical perspective that emphasizes conflict, practical reasoning, non-rational approaches to argument, the importance of discovering (that is, inventing) arguments that resonate with people who have different values, and goal-oriented compromises over arriving at consensus. In making his case, Hauser prefers to think of democracy as a process rather than the outcome of negotiation; that is, a “deliberative

model construes democracy in terms of participation in the ongoing conversation about how we shall act and interact, or our political relations. A vocabulary of participation brings certain types of activity into focus. For one thing, it looks for the ways citizens engage one another on matters of mutual concern. Participation replaces the pursuit of private interests as the central political behavior” (p. 241). In order to fully grasp Hauser’s perspective, we should begin with his concept of public opinion: “Public opinion is more than a nose count and more than the expressed views of its leaders. It is the civil judgments we reach through the convergence of formal and vernacular interactions dispersed across society, occurring in different media, and emanating from voices representative of different viewpoints” (p. 247). Hauser here is differentiating the diversity of opinions held by individual members of the public (which would be something like polling the masses) from a civil judgment that has a truly public character—that is, that has actually emerged out of rhetorical action within and across publics within the reticulate public sphere of civil society. Civil society is a necessary feature of any democracy, per Hauser: “The primary condition for democracy is an arena for individuals and groups to understand and negotiate differences autonomous from the state. The autonomy of civil society from the state permits a political society to emerge. In it, information and arguments can circulate without state regulation of their form or content” (p. 245). It is evident that the characteristic feature of democracy, for Hauser, is this civil society. Since civil society is nothing more than the autonomous arena within which groups understand and negotiate differences—that is, engage each other rhetorically—it is clear that a democracy is the product of these rhetorical exchanges. Hauser (1999) expresses this point with the notion that publicity is performed rather than existing a priori. For Hauser, a rhetorical democracy must be committed to engaging pluralism by making allowances for formal and vernacular rhetorics as well as asking

that discussants invoke public reasons that go beyond narrow self-interest; the latter is implied in the expectation that one must find arguments that resonate with members of groups whose interests differ from one's own (2008: 241). Furthermore, equity is important: Equity is essential to maintaining horizontal relations among citizens participating in a deliberative process *that is more than nominally democratic*" (p. 244, emphasis mine). Hauser's description of rhetorical democracy provides us with a number of expectations for how democracy should be conducted. To summarize the preceding, these are:

- Citizens have differences growing out of a plurality of perspectives and interests (p. 241)
- Agreements between groups are ephemeral
- Compromise rather than consensus
- Inclusion means more than giving voice to a point of view. It also treats reasons acceptable to that point of view as legitimate contributions to the deliberative process, even if they fall outside the mainstream (p. 244)
- Acknowledges a group's vernacular rhetoric as a valid contribution to the deliberative process (p. 244)
- Considers civil society—an arena in which citizens can rhetorically produce civil judgment autonomous from state control—necessary for democracy
- Horizontal relationships among different groups is essential
- Considers non-rational argument to be important for persuasion

Per Hauser, "economic, historical, and institutional factors play important roles in a given society's shape and direction" (p. 236) but these do not determine a society. "Discourse has elastic agency to enable and constrain social transformation. The most fundamental resource for penetrating social consciousness of what is and what might be is society's symbols. Their

capacity to expand and contract the field of relations outside the human subject—historicity, sociality, and ideology primary among them—provide rhetorical elasticity, or the varying capacity to appropriate this field of relations and tie rhetoric intrinsically to society’s self-production” (p. 236-7). This view implies that rhetoric is influenced by these factors but it also can influence these factors in turn, providing rhetoric with a critical role in a democracy and suggesting amenability to an ecological framework for thinking about rhetorical action (I will say more about the ecological framework in the next chapter, when I explain my study design).

Like Hauser and Young, Chantal Mouffe (2000) views difference as an irreducible political reality. For Mouffe, an antagonistic relationship between two people is one where each regards the other as an enemy to be destroyed, whereas in an agonistic relationship, each regards the other as somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend these ideas we do not put into question. Mouffe sees these relationships as outcomes of politics—so for her, democratic politics should secure commitment to a set of practices that results in the production of agonistic citizens who are committed to the democratic ideals of liberty and equality but who have differing conceptions of the common good. I see some overlap between Hauser’s approach and Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, but Hauser gives us a more complete way of thinking about the rhetorical acts involved. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it is useful to distinguish Mouffe’s approach from Hauser’s in terms of the objectives towards which each aims. Mouffe’s agonistic democracy theorizes that groups of people hold their views as a result of their positionality and their upbringing. She focuses on the agonistic elements essential to politics as a result of these different subject positions and histories and from this represents political discussion as a power game in which sides strive for hegemony. Both cast doubt on the capacity for reason to be persuasive in democratic publics. Sharon Crowley’s (2006) work on

arguing with fundamentalists helps us think about persuasion in terms of storytelling and reflects the same principle: rational persuasion is not possible nor should it be pursued. Fleming's (2008) theory that if people inhabit the same space, commonplaces that unite them across lines of difference will emerge is also amenable to Mouffe's theory. Hauser's vision is not antithetical to Mouffe's, although he is focused on a different objective. He theorizes that groups of people who hold different views and even deploy different rhetorics can achieve an ephemeral agreement on a particular policy objective, even if they desire the policy for different reasons. He is not arguing for rhetors who can persuade others to change their beliefs but for rhetors who can use arguments that speak to the values of different groups in order to convince different groups to come together as a coalition, albeit a temporary one.

Given this background for political judgment formation, what have researchers found about Internet forums and political judgment? Masudal Biswas's (2009) comparative discourse analysis of a local Louisiana TV station's coverage of a legislative pay raise and its associated blog commentary argues that the station, WAFB, was able to use the blog to collect public opinion about the issue and use it in subsequent coverage. Biswas uses theories of framing (see Gerhards and Schafer, 2010) to describe "what attributes or issues are emphasized or de-emphasized in a news story (Entman, 2007)" (p. 50). This technique is coupled with an analysis that categorized comments "on the basis of specific themes, words, and phrases" (p. 51). Biswas found that the framing influenced the issues that commenters addressed in their responses to the coverage. Christina M. Smith and Kelly M. McDonald's (2010) study on the influence of conservative bloggers on the design of a 9/11 memorial in Arizona is similar to Biswas's, describing the lines of argument and counterargument between said bloggers and the memorial's design committee during an election season in the state. In this case, as in Biswas's, the media's

coverage of the memorial was influenced by the blogs. However, unlike the case that Biswas studied, blogs and blog commenters are considered to be a vocal minority rather than representing mainstream public opinion (“the” public, for lack of a better term). This vocal minority is able to circumvent institutionalized and regulated processes of deliberation amongst representatives who are accountable to voters (p. 136) by taking advantage of the social capital created by the network of conservative bloggers and ultimately nationalize the issue, according to Smith and McDonald. Furthermore, by influencing national media coverage, there is the opportunity to influence broader public opinion by distributing their framing of the issue to a wider audience. Eliza Tanner’s (2001) study of comments in the online forums of *La Tercera Internet*, an online news publication in Chile, shortly after the arrest of Augusto Pinochet. Unlike Biswas’s study, where most of the people posting shared the same opinion, Tanner reports more disagreement about the meaning of democracy, the quality of Chilean democracy, and Pinochet’s status (as dictator, hero, and so on). However, she also reports that posters “developed informal ‘rules of deliberation,’ in which they agreed that the debate should be ‘civilized’ or ‘ethical’” (p. 393). She concludes that a consequence of talk in this online space is the development of public opinions (p. 399) and she attributes the quality of communication to cultural factors that structured participation; however, she also notes that 90% of the discussants were male, indicating barriers to inclusivity. Finally, Chang Woo-Young’s (2005) description of online public opinion formation in Korea claims that “the online media are richly endowed with devices that facilitate citizen participation and exchange of opinions, both of which support the pursuit of political goals” (p. 933) that can be useful to “[r]eformist netizens” to “produce and exchange values and arguments that challenge the existing social order” (p. 933).

Diana B. Carlin, Dan Schill, David G. Levasseur and Anthony S. King's (2005) study of political talk studies the phenomenon in both an offline and an online context. They study arguments made after the 2004 Presidential debates by assembling discussion groups to interview and by analyzing comments at websites for the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, and ABC News. They sort the arguments made in these discussions and comments into two broad categories: egocentric and common good. Each of these categories can be thought of as a special topic and breaks down into sub-topics (or resources for lines of argument). Egocentric arguments refer to those where "personal need is at the root of the argument without consideration of whether there is a societal reason for the policy or societal advantage from it" (p. 622). By contrast, arguments from the common good "demonstrated shared values, common purpose, and an international or national security perspective" (p. 622). Carlin et al. find that arguments from egocentrism draw from nationalism and personal narrative, while arguments from the common good draw from international awareness and sense of community, demonstrating the influence of circulating topoi on public opinion formation.

That said, because their study considers both online and offline discussions, they are able to offer arguments regarding the differences between the two environments. Carlin et al. argue that the online discussions were "less polite and more partisan" than the discussion in the offline discussion groups and that the "[l]anguage was less formal and often profane" (p. 623). However, "[b]oth types of groups made unsubstantiated statements and often were brief or even flippant" (p. 623). They conclude that "assertive moderators" are required in virtual communities to help "participants make the leap from personal frames to more collective ones and who establishes norms related to respect and diversity of ideas" (p. 633). Without this feature online groups will have a hard time encouraging equality and diversity of ideas—

qualities, along with collective frames, associated with the normative ideals of publics. Carlin et al. suggest that online publics promote the expression of individualistic and self-interested viewpoints. They believe that “face-to-face discussions better achieve the normative ideal than online discussions as they are both currently practiced” (p. 632). They are not alone in their skepticism regarding the effectiveness of virtual environments at encouraging the rhetorical enactment of healthy publics, but we should also remember that the discussion groups they study are not examples of spontaneous talk but of prompted talk. The researchers ran these groups as group interviews, and as such, functioned as “assertive moderators.” This makes it difficult to say for sure whether or not their results show that FTF (face-to-face) discussions truly come closer to achieving the normative ideal than online discussions. Furthermore, regarding the differences between online and offline interviews, Shani Orgad (2005) identified three major differences in the ways that research participants interacted with her in online interviews versus offline interviews: articulacy (p. 59), informants’ openness and collaboration (p. 59), and the kind of language used (p. 60). These differences did not always go in the same direction for each participant; in other words, while some research participants were more articulate online, others were more articulate offline, and so on. Orgad’s findings, which come from offline and online interviews, rather than offline interviews and online observation like Carlin et al.’s findings, show some similarities with the latter’s conclusions regarding online conversations but also serve to remind us that differences can be highly individualized. It is not possible to know for sure how the individuals in the offline discussion groups would have conducted themselves in unmoderated online discussion spaces.

Research explicitly into online argument and deliberation largely confirms the above results and the skepticism towards deliberation shown by motivated reason theorists. Graham

(2010) study of political talk in an online forum run by and for fans of the television program, Big Brother UK. Though he finds that “[t]he level of rationality, coherence, and reciprocity were high” (p. 37) in this forum, he also finds that “extended critical debate on a particular issue rarely led to convergence of opinions, falling well short of the condition” and that this finding is consistent with earlier studies (p. 38). Paul Ferber, Franz Foltz, and Raul Pugliese’s (2007) contrastive study of the level of intersubjective communication at four different online environments with comment capabilities (NJ.com; the RNC and DNC websites; and Moveon.org) goes one step further, attempting to correlate structural design with deliberative behavior by coding for whether the site design exhibits high control or low control over user-to-user interaction and describing the features of these sites in order to correlate user interactivity with structural design. Their consideration of interactivity covers three basic forms (one-way communication, two-way communication, or three-way communication, the latter which they consider to be closest to the deliberative ideal). They conclude that while there is hope for the quality of deliberation online to improve, in its current form it is lackluster.

Marcin Lewiński (2010) uses Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst’s (1984) work on reconstructing arguments in order to diagram arguments from online political discussions at three sites accessible through Google Groups. Lewiński’s objective is to add to the theory by describing the effects of a collective antagonist on the quality of argumentation: “Critical objections, even if they are not parts of one consistent position (as is the case in discussion 1) or even when they amount to a collection of fragmented ‘hit-and-run’ strategies (see Aakhus, 2002b; Weger and Aakhus, 2003), still can be argumentatively forceful if they multiply the defendant’s burden of proof” (p. 102). This perspective seems to be more invested in the success of argumentation, imagined as an adversarial process, rather than a process of

arriving at a new position together as a result of a process of inquiry, reflection, and discussion. In addition, he finds that due to the basic structural features of certain forums, such as pseudonymous or anonymous discussants and the ability to abandon a discussion at any time, there is no one with the duty to bring the conversation to a conclusion. This may explain why so many conversations that I witnessed in my study never resolved themselves—it was all too easy to simply stop the conversation instead of making the effort to do the hard work of revising points of view.

Harry Weger Jr. and Mark Aakhus (2003) use the pragma-dialectical model of ideal argumentation to analyze argumentation in AOL chat rooms, with the goal of “explaining argumentative conduct in these venues in terms of the communicative resources chat rooms provide participants for deliberation at a distance” (p.26). They argue that “the communication setting or forum can influence the expression of disagreement in the way it makes available opportunities for people to pursue argumentation in the setting” (p. 26) and find three conversational features that are problematic for “critical discussion”: “lack of conversational coherence, under-developed arguments, and flaming” (p. 27). Significant design features in the AOL chat rooms include “continuous scrolling transcripts, contribution limits, and unidentified participants” (p. 34). They propose that by attempting to understand the conversations in their data set as arguing, they may have been too narrow. They argue that “[a]rguments, or the use of reasons to support standpoints, can be used to achieve different types of communicative goals” (p. 35), for instance, to persuade others, to acquire information, to attack or hurt someone, or critical discussion of the kind favored by deliberative democrats. They believe that rather than viewing their data to show poor argumentation, it could be interpreted to show that the participants are not engaged in critical-rational discussion but rather “wit-testing”: “a competent

participant in the wit testing dialogue is less interested in contributing to the formation of a rational consensus than in being provocative and engaging (e.g., Billig, 1996)” (p. 35). Both Lewiński and Weger and Aakhus make helpful contributions to my inquiry, to be sure; the collective antagonist phenomenon is common online, as is wit-testing.

Laura W. Black’s (2008) study of discussions in a 2-week long forum for residents of New York City in 2002 to discuss what ought to be built at the site of the 9/11 attacks seeks to expand deliberative approaches to political talk by adding a better theorized version of dialogue theory to it, and within this theory, a sensitivity to how interlocutors use storytelling as part of discussions to share their values and negotiate identity. The effect of storytelling is thus to bring users together by constructing public identities that enable relationships to form. Brian M. Goss’s (2007) longitudinal study of blog comments in response to John Nichols’ blogs at *The Nation* takes a different approach, demonstrating how arguers from the left and the right sides of the political spectrum both reproduce the “American way of life,” a form of integrative propaganda that “integrates [subjects] into society and harmonizes behavioral patterns” (p. 367). Based on José van Dijk’s work, Goss analyzes the comments for two ideological markers of discourse: *topoi* and “evidentiality,” a disingenuous way to use pseudo-evidence in an effort to enhance the apparent credibility of one’s arguments. He finds that despite different political positions, arguers deploy masculinism (p. 371), position themselves as loyal Americans (p. 373), affirm communal values (p. 374), support capitalism in some form (p. 375), and put their arguing aside to observe the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day holidays (p. 372). He also documents a moment where arguers approach consensus, which begins with and appears to be facilitated by two significant instances of storytelling (p. 374), although it also appears that a common set of

special topics (listed above) helps. However, this was a rare moment of coming together—the rest of the study documents conflicts between the left and the right.

To summarize this section of my literature review: deliberative democratic approaches, rooted in Habermas' discourse ethics, provide some valuable ideals to strive for; however, at its most basic level it excludes political factors that must be taken into consideration to be considered truly inclusive and, given other research that has been done on political judgment formation, it leaves out communicative strategies that are not only more commonly practiced among certain cultures but are also necessary in order to effect changes in political judgment—for example, storytelling. Empirical perspectives on political judgment formation note the significant influence that rhetorical devices such as framing and commonplaces have on formation of political judgment. Work studying political discussion in online environments finds, furthermore, that the Internet is very effective at fragmenting the public. While there are some benefits to such balkanization, there are also drawbacks—namely, shielding groups from contrary points of view and inhibiting the formation of what Fleming would call *common places*, the pun emphasizing how shared commonplaces emerge out of people sharing places in common. I am reminded of Wright's (2010) argument for the use-value of third spaces, places that are distinct from state influence and primarily apolitical. Such spaces are inviting to a diverse group of people and offer a common place for discussion.

In the following section, I return to the topic of structure and its influence over user behavior, returning to the idea of technological non-neutrality to finish out this literature review.

Role of structure of social media network sites

Deen Freelon (2010) notes that several studies have considered how “a space's design choices can powerfully influence the nature of its users' engagement” (p. 1183). He calls for

research that will use this research to identify a space's design elements as independent variables and consider the content that is generated within these spaces as dependent. Freelon offers a framework for coding the content of these spaces, arguing, like Aeron Davis (2010), that we must be able to accommodate other modes of communication besides deliberation so that we can categorize a broad range of posts online and "allow them to be contextualized alongside deliberative content within a broader conceptualization of how design influences online political conversation" (p. 1184).

Marina Umaschi Bers and Clement Chau's (2006) study of the multiuser virtual environment *Zora*, specifically designed to encourage young people to take an interest in civic issues, offers a useful expansion of what counts as "civic." Since *Zora* is a kind of virtual city, matters related to "setting up the social organization of the virtual city" (752) are considered by the authors of the study to be civic issues as much as "controversial current events reported in the newspaper" (752). Bers and Chau found that deliberative activity was not common in this space; however, placing young people in an environment in which they had to build a virtual city engaged them in the collective project successfully.

Their work allows us to think about civic matters as those pertaining to the group affected by them, rather than attaching spatiotemporal boundaries on those matters. In other words, just because I am not engaged in political issues affecting the people within the geographical area referenced by my zip code or area code, does not mean I am not participating in civic matters somewhere, even if that location is online. The political issues relevant to an online collectivity may be entirely different than those relevant to my neighbors, but that does not mean they are any less political. These terms agree with Barney's (2007) definitions of citizenship and political. For Barney, "[t]he practice of citizenship is, at its core, the practice of political judgment" (p.

40). “[P]art of what makes political judgment *political* is that it always involves others,” he argues. “However, along with this formal attribute, political judgment has a substantive attribute: it is judgment brought to bear on claims about justice and the good life, with the latter understood not as the prosperous life or the easy life but a life lived well in common with others. Another way to put this is to say that political judgment concerns both (good) ends) and (just) means” (p. 44). If all that is required to be “*as a citizen*” (p. 40) is to exercise political judgment, then it seems irrelevant whether the issue is the state budget or the rules governing where users can “drop” virtual objects within a virtual city that we all share. Of course, another part of Barney’s definition of political judgment is that it is concerned with a life lived well in common with others, once again underscoring the importance of intersubjectivity and what it means to live “with” others in virtual space.

Renita Coleman, Paul Lieber, Andrew L. Mendelson, and David D. Kurpius’ (2008) is a two-phase quantitative study seeking to determine the effects of IA on attitudes towards civic engagement. The authors used a website designed by their state government, designed to inform voters about budget issues, as the control. For the experimental design, the authors used a website designed by University students to perform the same function. In phase one, the students designed the website and studied its usability by surveying potential users. Usability here really refers to the ability of users to get to what they want from the website. Once the website was deemed “usable” it became the experimental website for phase two of the study, for which a new pool of subjects was recruited and randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group. Each subject was allowed to use the website they were assigned to for 15 minutes and instructed to think aloud while they did so. Afterwards, they responded to surveys meant to gauge their impressions of the website and their attitude towards civic engagement.

Information architecture is considered in three dimensions: content, navigation, and appearance (p. 186). In order to assess these, the researchers used Likert scales and had subjects respond to some basic questions. For instance, regarding content, subjects were asked about how interesting, important, or believable it was. Regarding appearance, subjects were asked if the design distracted them from the information, how pleasing the design was, or how easy the design made using the site (p. 190). Subjects were also asked questions intended to ascertain how willing they would be to perform behaviors associated with civic engagement. For instance, they were asked if the site encouraged them to get more involved with a social issue or if it helped them learn how to contact a member of congress (p. 190).

While this study does make a case for the influence of IA on attitudes toward civic engagement, it imagines civic engagement as a solitary process in which a citizen must seek information to become informed about a topic or contact a representative to communicate their opinion. Furthermore, it imagines the role of technology as an instrument for content delivery, rather than a communication medium that could be used to encourage or enable the formation of public opinion. As such, key questions regarding inclusivity that are posed by many public sphere researchers and theorists (Barney 2007; Dahlberg 2007; Hands 2007; Sunstein 2007) are overlooked in favor of a solitary kind of citizenship.

Deen Freelon's (2011) study provides a richer depiction of civic engagement, describing two basic forms of citizenship. Dutiful citizenship, or DC, involves "news consumption habits, political knowledge and interest, participation in civil society organizations, and perhaps most importantly, voting" (p. 199). Freelon notes that, among young people, this kind of citizenship is declining. Then there's actualized citizenship, or AC, examples of which include "consumer activism, direct action (such as political protest and social-networking driven activism), and civic

expression through digital media” (p. 200). What Freelon wants to determine with his study is how IA influences the expression of DC or AC online among young people. To do this, he selects the website YouthNoise, a website intended to encourage young people to discuss political issues. YouthNoise features two sections, one a highly regulated debate space, the other a very open space. He describes the former as the Debate space and the latter as the Boards. In the Debate space, moderators pose questions (e.g., “Are the Homeless Less Fortunate—Or Lazy?” (p. 205)) and provide links for users to learn more about the subject. When a user responds, moderators must first review the post before it goes online. The Boards are different. Topics are raised by users and posts go live immediately after they are submitted (p. 204).

Freelon uses the terms “managed” and “autonomous” to refer to the Debate space and the Boards, respectively. These terms do not refer to kinds of web designs but approaches to using the Internet to help train young people to be citizens based on how young people are conceptualized. However, these conceptualizations necessitate certain kinds of information architectures, such that proponents of managed e-citizenship “favor the establishment of safe, civilized, moderated enclaves in which youths can learn and have their say” (R. Coleman et al., 2008, p. 191). Proponents of autonomous e-citizenship prefer open, anarchistic spaces. For Freelon, these terms stand in for the design features themselves. Any post that appeared in Debate was coded as “managed” while those appearing in the Boards were coded as “autonomous” (p. 206).

Freelon hypothesized that because the IA of the Boards differed from the Debate, and because the IA of the Boards reflected an autonomous view while that of the Debate reflected a managed view, that the Boards would reflect more AC and the Debate more DC. What he found was that DC was by far the most prevalent across both areas of the website, but that “the

participants who used Boards were significantly more likely than those in Debate to post on more than one occasion” (p. 210). The latter is an interesting finding since one of the limitations to online deliberation is the number of users who write one post and never return (echoing Lewinski’s (2010) findings). He concludes that “these findings suggest that management as a technological engagement strategy is more likely to elicit relatively shallow levels of participation from a broad base of young users” (p. 212), his study only analyzed shallowness in terms of how many times a user came back to post again.

Magda David Hercheui’s (2011) recent literature review of the research on virtual communities focuses specifically on research done since 1993 that explores how “virtual social interactions do or do not reproduce offline institutions” (p. 2). She defines an institution as “being patterned behavior and social systems that tend to be reproduced by social actors with a certain degree of inertia” (p. 2). This definition allows Hercheui to include information architecture within the category of institutions because the interface of a website contributes to the pattern of behavior on a website, while at the same time reflecting what we typically think of as offline institutions such as corporations, government agencies, universities, and so on. Thus, information architectures both mediate relationships between users and institutions as well as being institutions in their own right. Her assessment of the literature on this topic is that “the theme of institutional influence on virtual environments is still discussed only marginally in the scholarly literature, with few exceptions” (p. 4). Hercheui argues that extant literature describes online interactions in virtual communities rather than theorizing “the whys of online behaviors and how social contexts influence virtual environments” (p. 9) and believes that an institutional perspective would be useful for virtual communities research, especially when it comes to research on governance structures of these environments (p. 11). Such a perspective would

understand communities “in relation to their dependencies on broader social structures and contexts” (p. 10).

Barbara L. Ley’s (2007) ethnographic study of a virtual community of pregnant, trying-to-be-pregnant, and new mothers shows that key design decisions on the part of the site’s creator and moderator contribute to creating a safe environment for the site’s members. According to Ley, this atmosphere allows bonds to form between members that probably would not have formed in a different digital environment. The design features that Ley argues were central to the creation of a safe environment were the site’s moderation style, its membership policy, and the choice to keep the site from being a high-ranking search result in online search engines. I will refer to the latter as “privacy.” These three elements will show up often in analyses of site architecture. Because the people who posted on this site disclosed personal information often, this contributed to bond-formation between site members and therefore to the formation of social capital; however, Ley argues that if the site could be browsed by non-members or if its forums were searchable through Google (for instance), members would not have felt as free to post such information. Thus, it is evident that the site’s architecture correlates with a particular kind of subjectivity within this digital environment. Patricia Radin (2006), surprisingly, argues for the opposite: based on her research of BCANS, a forum to support women diagnosed with breast cancer, she argues that because people can read the very candid self-disclosures made by women on the site without having to sign in or register, women who lurk there can see the warmth and support that is given in response to these self-disclosures. This gives them the courage to join the site and write their own posts (p. 598). In other words, this structural element correlates to a greater degree of trust among users in this virtual setting. Where Ley was interested in how the Coming Up Roses forum constructed itself as a “safe” environment for its users, Radin argues

that BCANS constructs itself as friendly through structural elements such as “ease of use, visual symbolism such as pink ribbons, and the observable, friendly, varied virtual discussion” (p. 597). For Radin, these structural elements contribute to the development of trust between members as the byproduct of discursive exchanges between them through the site.

I express this as a kind of rhetorical invention. When we discuss the rhetorical situation, we imagine a rhetor whose subjectivity is itself produced in the moment of speaking. But in addition to the rhetor’s speech, the situation speaks through the rhetor and is a part of the subjectivity that is constructed in the moment of the utterance. When we think of computer-mediated communication, we must not only think of the broadest structural elements—those cultural grammars that exist in our rhetoric every day—but also the structure of the Internet and the World Wide Web itself and the interests it serves, and the architecture of the website in particular. All of these structures are part of the subjectivities that are construed in various fora or in interactions on SNS. Our rhetorical agency—our capacity to invent our messages and our identities through rhetorical acts—is constrained by these structures, which are the media through which our messages and selves are construed online. By “rhetorical invention,” I am referring to the messages and even the selves we create in our rhetoric. And since norms and values are themselves discursive, they both form part of the cultural structures that shape rhetorical invention and are influenced by these structures because they are rhetorical. In other words, CMC is shaped by cultural and material/technological structures (the interface, templates, site governance, and so on) within the local context of the online virtual community, within the broader context of the Internet and the World Wide Web as a whole, and within the offline material, political, economic, and social context. All of these structures speak through rhetoric that is mediated by online environments. Similar to Hercheui’s call, I believe we must bring the

structural perspective into online public sphere research in order to investigate the role that structure plays on the emergence of public opinion (or political judgment) online.

Other studies explore connections between rhetorical invention and the structure of websites, though (like Ley and Radin) analyses of the rhetoric produced or of the website's structure can be very broad. Amy Koerber (2001), for example, argues that online spaces allow for forms of resistance that can rupture mainstream cultural logics that are omnipresent offline. Michael Kirshner's (2003) study of online asthma support groups found that site-moderation made a qualitative difference in messages posted over non-moderated fora, as well as an increase in the amount of participation. C. Arthur VanLear, Megan Sheehan, Lesley A. Withers, and Robert A. Walker's (2005) comparison between asynchronous and synchronous CMC in online AA groups found that "[a]synchronous AA groups, in some ways, appear to be the prototypical supportive environment. There is less superficial discussion [...], more disclosure at both the semi-private and private-personal levels, more agreement, and more personal acceptance than in the synchronous groups" (p. 21), pointing to a difference in the kinds of interactions that are invented in digital spaces when asynchronicity is introduced as a structural variable. In their empirical study, Dongyoung Sohn and John D. Leckenby (2007) attempt to find a solution to the free-rider problem structurally. They create two experimental designs: in one, a group of users contributed information to one website, and in the other, each user in the group is responsible for their own website. In both cases, the users were told that there would be a reward, split equally amongst all group members, for the most informative website (p. 442). Among their results, they found that when everyone was responsible for posting information to their own website, people made more contributions (p. 444). All of these studies validate the claim that the

structure within which CMC takes place does have an influence over the kinds and number of interactions that occur online—that is, structure is a variable that affects rhetorical invention.

Two more studies are worth mentioning for their unique research designs and questions. Aaron Hess (2009) stands out from among these both for the site of his analysis as well as for the finer-grained analysis of the users' rhetoric. Hess analyzes how members of YouTube responded to the Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) YouTube videos, which consisted of their "Above the Influence" TV commercials. Initially, the ONDCP allowed ratings and comments, but soon disabled both. Users instead responded in a number of ways enabled by the digital medium and structure of YouTube: some users reposted the ONDCP content from their own accounts so that others could rate and comment upon the content while others uploaded parodic video replies to the ONDCP from their own accounts. These actions suggest "resistance," but Hess argues that the structure of YouTube cannot support genuine resistance, for a number of reasons. He observes that "YouTubers have misplaced their faith in democracy and new media, believing that YouTube operates via a model of free speech rather than one of business and capital or one that will succumb to oversight under copyright law" (p. 426). That is, the structure of the YouTube is itself partly derived from the larger legal and economic structures of the United States. YouTube, as Hess points out (p. 426), is owned by Google, and thus is better understood within the context of business, as so many websites and services under the label of "Web 2.0" are. These structural realities have a direct impact on YouTuber's rhetorical invention: when a user posted a portion of video from a CNN newscast as a means of talking back to the ONDCP, CNN requested that the video come down because they owned the rights to it (Hess, p. 426). The other problem, for Hess, is the way that YouTube presents itself, and is primarily used, as a site to entertain users. This correlates with user behaviors such as the

“flippant” pseudonyms of the users themselves, suggesting a “playful” environment rather than a site “for engagement with in-depth political controversy” (p. 427) and the presence of “name-calling and swearing” (p. 428) in comment fields. Hess concludes: “As such, YouTube, and perhaps a variety of similar new media sites, are places of human frivolity and playfulness which should not be revered as extensions of democracy or deliberation” (p. 428).

Clarisse Sieckenius de Souza, Ana Maria Nicolaci-da-Costa, Elton José da Silva, and Raquel Oliveira Prates’ study (2004) is unique in that the study examines what happens to a face-to-face (F2F) group when they attempt to bring their group online through sites like YahooGroups, SmartGroups, and MSN Groups, which has the effect of a “compulsory institutionalization” (p. 636). In other words, an F2F group, which may have many unspoken rules and few, if any, set policies, is forced by the nature of computing technology to create inflexible, binary laws for the operation of the group. Thus, the very nature of the group itself—how it invents its self—is construed through the structures (in this case, the logical capabilities) of software and hardware, transforming it from its initial offline incarnation. The most important factor affecting the way the group interacts is the new subject position of “group owner,” necessitated by the software, which introduces inequalities in the group where previously the group had no formal leader (p. 633, p. 641), complicating the decision-making processes for the group. “Because computer-encoded meanings are fixed (unlike human meanings), systems contain a fixed snapshot of representations that are compatible with the designer’s vision of the artifact at the time he or she completed the design specification” (p. 645). This excerpt from De Souza et al. illustrates how all three perspectives—user, designer, and system—are brought together to consider one aspect of Sophie’s experience. At other times in the article Sophie’s discomfort is situated not only within the context of her relationship to her group but also how

her cultural heritage informs her relationship to the particular signifier of “group owner.” But Sophie’s interaction is also made possible by the designer’s rhetorical act, which was itself constrained by the binary logic of the computer, which fixes signs as either “yes” or “no.” De Souza et al. ultimately call for “a scientific evolution towards new computing paradigms” (p. 654) as a means of addressing Sophie’s problem, referred to as the “social-technological gap (Ackerman, 2000),” the “fundamental and irreducible barrier preventing computer technology to support the social processes that prevail in human activities” (p. 651).

Both Hess and De Souza et al. touch upon the issue of self-presentation in online spaces. This is to be expected given what I would call the “genetic” bond between rhetoric and subjectivity. I have argued earlier that the rhetor’s subjectivity—what James Paul Gee (2011) would call their “situated identity” (p. 41)—is an outcome of the rhetorical situation. Hawhee (2002) argues that

when “discovering” or “making” arguments, one also “makes” a rhetorical subject. That is, as a first move, the discursive encounter itself forges a different subject; and as a second move, the emergent subject becomes a force in the emerging discourse: “I invent” in the middle becomes “I invent and am invented by myself and others” (in each encounter). (p. 17)

In other words, the rhetor’s “situated identity” is invented along with the rhetor’s arguments. For Hawhee, rhetorical agency is constrained by the structures of the rhetorical situation (such as the audience), which are manifest in the subjectivities and arguments that come out of it.

I want to conclude by discussing the two SNS studies that I reviewed, both of which are primarily concerned with the relationship between self-presentation and the structure of SNS. The first is Jenny Davis’s (2010) study of profiles on MySpace argues that design options for

these pages, provided by MySpace's architecture, influence the kinds of identities one can "claim" on that site. She analyzes features such as the "top friends" selections, through which users can select a number of friends to be displayed first (the user is allowed to select the number of friends; some have a Top 4, others a Top 8, a Top 24, and so on); the ability to moderate the comments people leave on the user's profile page; and blog and picture comments. While J. Davis does support the argument that the site's architecture does affect self presentation, she does not address how the interface design and templates offered by MySpace speak through the user's profile. Finally, Zizi Papacharissi's (2009) "comparative discourse analysis" (p. 203) of three SNS (Facebook, LinkedIn, and ASmallWorld) combines discourse analysis and grounded theory to isolate four key themes through which to articulate how the three distinct architectures of these sites impact how users use these spaces. The most interesting finding in Papacharissi's incredibly thorough study relates to how the structures of these spaces influence the behavioral norms of users on the sites. Whereas, on Facebook, the "[l]ooseness of behavioral norms obliges users to construct their own," LinkedIn and ASmallWorld feature "more tightly administered social settings" in which users "do not wonder about right or wrong; they conform to norms" (p. 215). These "norms" include rules about how and when one can make contact with unfamiliar users on the site (something which is policed by LinkedIn and ASmallWorld, while on Facebook there are numerous applications that offer users many ways to customize how these contacts are made) as well as, on Facebook at least, how to determine based on a user's cues whether or not they are open to being contacted by other users they do not know (which can also be controlled by the user through their privacy settings). Elements of taste cultivation, related to self presentation, are mediated through applications available to users as well as through one's choice of SNS. Choosing to have a profile on ASmallWorld, which is known as being a place for elites,

is a statement in itself about one's taste. On Facebook, applications exist to signal to others what books and music a user likes; these applications typically allow other users of these applications to discuss books and music with each other, facilitating interactions. Papacharissi points out that applications like these serve as a "visual wardrobe" that "fleetingly support a performance of the self, only soon to be replaced by the next most popular add-on" (p. 212). Templates for profile creation on each site dictate the kind of self one can present, although the tone of these sites also has an influence on the avatar that people select. She finds that on LinkedIn, which is a social network for professionals interested in networking with other professionals in the same or related fields, members "typically [use] professionally oriented, ID badge-type photographs" for their avatar. Norms governing the kind of photo one can use are not specified by these sites; rather, users appear to conform to the tone of these sites without overt prompting, demonstrating once again how rhetorical agency online is influenced by the structures of the online rhetorical situation.

Conclusion

The design of Internet spaces can influence participation in many ways, from facilitating particular kinds of interactions between users, to encouraging users to discuss subjects they would not otherwise feel safe doing, to positioning users in particular ways that would have been alien to them offline. In these ways, the rhetors' subjectivity is an expression, at least partly, of the site's design and information architecture as well as the social structures that mediate the interaction. For this reason, public sphere researchers must attend to how site design may influence the outcomes of political discourse.

Chapter 2: Methods

There are multiple ways of describing what ecological inquiry entails, however there is some consensus around what an ecology is and what its constituent elements are. Christopher E. Manion and Richard Selfe (2012) summarize Margaret Syverson's (1999) thinking on ecological writing systems: "The complexities of composing, she argued, might be better grasped if we see it as distributed among agents and other structures in the environment, emerging from local networks or organizing activity that is embodied in physical space and human action and enacted through contextualized practices unfolding over time" (p. 27). I'd like to zero in on two key elements of this definition and discuss the kind of rhetorical situation that Manion and Selfe are describing here. First and foremost, according to this definition, composing is *distributed* among agents *and other structures in the environment*. "Distributed" means "both divided and shared among agents and structures in the environment" (Syverson, 1999, p. 7), such that the work of composition is a product of *the ecosystem* and not of any one individual. Second, this also means that it's the contact between agents and environment that produces writing, which partially explains the idea that writing *emerges* from local networks. Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Clay Spinuzzi, Rebecca J. Rickly and Carole Clark Papper (2008), who apply ecological theory to the research setting, argue that "[i]f framed and performed according to an ecological metaphor in which activities, actors, situations, and phenomena are conceived as interdependent, diverse, and fused through feedback, a research project can be both robust and rigorous" (p. 389). In this definition, the constituent elements of an ecosystem (activities, actors, situations, phenomena) are conceived as interdependent, diverse, and connected through feedback. We can see, then, that consistent across both definitions is the idea of connection; Syverson's definition implies the connection between environments and writers that produces writing, while

Fleckenstein et al.'s emphasizes interdependence and feedback. So we can see that relationships between all of the elements within an ecosystem (environment to environment, environment to individual, individual to individual, etc.) are an important aspect of this theory. Thus Manion and Selfe adopt Syverson's "careful examination of the *interrelationships* among actors, artifacts, and environments as they develop over time" (p. 27, emphasis mine). Fleckenstein et al. echo this, arguing that "an ecological sense of the phenomenon of millennial writing gives rise to a specific array of concerns," among them "the co-evolution of writers, texts, and environments *as relationships*" (p. 393). This calls our attention to another core aspect of this theory: codetermination. For Fleckenstein et al, a system is comprised of writers, texts, and environments, but these elements co-evolve via their interaction with each other. They come about *through their relationships amongst themselves*. This is why the idea of feedback and interdependence is important to Fleckenstein et al. As such researchers who use ecological inquiry must keep in mind that the system has to be conceived in terms of both its elements as well as their relationships, which are constitutive and an object of study in their own right, if not the primary object of study.

One obvious question is, what are the constituent elements of the "environments" that ecompositionists study? From Fleckenstein et al. we know that activities, actors, situations, phenomena are all potential elements of a writing system. Sasha Barab and Wolff-Michael Roth's (2006) description of affordance networks is also helpful for researchers who are trying to envision what an environment consists of. They describe such a network as "the collection of facts, concepts, tools, methods, practices, agendas, commitments, and even people, taken with respect to an individual, that are distributed across time and space and are viewed as necessary for the satisfaction of particular goal sets" (p. 5). Keep in mind that an affordance network either

comes into existence based upon the goals of a particular individual who is already situated within an environment (p. 6) or becomes an element within the environment after being repeated enough times by enough people such that it takes on its own apparent intensions. My purpose is not to introduce this concept for my own theoretical framework, but rather to take advantage of Barab and Roth's specificity in laying out the elements of an affordance network that would be supplied by an ecosystem. We see a slightly different explanation in Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe's (2004) study of digital literacy narratives, in which they utilize what they call "cultural ecology." Cultural ecology emphasizes

the many related factors that shape, and are shaped by, people's adoption of computers as literacy tools and environments: social contexts; educational practices, values, and expectations; cultural and ideological formations like race, class, and gender; political and economic trends and events; family practices and experiences; and historical and material conditions—among many, many other factors. (p. 644)

This perspective on the environment of a writing system is quite broad, incorporating socially constructed meanings and historical structures that would be studied in rhetorical and discourse analysis as well as material structures. They view the environment in terms of macro-, medial, and micro-level circles that consider the affordances and constraints that come into existence due to historical shifts, institutions, and biographical variables as well as individual motivations.

However, like the other studies I've discussed, codetermination of individuals and systems is a key component of their application of ecological theory. Based on arguments made by the latter, Hawisher and Selfe write that "people can productively shape and influence technological systems in both their design and their use, even as these systems themselves shape and influence people's lives" (p. 666).

For Fleckenstein et al., feedback is constitutive of ecosystems in that you cannot have an ecosystem if its elements are not communicating. Recall that for the researchers, interdependence, feedback, and diversity are three fundamental properties of a writing ecosystem. Interdependence can be satisfactorily understood from what I've already presented from other ecological researchers and theorists, and diversity refers to the richness of the ecosystem and the number of connections between its elements. Feedback, however, requires further elaboration, as it is directly related not only to the issue of codetermination but also to how the researchers argue that ecological theory is used. They define feedback as "the flow of information between organisms and between organisms and their environment" (p. 396). As a property of ecosystems, "[f]eedback implicates two moves in ecological research. It suggests that scholars draw a circle around the pertinent feedback pathways to delineate the span of the research ecosystem and that the circle is always mutable and permeable" (p. 395). Based on this perspective, in addition to identifying the "nodes" of the networks that comprise the ecosystem, identifying *pathways of feedback* is an essential task for researchers who want to operationalize this theory. While the stuff of ecosystems are material, rhetorical, and human, pathways of feedback are often discursive. I would argue that when it comes to internet research, material structures provide feedback based on what actions they permit and do not permit. Furthermore, since "feedback" arises at the moment that user and design come into contact through use, our objective is not to study all aspects of the structure, but rather, those aspects of structure that users must work with, against, through, etc. in order to achieve their objectives. Diversity directly draws on the idea that a writing system only has so many resources available to the individuals within it. Fleckenstein et al. refer to this as an economic problem while Stuart MacMillan refers to ecosystems as providing affordances for actors within it.

Clearly, codetermination, interdependence, and feedback implicate subjectivity and rhetorical agency, which has further implications for rhetorical invention. MacMillan (2012) contends that the

ecological systems framework applied to writing research holds much in common with other contextualized frameworks. It embraces the uniqueness of individuals and their life experiences, while at the same time recognizing the centrality of environmental factors in constraining what is possible in writing. Productive moments in writing emerge when abilities, understandings, and motivations of individuals mesh with the enabling potentials (affordances) of resources and tools available to individuals in the immediate physical and social environment. During the writing process, interaction with material resources brings about the creation of new *artifacts* (e.g., outlines, drafts, reflective notes) that subsequently populate the writing space and, in turn, can be reutilized. In this sense, the nature of subsequent writing is always constrained by a series of interactions that have taken place beforehand. (p. 353)

A few points to take note of here: first, productive moments in writing *emerge*. Contrary to a view of agency where the subject takes action to generate writing, rhetorical invention happens as a result of a *meshing*—that is, of an *interaction*—between an individual and an environment's affordances. The individual is here conceived as having abilities, understandings, and *motivations*. Although MacMillan has not (yet) specified this, presumably these abilities, understandings, and motivations are themselves influenced by the ecosystem within which the subject is situated. Presumably we could explore the influence of a subject's or a community's histories as well as socially circulating, rhetorically constructed meanings on the subject's motivations, but ecological inquiry does not view these meanings as deterministic. Presumably,

this does not eliminate the possibility for exercises of agency that are problematic,¹ but ecological inquiry would require us to focus on how agents work with elements in the environment, including socially constructed meanings. This leads into the next important point: affordances include resources and tools in the physical and *social* environment. This recalls my earlier discussion about socially constructed meanings, which are available in the environment and can function to constrain or enable the individual actor. Thus, an ecological approach appears to emphasize two critical points as related to rhetorical invention: (1) rhetorical invention is the outcome of *the interaction between* subjects and environments and (2) environments are comprised of both physical and social resources and tools. Fleckenstein et al. agree, writing that “the story of conventional and new media writing as an ecology, or ecomposition, to use Dobrin’s term, is less about individual elements—author, invention, error—and more a narrative of interactions intrinsic to a system, what anthropologist and ecologist Gregory Bateson calls the organism-in-its-environment (457)” (p. 392). As a consequence, the structures that have to be privileged in this study must in some way be involved in an interaction with a user *or* be a part of the physical or social environment that the user is a part of. It makes sense, then, to argue that at an online forum, discursive constructions of what a user is or what a user should do are a part of the social environment and must be considered, in

¹ I am thinking here of Sine N. Just and Tanja J. Christiansen’s (2012) recent work on “text-audience agency,” which they ground in Butler’s work on performativity. They argue that rhetoric hails audience members (“the invitation to act in accordance with a certain identity” (p. 321)), constructing subjectivities for them which audience members can choose to take up or to reject. However, if the position is rejected, they argue that this means “not being able to act within the context at all” (p. 321). They point out that this version of agency is useful in determining how agential potential is delimited rhetorically in the way texts hail audience members (p. 322). From an ecological perspective, this hailing is merely one element within an ecosystem. What would be important is the feedback loops inaugurated by the contact between the actor, this discursive construct, other actors, other structures, and so on.

addition to observing how users leverage these discursive constructs in their interactions with other users.

However, it is also important to note that ecological inquiry, per MacMillan, also emphasizes *innovation*. This is evident in MacMillan's discussion of Clay Spinuzzi's (2003) book, *Tracing Genres Through Organizations*. MacMillan writes, "[t]he book explores everyday improvisations and innovations in the workplace as employees make use of designed information, and he stresses that *improvised uses do not always coincide with the intended uses of designers*. Information users are presented not as victims of information design, bound by rigid, predetermined parameters of use, but rather as *active transformers of the information systems within which they function*" (p. 354, emphasis mine).² Thus, if we imagine rhetorical

² The perspective on agency assumed by ecomposition appears to be influenced by phenomenologists like Martin Heidegger (2008 [1927]) and Alfred Schutz & Thomas Luckmann (1973). Because phenomenologists, starting with Edmund Husserl in *Logical Investigations* (1970 [1900]), posit that consciousness is intentional—that is, that consciousness is itself always oriented towards the world with an objective or project—agency is a fundamental assumption of phenomenology. However, it should be noted that phenomenologists do not presume a form of agency that is not situated in time, place, or culture, nor do they necessarily envision the agent as entirely unconstrained. Existential psychoanalyst Rollo May (1969) claims that “freedom and will consist not in the abnegation of determinism but in our *relationship* to it.” Because consciousness is intentional, that is, oriented towards the world, one “can and must, unless he [*sic*] abdicates his consciousness, choose how he will relate to necessity” (p. 268). May provides us with an excellent perspective on how limited a phenomenological conception of agency can be, although he does not explore the existence of sociocultural structures and their capacity to determine the subject, though other phenomenologists raise these concerns. Writing well before May, Heidegger's concepts of “the they” and of “falling” imagine subjects who, unable to face the anxiety of facing the certainty of their own inevitable deaths, easily take to valuing the things that the public values and in doing so lose touch with their own Being. Significantly, Heidegger's description of the they posits a social world in which, it is easy to imagine, meanings circulate and influence actors. In spite of what might appear to be a totalizing sense of control over the world that seems to be implied in Heidegger's description of the chain of objects—the totality of involvements (p. 118)—whose being is contingent upon the project towards which they have been oriented by the intentionality of the subject's consciousness, the subject is herself within an environment of affordances and constrained by ontological and environmental realities. Schutz & Luckmann, whose sociological phenomenology has proven useful in composition studies, describe this as relationship in terms of the subject pushing against the life-world and the life-world pushing back. And in a moment that teases out what I am observing in Heidegger's theory of agency, Schutz & Luckmann admit that race, class, and gender are important social structures that shape the way that agency is enacted in the life-world (p. 95). In fact, there are a number of similarities between the phenomenological theory of agency and ecological accounts of writing. MacMillan's review of work on ecological

invention in this model, we should be aware that users' rhetoric and actions are not entirely determined by the system; rather, their rhetoric and actions react to, react against, and take advantage of the writing system. The moment of rhetorical invention is a moment in which the actor's motives make contact and mesh with the writing system and the outcome is the product of this interaction. The actions that are invented as a result have effects on other actors and elements within the system, in turn influencing future rhetorical invention. Per MacMillan: "Personal intent cannot be divorced from the supporting structures and tools and the social environments through which individuals function and improvise" (p. 355). However, Macmillan also notes that "from the perspective of the individual writer, systemic influences should not be regarded as strictly deterministic. After all, the individual is an active agent who contributes to and changes his or her own ecology" (p. 355-6). Thus, he argues that from the perspective of ecological inquiry, "[i]ndividuals are no longer conceived as fully conscious and controlling architects of the materials they produce. In a sense, they are victims of a complex array of systemic influences, but they are also empowered beneficiaries of those same forces" (p. 357).

Structure-In-Use

Consistent with my ecological perspective, my study analyzes structure-in-use rather than performing an analysis of structure in the abstract. Thus, my perspective differs from Fogg's (2003), Hasle's (1996), Robert R. Johnson's (1998), Clarisse Sieckenius de Souza (2005), Harry Weger, Jr. and Mark Aakhus' (2003), and others who attempt to analyze the structure itself and describe its effects. In some ways, these approaches could be grouped with approaches that look at how structures provide "affordance networks," for instance MacMillan's (2012) perspective

inquiry points out this relationship and Barab & Roth's work on affordance networks appears to be grounded in Heidegger's notion of the project and how consciousness organizes the objects in the world towards that project.

that “tools and resources (e.g. guidelines, heuristics, databases) need to be perceived as useful in affording support for specific writing actions” (p. 354). Some of the research that has been done on social networking sites appears to fall into this category, such as J. Davis (2010) and Papacharissi (2009). Both studies investigate how templates at social networking sites reflect tacit values at the sites and guide how users create profiles and communicate with each other. These approaches are a hair’s breadth away from a structure-in-use perspective, which does not investigate elements of structure apart from instances in which participants create tangible traces of using elements of structure. To give you an example: at the BioWare Social Network, the system places badges beneath each user’s avatar reflecting the games that the user has registered with the site. However, a structure-in-use perspective does not consider this relevant unless it directly informs a user action—such as when one user accuses another of being a troll and cites the fact that she has not registered any games on the profile. At that point, this structural component has clearly been used as a source of rhetorical invention and it becomes relevant to my study.

There are precedents for regarding structure-in-use in the manner that I am deploying it here, and these studies also connect structure-in-use to acts of rhetorical invention. For instance, Spinuzzi (2003) observes how workers’ interactions with information systems of various kinds inspire them to create more convenient workarounds to accomplish their goals. These workarounds are adaptations to affordances provided by elements in their ecosystems and are acts of invention. Jeffrey T. Grabill’s (2007) study of how community actors use technology to support writing for community change very succinctly expresses the relationship between structure and rhetorical invention: “We in fact create information out of our interactions with infrastructures” (p. 40).

The structure-in-use perspective resonates with Fleckenstein et. al.'s privileging of feedback pathways as a means of communication between writer and ecosystem. Recall that feedback is "the flow of information between organisms and between organisms and their environment" (p. 396). According to the authors, researchers are invited "to define a research project by means of the relationships—the networks—feeding into a particular phenomenon" (p. 398). In order to operationalize the concept of feedback pathways, I first view the pathway as a point of contact between elements in the system. I have bound my study in such a way that the elements of the system potentially include users, moderators, administrators, text editors' markup language, terms of service agreements, rules of etiquette, ways that the system arranges user information (e.g., profiles, avatars, comment histories). Regarding users, moderators, and administrators, my case binding limits me to only what is available about these individuals online, keeping in mind that by "individuals" I am only referring to the online construct and not to the offline person (this is important because some people have multiple user accounts). A point of contact is visible or implied based on references to these moments in communication between users, moderators, and administrators. Obviously, multiple points of contact occur between elements in the system, but many of these are not visible to observers even if anyone who uses these websites on a regular basis can assume based on their own experience that these moments are occurring for everyone. For the purposes of my study, only those points of contact—and thus, those feedback pathways—that are in some way visible or implied by what users say will be coded.

Research Questions

As I stated in chapter 1, the basic question that motivates this study is: how does website design impact the formation of political judgments. In that chapter I explained, drawing from

Beiner's theory of political judgment (1983), that such judgments are about "the form of collective life that it is desirable for us to pursue within a given context of possibilities" (p. 138). I also explored some of the scholarship concerning intersubjective rhetorical action, discussing those influenced by Habermas' deliberative approach (in particular, Habermas, 1984 and Habermas, 1990) and Mouffe's (2000) agonistic approach. Arguments online, I suggest, take place within a writing ecosystem and the arguments themselves are products of the ecosystem that feedback into that system. The inventive resources that users draw from are also (though not exclusively) within that system, such that the arguments that users produce are dependent upon the resources that the ecosystem can provide. Rhetorical invention thus reflects points of contact between the writer and the ecosystem, and the resulting arguments become part of the ecosystem, becoming a resource for the rhetorical invention of others. Investigating rhetorical invention means looking at what resources users draw from when they produce their arguments. Investigating structure-in-use means looking at how structure forms part of the total pool of resources available for rhetorical invention in a particular site. Finally, as I explained in chapter 1, we can think of political judgment formation either in deliberative democratic terms, in terms of the formation of rhetorically salient meanings, or in terms of agonism. The latter are related to theories of framing and motivated reason.

My basic question is: do we see evidence that structure influences the formation of political judgment online? I see this question implying others, as follows:

- RQ1: In what ways could quoting/replying, hyperlinking, message structure, and access to users' profiles (and the information made available in them) affect the degree to which political judgments shift through the process of user discussions in comment areas?

- RQ2: In what ways does the tone or ethos of the site, as a product of its design or information architecture, affect the degree to which political judgments shift through the process of user discussions in comment areas?

Methods

Cross-Case Method

Per John Gerring (2007), a “case study” is “the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is—at least in part—to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population” (p. 20). Because Gerring is writing for political scientists, he claims that a case “connotes a spatially bounded phenomenon—e.g. a nation-state, a revolution, political party, election, or person—observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period of time” (2004, p. 342). A case study, therefore, requires the researcher to identify spatially and temporally bound examples of a particular phenomenon that she believes can help us understand similar instances of the same phenomenon. I say examples rather than example because no case study is $n=1$; per Gerring (2007), n must be equal to 2 or more in order for analysis to be possible. Thus variation can be within-case or cross-case. Regardless of which form of variation a research study is designed to elicit, the cases must be bound temporally and spatially.

Given that the purpose of my investigation is to make a correlative claim regarding the relationship between digital design and rhetorical invention/structure-in-use, it made sense for me to use a comparative, cross-case analysis because the most important variable is the design of the web spaces I am investigating. Had I selected one site, I would not have access to vast differences in digital design. By using a comparative case analysis, I can compare rhetorical exchanges across sites with drastically different designs. Since my aim is to get a glimpse at how structure contributes to the rhetorical ecologies these two sites facilitate, I think comparing

them will help me do this and that is why I believe that for this study a comparative case analysis is the best approach.

However, my study is also ecological. As I have demonstrated above, this means that writing is the product of a system in which all elements are interdependent and shaped by feedback loops. In order to attempt to capture how feedback might have been informing rhetorical invention, it was necessary to consult multiple sub-communities within each site. To place all of this within Gerring's language, the phenomenon I am investigating is rhetorical invention, understood as an emergent activity depending partly upon digital design. The cases of this phenomenon I have selected are the discussion of /r/creepshots at Reddit and the discussion of love interests at the BioWare Social Network. The examples (that is to say, my samples) of these cases are the specific instances of conversation at the individual communities, and these examples were chosen in an effort to make it probable that I would see feedback loops extending between communities. These cases are "spatially" bound in that they are situated at particular URLs online; however, an ecological framework in this context is suspicious of "spatial binding" because it is the very nature of hyperlinking to undermine static spatiality and a basic assumption of an ecological framework is that the "system" is not entirely closed.

Case Binding

To quickly review, an ecological framework posits that participants in digital forums are situated within an environment that includes not only other participants, but also a variety of socially constructed meanings, interface features, and technologies. A participant's online rhetorical invention is the product of this system and thus it always bears the stamp of both the individual *and the system* within which it was created. Rhetorical invention, following Syverson, emerges from this network, is embodied, is enacted, and unfolds over time. Participants and the

environment codetermine each other, such that participants are influenced by the system and they influence the system. Their actions online occur as a result of affordances within their environments but are also constrained by these same resources. And pathways of feedback, following Fleckenstein, reflect interactions between participants and other participants, participants and environmental elements, and between environmental elements. The system also contains the goals and motives of individuals.

This study does not take into consideration the goals and motives of individuals; rather, my objective here is to generate hypotheses about the relationship between design and rhetorical invention that could be explored in future research by incorporating participant interviews and offline participant observation. I decided that, in keeping with work done by Black (2008), Amy M. Corey (2007), Goss (2007), Graham (2010), and others, to collect a large amount of online data. Thus I am operationalizing the notion of feedback pathways in a limited sense, encompassing structure-in-use and relationships across communities and between users.

In order to operationalize this theory it is also necessary to put each element into concrete terms. How to bind the system? How much time is necessary to see the system unfold? What elements should be considered as part of the system? And what to do with “feedback”? Per Fleckenstein et al., pathways of feedback are important. As I stated above, these pathways are discursive and material. I should add that in some way these pathways are also emotional and cognitive—that is, embodied—but these particular feedback pathways can be made discursive via interviews with subjects. Clearly, feedback can also be rendered in individual comments that question or resist elements within the environment.

Sampling/Determining the Corpus

The decision was made to collect comment threads from posts in multiple communities at each website. These posts would be related to a common theme such that relationships between these threads—users reacting to other threads by creating their own, or users responding to ideas expressed elsewhere—could be observed.

This was easiest to do at Reddit because of an event that occurred that got the attention of many users on the site. It had its antecedents in a movement called Project PANDA, originating from a subcommunity of Reddit known as SRS or “Shit Reddit Says.” SRS is a critical group that highlights instances of racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic ideology among users in the Reddit community as a whole. They are the nexus of a network of inter-related SRS websites known as the “Fempire.” Project PANDA is an activist offshoot of this community that seeks to shut down pedophilic subcommunities at Reddit. Its home at Reddit is a subcommunity called /r/RedditBomb. After successfully drawing media attention to the /r/jailbait community (resulting in a change in administrator policy towards that content as well as the removal of any subcommunity that sexualized underaged or potentially underaged women), they were among many who objected to a community on Reddit called “creepshots,” a place where users could share photos they took, in public, of women. These photos were taken, and uploaded to the internet, without the consent of the subject of the photo. While this activity might be legal, many users of the Reddit community questioned the ethical status of the activity at /r/creepshots and at similar subcommunities at Reddit. The problem was compounded by the fact that the ages of the women in the pictures was not clear; it was possible that women whose ages were beneath the age of consent were being sexualized in the photos. For the community this became a question regarding the limitations of free expression that the Reddit community and its administrators would defend. The creepshots debacle came to a head when Adrien Chen, at Gawker, threatened

to publish an article outing the identity of violentacrez, one of the largest contributors to a host of pornographic and erotic communities on Reddit, as well as a moderator of many including /r/violentacrez, his own subreddit at the site. Shortly before the article's publication, violentacrez deleted his account and creepshots was banned by the admins. Some communities at Reddit accused Chen of doxing violentacrez, meaning that Chen had discovered his identity and made it public. Their response was to ban any links to Gawker's network in their communities. Additionally, many users assumed that users associated with SRS—possibly moderators there—had given Chen violentacrez's identity to advance the goals of Project PANDA. This triggered discussions in several subreddits about Gawker, about doxxing, and about freedom of speech.

My first filter for selecting posts was to mark any post, in any community, that was related to the Gawker/creepshots/violentacrez. Since my study's purpose is not to trace the unfolding of this story throughout Reddit, I had to filter my results down further to arrive at a manageable number of posts and comments. My selection process was not exactly replicable, informed as it was by more than a year of participation in Reddit. I knew that I wanted posts that had a lot of comments because I wanted to see what patterns emerged after there had been so many comments that a user could not read them all; I figured anything over 100 comments would be sufficient. In addition, I wanted to make sure that the communities that were really upset about the situation were represented in the data. In addition to these criteria, I needed to decide upon a sufficient number of comments in order for the study to be substantial enough to allow me to draw some conclusions from it. I do not think there is a magic number that renders a study substantial enough to draw conclusions from it and generalizability is not my concern with this study. I settled on an initial target of at least 2000 total comments for each case in my case

study, though as Jeffrey T. Grabill and Stacey Pigg (2012) observe, there is no standard for how large one's corpus should be in studies of this type. They decided to "subject 20% of posts with more than fifteen comments and three unique responders to coding" (pp. 106-7). They do not state how many posts were ultimately included in their corpus; they do state that their objective was to achieve both data saturation and "informational redundancy," which they explain as seeing "the phenomena of interest represented in its variation" (p. 106). It is also worth noting that they employ a rhetoric-in-detail approach, focusing on t-units as their unit of analysis, making a large corpus more difficult to analyze than if their unit of analysis were the entire post. Graham's (2010) study of political talk in Big Brother forums subjects messages to content-analysis and analyzes the whole message as the unit of analysis. For his first round of coding, he analyzed 345 threads and 6,803 postings because these posts coincided with broadcast dates of a show on British television that was also the subject of the forum he was studying. Goss's (2007) study of reader comments on John Nichols' "OnLine Beat" column at *The Nation's* website randomly selects 7 blog posts from a 5-month span. Users generated 931 comments to these 7 posts and these comments (not the blog posts) form Goss' corpus. Though he does not discuss it explicitly, Goss' unit of analysis is the comment itself. Biswas' (2009) discourse analysis of comments posted to the WAFB television network's blog consisted of 317 comments. These comments were in response to news stories posted regarding a legislative pay raise for Louisiana state legislators. It appears that only 3 stories were posted, thus Biswas analyzed all of the comments that responded to those stories. It should also be noted that like Grabill and Pigg's study, Biswas's method of analysis was more granular. Corey's (2007) rigorous discourse analysis of user posts to NBC's "Fear Factor" forum analyzes 7 messages and should be considered atypical. This review of some studies that are similar to mine shows that there is no

consensus regarding how big a researcher's corpus should be, and though I agree with Grabill and Pigg's decision to adjust corpus size based on one's unit and method of analysis, this is not a decision that I see reflected in extant literature. Nevertheless, I believe their decision to collect enough data to see both saturation and redundancy is also wise. However, the sites and the topics I have selected for my study make it difficult for me to follow them in their effort to analyze a specific proportion of posts. Finally, most of the studies I reviewed use purposeful sampling and I did likewise. For my purposes, I analyzed 3 posts from 3 different subreddits at Reddit: Subreddit Drama, bestof, and Mensrights. The combined number of comments responding to these posts totaled 1854.

The situation at Bioware Social Network was different for a number of reasons. Unlike Reddit, where users can create new communities at will, the communities at BSN are established by the company itself. These communities, and the forums within each one, are associated with products developed by the company. I wanted to maintain the structure that I had decided upon for Reddit, where a central theme organized conversation in multiple communities. While users can create new posts in a forum, forums and communities are created by moderators. This means that the structure of the site, on the whole, is far less reactive to users than Reddit is. As a result, it is impossible to trace a story across multiple communities the way one could at Reddit. However, because I am approaching this from an ecological perspective, I wanted to find a topic that would generate posts from users in multiple communities. One topic that seemed controversial enough and broad enough is the topic of "love interests" or "LIs" in BioWare's games. In most of their role-playing games, including the Mass Effect and Dragon Age series, the player ("PC") can attempt to initiate romantic relationships with other (computer-controlled) characters in the game. These efforts can result in a love scene and could place the characters in

a romantic relationship. Some players take this element of the game very seriously because they are invested in the story; other players take this element of the game seriously because successfully navigating these storylines can unlock special abilities that will enhance gameplay. Adding to the intensity of this issue for some gamers is the question of the sexual orientation of the companion characters. In the Mass Effect series, characters either are or are not heterosexual and homosexual; no matter what sex players choose for their character, other characters in the game have a defined sexual orientation that does not change (although some characters are canonically bisexual). However, in Dragon Age 2, the designers made the decision to make many characters “playersexual.” This is a term that users at BioWare frequently used to describe their sexual orientation, as characters would be attracted to the player’s character regardless of the sex players chose for their characters. This made many players happy, as they were no longer prohibited from romancing characters they wanted to romance. However, other players were unhappy. Some were unhappy because they felt that this was poor character design; their argument here was that characters should have a definitive sexual orientation. Others were unhappy because they did not like homosexual characters coming onto their PC. As before, I wanted to select enough posts to give me a good number of comments to work with. My choices for communities was far more restricted, so this was not difficult. Ultimately, I chose to focus on multiple posts related to Dragon Age 2 from the general discussion forum (for owners and non-owners) in the Dragon Age 2 community totaling 1392 comments.

On the other hand, there is also a drawback to selecting posts that have over 100 replies and this is evident both at BioWare and Reddit. At Reddit, there were a number of responses to the creepshots/doxing incident that fell well below the comment threshold that I selected. Many of these responses were from the /r/circlejerk community. Circlejerk is a parodic subreddit

where users riff on popular posts in the community—typically posts from large communities (often default communities). Where SRS has a definite agenda and is critical of the power structure and ideologies that Reddit participates in and maintains, circlejerk has no agenda. It seeks primarily to poke fun at everything popular. There were a number of parodic response posts from the circlejerk community but most had well under 100 responses. Nevertheless, the presence of these posts reflects another way for users to respond to site-wide developments.

A similar thing happens at BSN when users want to call attention to something that makes them unhappy. A user will post multiple posts with the same title serially. These posts seldom generate a high number of replies, are often incendiary in some way, and are typically locked (that is, closed by moderators so that no one can append replies) soon after they are posted. Often, users who do this are accused of trolling. Both kinds of behavior are indicative of how users adapt to structural confines with different approaches to rhetorical invention and activity.

I settled on 100 replies as a minimum threshold based on my experience with both sites. From the time that I have spent as a participant and observer at both BSN and Reddit, I have noticed that after a certain number of comments, users tend to repeat points that others have made. My initial thought was that this was a kind of “forgetting” due to the amount of commentary in the thread, reminiscent of Trisha Roberts-Miller’s (2004) personal observations regarding her interactions with newsgroups: at a certain point, the traffic is overwhelming. And this could certainly be the reason for this pattern of behavior. Based on my analysis of the data (see chapters 3 and 4), I now believe that what we’re seeing is actually the circulation and re-circulation of heuristically-derived political judgments that function like topical frames. I will say more on this in subsequent chapters.

As an aside, I want to note that it is probably no coincidence that both controversies ultimately involve the body. I don't want to suggest that every controversial claim discussed in the forums is related to the body or embodiment; certainly the fact that the posts I chose are related to the body reflects my subjective contribution to the study. I have been a frequent visitor and contributor to both Reddit and BSN for over 1 and 2 years, respectively. In that time, I have seen a handful of controversies big enough to garner attention from sizeable groups of users. I choose to focus on the creepshots/doxing issue because it appeared to me to be the biggest controversy that I witnessed at the site in the time that I have been there ("biggest," in this case, refers not only to how much attention it received from larger "default" subreddits, but also that it resulted in outside media coverage, the departure from the site of an infamous member of the community, and a change in the administrators' policy regarding voyeuristic subreddits). I chose the issue of same-sex and transgender love interests at BSN because these issue continues to be controversial regardless of the particular game users discuss. As such, it could be said to be an issue that affects a large portion of contributing users. This is, of course, not the only issue that is this broad. I could have chosen, for instance, the frequent struggle between users who favor more "role-playing" versus users who favor more first-person shooter elements. I could have chosen to focus on the posts that make suggestions for future content. I could have chosen to look at posts where users make an argument for whether they want a voiced player character or a silent one. Or posts critical of the dialogue wheel, or the story of the game, and so on. At Reddit, it is more difficult to find an issue so important to enough users that it galvanizes the community the way that the doxing one did, but at BSN issues related to game design, story elements, and mechanics are important enough for users there to invest a great deal of time analyzing, critiquing, and recommending changes to the games. In fact, when the playable demo

for Dragon Age 2 was released, a civil war erupted in the Dragon Age 2 community over the changes that were made between Dragon Age: Origins and its sequel. The amount of rage expressed from both sides regarding DA2 was sufficient to cause the administrators to create a second “general discussion” forum strictly for registered owners of DA2, based on the reasoning that the people who were venting their spleen about how awful DA2 was were probably not owners of the game. At the same time, rumors were circulating that BioWare was banning users from the site if they expressed critical views of DA2 as well as blocking their access to the Electronic Arts servers, making it impossible for the digital rights management software to verify that their copy of the game was legitimate, thus rendering their game unplayable. This led some registered owners to create alternate accounts that were not tied to any copies of BioWare games just so they could critique the game. Whether or not this made it so that the owners-only general discussion forum was a calmer place is unknown. My point is that there have been other controversies at BSN, and no doubt at Reddit too, where embodiment was not an issue (at least, not overtly; I would argue that some of the arguments about DA2 did come down to issues of socioeconomic status, even if the topic of discussion didn’t overtly relate to questions of the body). My choice to focus on the issue of same-sex love-interests in the games had to do with the availability of multiple, easily-identifiable, high-response posts on this issue in all three of the gaming communities at BSN related to high-profile BioWare games. Furthermore, I felt that this issue was closer, thematically, to the creepshots/doxing issue at Reddit. At the end of the day, though, you could say my choice was based on convenience. I don’t believe that this is a limitation of the study; while every choice researchers make contributes something to the outcome, in this instance my objectives are related to how users take advantage of structure in their process of communally forming “civic” or political judgments. So long as the subject they

discuss offers an opportunity for users to orient themselves to this task, the actual subject they discuss is irrelevant. The only other concern I would have is for my ability to compare these cases. The question there is, does it matter what the topic of discussion is if I want to compare the cases? If I select two topics that are unrelated, would that be a limitation of the study? My first response would be that in a small-n, qualitative, non-generalizeable study such as this, the elements that are compared will make a major impact on the conclusions of the study, regardless of how closely related they are. I would add, as a second response, that determining how “related” the cases are is a bit tricky given that these cases are embedded in their own contexts.

Data Analysis and Coding

Because I approached the research site as an ecology, I needed to analyze multiple aspects of each forum. For the sake of ease, I refer to the “structures-in-use” (features provided by the system at social networking sites that users take advantage of when communicating with each other), information architecture, site policies, and approach to enforcement of said policies as the site’s structure. The language of site policies was analyzed with an eye towards characterizing the ways that they constructed users’ positions relative to administrators and moderators, the site’s purpose, and what constituted the “good” on the site. Structures-in-use were analyzed for how they enabled or restricted user behaviors. Information architecture was analyzed in terms of affordances, like structures-in-use; it was also analyzed in terms of its function as a source of rhetorical invention when users chose to leverage user information provided by the system in their arguments. My broader purposes for this part of my analysis were: first, to make an argument for the ethos of the site; second, to construct a context that would enable me to identify moments where users resisted the rhetorically-constructed position effected by the various elements of structure, above; third, to develop an argument for how

structural elements served as sources of rhetorical invention for users. It is this latter question that most directly relates to my overarching question about the relationship between a site's structure and the formation of political judgment in these spaces.

This leads us naturally to the question of political judgment. To answer my research questions, I wanted to first get a sense for the kind of rhetorical behavior that users were producing at each site. Thus, my first phase of analysis was a content-analysis using a modified version of the pragmatic codes developed by Graham (2008). Graham's codes are based on deliberative democratic theory and designed to facilitate evaluating the deliberative quality of a discussion. I added some codes based on what I was seeing in the data, as well as codes for the structures users took advantage of.

For this phase of my data analysis, my unit of analysis was the comment as a whole, meaning that if the comment featured one or more of the elements referred to in the codebook, the entire post was coded for it. This meant that the post could have multiple codes assigned to it.

The codes and their definitions were as follows:

STRUCTURAL CODES

Image: The user inserted an image file in the message. Note that this was only possible at BSN.

Linking:

Link to Comment: The user included a hyperlink to another user comment.

Link to Outside: The user included a hyperlink to a web page from outside of Reddit or BSN.

Link to Post: The user included a hyperlink to the top-level post originating a new comment thread.

Link to Site Docs: The user included a hyperlink to a “site document,” such as a posting regarding the rules, the terms of service, or any other resource intended to stipulate norms for the community.

Link to Other Subreddit: The user included a hyperlink to another subcommunity at Reddit. This was not possible at BSN.

Moderator Action: A message that exhibited the traces of moderator intervention were coded as “Moderator Action.” This was usually an automatic insertion from the system after a moderator removed a post. For example, at BSN, a message would say “Edit: Post Removed” and included an attribution to a moderator. At Reddit, it was not always clear if a moderator had acted. In some subreddits, the system would state “Comment removed” if moderators had removed it, whereas it would state “[deleted]” if the post’s author did it; however, other subreddits would simply use “[deleted]” for any comment removal regardless of who did it.

Multi-Quote: The message featured the use of BSN’s “multi-quote” feature, which allowed users to quote from multiple posts simultaneously in their replies. This was not possible at Reddit.

Quoting: Any message that featured the use of the site’s quoting feature, which allowed users to incorporate some or all of another user’s message in their own.

Referencing Comment: Any message wherein a user referred to something another user had said.

Referencing Site Docs: Any message wherein a user referred to a document at the site intended to establish norms for the community, such as terms of service or rules.

Referencing Site Ethos: Any message wherein a user referred to the ethos of the site. For instance, a user might say that Reddit has always been known for supporting free expression.

Referencing Votes: Any message wherein a user referred to the upvotes or downvotes a post received. Because there was no voting mechanic at BSN, this was only possible at Reddit.

Reply: Any message that used the system's reply feature. BSN did not have a reply feature, so this was only possible at Reddit.

PRAGMATIC CODES

Affirmation: Messages including a claim, supported by reasoning or evidence, that supported or defended another person's claim, rebuttal, or refutation were coded as affirmations.

Claim: Graham (2008) does not define what a claim is, except to say that it is a top-level comment that started a thread. This definition would be serviceable at Reddit because messages there are arranged hierarchically; however, BSN's messages are arranged chronologically, thus there are no "top-level" messages in the thread. In addition to this problem, I knew that in my next phase of data analysis I would be focusing on specific debates between users and I would need a definition of this term that was better suited to that task. According to Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz (2016), Toulmin defines claims as "debatable and controversial statements or assertions you hope to prove" (p. 130). Frans H. van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, Sally Jackson, and Scott Jacobs (1993) include claiming in a broader class of speech acts they call "assertives" (p. 28ff). "[A]ssertives are central to argumentation," they write, "not only as conveyances

for standpoints, but also as the means by which arguers put forward the grounds for their standpoints” (p. 29).

Habermas discusses validity claims in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 1 (1984).

He writes:

To sum up, we can say that actions regulated by norms, expressive self-presentations, and also evaluative expressions, supplement constative speech acts in constituting a communicative practice which, against the background of a lifeworld, is oriented to achieving, sustaining, and renewing consensus—and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims. The rationality inherent in this practice is seen in the fact that a communicatively achieved agreement must be based *in the end* on reasons. (p. 17)

Communicative action refers to the sustenance and renewal of this consensus through achieving consensual agreement to these validity claims based on reasons. Validity claims must be objectively criticizable. For instance, Habermas explains that “[r]ationality is understood to be a disposition of speaking and acting subjects that is expressed in modes of behavior for which there are good reasons or grounds. This means that rational expressions admit of objective evaluation. This is true of all symbolic expressions that are, at least implicitly, connected with validity claims (or with claims that stand in internal relation to a criticizable validity claim)” (p. 22). Earlier, he states, “[w]e use the term *argumentation* for that type of speech in which participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through arguments. An *argument* contains reasons or grounds that are connected in a systematic way with the *validity claim* of a problematic expression” (p. 18). From these two excerpts we can

gather that *a validity claim, or claim, is a contested statement that is objectively criticizable and can be supported with reasons or grounds*. This definition agrees with the others, so this is the one I used for my study. At Reddit, I applied this definition to any top-level comment that satisfied this definition. At BSN, I applied this definition to any message that satisfied this definition. If the message included some kind of reasoning or evidence to support the claim, it was coded as a claim; if not, it was coded as a non-reasoned claim.

Counter: messages that introduced claim, supported by reasoning or evidence, that changed the topic of the thread were coded as counters. This category was only used when it was clear that it was not a top-level comment. At Reddit, this was easy to determine, but as I stated above, BSN's organization of messages did not have top-level comments. Ultimately, for the sake of ease when comparing the two data sets, I merged claims and counters (and their non-reasoned counterparts).

Rebuttal: messages that included statements that directly challenged a claim or counter and provided reasoning or evidence.

Refutation: messages defending the claim or counter in response to a rebuttal and providing evidence or reasoning.

I also used non-reasoned variants on the above pragmatic codes whenever users chose not to include evidence or reasoning in support of their assertions.

Non-claim statements:

Acknowledgement: messages containing statements that acknowledged something another user had done or some action another user had taken.

Commissive: messages that included statements that agreed with or conceded a point were coded as commissives. Note that “agreed with” is not the same as an affirmation, since the latter is an actual claim in support of another argument. “Agreed with” refers to simple comments such as “Yes!” or “I agree.”

Curbing: Messages that included statements attempting to limit a user’s participation in the discussion were coded as curbing.

Degrading: Messages including statements insulting other users were coded as degrading

Directive Informative: Messages including statements that either asked for or provided information were coded as directive informative. In practice, this code was challenging to operationalize given that statements of fact can also fall within the definition of claims. I write more on this point in chapter 3.

Expressive: Messages including statements commenting on one’s own emotional state were coded as expressive.

Humor: Any message including statements made in jest were coded as humor.

Imperative: Any messages including statements in the imperative mood were coded as imperatives.

Usage Declarative: Any message including statements that attempting to clear up a misunderstanding were coded as usage declarative. As with affirmations, it is important to keep in mind that statements coded in this category are not making claims.

The first phase of data analysis allowed me to characterize the kind of discussions users were having in the comments and identify some of the structures they were using while they did so. Since I was interested in the degree to which political judgments shifted as an outcome of discussion, I needed to look more closely at the messages themselves to determine whether any

shifts in political judgment were identifiable. To do this, my second phase of data analysis involved associating claims, counters, rebuttals, refutations, and affirmations with user names to understand the evolution, or conservation, of positions over time. This analysis also included a topical analysis. For this part of my analysis the unit of analysis was the phrase. I coded in vivo for recurring claims in the arguments, including claims, reasoning, and evidence. Following this step, I reduced the codes where it appeared that multiple codes were referring to the same concept; for example, regarding one possible consequence of doxing someone, the topoi “witch hunt,” “lynch mob,” “mob justice,” “internet vigilantes,” and “vigilante justice” were reduced to “vigilantism.”

Phase 3 of my data analysis was meant to address the effects of structures-in-use on the deliberative activity at each site. For this phase, I intersected the structural codes with the pragmatic codes to determine what structures users were taking advantage of most often when engaging in particular kinds of argumentative or expressive behavior. Following this step, I performed a thematic analysis on messages that featured intersections between pragmatic and structural codes where the number of incidents seemed noteworthy. Specific procedures for this step are explained in greater detail in chapters 3 and 4 since the different structures of each site necessitated different approaches to the data.

Research Ethics

I think it’s obvious that the central ethical question for researchers is, how should we conduct ourselves in relation to our research participants? This question has given rise to many other related questions, some epistemological, some ontological. These questions involve the positionality of the researcher and the research participants and the degree to which this positionality makes understanding the lifeworld of the research participants possible (which we

could refer to as the problem of incommensurability), what kind of relationship should exist between researchers and research participants, who should benefit from research and in what ways, and the degree of interdependence between researchers and participants.

Digital researchers have approached ethics questions primarily through issues of framing, privacy, and attribution. By framing, I am referring to how we understand what the Internet “is.” Is it a medium of social interaction? Is it a medium for publishing? Is it “monolithic” or should it be understood as a space with heterogeneous ethical demands (Berry, 2004; Ess, 2009; Jones, 2004; Orgad, 2009)? How researchers answer these questions has implications for questions regarding the degree to which we consider data on the Internet to be “private” as well as what situations researchers should seek consent from people online to use their communication for research purposes. Unsurprisingly, these questions are answered differently depending upon the kind of research that one does. For instance, researchers doing virtual ethnography and virtual community research tend to view their research participants as members of a community who should be given the ability to consent to their participation as well as some say in how their data will be used. Communication researchers in a naturalistic (as opposed to lab) setting tend not to secure consent, however they also typically use quantitative or content-analysis methods that allow them to avoid directly quoting research subjects. This lets them avoid some of the problems that arise in an age where almost anything on the Internet is accessible by a simple search in a wide variety of search engines.

Privacy, publicity, risk

Heather A. Kitchin (2002), writing about participants in newsgroups, argues that “although some naturalistic means of observation may threaten the privacy of individuals who prefer to remain unobserved, public self-promotion shows that cyber participants clearly do not

value privacy” (p. 171-2). This is especially the case when the people communicating are not named and their geographical location is concealed. Kitchin’s position requires us to accept either that people in newsgroups understand that they are a public medium, or that the same privacy norms are shared by all newsgroups participants, or that newsgroups should be treated as public regardless of what people believe, or perhaps some combination of all three. The heyday of newsgroups has passed, but they are very similar to comment threads in various forums online. Consider that a newsgroup is essentially a group of people who circulate emails to each other. Because many newsgroups are publicly available and archived, there is only a difference of degree between communicating via email to a large group of people and posting to a forum online. In both cases, emails are stored on a server, it is merely the mode of delivery that differs. Some might argue that in one or the other case, a greater sense of community is felt among participants, but even so, this seems to be irrelevant if we are to regard the situation from Kitchin’s point of view. Even if there is a community, it is still a community whose members perform publicly. So long as anonymity is maintained, Kitchin argues that there is as much risk posed to participants as there would be in their everyday lives.

Michele White (n.d.) offers a unique take that, in a way, supports the notion for the Internet as a public space. White critiques current IRB frameworks and the discourse of research ethicists for equating avatars with real people rather than viewing them as art objects in their own right. Viewing them in this way complicates the research situation, since it requires us to confront this ambiguity in our data collection rather than assuming that we are dealing with a “real” person. White’s critique supports the view that the Internet is a publishing space and can be used to argue against the idea that researchers require informed consent; on the other hand, it does imply that online behaviors are artistic endeavors requiring copyright protection and

attribution. “Ronnie,” the main character in Amber Buck’s (2012) study of digital literacy practices on social networking sites, appears to approach services like Facebook and Twitter with an awareness of his audience. Later on in the study, Ronnie adopts different personae that organize online content in terms of different hobbies or interests; in one instance, he creates a fictional online girlfriend as a prank and at another point uses an alter-ego to reflect his interest in music. Ronnie’s intermeshing of his offline and online lives and his active construction of multiple digital personae reflect the ambiguity that White describes. Buck’s study demonstrates the limitations of a “real person or rhetorical construct” binary for researchers.

Kris Nesbitt (2009) argues for a similar position in spite of the fact that her study focuses on the blogs of women whose children were stillborn:

The sites might seem inherently private, personal creations meant for self-healing and documenting a life. Yet, their context is eminently public, a key point. These sites are created for audiences, not solely for the women themselves. Documenting and cathartic self-healing through writing could be achieved privately through scrapbooks and journals. These women make a conscious decision to share their most intense heartache in a public realm. (p. 49)

In other words, the very publicity of their writing is an essential part of the function the blogs serve for their authors. Nesbitt’s position supports the idea that the Internet can be viewed as a publishing space, at least in this circumstance.

As many researchers remind us, the Internet is not a single space. It is used for a variety of different purposes and by people across the globe. As a result, privacy norms cannot be assumed to be universal—the context may presume particular privacy norms and the users themselves may bring with them different assumptions about privacy (Ess, 2009). Furthermore,

we should not assume that simply because the Internet is public that its users write with the notion that their words will be seen by people that they did not intend and that their words will be stored on a server, possibly forever. Recent research (Antheunis, M. L. et. al., 2012; Jiang, C. L., Bazarova, N. N., and Hancock, J. T., 2013) has found that users online tend to disclose more than they would in a face-to-face encounter. Yong Jin Park (2013) found that, contrary to other communication research that has been done, a person's familiarity with technology was the most significant factor affecting their privacy behavior online and that this knowledge appeared to be greater among male users when compared to female users. While we cannot base conclusions on one study, especially when that study finds results that run contrary to multiple studies, we can conclude that in spite of what users "should" know about how public their behavior is, they do not always act as though they can be observed by just about anyone. danah boyd (2007) characterizes the Internet as a place where the context has collapsed. In our offline lives, different places are subject to differing privacy norms—some places being more intimate than others. Most of us can figure this out based on context and social cuing. Because information on the Internet doesn't stay put (it is "greased," as Charles Ess (2009) puts it, and easy to move), context is unstable. Unfortunately, users do not always pay heed to this reality when they post in a public place. Thus she reports that

When asked, all youth know that anyone could access their profiles online. Yet, the most common response I receive is '...but why would they?' Of course, the same teens who believe that no one is interested in them are pseudo-stalking the 'hottie' that they have their eyes on. Educators are not the only ones playing ostrich for mental sanity. ("Navigating public life today")

boyd describes the Internet as a heterogeneous space that groups of users use in different ways. Like the offline world, where we have offices, beaches, and auditoriums, the Internet has instant-messaging, email, online communities, and social networking sites. This perspective is shared by many researchers (Barnes, 2004; Berry, 2004; Ess, 2009; Hall, Frederick, and Johns, 2004; Jones, 2004).

I argue that in spite of the fact that the Internet is public, researchers cannot approach each research setting as a fully public space; rather, we must evaluate each on its own to determine how to handle the question of publicity versus privacy in order to determine whether or not consent is necessary. In addition, the question of whether or not to get consent is also impacted by the research goals and study design.

Attribution and Consent

How one resolves the question of publicity and privacy impacts a researcher's (ethical) choice of attribution, disclosure of one's presence and motives, and consent. Clearly, if one views the Internet as a publishing space, users can be viewed as copyright holders who are entitled to having their work credited to them, since they are authors. White (n.d.) argues effectively against any simple treatment of users as either artistic constructs or human subjects, at least in a research design that does not include offline interviewing in addition to collection of online data; since my study design does not call for offline interviewing, and since I believe that usernames and avatars contribute to a user's rhetoric, I have to take White's critique into consideration.

Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter (2009) discuss this issue in depth and provide a helpful framework for Internet researchers struggling with determining whether or not consent is necessary. It's based on evaluating the research situation on four factors: privacy versus

publicity, topic sensitivity, degree of interaction between the researcher and research subjects, and subject vulnerability. In the categories of sensitivity and vulnerability, they recommend that community and cultural standards are taken into consideration. In other words, does the community that one is researching consider the topic to be sensitive? What is the risk to individual research subjects if the information they are sharing were to be brought to greater public attention or scrutiny? These are the kinds of questions that McKee and Porter recommend that researchers ask as they their rubric to research.

The research that I have reviewed ranges between virtual community/virtual ethnography research and content-analysis work. It would be easy to assume that because ethnographers tend to view meanings as emerging out of a community, they would be predisposed to self-disclose and gain consent as a rule; however, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, in Arthur C. VanLear et. al.'s (2005) study of online AA support groups the researchers chose not to make research participants aware that they were being studied, arguing in a note that "open meetings are not restricted to alcoholics or those seeking recovery. Therefore, interaction in open online meetings is public behavior and accessible to study" (p. 24 n. 3). To be fair, the researchers do not quote any of the posts or identify any of the participants, making it difficult for future readers to track the original posts down. Similarly, Jeana Frost and Michael Massagli's (2008) study of the online community, PatientsLikeMe, collects publicly visible information from user profiles without getting consent. Curiously, both researchers were employed by PatientsLikeMe at the time of the study; it is possible that their status as employees supported their decision not to seek consent. It is also possible that they may view user profiles as public web documents. I would argue that given the sensitivity of the topics, it is surprising that consent was not sought, especially in the PatientsLikeMe study.

Other studies support my initial assumption. For instance, Filipp Sapienza (2007) describes his decision to craft a very specific ethos for his ethnography of a virtual community he calls Virtual Russia:

In developing my virtual Russian ethos as *skazki pushkina/bella*, I gambled that I could maintain a unique cultural-technological ethos that might indeed be higher than it actually should be if people met me face-to-face. This bit of fictionalizing did not trouble me because nearly every identity online is somewhat fictional. (p. 100)

That is, Sapienza takes advantage of the communicative setting to construct a particular identity for himself that takes advantage of reactivity in addition to taking advantage of the unique properties of the rhetorical situation on the Internet. Of course, the ethos of the researcher could be seen as one of the ways that the researcher negotiates access to the field, and since Sapienza ultimately becomes one of the administrators of the website, it may be the case that his “cultural-technological ethos” helped make him more of an insider. I would also like to note that Sapienza recommends that “in naturalistic designs that involve a rhetorical basis” (p. 106) the researcher should help the community of research participants if asked (as he himself did). He argues that “communication theorists and digital writing scholars have a special obligation to use the methods and results of scholarly inquiry in such a way as to benefit the communities they study” (p. 106). Thus, Sapienza’s approach to the Virtual Russia community is reminiscent of Norman K. Denzin’s (1997) “feminist communitarian” approach. Sapienza treats his research participants in a “neighborly” way (Hall, Frederick, and Johns, 2004), positioning himself as a member of the community that he is researching and “exhibit[ing] reciprocal care and understanding” (p. 248). This is the case even though the topic does not appear to be very sensitive nor the population very vulnerable.

In Radin's (2006) study of the Breast Cancer Action Nova Scotia (BCANS) online community and in Barbara L. Ley's (2007) ethnographic case study of an online pregnancy and mothering group, we continue to see a "neighborly" approach taken by researchers to communities that may be more vulnerable or to topics that may be considered more sensitive. Ley had been a member of the community since 2005 and was able to build upon her ethos within the community to get the site administrators to create a forum at the site specifically for her study. In that forum, Ley was able to provide potential participants with informed consent documents, a project description, project updates, discussion questions, and a place to answer questions about the project.

On the other hand, studies that are more oriented towards discourse analysis, content analysis, or rhetorical analysis rarely describe protocols where researchers gain consent from research subjects or disclose their presence or motives. The exception is Heidi A. McKee's (2004) study of student writing in an online forum about sexuality and sexual orientation gained consent from students for interviews as well as quoting from their posts. Black's (2008) study of deliberation and storytelling in an online forum about what New York should put in the place of the World Trade Center changes the names of participants but includes no discussion of informed consent nor of self-disclosure. Corey's (2007) discourse analysis of discussion forums for the show "Fear Factor" at NBC.com does not describe any procedure to disclose researcher presence or motives, nor to seek consent. Furthermore, Corey does not note any attempt to pseudonymize research subjects. Since users there apparently use handles, Corey apparently reproduces those handles in her study. The topic of conversation she focused on was the lack of fat bodies on the show. Biswas (2009), like Corey, performs a discourse analysis. Biswas is investigating public deliberation in a forum at a Louisiana television station. Like Corey, he

does not describe gaining consent, disclosing his presence, or changing the handles of the users he quotes. Goss's (2007) diachronic study of comment replies to Jay Rosen's blogs likewise does not describe self-disclosure, gaining consent, or changing the handles of the users he quotes. Grabill and Pigg's (2012) rhetorical analysis of rhetorical agency and identity performance on a blog called Science Buzz does not describe disclosure or consent, however they do not reference any of the users by name or pseudonym. They do directly quote users because of their rhetoric-in-detail approach (Johnstone and Eisenhart, 2008). Graham's (2010) content analysis of the "Big Brother" forum does not describe any procedures to self-disclose, gain consent, or pseudonymize research subjects. Finally, Eliza Tanner's (2001) textual analysis of posts to a Chilean newspaper's forum regarding the arrest of Pinochet considers these posts to be inherently public, likening them to letters to the editor. She argues that posters "were quick to complain if the letters were not posted" (p. 387). In the studies that did not involve self-disclosure or consent, I noted that these were studies with a large number of individual comments to review and they were typically going back to comments that had been left prior to the start of research. Furthermore, in almost all instances, the locations were forums associated with television networks or digital forums with a large number of users. Finally, none of the topics appear to be "sensitive," although ultimately that is a question that would have to be answered by participants. Corey (2007) and Grabill and Pigg (2012) appear to be the exception, though it seems that the latter handled this by not reporting any names. This in itself does not guarantee that one could not discover the original posters (an internet search using the quotes that Grabill and Pigg provide should do the trick) but it's a start. One could argue that because users in Corey's study are already using pseudonyms, there is less risk in directly quoting them. None of the studies I am discussing here would qualify as ethnographies or virtual community

research—that is, they are all designed in a way that limits interaction between the researcher and the research subjects. The only study that does not do this is McKee's (2004); furthermore, since the subjects are writing about sexual orientation, and since they are college students, one could argue that this is a sensitive topic (especially if any students were to self-disclose their sexual identity). Her study has only 11 participants. Because of the topic sensitivity and the high degree of interaction between McKee and her participants (she interviews them as well as studying their posts), it makes sense that she seeks consent and discloses her motives to her participants (furthermore, that she only has 11 participants facilitates a high degree of interaction with her participants).

Studies like mine do not appear to seek consent or disclose researcher motives or presence as a norm. However, in most cases, these researchers are using research sites that are, arguably, obviously public (websites for television networks, publications, blogs). Furthermore, these researchers are not often working with vulnerable groups or sensitive topics. Thus the questions I must respond to with my research practices are:

1. Should I consider Reddit and the BioWare Social Network to be obviously public?
2. Can Reddit (and BSN) be considered homogeneous spaces, or should they be considered heterogeneous enough to warrant different norms of consent in each separate community?
3. Are the topics of the sexuality of video game characters and creepshotting sensitive enough to warrant gaining consent from users?
4. To what extent can these populations be considered vulnerable?
5. What practices can I adopt in order to protect research participants, if necessary?

When I began collecting data for this study, my data was already six months old. Following the advice of G. Jon Hall, Douglas Frederick, and Mark D. Johns (2004), I “lurked” on Reddit for a long time prior to deciding what incident would be the focal point of my data collection. At BioWare, I had been a contributor to multiple threads in different communities prior to settling on an issue to focus on with my data collection. Although some form of self-disclosure and informed consent would have been possible, at the time I chose not to do either because researchers in my field, doing studies like mine, tend not to. Furthermore, I was inclined to see both spaces as obviously public and to view them as publishing media rather than gathering places.

BioWare is a different space than Reddit. The freedom that users have on Reddit to create their own subreddits means that intimate virtual spaces can emerge there. I speculate, based on over 2 years of participation and observation there, that the degree of control over the structure of the BioWare Social Network exercised by BioWare/Electronic Arts, as well as the layout of the website itself, creates spaces of less intimacy. One can view BSN as a homogeneous space more easily than Reddit and it is easier to view BSN as obviously public since it is attached to one of the largest video game companies in the world. Nevertheless, the particular topic that I am working with—dealing with sexuality and sexual orientation—is a sensitive one. To be safe, I would argue that I should have performed some gesture of self-disclosure and informed consent here as well, even though my IRB views this as unnecessary given the inherently public nature of the Internet. However, how I would have gone about gaining consent poses some problems. At Reddit, subreddits have moderators that manage them. BioWare has moderators who are employed by the company to enforce the terms of service and etiquette rules. These moderators are not interacting with a community so much as supervising

people using their equipment. It is organized more like a bulletin board (akin to the way message systems on some old BBS's were before there was a World Wide Web). I could have created a post indicating my presence, research questions, goals, and plans for the data (including my intention to attribute quotes to user handles), but I am not sure how many people would have seen it if I did. Had I repeatedly posted it to be sure it remained visible, or "bumped" it to the top of the messages by commenting on it to keep the message on the front page, that action may have been viewed as spam by users or moderators (Smith, 2004). As with Reddit, I do intend, even though it may only be a token gesture, to allow users at BSN to review my work and comment on it and I plan on informing them of my intentions to publish my findings and allow them to have a say in this. This not only functions as a validity check (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), but I believe it brings me closer to the standard of "neighborliness" that I discussed earlier.

In each case, users at the space do not use their real names, providing them some protection, but their words are easily accessible via an Internet search so were I to leave their handles out of my study one would still be able to find their posts. Some of the very helpful strategies suggested by researchers are not applicable to my study. Susan Barnes' (2004) technique of combining personality traits of multiple people into one composite personality to showcase an online behavior in order to maintain anonymity is not suitable for a study like this one, which requires attention to rhetorical moves in an argument and specific word choices. Furthermore, I would argue that even changing one's handle is problematic, since the ability to specify a name for oneself is an instance of structure-in-use that affects conversation.

The Rhetorical Research Situation

In their sustained critique of positivism and simultaneous establishment of the naturalist research paradigm, Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba (1985) claim that "the inquirer and the

‘object’ of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable” (p. 94). From this fundamental entanglement of researcher and participant three consequences emerge: reactivity, indeterminacy, and interaction. Reactivity is what happens when participants’ interaction with the researcher is affected by the fact that they are in a research setting. Indeterminacy is unfortunately labelled because it doesn’t capture very well the core idea they are expressing, which is that the researcher’s observation affects the research setting and the participants (they based this on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, hence “indeterminacy”). Interaction refers to how the researcher’s observation is shaped by what is observed. In each of these relationships, participants shape researchers (and inquiry) and researchers shape participants (and data). Thus they argue that “objectivity in its pure form is an unattainable state” (p. 108). However, while the positivistic form of objectivity is unattainable, Lincoln and Guba are interested in “balance and fairness” (p. 108), as I discussed earlier (see “Validity,” above). For Lincoln and Guba, it would seem that the researcher must situate herself between the poles of “going native” and becoming “ethnocentric”; at one or the other pole balance and fairness (and thus the credibility of the study) are sacrificed. This appears to be a slightly modified version of the two poles that Michael Agar (2008) refers to as “going native” and being a “fly on the wall,” a dichotomy that Leslie G. Roman (1993) critiques in her ethnography of punk women. Roman’s critique extends to naturalist ethnography generally, arguing that “going native” amounts to intellectual tourism while being the “fly on the wall” mimics a kind of objectivist stance that, in theory, naturalism intended to correct. During the course of her fieldwork, Roman recognizes that the positions offered to the researcher by naturalism—going native and the fly on the wall—obscure the ways that researchers and research participants are socially positioned and vulnerable to relations of power. Significantly, it is not only that the

researcher can act in ways that oppress research participants; Roman reports that she was surprised to discover that she could be treated in “oppressive and objectifying ways” by male Punks (p. 292). As a result of her awareness of her situatedness as a female academic researcher in her community of research participants, Roman decides to make interventions to encourage the female Punks to become aware of their gendered positionality and to resist it. Another theme of her ethnography is her continuous efforts to negotiate her status in the group, which she contrasts the notion that once access is achieved, it is achieved for good.

Denzin (1997) argues that the ethnographer’s work should help members of the community escape oppression: “Feminist, communitarian research is judged by its authenticity, its fairness, and its ability to provoke transformations and changes in the public and private spheres of everyday life—transformations that speak to conditions of oppression” (p. 275). Denzin argues that the legitimation crisis experienced by Western culture means that ethnographers can no longer have the authority to study anyone, and the dialogical understanding of the researcher’s (and the other’s) subjectivity and their mutual involvement in the production of research mean that researchers cannot claim to own the field notes from their encounters (p. xiii). The vexing issue for naturalism of the researcher’s involvement with research subjects is gone, and validity is transformed into legitimacy, invoking the situatedness of the researcher’s subjectivity and discourse within a political economy. For Denzin, the goal is “catalytic validity, the degree to which a given research project empowers and emancipates a research community” (p. 10). This is referred to later in his text as “neighborliness” (p. 276), the capacity for the product of research to serve the community it is about rather than the community of other researchers or policy-makers—precisely the communities who are imagined by Lincoln and Guba, Agar, and others as the consumers of research. Denzin sees this as a democratic project.

This is a very short consideration of how positivism has been critiqued. We can see that the positivist notion that the researcher can be a completely objective observer whose gaze does not interfere with data gives way to naturalist concerns regarding the interdependence of researcher, participant, and data, then to materialist, feminist, post-structural, and post-colonial concerns regarding the effects of the researcher's and research participants' positionality within a web of power relations that exceed these parties. All of these theories have ethical implications, hence Denzin's claim that the purpose of research should benefit research participants. Researchers investigating digital rhetoric, virtual communities, and computer-mediated communication reproduce these orientations towards the research situation, although it should be noted that the above discussion considers ethnography primarily. The question for digital researchers is not simply what ethical procedures are necessitated by the research goals and questions of the study; we must consider what ethical procedures are necessitated by our understanding of our position vis-à-vis research participants and consumers of the research, which I have discussed at length above, and what the epistemological impact our presence will have. By "epistemological impact," I am referring to how our presence shapes the content of the data we collect (Alcoff, n.d.; see also Spivak, 1988).

How to situate oneself on this spectrum is partly informed by one's theoretical approach to research and by the context. Recall from above that Kristie S. Fleckenstein et. al. (2008) argue that writers are immersed in ecosystems in a way that resembles the depiction of the researcher and participant sketched by Lincoln and Guba, although Fleckenstein et. al.'s is a more inclusive description of interactivity because it incorporates the entire system. They argue that the researcher is not above or outside of this system but immersed in it:

Immersion is thus an important corrective to the flawed belief that a researcher can be separated from the phenomenon of study. An ecological orientation fuses the knower, the known, and the context of knowing. Research, researcher, and phenomenon are interdependent. An individual can be identified as a researcher—can be a researcher—only to the extent that he or she is a participant in and an effect of a particular ecology. (p. 395-6)

However, this view of participation does not have the same ethical demand that Denzin or Sapienza place on the researcher to help the community, although I believe it has ethical implications for researchers. We have to go back to exploring what it means to “participate” in an ecology. Fleckenstein et. al. describe the researcher’s involvement in the process as a form of interdependence which includes “active participation in the multiple linkages of the research web” and “hails back into the research process ... the disorder and complexity of what Thomas Newkirk calls the wet, messy, rowdy elements like feelings, intuitions, and bodies: heart, mind, and guts” (p. 396). So again we have what is essentially an ontological account of the researcher’s subjectivity. But this interdependence does not necessarily mean that the researcher must participate in the communities she researches. Indications of interdependence may be registered at the level of case binding, data selection, or data analysis (for instance); rather than having a “rigorous” approach that insists upon these elements being static throughout the research process, a researcher who adapts to the field and makes changes to her design as a reaction to the ecology is registering “feedback.” Fleckenstein et. al. would argue that to avoid doing so is to deny the situatedness of the researcher.

Furthermore, grounding the situatedness that Fleckenstein et. al. refer to is a more basic situatedness described by Jurgen Habermas (1981), wherein a researcher’s ability to interpret

data is predicated upon the ability to assess validity claims, requiring the researcher to participate in communicative action with research participants, rendering any claims to objectivity void (see pp. 102-141). This is similar to the phenomenological claim, made by Edmund Husserl, that the subjective life-world is the grounding of the objective sciences (Husserl, 1970[1900]). As an example of this, Maurice Merleau-Ponty examines the way that intentional consciousness can pick out an individual tree from a forest skyline. The ability to establish figure-ground relationships like this comes prior to any “objective” analysis of objects in the world and thus grounds the objective sciences (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). However, Habermas’ argument is predicated upon the claim that the lifeworld is universal. Many theorists across multiple disciplines have challenged this claim, and Habermas ultimately argues that there are multiple lifeworlds (see Habermas 1998). This introduces the problem of incommensurability into the research setting; some, like Gayatri Spivak (1988) argue that these lifeworlds are forever alienated from each other, while others posit various ways of making them commensurable. Regardless, my point in all of this is to show that even when a digital researcher adopts a “lurking” pose—that is, not disclosing her presence to research subjects and leaving no tangible trace (other than in the server logs) to users that she was ever there—she cannot escape the interdependence that Fleckenstein et. al. describe because the researcher is making decisions about procedures, methods, and redemption of validity claims throughout the process—decisions that are interdependent with other agents and elements of the research setting.

Furthermore, Habermas’ discussion of the relationship between researchers and research participants foreshadows a way to understand the research situation as a *rhetorical* situation. We can also see this in Lincoln and Guba’s use of “credibility” in the place of validity and their depiction of research as fundamentally persuasive or not (1985). It should be obvious that a

research report is rhetorical, but to say that the research setting is itself a rhetorical situation has different implications for knowledge production and the researcher's identity. Fleckenstein et al. claim that "in ecological language, rhetoric is immersed in feedback loops that link the timeliness of the situation, the constraints of a situation, the push-pull of actuality and possibility, and the vagaries of audience to the research ecosystem" (p. 405). Thus, the research setting is rhetorical and the researcher-qua-rhetor is shaped by the situation; the knowledge that emerges is a product of a particular moment in time. Their invocation of *kairos* calls to mind Hawhee's (2003) concept of invention in the middle. This implies that rhetors themselves, and thus researchers' identities, are the outcomes of situated (and kairotic) rhetorical encounters (see Hawhee, p. 18); this is anticipated by LeFevre (1987, p. 119) and argued by Biesecker (1989, p. 112), and Sharon Crowley. With a claim that resonates with Habermas', Crowley and Hawhee (2004) argue that "within a rhetorical encounter rhetors' discourse merges with and emerges from *doxa*" (p. 51). Sapienza's (2007) construction of an ethos appropriate to Virtual Russia is an excellent example of how researcher identity is shaped for a particular rhetorical situation, although in theory this happens in less obvious and less conscious ways.

The outcomes of the research setting are contingent upon how one theorizes the situatedness of the researcher, and these outcomes are not limited to knowledge production in that power dynamics also come into play. The researcher is herself positioned in networks of power before she accesses the research site, at which point other relationships of power are constituted. Participant data becomes a kind of commodity and the knowledge produced in the encounter of researcher and participants circulates among elites who are remote to the original site where meanings were shaped. Whereas in the natural sciences elements of the positivist's approach to knowledge production are still evident, qualitative researchers must choose an

epistemological approach. Standards of rigor in the natural sciences exist to ensure that researchers follow protocols exactly, ensuring replicability. Experimental design exists with the belief that these procedures isolate variables and can provide insight into universal, generalizable causal relationships between them. This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of the work that is done in the natural sciences and I do not mean to suggest that qualitative work is inherently better than quantitative work; both reflect different approaches to knowledge production and have their role to play. But qualitative work is not quantitative and we cannot simply imitate the standards of validity used in quantitative work without giving thought to how our situatedness impacts validity.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) distinguish between positivistic notions of internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to how much trust we have that there is a causal relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable; external validity refers to our ability to generalize the results to different persons, settings, and times (p. 290-1). They also include reliability and objectivity among the core aspects of positivistic notions of trustworthy research. Because naturalism is based on an ontology of multiple constructed realities (p. 295), these notions of validity are unacceptable for the paradigm, and these concepts are replaced by credibility, transferability (in the place of internal and external validity, respectively), dependability, and confirmability. Based on the notion that there are multiple constructed realities, credibility refers to the ability of the researcher to demonstrate that she has represented the participants' constructions of reality in a credible way. However, the researcher must also ensure that findings can be easily transferred to future contexts by other researchers/readers by providing thick description. Dependability replaces reliability; Lincoln and Guba use the term to imply replicability. That is, if two independent researchers can reproduce the experiment by

following the same process under similar conditions and get the same result, then you have replicability and therefore have demonstrated reliability. In their discussion of dependability, the recommendation they appear to be most comfortable with is to have the research audited by an outside party. (The other recommendation was to have two separate research teams work independently of the other on the same phenomenon but in daily communication; they refer to this as stepwise replication; see p. 317.) The auditor would verify that the research was conducted via an acceptable process. Confirmability would be established by an auditor's investigation into the research findings to ensure that they are "supported by data and internally coherent" (p. 318). Ultimately, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that no naturalistic ethnography can be perfectly trustworthy; "it can at best *persuade*" (p. 329). Trustworthiness is, in the end, a rhetorical effect.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) representation of trustworthiness in naturalism is problematic for some versions of qualitative inquiry. Andrew C. Sparkes (2001) provides a helpful discussion of critiques of Lincoln and Guba's model, including internal contradictions between the specific techniques for establishing trustworthiness and the epistemological foundations of naturalism and criticism regarding the project of retrofitting positivist criteria for use in qualitative research. I consider it to be more important to consider the value of the four criteria. Certainly, I agree with Richard H. Haswell (2005) that replicability and aggregability are important, and that this requires "inquiry that is explicitly enough systematized in sampling, execution, and analysis to be replicated" and "exactly enough circumscribed to be extended" (p. 201). As someone using a case study methodology, I value replicability and aggregability because they help ensure that the case study can serve its function as a building block to expert knowledge (see Flyvbjerg, 2006). That is to say, the case study reflects context-dependent

knowledge; however, upon evaluating multiple case studies, a generalized picture emerges. According to Bent Flyvbjerg (2006), this reflects how people learn. I consider the ability to replicate qualitative research important, not as a validity check (I will explain why in a moment), but as a means of extending our knowledge of the phenomenon that we are investigating. In other words, I see replicability as a means of facilitating aggregability, the ease with which research can be assimilated into the larger picture provided by the background of other studies. Sparkes (2001) argues that we must avoid universal validity criteria because this would force “artificial categories” on research paradigms that may violate their internal structures of meaning. He advocates an approach where researchers make their assumptions as clear as possible so that they could be judged on their own terms (p. 549). I believe this too facilitates aggregability in an epistemological environment after the paradigm wars of the 80’s and 90’s.

Assuming an ecological stance, and imagining the research situation as a rhetorical situation in which the rhetor and all participants are immersed in a relationship which their identities and rhetorical actions emerge out of and merge with (that is, an invention in the middle approach), what are the demands upon the researcher for producing credible research? From this perspective, whatever knowledge that is produced will be context-dependent and considered to be produced by the ecosystem itself, of which the researcher and all of the participants are a part. Given that this is the case, a true replication of such a study is *a priori* impossible. From the perspective of *kairos* this should be obvious, since the researcher/rhetor is moved to act at the right time (Fleckenstein et. al., 2008); however, the fact that the researcher is a part of the ecosystem means that the presence of the particular researcher changes the system. While another investigator can repeat the same procedures, this cannot provide validation of the previous study if we assume that researchers are immersed in the research setting. In regards to

an auditing process, I question what would be gained. An auditor is an outsider who reviews a researcher's materials to verify that the inquiry process was done in a satisfactory way and to assure that the researcher's conclusions are backed by data. The metaphor that informs Lincoln and Guba's (1985) discussion of the auditor is a fiscal auditor, one who checks the books. But accounting and qualitative research are vastly different endeavors that presume entirely different stances from the person who keeps the books (if you will). Who would the auditor be? In a fiscal setting, an auditor would likely be another accountant. However, a data auditor would presumably be another researcher. In that sense, the auditor is similar to any other reader. Unlike a financial situation, the readership for research come from a variety of different epistemological, ontological, and political perspectives. Is it satisfactory, any longer, for an auditor to say that the work reflects the standards of a particular discipline and leave it at that, at least in a field like composition and rhetoric, in which "methodological ecumenicalism" has been the rule? Furthermore, in ecological terms, what does an audit mean? It means that the researcher must now make a case to someone who is outside of the research setting. We can understand this as an expansion of the system and a new feedback pathway. However, why is it particularly valuable, or any more valuable than the broader system of peer review that already exists? Furthermore, note that Lincoln and Guba's (1985) description of dependability itself transforms into replicability, and that this version of replicability seems to imply rigor. This is why the audit is favored over stepwise replicability. In the latter, two research teams have to maintain frequent communication to avoid developing different processes. Only by maintaining the same research processes and design can stepwise replicability function as a way of establishing dependability. Rigor is the term for how well researchers follow their research design. This is a holdover from quantitative research contexts wherein the research design is

itself the guarantor of reliable results; if one adheres to the design (demonstrates rigor) then one produces valid data. But the ecological approach is incompatible with rigor because the concept of immersion and interdependence presume that the researcher is affected by the ecosystem. Thus the research design must itself remain fluid. To attempt rigor would be contradictory to the ontology of the researcher in this paradigm. Hence Fleckenstein et. al.'s emphasis on *kairos* and *te prepon* (decorum). What I argue is left is the notion of thick description that articulates very clearly what the researcher did, the moments when the research design changed as a result of influence from the ecosystem, and very clear adherence to data that is produced. I would also argue that member checking is helpful for providing a take on the report from others who inhabited the ecosystem along with the researcher. However, members should not be given epistemological priority; that is, the "truth" is not located with the research participants. Nevertheless, they are the best equipped and best situated to offer to take on the report. Furthermore, as I stated previously, I believe it is an important ethical step for this study.

Chapter 3: Reddit

Recall from chapter 1 that deliberative democrats seek to orchestrate just procedures so that the judgments produced from discussion will be just for all affected. Their theories are often rooted in the work of Habermas and Rawls. Habermas provides us with a very rigid definition of discourse, which concerns the redemption of truth claims within an ideal speech situation. The latter is an ideal to aim for rather than something that we can expect to be achieved in any given existing speech situation. If participants are engaged in communicative action, there should be the possibility for new judgments of a public character to be formed as a result of the process. Unfortunately, due to social, cognitive, and affective factors, strategic communication is far more likely. Additionally, the research on judgment formation reveals that people rely predominantly on heuristic, rather than systemic, judgment formation, basing their positions off of the cues from elites with whom they identify. Committing to genuine communicative action requires one to be willing to change one's position; many people likely feel threatened by this prospect.

I believe the question for deliberative democrats is, how can we design spaces and situations that promote just procedures and communicative action?

Given how prominent social networking sites have become, I believe it's important for researchers to study the design of these spaces and the kind of deliberation that occurs within them.

From chapter 2, recall that my research questions are:

- RQ1: In what ways could quoting/replying, hyperlinking, message structure, and access to users' profiles (and the information made available in them) affect the degree to which political judgments shift through the process of user discussions in comment areas?

- RQ2: In what ways does the tone or ethos of the site, as a product of its design or information architecture, affect the degree to which political judgments shift through the process of user discussions in comment areas?

These research questions explore the relationship between “structures-in-use” (features provided by the system at social networking sites that users take advantage of when communicating with each other), information architecture, site policies, approach to enforcement of said policies, and the rhetorical contributions of users. I refer to the former four items in the preceding sentence as the site’s structure for the sake of brevity. These contributions were analyzed, looking for changing, or newly emerging, political judgments. For my data, I selected multiple threads from two SNSs: reddit.com and the BioWare Social Network (BSN) because they offered two highly contrasting forum user experiences. I selected threads from each site that had a high number of user replies and that featured arguments over political issues. Drawing upon Beiner’s (1983) definition of political judgments as “judgments about the form of collective life that is desirable for us to pursue within a given context of possibilities” (p. 38), I looked for arguments on controversies that elicited users to express political judgments. At BSN, users sparred over whether non-playable members of the player’s party should be explicitly hetero- or homosexual (I make the argument that this is issue invites political judgment in chapter 4). In this chapter, I analyze data from discussions at Reddit concerning the administrators’ decision to remove a handful of related “creepshot” communities from the site in the wake of an expose published by the website Gawker, which was picked up and reported on by CNN’s Anderson Cooper.

First, I describe and analyze the structure of the Reddit.com website. In this section, I argue that these features give users the impression that the site champions negative liberty. Users, like citizens, have responsibilities towards their communities while they are

simultaneously de-emphasized and obscured by the design and information architecture of the site. Second, I provide the context for the discussions that I analyzed at Reddit and argue for why I believe the issues taken up by users in response qualify as political per Beiner's definition. In the third section of this chapter I describe and analyze the relationship between structures-in-use, site design, information architecture, and political disagreement at Reddit, focusing on how users took advantage of quoting, linking, and replying in their discussions with each other. I argue that rather than demonstrating a capacity for generating new, co-constructed political judgments or movement of one's judgment before and after discussion, we see instead users taking advantage of site features to undermine each other. As would be expected from the research I reviewed in chapter 1, the arguments users engaged in focused primarily on framing the issues in ways favorable to one side or the other.

I found that there was less argumentative activity at Reddit than there was at BSN, measured by content analysis. More importantly, rather than finding evidence of communicative action, successful persuasion, or even slight movements in political judgments, users at Reddit engaged in strategic communication. Rhetorical framings, likely developed over time within enclaves at the site, were circulated in lieu of reflection or deliberation over the issues being discussed. The ethos of playfulness and liberal-democratic freedom effected by the site's structure affords users opportunities to construct unique and fun personae, and gives moderators an outsized role in policing behavior, these structures operate in conjunction with group tendencies towards enclave construction and heuristic judgment formation. Based on these observations, I ultimately conclude that Internet forums may actually promote polarization.

1. The Structure of Reddit

In this section of my chapter, I will describe and analyze the structure of Reddit. I am using the word “structure” as a catch-all that includes the structures-in-use, visual design, information architecture, site policies, and enforcement of these policies. These elements construct a particular ethos for the site, provide resources for rhetorical invention, and mediate the expression of arguments and counter-arguments at the site. In this section, I argue that the site simultaneously imagines users of reddit as members of its community, tasked with particular responsibilities in exchange for a high degree of freedom. At the same time, the site, through its visual design and information architecture, seems to minimize or obscure the individual user, favoring instead the shared content users provide. The site’s ethos, a rhetorical effect of its structure, helps us to better understand why Reddit’s decision to ban multiple “creepshot” subcommunities was so controversial. Their decision to ban these communities happened at a time when the site was gaining in popularity and orienting itself more towards advertisers, but for many users who had been with the site when it was relatively unknown, their decision to ban these communities seemed to run contrary to the ethos the site’s administrators had constructed, not only through their descriptions of the site but also through the other structural elements of the site. I will demonstrate this by an analysis of these structural elements of Reddit in this section.

A. The Front Page

Pointing your browser to Reddit’s URL, <http://www.reddit.com>, will take you to the “front page” of Reddit. Because the majority of my experience with on-line communities came from my casual use of social networking sites and internet forums in my everyday life, I experienced enormous confusion when confronted by the front page. Now that I have spent significant amounts of time using the site, I can say that there is a tremendous amount of complexity belied by its apparent simplicity, but when I began researching Reddit I felt as

though I was called upon to build coherence where there was none. In fact, this may be an experience that the site's administrators and programmers want to create, as opposed to BioWare/EA's more directed and organized approach to the information architecture ("IA") of their game forums. It was this difference between the design of the two sites that made them desirable for this study.

Note that the site identifies itself as reddit, with a lowercase r. This is a significant choice because the individual subreddits are also called "reddits." If reddit is merely the confederation of reddits, it imagines itself as somehow equal to them. And to be fair, there is some truth to this, in so far as the front page of reddit functions exactly the same way as any of the smaller reddits within the site, save that the front page of reddit draws content from multiple reddits at once while each individual reddit's front page shows only content from its own community. In other words, the front page of reddit is basically equal to the front page of many other subreddits within the community, obfuscating any hierarchical relationship that might exist between them, unlike many other forums on the World Wide Web that are explicitly so. Choosing this structure, and the lowercase "r" for the name of the community as a whole, helps to construct an ethos of equality among subreddits as well as the idea of user empowerment, since shared links can be simultaneously posted to a smaller subreddit as well as to the front page (provided these links become popular enough, which I will explain momentarily). This structure also constructs the impression of negative liberty that the site champions in many different ways.

In spite of the significance of the choice for reddit to identify itself with the lowercase "r," I have decided to refer to the website, as a whole, as Reddit, so as to distinguish it from the smaller communities that are hosted on the site for the sake of clarity. But I should also add that my choice serves to remind readers that Reddit is a system that has default rules, is maintained

by programmers who design it to operate in particular ways, produces particular rhetorical effects that influence the rhetoric of its visitors, and must ultimately answer to the corporation that owns it. Although I did not see any obvious examples of Reddit explicitly invoking corporate interests as justifications for any of its actions during the time of my data collection, many users argued that its decision to ban “creepshots” subreddits was an effort to sanitize its brand to make itself more desirable for advertising or other forms of monetization. These aspects of Reddit may be obscured if we see it merely as “reddit,” as though it is merely one reddit among many.

B. Arrangement and Style of Posts on the Front Page

Figure 3.1. The Front Page of Reddit



Figure 3.1. A snapshot of the “Default” view of Reddit’s front page, visible when someone without a user account visits the site.

I chose to invoke the rhetorical canons of *taxis* and *lexis* because I argue that the arrangement and style of information presented at Reddit minimizes the significance of

individual users as a rhetorical effect of these choices. I will return to this claim after describing what the front page of Reddit looks like and how information finds its way there.

For your reference, I have included a screenshot of the front page (see Figure 3.1). The numbers on the far left of the main screen refer to the position in the 25-item hierarchy. The position of a posted link within this hierarchy depends upon the view that the user selects from the tabs just above the main screen. There are five: “What’s Hot,” “New,” “Controversial,” “Top,” and “Saved.” Each of these views uses a different algorithm to determine the list order of posts on the front page. “What’s Hot” is the default view and the list order is influenced by the time the post was created and the number of “up votes” it has received. I will explain voting and its importance on the site in greater detail in a moment, but for now I hope it will suffice to say that users can choose to vote links up or down (hence the gray up and down arrows to the immediate left of the link titles, in the large blue font). The numbers themselves, to the left of the link title (in blue) reflect the difference between up votes and down votes, not the tally of the votes themselves.

The links themselves come from a selection of default “subreddits” (also known as “reddits”) that reflect the most popular ones (that is, the ones that have the most subscribers) on Reddit. I will go into subreddits in more detail in a moment, but for now, consider a subreddit to be an “area” of Reddit dedicated to a particular topic; subreddits have their own moderators and their own posting guidelines. You can see the titles of some of the default subreddits in the small gray banner at the very top of the screen in Figure 3.1. For registered users, the same banner will reflect the subreddits to which the user has subscribed rather than the default reddits. Because the front page reflects activity across multiple subreddits, it provides a cross-section of diverse links rather than reflecting activity in a singular reddit. That said, because users can log in

directly to Reddit.com and subscribe to redds that they prefer, the front page can still be used to filter out diverse perspectives that the users is not interested in.

“Diverse,” in this sense, refers not simply to diverse political positions but also to a diversity of religious perspectives and interests. Visitors without an account will see oft-upvoted links about gaming, atheism, news, politics, funny pictures, along with links from subreddits dedicated to particular genres of links (“Today I Learned” or “IAMA,” for instance).

To describe this in terms of information architecture, the front page of Reddit would be akin to a “metareddit,” rather than the beginning of a tree-like structure. At a forum with a more hierarchical form of organization, visitors would begin with a menu of options, each of which might take them to different areas of the forum. At this secondary level of the tree, visitors would then select either another level of sub-forum categorization or select individual threads. For instance, a forum dedicated to popular entertainment may have levels in the hierarchy that first ask visitors to select music, or film, or television; second by genre; and perhaps third by the specific artist, director, or show, before allowing visitors to access topical threads where user links could be found. Unlike this tree structure, which emphasizes “filing” content into a specific area and filters out an enormous amount of variety, Reddit’s front page functions exactly the same way that all of the subreddits function. If a link is made to a subreddit, it must compete for upvotes alongside all of the other links. The front page of a subreddit features those links with the most upvotes. But when one looks at the front page of Reddit, it features the exact same mechanics involved in determining which links are at the top of the list, but the pool of links from which it draws is much bigger according to how the user has managed their subscriptions. So “filing” is not an adequate metaphor for this way of presenting information. Files in a file cabinet or within a directory a PC are locatable only by selecting the right choices of the tree

structure to get down to the file; they are not all immediately visible at once. Reddit's organization of links is more like a pond with different kinds of things in it, which the user chooses to focus on by selecting an appropriate filter. By selecting the "Theory of Reddit" subreddit, I have not gained access to links that I did not have access to from my front page, because links with a high number of upvotes would have showed up on my front page anyway. But when I select this specific subreddit, each link I will see is going to come from that specific subreddit, rather than all of the ones I have subscribed to. Furthermore, because it only competes for my attention with others links from this particular subreddit, it is possible that links with fewer upvotes will now be visible. It should be noted that where a filing structure for organizing links minimizes the possibility for users to encounter content they were not seeking, a filtration structure makes those encounters more possible. That said, recall what I said above about the effects of subscription. The only case in which the filtration structure effectively increases the possibility for users to encounter unsought content is when they are not logged in, have not attempted to adjust their subscriptions, have purposefully done so to maximize diverse content, or if the visitor selects the "All" option in the gray subreddit menu banner (see Figure 3.1). Doing so will open the filter entirely, so to speak, and compare all links to every other link from every other reddit on the site, effectively providing the user with a view of either the "hottest," newest, most controversial, or most popular links from the entire site. Because these rankings will skew according to links originating from more popular redds, in practice this means the front page is loaded with content from the most popular redds.

Individual subreddits are not required to share the default appearance of Reddit's front page; they are configurable by their moderators. But in the case of the Theory of Reddit subreddit, it does, so my remarks on the appearance of the front page should also apply to that

particular subreddit. Given the importance of voting on Reddit, I found it surprising that the arrows are presented in a muted gray, while the link titles appear in a big blue font. When I first started spending time at this site, the link titles were what drew my attention. Thinking that when I clicked on a link title, I would be taken to a thread of comments, I was instead transported to content hosted off-site. In fact, many of the post titles are actually links to internet content hosted elsewhere. In a moment, when I discuss the karma system, I will explain this in more detail. What is significant is not that the links are links; rather, that if you wish to access users' comments on the link, you must click on the link in dark gray on the final line of the link information. For instance, consider the first link in Figure 3.1. After the link title, the next piece of information is the site where the content is hosted—in this case, i.imgur.com, a photo-hosting site that was developed for Reddit by one of Reddit's users. Sometimes this information will read "self.post," indicating that the content is a message written by a Reddit user and hosted on the Reddit server. The next pieces of information include the age of the link (rather than a date and time stamp), the name of the person who authored the link, and the reddit from which it originated. Since Reddit's "what's hot" algorithm factors in both the age and the number of upvotes associated with a link, it makes sense that they would eschew a date or time stamp in favor of an age indicator. This is not uncommon at web forums. It reinforces the importance of newness that goes along with a desire for a constantly changing front page in response to user votes or commentary on links. Clicking on the user name or the reddit name will allow you to view the user's information page or to go to the specific subreddit where you can presumably find similar content. Finally, after all of this information, the number of comments is listed. Clicking on this will allow you to view comments. A result of this organization scheme is that,

unless the link is a self post, users cannot view the link and the comments within the same browser window.

What I believe is significant about the visual presentation, or style, of the link information is how the author's name, the subreddit of origin, and even the link to the comments is minimized while the link title is maximized. As I said at the opening of this section, when this is considered in relation to other features of the style and information architecture of the site, in particular those associated with the karma system and the style mediating the presentation of comments to a link, I believe this suggests a pattern where individual users are less important than the off-site content. Simply put, "who you are" is a background issue on Reddit based upon how the system handles and presents this information. In fact, in the "Reddiquette" document—essentially a "how to behave" article for redditors—the authors write that "[q]uality of content is more important than who created it." This particular comment is directed at the moderators of subreddits, asking them not to delete links based on their opinion of the sources to which the links point.

C. Comment Structure

As I stated above, if you click on the small gray "comments" link beneath the blue link text, you will access user responses to the shared link. Since the arrangement and style of this part of Reddit is what most directly mediates user interactions, I will briefly describe how they are laid out. The arrangement of comments in the public forums at Reddit, part of the site's information architecture, is one of starkest contrasts between Reddit and BSN; unlike the arrangement of messages at BSN, which are presented in chronological order, Reddit's are grouped by conversation. This is visible in Figure 3.2, above. Below, I will discuss in greater detail the voting arrows to the left of each comment and their associated mechanics, but for the

moment I want to describe what you are seeing in Figure 3.2. The blue font is the username of the person who left the comment. Clicking on it will bring you to the user's information page, which I will describe in just a moment. Next to the username is information on the difference between upvotes and downvotes that the comment has received and an age marker reflecting how old the comment is. Take note of the fact that no reputation or other user information is provided in the comment. In fact, in lieu of providing information on the user's karma, information is provided on the community's reception of the comment itself. One would have to visit the user's information page to discover how much karma that user has earned on the site.

Normally, an information architecture that organizes comments the way Reddit does

Figure 3.2. User comments in response to a link in a subreddits



Figure 3.2. This is a screenshot of user comments to a post in a subreddit. On the right, the upper box provides the list of moderators for this subreddit. The lower box indicates the posts that this user, or “redditor,” has recently visited. Above these two boxes, cropped out of this screenshot, would be the login interface, if the user were not logged in, or the interfaces for searching Reddit and submitting a link if they were. Note the absence of “identifying marks” or reputation indicators for the users, such as avatars or badges. Finally, in this screenshot you can see two novelty accounts: “THEN_JUST_UPVOTE_IT” and “JUST_DOWNVOTE_IT_MAN.” In this example, the user names are synonymous with the likely commentary from the user, hence nothing is written.

would make it more difficult for users to create a back-and-forth conversation. As the number of comments in response to a link increases, it becomes more difficult for users to read all of the comments and formulate a response that demonstrates an awareness of everything that has been said. Furthermore, if a reply to a comment that I left remains attached to the parent comment, it is unlikely that users who join the discussion after me will see my reply. It may be difficult for me to respond to anyone who responds to me, furthermore, because it is easier for all users to read the first few or the last few comments rather than diligently reading every single comment in the thread. This could act as a limiting factor on the quality of conversations that take place online. Reddit's system provides users with two mechanics that change these dynamics. First, like the front page of a reddit, the user can sort the comments according to different algorithms: hot, new, controversial, top, and old. These algorithms take various data points into consideration. Obviously, the newest and oldest sort orders reflect how old the comments are. Best reflects the difference between upvotes and downvotes and puts comments in order of most to least. Hot, similar to the "What's Hot" view on the front page, considers both age and number of upvotes. The second mechanic that the system uses is to treat replies to a user's comments as a message for that user. Hence, if I reply to a comment, the user who wrote it receives a notification and can choose to reply to me. The notification system enables users to engage in a back-and-forth dialogue and the "best" sort allows users to read comments the community liked the best (though the standards employed by the community are not always consistent). To understand why the notification system is important, consider how difficult it would be to find replies to your comments when the number of responses to a link is large. At BSN, where the arrangement of messages makes reading them like reading a book, one can simply resume reading where one left off. In fact, the system alerts users to the existence of unread messages in

threads so that users can go right to new comments. Without the notification system at Reddit, users returning to posts with many replies might have to scan over 50, 100, or more entries looking for replies to their posts. Requiring this much energy from users to opt into discussions would likely result in fewer replies (although, as my data below will show, many clusters of replies were not large even with the notification system).

However, other consequences must be noted. While the notification system does facilitate protracted user engagement, that may come at the expense of contextual awareness. In my comments about the users at BSN, I note that the linear presentation of messages may have proven to be a richer inventive resource since users who did read through the comments were exposed to multiple threads in the conversation. The notification system at Reddit allows users to go right back to discussing a particular point with a particular discussion partner, but these notifications are presented to users outside of their context. As a consequence, users do not automatically see other replies without returning to the thread (a “context” button makes this much easier for users so inclined).

D. Moderation

The authors of Reddit’s “Reddiquette” document, a set of guidelines (claimed to have been written by members of the community, appropriately) for how users should behave on the site, describe the nature of Reddit as “neutral and user-driven” (“Reddiquette”). Neutrality presumably refers to the proclaimed interest in preserving freedom of speech rights³ on the site

³ On the subject of freedom of speech, Reddit’s statements resemble a liberal approach, in that users essentially have the freedom to say what they want but must avoid speech that could invite legal action. In response to the question, “Will you remove something defamatory about me or ‘my friend’ from reddit?” they respond that “reddit does not remove posts for containing insults or negative commentary, but leaves such decisions to the moderators of particular communities.” They also provide a version of the *topos* that the cure for distasteful speech is more speech: “The best way to deal with incorrect information on the Internet is to post the correct information next to it” (emphasized in the original). Significantly, Reddit’s users are subject not only to Reddit’s terms of service but to

and in adhering to facts in the titles of shared links rather than inserting bias (“Keep your submission titles factual and opinion-free,” says “Reddiquette”). It is not clear exactly which members of the community contributed to the “Reddiquette” document. Certainly, it is resisted (or perhaps simply ignored) by many members of Reddit. And judging by the occasional complaints from users about the behavior of new users, it is clear that whatever image of homogeneity and/or consensus presented by “Reddiquette” of a community that could basically agree on a set of norms is a fiction in the sense that new users are continuously challenging these norms either out of ignorance or some other motive. A document like “Reddiquette,” which imagines itself as having emerged from the community, is also an attempt by that community to impose its norms on new users who come to the site. Due to the structure of Reddit, guidelines for the entire site are less effective than guidelines for individual subreddits, because there “is” no Reddit in the sense that links cannot be shared to Reddit but must originate within a subreddit with its own policies governing link sharing and its own norms regarding commenting and voting. Any link that makes it to the front page of Reddit will a priori reflect a diversity of user

Conde Nast’s user agreement as well, which prohibits “obscene, indecent, or offensive language”; the providing to, posting on, or posting *through* Reddit “any graphics, text, photographs, images, video, audio or other material that is defamatory, abusive, bullying, harassing, racist, hateful, or violent”; and not to “use any sexually suggestive language or to provide to or post on or through the Website any graphics, text, photographs, images, video, audio or other material that is sexually suggestive or appeals to a prurient interest” (“User Agreement”). I am not aware of any incidents in which the user agreement with Conde Nast was invoked, but I can say that all of the content prohibited by the user agreement is available either on, or through a link to, Reddit. I point this out not to attempt to undermine Reddit’s claims about championing free speech but merely to provide an example of what I consider to be a tension between older values associated with the internet and the new values associated with the corporate owners of these sites who want to protect their revenue streams and to avoid legal problems. The tension is here marked in an obvious disagreement between Reddit and Conde Nast regarding what users should be able to say or post online. In a recent controversy regarding the “Jail Bait” subreddit, Anderson Cooper called attention to the subreddit on his CNN program “Anderson Cooper 360” from September 29, 2011. The subreddit was shut down on October 10, 2011 by site administrators. For some users of the site, this action foreshadowed a transition away from Reddit’s historically laissez-faire attitude towards a more regulated, corporate-friendly environment.

norms regarding appropriate commenting standards, especially when the subreddit the link was shared in is a default subreddit that a new user would see.

Reddit's purported neutrality is reinforced by the site's approach to moderation, although in practice the site's hands-off approach enables moderators to become a powerful administrative class in their own right. Before I discuss that development, let me first discuss the ideal vision of moderation Reddit's documentation constructs. Moderators are responsible for particular communities, aka subreddits. There are three ways to become a moderator. If you create a subreddit, you automatically become its moderator. Alternatively, you can be invited or appointed to moderate a subreddit by the existing team of moderators. In addition, you can make a request to be appointed as moderator over an inactive subreddit. Such requests are made in a designated subreddit and are fulfilled, or denied, by the site's administrators. Although the site's administrators are paid, subreddits are moderated by redditors for free (by contrast, the BioWare Social Network's moderators are company employees). The people who run Reddit do not claim any authority over who can be a moderator and claim that "moderators are not employees of or retained by reddit" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). In fact, they propose that if there is a problem with the moderation of a subreddit, and you have contacted the moderators and you have presented your issues to the subreddit community through a self post, you should create your own subreddit on the same topic and attempt to put your moderating style in competition with theirs in an attempt to siphon off users from the existing subreddit. Rather than get involved, Reddit proposes first a liberal approach (enlightened debate) followed by a free market solution to the problem.

According to the FAQ, moderators exist to maintain group norms within the political structure of the site. "The reason there are separate reddits is to allow niche communities to

form, instead of one monolithic overall community. These communities distinguish themselves through their policies: what's on- and off-topic there, whether people are expected to behave civilly or can feel free to be brutal, etc.” The consequence of this approach is a confederacy of distinct subreddits with their own norms, or it would be if not for the fact that particular moderators oversee tens—in rare instances, hundred—of subreddits. These users are well-known and friendly with moderators in other subreddits, forming a network of power users with tremendous influence over the various communities. This can result in abuses, for example, banning a user from multiple subreddits based on bad behavior in one community or simply because a moderator moderates multiple communities or is friendly with moderators in other communities. Users who find themselves in such situations have no recourse, though they are free to create an alternate account.

There are a few expectations for moderators expressed in “Reddiquette.” Like redditors, moderators are held to the ideal of moderating based on the quality of content and not on personal opinion of the content, the sources, and so on. Furthermore, moderators should not take positions in subreddits where their profession “could pose a conflict of interest to the neutral and user-driven nature of reddit.” This statement seems like a blanket statement about the kinds of professionals who should be involved with moderating across the entire site, rather than a particular subreddit. The issue here is not with having a conflict of interest when it comes to the topic of the subreddit, but rather, having a conflict of interest with the “nature” of Reddit itself as a “neutral” and “user-driven” place. That said, there are no consequences for moderators who act outside of these norms.

Out of the 21 instances I found of moderator action in the threads I analyzed, all but one were from the “MensRights” community. Unlike BSN, where there is a consistent policy

administered throughout the site enforced by employees, accompanied by the potential of losing access to offline content, moderation at Reddit differs from community to community. Each community's rules are different, as is the consistency of their enforcement. The consequences of violating a subreddit's rules can range from simply having one's post or comment removed, to a temporary ban from posting, to permanent suspension. However, because there are no restrictions on how many alternate accounts a person may create, nor any way of connecting an account to an individual, short of identifying the IP address of the person using the account, banning a person from a subreddit is not a high penalty.

It's worth noting that moderators at BSN have a very different relationship to users. Moderators at BSN have much greater authority, owing in part to the Terms of Service at BSN and to their status as employees of the company. Moderators at Reddit are highly visible and all of them use their authority differently, but users usually get around authoritarian moderators by joining subreddits on the same or similar topics with less onerous people running them. The moderators at BSN are not often visible in discussions and the tenor of the relationship between users and moderators is very different. In one thread at BSN, moderators posted 4 times out of the 507 total messages; in 3 of those messages, they issued warnings to the community. It was also common in my data to see users either requesting moderators to close the thread down, or accusing others of acting in ways on purpose in order to encourage moderators to end the thread and silence their opposition. I will say more about the possible consequences of this on discussion at BSN in chapter 4.

E. User Accounts

In order to "submit a link" (that is, create a new thread or link) to any of the individual subreddits, a user will need an account. An important aspect of Reddit is that they do not require

new users to provide a lot of information before an account is issued. In fact, the most a person has to provide to the system is their choice of an account name and a password. If they have not selected an account name that is currently in use, and if they can pass a security check in the form of a “captcha,” that person will be given a user account to use on Reddit. This is the bare minimum required to be able to create links, write comments, or cast votes. By contrast, at BSN, new users must provide a valid email address and date of birth to sign up for an account, after which their profile must be approved before they are able to post replies in the forums. Because Reddit requires so little, it is very easy to users to create multiple accounts, since it isn’t necessary to generate multiple email addresses to validate them (as would be the case at BSN). Unlike many other social sites, Reddit appears to celebrate this fact rather than discourage it. In fact, a phenomenon on Reddit is founded upon this possibility: “novelty accounts” like “chicken tetrazzini” or “PhD in everything” are essentially joke accounts whose account names foreshadow the kinds of responses they give in a comment thread (see Figure 3.2 for two more novelty accounts, “THEN_JUST_UPVOTE_IT” and “JUST_DOWNVOTE_IT_MAN”). Does this suggest that they care less about the problems often associated with such an attitude, like spamming or trolling? For instance: many websites require users to provide their real names, birth dates, and a valid email address, particularly larger social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. Through their interface design and information architecture, these sites coerce users into the construction of a singular online identity to serve commercial interests (van Dijck, 2013). Though Reddit was owned by Conde Nast at the time that I did my research, they do not collect this information and celebrated the multiplicity of online identities. Another element that should be noted is that Reddit does not ask users to upload a picture or select an avatar. Curiously, as you can see in Figure 3.1, *links* frequently feature some kind of graphic appropriate

to the linked content, while, as evident in Figure 3.2, individual redditors do not have avatars or any identifying elements of any kind. Novelty accounts may, in fact, be a way of garnering attention from other users by developing an identifying characteristic that allows them to become notable figures across multiple subreddits. In fact, in 2009, Reddit gave a “best of” award to a user named “look_of_disapproval” for “Novelty Account of the Year.” Earlier, I suggested that the structural choices made at Reddit minimize the importance of the “self” and maximize the importance of the links and getting to the front page. Novelty accounts take advantage of Reddit’s liberal policies on multiple accounts to develop a self that is recognizable even though it is based in the minimal tools provided by the system. Without access to badges or other reputation markers or a distinct avatar, novelty user accounts essentially repeat the same joke in every comment they leave, developing a strong correlation between commentary and user account such that the user name begins to stand in for the commentary by virtue of metonymic association. The result is that if you see the comment, you know the user, and vice-versa. Whereas, my experience has been that without making a special effort to look at the user name, my focus when reading comments is on the comment itself and not who left it. Consider, for example, the user PhD_in_everything. Here are three of his comments so you can see the effect I am describing:

Example 1:

You know what, Reddit has hit the nail on the head. I am a practising doctor and a researcher with a PhD in Psychiatry (Concentration: Addiction Studies and Neuropathology), and that CNN author really has all of the 'paper' symptoms of some kind of stimulant addiction. I studied the neurological changes associated with Phencyclidine (PCP) dependency in depth as part of my thesis. Those with PCP

addictions typically have trouble concentrating, adjusting to social norms, conveying emotions, and relating to others, presumably due to a build up metabolites (and subsequent damage) of the profrontal cortex. This has a lot to do with acquired deficiencies with the thenglutamate–N-methyl-D-aspartate receptor to which PCP binds (For a review see Robbins and Everitt, 1999). That CNN author needs treatment, or interventional counselling, ASAP otherwise permanent changes in his psychological functioning may result. I'm not even joking.

Example 2:

You're absolutely right about fake bidding accounts. I have a PhD in Software Engineering (Concentration: Network Security) and am currently working as a 'consultant' for the FBI. I can't go into detail about what I do exactly, for obvious reasons, but trust me when I say that there is a room full of people in black suits, ties and sunglasses at the FBI working on tracking down scum who run scams like these. Trust me, I'm one of the suits.

As you can see from the examples above, this user's comments follow a template that includes the claim of an advanced degree in some field relevant to the topic of discussion, the specification of a concentration, and sometimes a citation or two. This user has claimed to have PhDs in zoology, geology, political science, health economics, law, neuropsychology, to name only a handful of the subject areas this user claims to have studied. The pattern of this user's commentary *is* his persona. In an environment that reduces the user's ability to create a recognizable identity by removing avatars and displaying user information in a way that doesn't attract attention, novelty accounts can be a way to resist these effects.

Figure 3.2 indicates the standard formatting of comments on Reddit. Regarding it objectively, the blue font might seem to make user names stand out from the flow of the discussion, but in practice, when one is oriented towards participating in the conversation, user names fade into the background and the comments themselves take prominence. To counteract this, moderators at individual subreddits can make adjustments in the visual presentation of information related to commenting. In the NFL subreddit, for instance, moderators have made “flair” available for redditors to choose. “Flair” are small icons that appear next to a redditor’s user name when they link in the particular subreddit where the flair is available. In the NFL subreddit, users select flair in the form of icons representing their favorite American football team. When I read comments in this subreddit, my focus is drawn first to the comment, and then I typically check the flair to get a sense of what is motivating their statement. For instance, if I read a comment that is critical of the Oakland Raiders, I check out the flair to see if this person is a fan of the Broncos, Chargers, or Chiefs, since those teams are all divisional rivals of the Raiders and their ability to get to the postseason depends in part on the Raiders having a bad year. In this case, and in others, the flair effects a construction of the user’s ethos. But I typically do not pay attention to the user name. This is not to say that other users do not: I have observed discussions in subreddits that address the personal struggles and triumphs of individual redditors and noticed that some users have been following along with a particular user’s battle with weight loss or struggle with a romantic problem for weeks or months. My point here is not to argue that this is *impossible*, but that the default settings of the system do not call attention to user names and do not offer information with which other redditors could get a sense of the ethos of the user without making extra effort. In this sense, the “system message” sent by Reddit, as a whole, is that “who” is linking or commenting matters less than the link or the comment itself.

And, seemingly in response to this, elements like flair and novelty accounts have emerged as ways of facilitating ethos construction. While it is certainly true that users at other sites can construct elaborate personae to inhabit, not having access to the ability to create multiple accounts means that the user can only inhabit that one identity. Reddit not only enables, but celebrates these novelty accounts. Furthermore, while it is certainly probable that some users regard these accounts as a form of trolling, I have not observed any criticism from users about these novelty accounts and the attitude from the administrators appears to be supportive of them. The same is *not* the case regarding the creation of alternate accounts to circumvent bans from moderators or to game the voting system.

F. Voting and Karma

On the one hand, the system celebrates novelty accounts and multiple accounts of all kinds. On the other hand, there appears to be some anxiety about how multiple accounts will be used on the site. I say this because of the amount of attention that Reddit administrators give to elements of voting and karma on the site. Certainly, the fact that Reddit was owned by Conde Nast as part of their digital division and was recently spun off from the company to become its own independent division of Advance Publishing (which owns both companies) would lead one to believe that Conde Nast had business interests in mind when it acquired Reddit in 2006. And Reddit does feature advertising, although not as prominently as other websites. You can also license the “alien thing,” the mascot for the site (if you would like to know what the “alien thing” looks like, see the creature in the top left corner of Figure 3.1). I do not believe that the voting and karma features exist to serve corporate motives directly, but I do believe they exist to promote greater user participation in the site, which brings more people to the site. In fact, based on information provided by Conde Nast, Google reported that the average number of unique

visitors per month to Reddit between January and June of this year was 19.5 million people, providing an average of 1.1 billion page views per month. It is in the best interests of the corporate owners of Reddit for the site to continue to be an environment that people want to be a part of to encourage licensing and advertising revenue to persist. Reddit also offers a “reddit gold” subscription level. In other words, while enabling multiple user accounts promotes one way of using the site, the voting and karma mechanics are part of what makes Reddit a place for people to go. If these mechanics are abused, people may sour on the community and stop coming to Reddit—obviously an undesirable outcome for its owners.

Before I get into the impacts of voting and karma on the Reddit community, I will explain a little more about them. As I said before, the arrows next to the link titles are for voting, and where the link is listed on the front page depends upon the view that you select (each view uses a different sorting algorithm). In some of the views, up voting affects sort order. Furthermore, up voting a link awards the user something called “link karma.” Link karma must be differentiated from “comment karma,” as the two are tracked separately, though they are earned the same way: users earn karma for the total number of up votes their comments or links have submitted, minus the number of down votes.

What is the purpose of voting? It could be that voting reinforces the claims made by the site administrators in the “Reddiquette” document that Reddit is “neutral” and “user-driven.” Whereas the system appears to “equalize” users by emphasizing the quality of content over the individual’s identity, the system constructs the user as a citizen with responsibilities and freedoms. This begins with the way that users are referred to as “redditors.” Though this is not claimed anywhere on the site, the word redditor seems to be a contraction of the words “reddit” and “editor.” Think of Reddit like an aggregator of internet content. On most aggregators, there

is a staff of people who select links that are appropriate for the theme of the site. At Reddit, instead of editors, the system gives users the privilege of “editing” the content by selecting what links should appear on the front page based on their votes.

G. Positioning of Users

The authors of the Frequently Asked Questions document construct the role of users early in the text, stating that “Users like you provide all of the content and decide, through voting, what’s good and what’s junk” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). The notion that users (like me) provide all of the content overlooks the significant amount of site “content” that users do not have direct control over, even though users have significantly more freedom at Reddit than they would at many other web forums. The statement, furthermore, suggests a virtual world in which power emanates from the users themselves, who are empowered with the ability to choose the content on the site. The notion of voting and choice resonate with ideologies surrounding voting in American politics as well as the popular quasi-libertarian ethic that is prevalent on the internet.⁴ Finally, this statement tasks redditors with the responsibility to sort out the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. “Links that receive community approval bubble up towards #1, so the front page is constantly in motion and (hopefully) filled with fresh, interesting links” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). When users upvote or downvote links, they are fulfilling the

⁴ In his analysis of YouTubers’ resistance to videos from the Office of National Drug Policy, Hess (2009) argues that the structures that mediate discussion at YouTube are designed according to business interests rather than democratic ones, while users of YouTube falsely believe that the site functions as an open, democratic forum where speech is protected. This fact, along with the lack of seriousness often demonstrated in comments at the site, severely limits the effectiveness of resistance. The misalignment between user beliefs and YouTube’s interests (as evidenced by the structures that mediate user interaction and activity) foreshadows the tension users will experience at Reddit, when the site, in its bid to be taken seriously by advertisers, bans unsavory (and potentially illegal) communities. Users saw this move as a betrayal of the ethos the site’s structures had, until that point, constructed—that Reddit was a place that protected free speech and content was evaluated on its merits (those merits varying from community to community, naturally) through the process of voting.

wish expressed here—that “fresh, interesting links” are constantly moving up and down the front page of Reddit or any of its subreddits. This is stated as something inherently valuable, but it is not clear exactly why a constantly changing front page is valuable, other than that if the front page were not in constant motion featuring “fresh” and “interesting” links regularly, users might tire of coming to the site. That would be reflected in their metrics, which would in turn affect advertising. It would be presumptuous to claim that this is, in fact, the rationale behind the goal of having constantly new content; certainly a positive user experience may also exist as an inherent good. Nevertheless, this objective—new, interesting links—is clearly valuable from the amount of attention that the subjects of voting, vote manipulation, and how to use the vote receive in the “Frequently Asked Questions” and “Reddiquette” documents. But this is also an area where users resist the guidelines. In spite of requests from system administrators to use voting in certain ways, individual reddits develop communal norms.

A quick survey of all the references to voting in the FAQ and Reddiquette documents reveals a broad representation of the practice that leaves the user with the task of interpreting standards. As described above, voting is the mechanism through which users “decide” what is “good” and what is “junk” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). Voting for links and comments determines the “score” of said link or comment, which presumably communicates the “goodness” of the link or comment as well as determining its placement depending upon the sort order the user has selected. The score also determines the link- or comment-author’s karma, so voting is connected to that metric as well, and karma “reflects how much good the user has done for the reddit community” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). This notion of “goodness” will become clearer as we consider the meanings of voting and karma. According to Reddiquette, voting has specific kinds of uses. Voting is not to be used as a mechanism for conducting

informal polling by placing a request to “Vote up if you’re a male, down if you’re a female” (“Reddiquette”), for example. Asking people to vote for your posts, or joining up with other users to form a “voting clique,” is not only frowned upon but considered a form of cheating (“Frequently Asked Questions”). As the authors of Reddiquette state, “[a] link should get points for being good, not because the submitter is part of a voting clique.” The idea that quality of content should be most important is evident again in the statements that “[t]he down arrow is for comments that add nothing to the discussion” and, when asking users not to target specific redditors for downvoting, that “[i]f it really is the content you have a problem with (as opposed to the person), by all means vote it down when you come upon it” (“Reddiquette”). But voting is constructed as something that redditors should do; it falls within the list of items that redditors would “Please do,” although the contents of Reddiquette are described as “an informal expression of reddit’s community values, written by the reddit community itself” that functions as “a collection of guidelines.” According to these guidelines, “[t]he up and down arrows are your tools to make reddit what you want it to be. If you think something is good, upvote it. If you think it shouldn’t be on reddit, or if it is off-topic on a particular community, downvote it.” However, users are asked to “[a]ctually read an article before you vote on it (as opposed to just basing your vote on the title).” So although “goodness” is not clearly defined (although we have seen it associated with both “interesting” and “suited for the particular community,” since the primary functions of voting are to ensure that “fresh, interesting” links move up the list on the front page and to keep things that “shouldn’t be on reddit” or that are “off-topic [for] a particular community” off of Reddit or off of a particular reddit), users are to disregard who wrote or shared the content and evaluate it solely upon its own merits, to resist schemes to manipulate voting or exploit the system to boost their own karma or that of a friend, to resist schemes to

move links up the hierarchy by similarly engaging in vote manipulation, and to actually read content before passing judgment on it.

H. Karma

In Reddit's Frequently Asked Questions document, "Karma" is described in response to the question, "What is that number next to usernames? And what is karma?" Karma is the reward for reddit users: "The number next to a username is called that user's 'karma.' It reflects how much good the user has done for the reddit community. The best way to gain karma is to submit links that other people like and vote for, though you won't get karma for self posts" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). A couple of points on this: as it stands now, the user's total "link karma" is not recorded anywhere except the user's profile page, meaning that you have to click on that user's name in order to see it. And though there is a number recorded after a user name in individual comments, that number refers only to the difference between upvotes and downvotes for that comment, not that user's total "comment karma." In other words, in spite of what the FAQ says, karma is not available immediately when one is scanning post titles or comments.

Because voting directly impacts karma, it is in the interest of users to submit links and make comments that will please other redditors—though it is not clear why users should value karma acquisition. While karma does function as a form of reputation marker, what exactly is it communicating? According to the FAQ, it communicates "how much good the user has done for the reddit community." That is to say, "good for the community" is here equal to either posting links that people like or posting comments that people like. "Good for the community" is equated directly with posting things that earn upvotes.

This is an important point that expresses the relationship between votes and reddit's (at least, this document's) vision of the good. At BSN, the site's Terms of Service and other documents that describe the norms users are expected to abide by make it clear that the "good" is in alignment with BioWare's (and Electronic Arts') corporate interests. At Reddit, the good is not as clear. Whereas we may agree that sometimes what is good for a community is not the popular choice, is it fair to say that at Reddit, what is popular is always good? We know what is popular because of how the votes go. Reddit's administrators have attempted to set guidelines about how votes should be used in a document called "Rediquette." However, users argue with each other about how the voting buttons should be used—whether one should upvote content that clearly does not belong in a community, for instance, even when that content is very popular. For instance, if a video of a raccoon is posted in a subreddit dedicated to bears, with the argument that in Germany the word for raccoon translates to "washing bear," and it receives thousands of upvotes in spite of the fact that the rules clearly state the subreddit is for videos of bears only, was that contribution "good"? Cases like this reveal a tension in Reddit's rules between the good as constructive to the community and the good as what is merely popular. This again begs the question: why is voting, itself, so important? Why is it so important to the admins, and to the users, to know how popular any particular post is?

In addition, though I have pointed out that it is possible that self-posts do not earn karma so that users can not abuse this feature to rack up karma, the side-effect is that the community's "good" is tied to posting *links* to someone else's content or to images that users have created that are hosted elsewhere. In other words, the good is tied to *sharing* as opposed to *creating* content. In practice, the line between sharing and creating content is not so absolute, because users can create their own pictures or take screenshots, have a third-party site host them, and then link to

them. In fact, this happens quite frequently. There is only one warning about this behavior, under the section of the FAQ entitled “What constitutes spam?” The authors of the document note: “It’s not strictly forbidden to submit a link to a site that you own or otherwise benefit from in some way, but you should sort of consider yourself on thin ice” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). This obviously says nothing about creating your own content and uploading it to a site like Imgur or Flickr to share with people on Reddit. And to be fair, it depends on the subreddit within which one posts. For instance, the rage comics subreddit (called “ffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu” and often referred to by users as “f7u12” because there are 7 f’s and 12 u’s) is almost entirely comprised of links to original content, hosted on Imgur or elsewhere.

Furthermore, karma does not function very effectively as a reputation marker because it is not visible unless you go looking for it. And when you do look for it, it serves only as an indirect indication of one’s reputation, since what it actually measures are upvotes. It does not tell you how many comments a user has posted or how many links a user has posted. It could be that the user has posted a great many links or comments that have only been marginally appreciated, or that they have been moderately active but very effective. So in that sense, a user’s karma can illuminate either activity or appreciation or maybe both. That said, by visiting a user’s page, you can review their entire comment history, so while karma numbers may not tell you anything, you can review the qualitative evidence of a user’s contribution to the entire Reddit community if you wish.

What if you do visit a person’s profile page? Unlike a social networking site, where you would be presented with information about them, Reddit provides very little info about its users. Where the main content screen on the front page of Reddit displays links or self posts, the main

content screen of a profile page presents the links and comments posted by the user, up to 25, ranked by new as a default.

Unlike the front page, where the eye is drawn to the content, on the user profile page the eye is drawn to the user's karma, which is printed in bold and in large black print. Beneath this information is information in smaller, lighter script indicating how long this person has been a "redditor" and a blue-scripted link to send this person a message. Beneath this info is the "trophy case," where the user's trophies are displayed. Trophies are awards, indicated by a special graphic icon, that the system awards for various achievements. The particular user I was looking at had a trophy for having verified his email, meaning that the system believed that the user had provided a genuine, working email address attached to his account—which, as you will recall, is not a requirement for creating a user account at Reddit.

So reputation counts, but only if you take action to find out what it is.

I. Commenting and Message Structure: Entering Comments, Quoting, and Replying

Reddit enables users to format their comments using a markup language. Unlike BSN, reddit does not provide users with a what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) text editor though users can access a guide to the markup language. This seemed insignificant to me but my analysis demonstrated that users at BSN use the QUOTE feature differently than users do at Reddit, and I believe that this could be due to the fact that a WYSIWYG editor obscures the markup language the system is using to format text.

In Figure 3.3., below, you can see the comment-entry box (at the very top of the image). At the bottom-left of the entry box there's the save button. Clicking on that button will publish your comment. At the bottom-right of the entry box are two links: one takes you to "rediquette," an unofficial guide to commenting norms/ethics; the other would say "formatting

help.” Clicking that opens up the rest of the image that you see above. This is the default comment-entry box; some subreddits have customized theirs. At any rate, you can see in the guide from the that by typing “>” before you type some text, the system formats your writing as

Figure 3.3: Guide to Markup Language at Reddit



you type:	you see:
italics	<i>italics</i>
bold	bold
[reddit!](http://reddit.com)	reddit!
* item 1 * item 2 * item 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • item 1 • item 2 • item 3
> quoted text	quoted text
Lines starting with four spaces are treated like code:	Lines starting with four spaces are treated like code:
<pre>if 1 * 2 < 3: print "hello, world!"</pre>	<pre>if 1 * 2 < 3: print "hello, world!"</pre>
~~strikethrough~~	strikethrough
super^script	super ^{script}

Figure 3.3. The top of this screenshot shows what the basic comment entry field looks like at Reddit. If you click “help,” the guide to Reddit’s markdown language will appear, providing explanations for the commands users can enter to stylize their message text.

a block quote. You can see an example of a block quote, below. The indented text preceded by the heavy line is a block quote :

Figure 3.4. An Example of Block Quoting

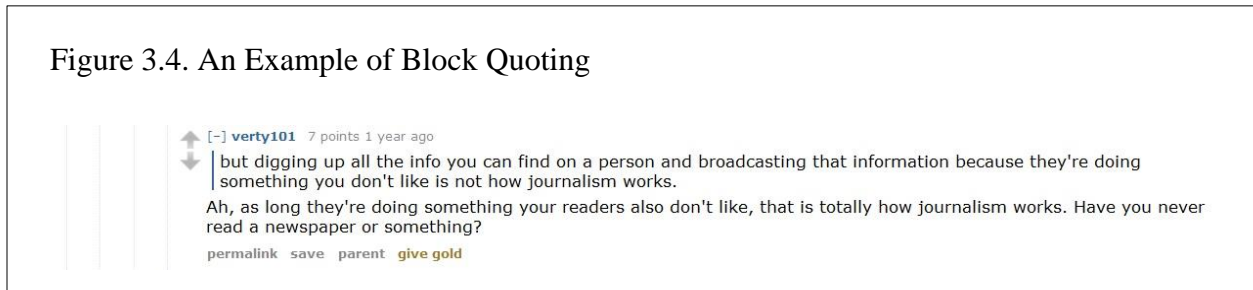


Figure 3.4, above, is a single comment in response to the /r/bestof post. The vertical lines on the left indicate how nested this comment is within a hierarchical chain of replies to a “parent” comment. Users can click either the up or down arrow to up-vote or down-vote the comment, respectively. Doing so changes the score of the comment—you can see that at the time when this screen shot was taken, this comment had 7 points. To the right of the arrows, in blue, is the user’s name. The username is clickable and will take you to an overview for the user, where you can access all of the posts the user has created on reddit. That dash in brackets can be clicked to minimize this comment and all of its replies. The two lines that are indented show the effects of using the QUOTE function. The user is free to type whatever he wants here, so use of the QUOTE function does not imply that the words are actually from another person’s post—this could be language taken from anywhere. Below the quoted material you can see what a regular default comment looks like. Finally, beneath that there are various links. The most important one for our purposes is the “parent” link, which brings the user to the comment that this person has replied to.

2. CONTEXT FOR DATA ANALYSIS: Violentacrez Unmasked

In first section of this chapter, I argued that the structure of Reddit, inclusive of the site’s information architecture, visual design, norms and enforcement, and features for users to take advantage of when using the site and commenting, construct an ethos of negative liberty, freedom of speech, and playfulness. Through its visual design and arrangement of information,

the site communicates to its users that the content matters more than the individual user who shares it, and through its descriptions and soft regulations of the voting mechanic the site imagines a user who is invested in the community, both the small subreddit community and the broader community of the site as a whole, the way one would expect a citizen to be. But within the site's descriptions of its expectations there is tension between users' freedom and responsibility. Tensions regarding the use of voting reveal this conflict. Some users reject the soft demand from the site to use voting in ways that conform to the requests of either the administrators or the moderators of individual subreddits, choosing instead to take advantage of voting in ways they see fit. What this shows is the kind of normal multiplicity of visions regarding the kind of community within which we want to live. This tension between freedom and responsibility is also, I believe, one of the underlying tensions that informed the passionate discussions that erupted after a user known as violentacrez deleted his account following an article written by Adrian Chen for Gawker revealed his identity. In the aftermath of the attention this article received, Reddit banned multiple "creepshot" subreddits. This action signaled to some users that Reddit's administrators, in an attempt to garner advertiser interest in their platform, had decided to limit user freedom to make their brand more appealing. This move was viewed by some as a betrayal of the ethos the site's structure had been producing and reinforcing for years. In this brief section of the chapter, I will provide background for the conversations that comprise my data and make the case for why this issue can be considered political.

On September 26, 2012, MyFox5 Atlanta reported that the Sheriff's department was investigating a substitute teacher in East Coweta County, Georgia, for taking clandestine photos of one of his students and uploading it to Reddit's "creepshots" forum. The story was picked up by national media outlets, bringing much unwanted negative attention to the site. In the wake of

this publicity, the moderators of “creepshots” added violentacrez to their team. Violentacrez was one of the “power-mods,” perhaps the biggest at the time, moderating 400 subreddits (Morris, 2020b [2011]). Some of the subreddits he helped moderate were popular communities with far-less controversial or obscene content like the “WTF” and “funny” subreddits (Chen, 2012). But he was also known for creating and moderating forums focusing on extremely misogynistic, racist, and pornographic content. For example, he created the “jailbait” subreddit, a community focused on sharing images sexualizing underage girls—a community that was ultimately banned by Reddit following a 2011 report from Anderson Cooper on his AC360 program that named violentacrez in connection with the community. Reddit administrators, deferring to the site’s emphasis on freedom of speech, tolerated the unsavory content being shared on the site, and entrusted violentacrez with the task of ensuring that illegal content was kept off of the platform. From Chen’s article, it seems as though violentacrez and the administrators had a good working relationship: they allowed him to create and help moderate a large number of hateful, sexist, or pornographic subreddits and he would alert them when he found users distributing illegal content, such as child pornography, on the site.

It’s not clear whether anyone thought that adding violentacrez to the moderating team at “creepshots” was supposed to quell public concern about the community. Concern only seemed to grow, inside and outside of the Reddit community. Adding to their troubles, word began to circulate that Gawker was going to run an exposé on violentacrez. In it, his offline identity would be revealed. In response, multiple communities, including some very large ones, banned links to the Gawker media network over outrage that a user would be “doxed”—that is, his information would be made public. The site’s administrators took action as well: according to reporting by Fernando Alfonso III, on October 11, 2012, “creepshots” and its like were officially banned

(Alfonso, 2020 [2012]). Violentacrez deleted his account. He blamed a known activist community at Reddit called “ShitRedditSays” for fueling the controversy and revealing his information to Chen and claimed he deleted his account because he was angry that the site’s administrators allowed “ShitRedditSays” users to get away with their behavior (Morris, 2020b [2012]), though I speculate that he may have deleted his account in hopes that once Chen’s article was published it would be more difficult to find traces of his activity on the site. Finally, on October 12, 2012, Gawker published Adrien Chen’s (2012) exposé on violentacrez, identifying him as Michael Brutsch, a programmer living in Texas.

The discussions at Reddit I analyzed focus on two issues: the first, whether it was ethically right for violentacrez’s identity to be revealed; the second, whether the Reddit platform should host communities like “creepshots.” Both discussions explored the limits of free speech and the extent to which “creepshots” could be perceived as harmful or illegal. As I have said multiple times above, the disputes also signaled to long-time redditors that the site would be less interested in “freedom” and more interested in preserving its public image so that it would be viewed favorably by corporations looking to reach its millions of users and celebrities looking for publicity in its “IAmA” subreddit. Indeed, in the years since this incident, Reddit’s limitations on permissible speech have increased, as has the presence of corporate advertising on the site (though reddit users retain a high degree of freedom when it comes to the content they can share on the site). More so than the question of what sexual orientation video game characters should have (see chapter 4 on BSN), these questions are obviously political and relevant to our contemporary lives in the developed world, where we struggle with fake news, Russian troll farms, organized astroturfing operations, weaponized autonomous algorithms and other coordinated efforts to take advantage of free speech, internet anonymity, and the multiplicity of

online identity to manipulate the public. But they are also questions that are immediately relevant to “inhabitants” of the Reddit community itself. Beiner (1983) states the following:

The reason why public judgments are possible at all is that the objects of those judgments are shared by those who judge, or are the focus of their common concern. For instance, I judge as a member of a community because of a common tradition and shared history, public laws and obligations to which all are subject, common ideals and shared meanings. These ‘public objects’ or public things (*res publica*) allow for judgment of a public character, for these things concern all of us who participate in these traditions, laws, and institutions, and who therefore share in common meanings. Such judgments concern not merely what *I* want or the way of life *I* desire, but rather, entail intersubjective deliberation about a common life (how we should be together). (p. 141)

In the previous section of this chapter, I analyzed the structure of Reddit to show how it produced and maintained an ethos for the users of the platform. This ethos and the site’s traditions, history, and behavioral norms co-evolved over time. But as I also described, above, there were opposing impulses within Reddit’s structure and its community. The “creepshot” incident brought the political judgments of individual users to light, but would it allow for the formation of an intersubjective political judgment that could mediate the tensions at the core of Reddit’s traditions and norms? As is so often the case in public deliberation: no. In the third section of this chapter, I will analyze how users took advantage of the features of Reddit to invent statements in the discussion and argue that rather than deliberating, redditors were essentially vying for control over the framing of the events.

3. DATA ANALYSIS STAGE 1

The preceding section contextualizes the discussions I chose to focus on at Reddit in order to answer my research questions. This section begins with a brief recap of my methods. After that, I will analyze how redditors used three features made available by Reddit's commenting system: quoting, linking, and replying.

A. Methods

In order to investigate the relationship between structure and political judgment formation in online public forums, I selected two websites: Reddit and the BioWare Social Network. I chose these sites because they have very different structures, which I believed would maximize any effects on the expression and development of political judgment through online deliberation. But once I selected sites to analyze, I still needed to sample comment data. The sitewide controversy at Reddit surrounding the banning of creepshots-like communities was ideal because multiple communities took up the issue, which allowed me to collect a high number of comments related to the issue. In addition, given that there were passionate people on all sides of the issue, I felt that if there would be an opportunity to see deliberation occurring, this would be where I should look.

I selected three threads for this section of my analysis, together amounting to 1,854 comments. I believed it was important to select posts that received a large number of replies because one of the choices administrators have made at Reddit is to allow a large number of comments. I believe this choice has consequences for how arguments unfold in public forums.

The first thread came from the "bestof" subreddit. It was titled, "In a show of solidarity with dozens of other subreddits including /r/politics & /r/gaming, we are joining the boycott of Gawker and all affiliated subreddits. Doxing can ruin lives and put people in real danger. The ends do not justify the means. Adrian Chen, you're bad and you should feel bad." Though it was

clearly posted by a moderator, the user's name is unrecoverable because the account was deleted before I collected my data. This thread had 922 posts from 281 participants. The second thread came from the "subredditdrama" subreddit and is titled "All the subreddits of the 'Creep Shot' type are being banned," posted by Tebaxx. This thread had 306 posts from 117 participants. The final thread I analyzed came from the "Men's Rights" subreddit. It is titled "/r/Creepshots and /r/violentacrez taken over by SRS by blackmailing with doxxing info. Apparently r/MensRights is next," by ignatiusloyola, one of the subreddit's moderators. This thread had 626 posts from 255 participants. Only a handful of participants appeared in more than one thread; considering all three threads together, there were 643 participants and 1,854 comments. These threads were created sometime in October, 2012. I do not know the exact dates because Reddit's timestamp only provides the age of the post, not its date of creation. Based on the content of each, though, I believe these were posted on October 11 or 12, 2012.

My unit of analysis was the message as a whole. What this means is that if I observed a message that featured a REPLY and a use of QUOTE, the entire message was coded for both. I used two different kinds of codes, one set for structures-in-use and one for pragmatic actions in the comments. "Structures-in-use" refer to elements of the site that users could take advantage of to invent arguments. Features like quoting, linking, and replying are included, but so are actions like referring to a user's profile to get information, referring to the site's guidelines, moderator actions, and so on. "Pragmatic actions" refer to the functions of moves in the conversation. These are based on Graham (2008)'s codebook, which he in turn based on Habermas' work as well as that of other deliberative democratic theorists. Please refer to chapter 2 for a list of these codes and their definitions.

B. Findings from the first stage of analysis

Table 3.1: Incidence of Structure-in-Use and Pragmatic Codes in Reddit Data Set

STRUCTURE-IN-USE CODES	Number	Percentage
Link (Total)	334	18%
<i>Link to Comment</i>	38	2%
<i>Link to Outside</i>	96	5%
<i>Link to Post</i>	21	1%
<i>Link to Site Docs</i>	1	0%
<i>Link to Other Subreddit</i>	178	10%
Moderator Intervention	21	1%
Quoting	240	13%
Referencing Comment	3	0%
Referencing Site Docs	6	0%
Referencing Site Ethos	4	0%
Referencing Votes	23	1%
Reply	1,681	91%
PRAGMATIC CODES		
Acknowledgement	24	1%
Affirmation	34	2%
Affirmation NR	62	3%
Claim + Counter	161	9%
Claim NR + Counter NR	457	25%
Commissive	115	6%

Curbing	4	0%
Degrading	126	7%
Directive Informative (“DI”)	435	23%
Expressive	421	23%
Humor	110	6%
Imperative	16	1%
Refute + Rebut	183	10%
Refute NR + Rebut NR	239	13%
Usage Declarative	34	2%

Table 3.1 displays some of the findings from my analysis. In Chapter 4, I will present these data side-by-side with my data from BSN and provide a fuller account of deliberative activity in the two environments using the pragmatic codes as a reference. For now, I will briefly comment on what the results from the pragmatic codes show. As you can see, instances of curbing were very low. Curbing, you will recall from chapter 2, is commentary that attempts to limit participation from people expressing other points of view. Instances of affirmation, non-reasoned affirmation, commissives, and degrading commentary were low relative to the data set as a whole. Affirming comments are claims support other comments, while commissives are comments that agree with or concede to another point. Examples of the latter could be simple phrases like “Yes!” or “Agreed,” while affirmations are claims that further support or extend the claims of others. I was curious about commissives, hoping to see many instances of concession. Unfortunately, there were fewer instances of commissives than there were instances of degrading comments, and the majority of messages coded as commissives were interactions between

people who were in agreement and were in exchanges of 2-3 messages. Out of the 115 instances of commissive comments, 11 featured a concession. With such a small number of instances, reducing the data to representative themes seems disingenuous. Two of the instances were strategic concessions, where users would concede a point in order to capitalize upon it to continue their own attack. There were another two instances where users conceded points as a way of clarifying their original positions. These four instances do not signal emergent political judgments. That said, there were some promising examples that by themselves do not indicate significant change in political judgment, but do at least show a change in the intensity of commitment to one position. Since all of these occurred in replies, I will discuss them further in my section on REPLY, below.

Speaking of REPLY, I would like to draw your attention to some of these findings regarding the structures-in-use at Reddit as well. Because Reddit allows users to reply directly to comments in a chained hierarchy of comment-replies, and because Reddit alerts comment authors when another user has responded to a comment, I expected to see more deliberative activity (such as counters, rebuttals, refutes). These expectations were naïve, in hindsight. In fact, structures-in-use are mostly not represented in the sample. By far the most commonly used system function was REPLY—over 90% (1681) of the comments were tagged as replies. This was predictable. The next highest feature was QUOTING, with almost 13% (240) of the comments featuring the use of this function. LINK TO USER and REFERENCE COMMENT were both represented in very small quantities once I screened out linking done by the system automatically. I will report on these uses later but for now it's sufficient to say that they do not reflect a common practice at reddit. What my data suggest is that Reddit is an entertainment platform, as Manuel Castells (2000) predicts. Users seldom take advantage of site features

besides replying to each other, exchanges are often short, and messages featuring emotional comments are the most common.

Although almost one-fifth of the messages I analyzed featured a link, almost all of those links were to other subreddits. Recall from earlier that if a user wants to place a hyperlink to another subreddit in her message, she just has to write the name of the community with r/ in front of it for the system to automatically create a hyperlink. It's no surprise, then, that links of this sort, which require little energy on the part of the user, would be the majority of the links I found. Links to other resources that could serve as support for arguments or provide information to other users were only a small portion of the data. Later in this section, when I analyze linking more fully, I will argue that Reddit's system of linking facilitates internal site cohesion but is otherwise not capitalized upon for rhetorical invention. Common traditions were not a frequently-used resource for rhetorical invention, either, as evidenced by the low incidence of references to voting, site guidelines, or site's ethos. By far, the structural code with the highest incidence was REPLY, but that was to be expected. Later in this section, I will provide further analysis of the intersections between LINK, REPLY, and QUOTE with the pragmatic codes to show how these interactions may have influenced the expression and formation of political judgment at Reddit.

One final observation about my findings before I transition to my second level of analysis, in which I will look at the intersections of the structural and pragmatic codes. Relative to the data set, there were few instances where moderators took visible action in their subreddits, but it's important to note that it may not always be obvious from what's left in the message thread that moderators have stepped in to remove a message. In some communities, a message removed by moderators would look the same as a message deleted by its author. Of the 288

deleted messages in the three threads I analyzed, I was able to identify 21 instances where moderators had removed the messages, but there is no way to know for sure how many of the 288 messages that were deleted were actually removed by moderators. As a result, this is not comparable to instances of moderator action at BSN, which are explicitly marked.

4. DATA ANALYSIS STAGE 2

Beyond just assessing to what extent discussion at Reddit facilitates the creation of new political judgements or formation of consensus around a political judgement, I wanted to see how the structure of a public forum might influence persuasion and emergence of co-constructed political judgements. To do that, I looked at the most common structural codes, QUOTE, LINK, and REPLY, reducing the data to themes reflecting how users took advantage of these features during discussion. In each subsection that follows I will present my findings from my analysis of each coding group.

A. Quoting

This section presents 4 themes from my data reflecting how users took advantage of the quoting feature at Reddit.

Quoting Theme 1: Providing Context

In a threaded system like this—especially one that users can change by switching the organizational scheme of the comment thread—quoting what you want to reply to can contextualize your response. The reason users may want to do this is a result of the notification feature I described earlier. When someone replies to a comment, the author of the original receives a notification. When that notification is clicked on, it presents the reply devoid of any context. That said, the recipient of the reply can click on a “context” button to see a small portion of the original thread and a button “see rest of comments” to view the thread in its entirety. In

truth, although users did use the quoting feature to provide context, this usage was much more useful at BSN due to its chronological presentation of messages and lack of a notification feature when replies to comments in a thread were posted. See chapter 4 for more on this.

Quoting Theme 2: Incorporating Text External to the Conversation

A third use of quoting is to bring information into the discussion from an outside source; for instance, quoting from the article that Adrian Chen wrote. This is somewhat ingenious given the circumstances since linking to the article itself was no longer permissible according to the moderators:

[–] becoolhunnybunny 6 points 8 months ago⁵

I thought the Gawker article was pretty good.

> "When it comes to mods, the political model of Reddit is not so much a vast digital democracy, as it's often framed by fans and users, as online feudalism. Moderators like Violentacrez are given absolute control over their turf in exchange for keeping the kingdom of Reddit strong."

This is a mod on a power trip for sure.

Not only does becoolhunnybunny cut and paste text from the article into the discussion (thus circumventing the ban on links to Gawker and literally bringing into the conversation), but the particular language he pastes in is critical of moderators, accusing them caring more about taking care of each other and maintaining moderator control rather than freedom of expression or the concerns of community members. His final sentence of his comment—"This is a mod on a

⁵ Where I have quoted comment threads from Reddit, I have attempted to replicate how these messages would have appeared at Reddit by indenting to illustrate how the hierarchical thread would display. Rather than try to replicate the appearance of block quoting exactly, I will indent the quoted language and include an angle bracket to further call attention to places where users have used the quote feature from the site.

power trip for sure”—is ambiguous in that it could be referring to VA, the moderator discussed in the quoted material, or to the moderator who made the post banning links to Gawker. It indicts both and manages to extend the critique to the moderators of /r/bestof.

Quoting Theme 3: Memory

A third use of quoting is in the service of memory, as in this case:

[-] [deleted] 8 months ago*

[deleted]

[-] jack2454 130 points 8 months ago*

You didn't ban the fucked up sub-reddits because of freedom of speech, but now you ban links in comments? And you ban Huge_Jacked_Man for expressing his beliefs?

[-] spoils 44 points 8 months ago

Aaaaand the mods have now deleted the comment. It read:

> So "doxing" = bad but publicly disseminating thousands of pervy, sexualized shots of women and minors without their consent so perverts can jerk off to them is ok? Go fuck yourselves, seriously.

Edit: I've been banned from /r/bestof for this post, thank you for standing up for "freedom of speech"!

Edit2: Syncretic is apparently also banning people who agree with me in comments, a better use of his time than explaining how a journalist profiling a somewhat influential individual is the same as doxing some

random nobody. Maybe /r/bestof and /r/politics should also ban wikileaks and every single investigative newspaper?

Because of the possibility for users to edit comments, and because the comment was deleted, it's impossible for us to verify that the content of the block quote in spoils' comment is accurate.

Nevertheless, this form of quoting is, again, a form of resistance against moderator power.

Supposing that the moderators did remove the comment, spoils uses his comment to restore the censored text to the conversation.

Quoting Theme 4: Rewriting Others

A messaging strategy that was far more common at Reddit than BSN was the practice of using quoting to parodize, correct, or expose the blindspots of another user's comment. There can be a playfulness in this strategy made possible by the logics of both parody and digitization: cutting and pasting, remixing and recontextualizing original content so that it says something that ultimately works against itself or reveals an unsavory or absurd subtext. Here's a quick example to illustrate what I'm talking about, though in this example what we see is simply a user affirming and adding to the original comment rather than challenging it:

[-] [deleted] -9 points 8 months ago

Their agenda is to shutdown **any reddit that displeases them**. Unfortunately, a lot of them hate all subreddits and want reddit shut down. They hate reddit in general because of all it's "white males." A reddit shutdown won't affect them because they are SA forum users.

See <http://www.reddit.com/r/redditbomb> for their latest attempts.

[-] Isellmacs -2 points 8 months ago

> Their agenda is to shutdown reddit.

FTFY. They really hate reddit, and redditors.

In this example, Isellmacs uses the quoting feature to edit the original language to produce a new, highly compressed claim. He writes FTFY, which is an abbreviation for “fixed that for you.” Some messages only feature the edited language, some have the edited language and “FTFY” written, and some do follow with further commentary explaining the claim in greater detail, as is the case in this example.

Here is a more complex variation on the same theme:

[–] MisterSjeiks 117 points 8 months ago

Why am I suddenly seeing so much irony "We have our freedom of speech and will defend it!" "No more Gawker links allowed"

"I post pictures of women without them knowing, so my internet buddies can fap to them!" "Oh no, they know my name! MY PRIVACY!"

[–] selectrix 21 points 8 months ago

> "I post pictures of women **and their names and where they live** without them knowing, so my internet buddies can fap to them!" "Oh no, they **have my picture and** know my name **and where I live!** MY PRIVACY!"

Dude you are so right. This is utterly unbelievable that this was happening.

Because this is what was happening and totally wasn't the thing that you said- the thing that you said had big differences between the two. (emphasis mine)

MisterSjeiks observes the irony of violentacrez complaining about his privacy being violated when he was doxed, even though he was a frequent contributor to “Creepshots,” a subreddit dedicated to sharing pictures of women who were unaware that their photos were being taken

and shared on the Internet. The further irony, per MisterSjeiks, is that many reddit users defended violentacrez's actions as free speech while at the same time supporting "BestOf's" decision to ban links pointed at the Gawker network for using their freedom of speech to share the real name of violentacrez. Selectrix uses the quoting capability but alters the text of the quoted material. This is part of selectrix's use of irony as an argumentative approach—she changes MS's initial claim to something that she believes is actually wrong and then writes as though she is agreeing with what MS said. The final sentence of selectrix's comment is difficult to parse, but I believe that here she drops the pretense and corrects MS's account, asserting that "this is what was happening."

While some deliberative democratic theorists would certainly make room for this strategy, this use of language appeals not only to logos but also to ethos. I believe this is significant, for what I will discuss later, when I discuss the use of the reply function—and when I discuss my findings from BSN—will focus on the avoidance of deliberation, properly speaking, and an emphasis on ethos and framing, for if one can coerce others to identify with a particular framing, the ethical implications of that framing are assumed to follow. This strategy relies upon a broadly shared communal understanding of norms that can be leveraged.

We can see an example of fighting over framing play out in the dispute over whether Adrian Chen doxed violentacrez or whether he functioned as a journalist reporting news. If the issue is framed as doxing, communal norms at Reddit would advise that what Chen did was wrong; however, framed as journalism, there is nothing wrong with Chen's article. Were anyone to simultaneously agree that violentacrez was doxed and condone what Chen did, that individual could then be required to work through the nuances of when doxing is appropriate. This, by the way, would be the kind of controversy that could open the door for renegotiating shared norms

and co-constructing new group norms, and it is unfortunate that this was not the path traveled by users at Reddit (or BSN). We will see more of this later when I analyze the use of the reply function.

B. Linking

For my analysis of linking at Reddit, I added an additional step to my procedures described above in order to better isolate intersections of linking and pragmatic behavior in the discussions by creating a query in nVivo that reported on the intersections of my structural and pragmatic notes. Doing so allowed me to see messages that were coded as both linking and a behavior within the pragmatic grouping such as affirmation or rebutting. The result was 351 instances of some use of linking (see Table 3.1 for the list of all linking types) also coded for some kind of pragmatic element. We already know from Table 3.1 that linking was an under-utilized affordance for users, with the exception of linking to other subreddits using the system's shorthand method for creating those hyperlinks. When links are used in the flow of an argument, they can function as an enthymeme, as we can see in the following example:

[–] littlethistle 30 points 8 months ago

doxing can ruin people's lives and put them in "real" danger but posting CP and creep shots is totally acceptable and safe. FREEEEEE SPEEEEECH but only if it's in the interest of the boners of redditor.

VA getting his life thrown all over the Internet is the best thing to happen on reddit in, well, ever. Free speech isn't carte blanche to be a fuck on the interwebz with zero repercussions. sorry boys.

[–] righteous_scout -2 points 8 months ago

> posting CP

Nobody posted CP What are you talking about?

What are you fucking talking about? Nobody's done that!

[-] littlethistle 5 points 8 months ago

lol ur right no one EVER posted CP on reddit, ever.⁶

you must be new here. buckle up, kiddo!

Like an enthymeme, the linked content serves as the evidence supporting the claim, allowing the user to leave the “proof” out of his argument. Using linking in support of arguments was uncommon at Reddit, but the above example illustrates how users could take advantage of linking to produce highly compressed proofs in which the claim and its support were presented simultaneously.

Data Analysis 3: Replying

To analyze the use of reply at Reddit, I added some additional procedures to my methods. Phase 1 of my analysis concerned the intersection of pragmatic codes with use of reply. For this, I first ran a query in NVivo that intersected instances of replying and instances of pragmatic codes to determine how many messages were coded both as a reply and as at least one of the pragmatic codes. The results of that query are in Table 3.2, below. Second, to get an idea of the typical size and shape of reply clusters in message threads at Reddit, I went through the message threads I analyzed for this part of my study and isolated just the top-level comments that had replies. For each of these clusters of messages, I counted the total messages as well as the number of second level messages, third level messages, and so on—out to 20 levels, attained by

⁶ This sentence was the display text for the hyperlink. I have underlined it to show where the hyperlink was in the original.

only one of the clusters. I did this to give me a sense of the kind of commitment to dialogue users demonstrated in these threads.

Phase 2 of my analysis included a topical analysis to determine the topoi that circulated in the discussion. My unit of analysis was the message as a whole, as with my other analyses. In order to select representative data for this section, I next concentrated my attention to the thread from “bestof” entitled “In a show of solidarity with dozens of other subreddits including /r/politics & /r/gaming, we are joining the boycott of Gawker and all affiliated subreddits. Doxing can ruin lives and put people in real danger. The ends do not justify the means. Adrian Chen, you're bad and you should feel bad.” Because I was looking for exchanges between users, I eliminated from consideration any message thread without at least a claim, rebuttal, and refutation in a sequence.

Use of Replying: Trends from Intersecting Pragmatic Codes and Reply

As I stated earlier, I was surprised by how infrequent users’ use of quoting. In my sample, out of 1854 comments, only 240 (12.7%) feature the use of quoting. Even more telling is the data on use of replying. Although 1680 (89.2%) of the messages in my sample from reddit are coded as reply—meaning that they are replies to a “top-level” comment, sorted by the system into a chain with replies subordinated to the messages to which they were replying because the user selected “reply”—, the dialectical exchanges that occur seldom go more than a few messages. If we look just at those sets of comments that are part of a chain of replies, the minimum size of a cluster was 2 messages, the maximum was 181, and the average number of comments per cluster was 16.75; however, the median number of comments per cluster was 6 and the mode is 2, which tells us that shorter comment-chains are actually more common in the data-set. In fact, out of 117 clusters, only 30 had more than 16 messages (25.6%) whereas 41

clusters had less than 3 (35.0%). These results show that when users do respond to each other, the conversations are short-lived, even though users receive notifications when others reply to their comments. If we consider these data in light of the data on the kinds of comments that users are leaving, it is hard to imagine that users are sustaining engagement with one another for long enough periods of time to achieve the goals that deliberative democratic theorists desire for public deliberation. However, it is possible that when viewed longitudinally, a distributed form of deliberating is taking place where the individual actors and actions are less important than the accumulation of messages over time. To analyze this would require following the contributions of individual users over time and was thus outside of the purview of this study.

Table 3.2: Intersections between use of the reply feature and pragmatic codes

Affirmation	34	1.8%
Affirmation NR	61	3.3%
Claim	15	0.8%
Claim NR	45	2.4%
Commissive	112	6.0%
Counter	103	5.6%
Counter NR	306	16.5%
Curbing	4	0.2%
Degrading	105	5.7%
Directive Informative	367	19.8%
Emotional	289	15.6%
Empathy	0	0.0%
Expressive	2	0.1%

Humor	95	5.1%
Questioning sincerity	3	0.2%
Rebuttal	128	6.9%
Rebuttal NR	178	9.6%
Refute	51	2.8%
Refute NR	59	3.2%
Usage Declarative	34	1.8%

The table above is limited to the pragmatic codes. Here, the number of incidents reflects those instances where a message was coded both as a reply and as the respective pragmatic code indicated. Keep in mind that since my unit of analysis was the message as a whole, these codes are not exclusive; a message could have been coded as “refute” as well as “affirmation.”

From Table 3.2 we see that the most common reply type was non-reasoned counters. A non-reasoned counter signals that the responder is introducing a new claim in the middle of the discussion stream, with no supporting statements. I also want to note that there were 147 instances of non-reasoned claims compared to 56 instances of claims, meaning that instances of claim-making without support occurred more frequently than supported claim-making by approximately 2:1. The most frequent activity in a comment was directive informative, or providing information (often biased information), followed closely by making some form of emotional statement (anything from “I think that...” to “I hate this”). Directive informative, or DI, occurred in roughly 20% of comments and emotional comments in roughly 16% (though again please be reminded that because my unit of analysis was the message as a whole, it would be incorrect to say that these two codes accounted for 36% of the data).

I want to quickly restate what these data represent. Although these categories were derived from Habermas' normative theory of the ideal speech situation, I am using them to *describe* the kind of talk that takes place in these online forums. My objective is to correlate how users talk with the structures-in-use in order to gain some insight into how these structures contribute to the generation of talk in these spaces. In the table above you can see what users did deliberately when they used the reply function. Any message that wasn't a top-level response to the original post was a reply (because reply is a feature of the website and an element of structure-in-use). In this section of this chapter, I want to look at some of the highlights from use of reply. The first thing I want to point out is how infrequently REPLY was used for purposes associated with rational-critical deliberative activity. This is not a surprising discovery; I expected that by choosing not to screen out messages that are apolitical (as Graham (2010) does) or off-topic, my results would confirm what others have found: that rational-critical deliberation is not the default mode of communication people use on the Internet. Many deliberative theorists argue that spaces must be cultivated in order to promote forms of discussion that manifest mutual respect, hence the body of work on publics and other metaphors for spaces wherein talk occurs. The only rational-critical deliberative categories that were found in over 10% of the messages coded reply were non-reasoned rebuttal and non-reasoned counter. Both categories are non-reasoned, meaning that no evidence was supplied in these moments to support the rebuttal or counter-assertion offered by the user. Both rebuttals and counter-assertions reflect responses: a rebuttal is a reply to another user that challenges that user's claim and a counter-assertion is a alternative claim that does not challenge the previous user's claim. A rebuttal stays on topic while a counter-assertion moves the conversation in a different direction. One thing that we can say at this point is that the Reddit environment does not appear to promote rational-critical

deliberation to a great extent, although I was pleased to see that degrading only co-occurred with reply 5.7% of the time (and 6.69% out of the entire dataset) and curbing only 0.2% of the time. On the other hand, I found zero instances of empathy. There appear to be low co-occurrences of claim (or claim NR) + reply and commissive + reply, but these would likely be the opening and closing moves so finding them less frequently is not surprising. However, keep in mind that Reddit is set up to alert users when someone has replied to one of their comments; initially I had guessed that this would result in more rational-critical debate because it would compensate for some of the weaknesses of asynchronous communication—such as sifting through what could become an overwhelming number of messages prior to commenting or taking the initiative to return, unprompted, to a conversation to continue a protracted exchange with another user or group of users. However, it's also possible that by alerting users to the existence of replies to their comments, the feature only facilitated the production of more antagonistic commentary. Once we review the data from the Bioware Social Network, I'll be able to say more about the contribution that Reddit's reply feature could have made to the deliberative activity on the site.

There are some categories that I believe deserve closer attention. Earlier, I began analyzing the use of commissives because I hoped to see a high number of users coming to agreement with one another. I found that almost every case of this behavior occurred between users who were already in agreement with each other. Combining this finding with my findings on the typical size of a reply cluster reinforces my belief that commissives were by-and-large used to reinforce positions commenters already agreed with, as, again, the typical reply cluster was often too brief to realistically expect a change in anyone's position (much less the intersubjective construction of a new perspective on events). There were, however, a very small number of promising instances of user agreement where reply and commissive functions

coincided, and I would like to finish my analysis of commissives at this time. As I said earlier, there were 11 instances where one user conceded a point to another user. Of these, four were either strategic concessions or concessions that were made for the sake of clarifying a prior position. The other seven instances were changes of position, though they were inconsequential; consider, for example, the following exchange:

1 **[-] iluvurkidz -18 points 8 months ago**

2 As someone who's regularly communicated with him, PIMA is actually the nicest redditor you
3 could possibly find.

4 **[-] TripleHekate -8 points 8 months ago**

5 "nicest redditor"

6 "mods creepshots"

7 Sorry, no.

8 **[-] youregonnaloveme 4 points 8 months ago**

9 I fail to see how moderating creepshots instantly makes him not nice.

10 **[-] TripleHekate -8 points 8 months ago**

11 Do you need it spelled out? I'll try.

12 Overseeing a sub where people post voyeuristic pics without the subject's consent is a
13 pervy, unpleasant activity - it's even called CREEPshots - and excludes him from the
14 category "nice".

15 Even if he might have bought you drinks, or bungee jumped for charity, or love his
16 mum, or be really super funny and cool.

17 He's a creep.

18 **[-] youregonnaloveme -6 points 8 months ago**

19 Man, I'm finding all the condescending douches on reddit lately. I do think you
20 have a strange perception of nice and not nice, though. It's just weird to me that
21 because someone MODERATES a subreddit, not even talking about submission
22 contributions, they are automatically dispelled from the "nice person" category. I
23 happen to think I'm pretty nice, but what do I know. -creepshots moderator

24 **[-] BritishHobo 7 points 8 months ago**

25 Presumably moderating a subreddit means you're okay with what they do.
26 You're definitely assisting in helping them do it. You're fine with the content
27 and you're helping sort through it. So the 'MODERATES' thing is sort of
28 irrelevant.

29 **[-] youregonnaloveme -4 points 8 months ago**

30 If they want to engage in this perfectly legal activity, yah, I have no
31 problem with it. You can sit on your moral high horse all day and spew
32 about how it's wrong and what not, but I'm not a big fan of judging people.
33 If its legal, I'm okay with it, and I'm there to ensure that it does, in fact,
34 stay legal. Not much else.

35 **[-] BritishHobo 5 points 8 months ago**

36 I'm not spewing anything, I was just pointing out that moderating a
37 subreddit means you are okay with its content.

38 **[-] youregonnaloveme 0 points 8 months ago**

39 Fair enough, and in return, yes I agree

I've removed some of the intervening comments that did not contribute to the context. In this example, what is actually at issue is whether one can be considered a "nice" person if that person

is also moderating the “creepshots” subreddit. The user *youregonnaloveme*, who claims to be one of that subreddit’s moderators (see line 23), pushes back on *TripleHekate*’s claim.

BritishHobo takes a different tack in response to *youregonnaloveme*’s rebuttal, making the argument that a person who moderates a subreddit condones its contents. Although *youregonnaloveme* never agrees that being okay with the contents of that subreddit makes one “not nice,” he does concede to *BritishHobo*’s initial claim. Of course, from the context it seems obvious that the rest of *BritishHobo*’s claim is assumed—one who is okay with the content at a subreddit like “creepshots” is not a nice person—but *youregonnaloveme* does not comment on that, nor does he respond to *BritishHobo*’s claim that *youregonnaloveme*’s distinction between moderating the subreddit and contributing to it is a distinction without a difference.

I want to spend some time analyzing DI not only because it is the category that co-occurred with reply the most, but also because the act of soliciting or providing information can also perform an argumentative function. Graham (2008) refers to messages in this category as “non-claim replies” that “solicited or provided information” (p. 25). But what *is* a claim, and how is a claim distinguished from “information”? This is a critical question if we wish to operationalize either category. Neither Graham (2008) nor Graham (2010) defines claim. Based on the work of Habermas (1981), Toulmin (see Lunsford and Ruskiewicz, 2016), and van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs (1993), I define a claim as a contested statement that is objectively criticizable and can be supported with reasons or grounds (see chapter 2); however, based on this definition, how does one distinguish “information” from a “claim” given that many factual statements can be objectively contested? Are there formal properties that distinguish the solicitation or providing of information from the assertion of a reasoned or non-reasoned claim? When I coded my data initially, I coded many messages with questions as DI; this explains the

high incidence of directive-informative in my data. Many of these instances of directive-informative serve a dual purpose, though; formally they may be requesting information, but their role in the discussion is strategic. In sum, I believe that the findings regarding DI are artifacts of the definition of this coding category, resulting in a large number of questions being included simply because that is an easily identifiable formal property. However, it does also lead me to question how questions are used in online arguments, and future research should investigate this.

Here are two examples of instances that I believe demonstrate people soliciting information. In the first example, we see [zombiesingularity](#) asking [starberry697](#) to show him where he created a false equivalence. In the second, [WouldntThatBeNice](#) asks [Isellmacs](#) to describe the various groups involved in the conflict at Reddit. In both instances, we see users who are inviting more conversation through their requests for information. Clearly, in example 1, [zombiesingularity](#) does not believe that his argument was fallacious, thus one could argue that this is actually a claim.

Example 1:

[–] [zombiesingularity](#) -9 points 8 months ago

The point is that her nude photos were leaked without her consent, and Reddit has no problem with this. But take a pic of a stranger in public and suddenly you're evil.

[–] [starberry697](#) 17 points 8 months ago

This too, I just like pointing how extra falsley equivalent this particular false equivalence was.

[–] [zombiesingularity](#) -11 points 8 months ago

The OP supported banning individual creepshot submitters, so I asked if he'd supported banning individual celebrity creepshot submitters. Where's the false equivalence?

Example 2:

[-] Isellmacs 7 points 8 months ago

No, it's not like that. Good attempt though, nice writing skills.

[-] WouldntThatBeNice -5 points 8 months ago

How do you see it?

The majority of instances performed an argumentative function, though. Very often, users would use questions to introduce a comparison as a challenge to a claim, as in this example:

[-] zombiesingularity -27 points 8 months ago

So when the Scarlet Johansson photos were leaked, you supported banning those who posted her photos on Reddit, right?

In the above example, zombiesingularity is replying to a top-level comment that has been deleted, so it's impossible to know for sure what the immediate context of this reply is. Based on the other comments from this user (see above), it's evident that the question here challenges the ban of the creepshots subreddit on the grounds that an arguably more egregious violation of privacy—making public photographs of a celebrity that were obtained by criminal means—was not met with a similar response. It is possible that this is intended as a genuine solicitation of information, but given that this technique occurs so often during discussions at Reddit (and also given that a comment from this same user later in the thread and elsewhere clarifies his position), it seems evident to me that this question functions as a challenge to the initial claim by reframing the issue and implying hypocrisy, the latter being one of the dominant topoi in the thread as a whole.

Use of Reply: Characterizing the Discussion through Topical Analysis

My analysis of commissives earlier foreshadows the fact that I found little evidence of changing political judgments, though in a small number of instances I did find examples of users changing the intensity of their commitment to a particular position. We also know from the data that particular exchanges between users were often short-lived: out of 117 clusters, only 30 had more than 16 comments and the mode was 6 posts per cluster. We also know from the data that the most common contributions were expressives and non-reasoned claims and counters. Directive-informative contributions were also found in comparable numbers but upon investigating those further, the majority of them functioned as counters or rebuttals. Given these findings, it is evident that there were few discussions that adhered to deliberative norms as outlined by deliberative democratic theorists. Like the arguments at BSN (see chapter 4), the arguments at Reddit do not appear to feature much deliberation, properly speaking; rather, they appear to pivot on deploying and redeploying arguments from a circulating set of special topics. That said, the variety of topics used by interlocutors at Reddit is broader than those in circulation at BSN, while also being very specific to the community under consideration. What appears to be most disputed is the frame through which to evaluate what happened. As I have written previously, frames evoke schema. In this case, I believe they invoke schema for making determinations about rightness or appropriateness, as well as making decisions at the stasis of policy.

What I will focus on in this section are the times that frames are disputed. Argument by analogy was a very common strategy in these discussions, and questions were frequently used in place of rebuttals to challenge arguments (as I have covered previously in my discussion of Directive-Informative, above).

To illustrate my findings, I will analyze two exchanges from the thread entitled “In a show of solidarity with dozens of other subreddits including /r/politics and /r/gaming, we are joining the boycott of Gawker and all affiliated subreddits. Doxing can ruin lives and put people in real danger. The ends do not justify the means. Adrian Chen, you're bad and you should feel bad.” This thread was posted in the “Best Of” subreddit by its moderators. Recall from earlier that prior to Gawker’s publication of Adrian Chen’s article outing Michael Brutsch as the man behind the violentacrez account, multiple subreddits at Reddit decided to ban any links to Gawker. They argued that they were taking a stand against Chen’s choice to “dox” violentacrez. Also before the article was published, Brutsch deleted the violentacrez account. After Chen’s article was published, Reddit’s administrators banned all “creepshots” style subreddits. The thread in question was r/bestof’s official announcement that it was going to join other communities in their ban on links to Gawker.

Compared to the discussions at BSN, the discussions about this topic at Reddit exhibited a far broader number of topoi. This could be due to the way that users approached the issue through their identification with a community. Indeed, almost none of the users who contributed in any one of the three threads I included in my sample posted in more than one thread. It is also possible that the original post of the thread frames the issue and primes users for particular topoi. Considering the original post for the thread in Best Of, as well as the article it responds to and the structure of the site itself, it’s not surprising to see that topics such as consequences, freedom of speech, moderator abuse of power, and vigilantism in the list. From what I have written above it is clear that freedom of speech is a core value at the site; the thread itself begins with the warning about the consequences of doxing; and Chen’s article calls out the site for the way that

moderators are basically the de facto rulers of the site. The complete list of topoi that I found in this thread follows:

- Astroturfing
- Brigading
- Consequences (of creepshotting, of doxing)
- Censorship (of Chen's article, of creepshots posts)
- Freedom of speech
- Hypocrisy (of Reddit, of people wanting creepshots banned)
- Investigative journalism
- Legality
- Moderators abusing their power
- Public photography
- Right to privacy
- Vigilantism (sometimes "witch hunt," "lynch mob," or "mob justice")
- Violentacrez is a pedophile (or rapist)
- Violentacrez is a public figure
- Violentacrez posted child pornography
- Violentacrez was careless

In the discussion, there were only a very small number of people defending violentacrez's character or the content of the creepshots subreddit. Many users expressed the position that he was a creep while also arguing that Chen's decision to make his real name public was wrong because of the potential for real-world consequences for Brutsch and his family. Occasionally these users argued that if there was a crime law enforcement should get involved, rather than

people like Chen taking it upon themselves to act. These users would at times make the claim that another community at Reddit called “Shit Reddit Says,” or SRS, had helped Chen with his research and were actively brigading or astroturfing the thread in Best Of. By brigading, what they mean is that users in the SRS subreddit had coordinated a mass downvote campaign on threads related to violentacrez and creepshots. Astroturfing refers to a coordinated effort of a group to make it appear as though their opinion is more popular than it is. At Reddit, this would be accomplished by using alternate accounts that could not be traced back to the community organizing the campaign.

Other users argued that Reddit was in the wrong for even allowing creepshot content on the platform. These users would often argue that violentacrez facilitated the posting, or himself posted, child pornography, or that creepshots amounted to rape. They viewed Best Of’s decision to ban links to Gawker as an ironic rejection of free speech given that they were standing with violentacrez, whose behavior was often justified by other users with the argument that freedom of speech demanded that he and others be allowed to share creepshot content on the site. In response to those who worried about mob justice they argued that the women whose pictures were shared on the site were also being harmed. Where supporters of the Gawker ban would sometimes argue that the women whose pictures were shared were in public and thus had no expectation of privacy, these users countered that violentacrez was careless with his anonymity but also that his stature at Reddit made him a public figure, fit for journalistic interest. Thus they also argued that Chen had not doxed anyone; this was investigative journalism serving the public interest. Taking a cue from Chen’s article, these users sometimes claimed that the Gawker ban was proof enough of Chen’s accusations that reddit’s moderators had carved the site into fiefdoms and abused their authority.

These topoi reflect the frames that users applied to the issue at hand. When I look at the data, I do not see many people interested in deliberating over the issue. What I see instead is users contesting each others' framings of the issues embedded in the event that unfolded. A frame, you will recall, not only selects particular details to emphasize, it also characterizes those details in a particular way to activate schema. These schema can be thought of similar to heuristically formed opinions; they are preloaded judgments that enable people to make decisions about what is true and what should be done in response. Consider, for instance, the difference between doxing and investigative journalism. If we select the details of the narrative that suggest doxing, we know how to evaluate it and what actions to take because we (and here I am referring to users of Reddit) have a site culture that tells us about the ethics of doxing; likewise, if we frame the events as investigative journalism, then we already have a cultural background that provides us with the resources to evaluate it in those terms.

Because my study is interested in political judgment formation, I want to provide two instances where users contested the framing. Throughout, I have italicized sections I will emphasize in my discussion (I also underlined "yes it is" in line 7 to indicate the presence of a hyperlink in the data). Note as well that I have cut out all of the comments in the thread that weren't related to this specific exchange. Example 1:

1 **[-] mindaika -11 points 8 months ago**

2 Do you think that disgusting people came into existence solely because of reddit?

3

4 **[-] SMTRodent 27 points 8 months ago**

5 They've always been there, but it's nice not to validate them in their disgustingness, or give
6 them a platform to find other disgusting people and practice disgustiness together.

7

8 **[–] mindaika -1 points 8 months ago**

9 So where do you draw the line? Why is it acceptable to take down photos *legally taken in*
10 *public* because it offends some people, but not okay to take down pictures of Mohammed
11 because it offends some people?

12

13 **[–] yakityyakblah 8 points 8 months ago***

14 Well actually we've got to separate this out. Legally it's because *pornography* is not
15 protected speech. Ethically, it's because posting people's genitals on a website without
16 their permission can be more costly to them personally than insulting someone's
17 religion. It's not about the offense, it's about the *actual harm* it can cause a person in
18 their relationships and also their career.

19

20 **[–] mindaika 7 points 8 months ago**

21 Okay. Aside from the fact that yes it is, what does that have to do with anything,
22 *since we weren't talking about pornography?*

23

24 **[–] yakityyakblah 4 points 8 months ago**

25 That example is libraries deciding for themselves that it's protected and the
26 ACLU backing them, there's been no legal case on the matter. That also
27 doesn't look into what pornography is covered by that and which isn't. I doubt
28 they'd be *defending someone looking at child pornography* on there, now
29 would they? Which by the way, is the biggest hole in any pretense of

30 pornography being protected speech. You can record a guy getting killed and
31 as long as you didn't kill them, it's protected. You can't record a minor having
32 sex and post that, even if you just ended up finding them in the woods or
33 something. Which by the way, I'm not saying that isn't exactly how it should
34 be, just pointing out the facts. And that being said, I'm pretty certain
35 creepshots wasn't posting shit for artistic purposes, hence the name.

36

37 **[–] mindaika -1 points 8 months ago**

38 So, I get what you're saying, but *it still wasn't pornography* that we were
39 talking about. It was *a public display*.

40

41 **[–] yakityyakblah 1 point 8 months ago**

42 How was it a public display?

43

44 **[–] mindaika 1 point 7 years ago**

45 Because...it was in public? I'm talking about people taking pictures
46 of other people in public (usually attractive females) without their
47 knowledge.

48

49 **[–]yakityyakblah 3 points 7 years ago**

50 It's not like they were just pictures of people in public, they
51 were close ups of someone's ass, or cleavage, or something

52 else. The pictures were pretty transparently being used as
 53 something to jerk off to.

In the above example, both mindaika and yakityyakblah are drawing from topics that were frequently drawn from in the discussion. The claims that each makes are not unique to each user; rather, they are commonly asserted throughout the discussion. In fact, mindaika's questions in lines 2 and 9 were posted a handful of times in the thread by different users as well. The discussion exemplifies contested framing but there is no change in either user's position as a result. User mindaika comes to the discussion framing creepshots as photographs of women taken in public, thus legal content protected by the First Amendment. It's evident that yakityyakblah frames the content as child pornography, though that language is not made explicit until line 28. Again, that specific framing (and the associated framing of violentacrez as a child pornographer or pedophile) was commonly deployed in this thread. Another feature of this exchange is that, although the framing is contested, the two are not arguing the same issue. Whether the photos were taken in public has nothing to do with whether they could be considered pornography, a point yakityyakblah alludes to in lines 50-53. The distinction mindaika makes in lines 38-39 appear to assume that these two categories are mutually exclusive, perhaps to avoid having to acknowledge the strength of yakityyakblah's argument, which would then require mindaika to reframe the narrative of events.

In example 2, we see a similar pattern:

1 [-] **[deleted] 8 months ago***

2 [deleted]

3

4 [-] **AlbertIInstein 132 points 8 months ago**

5 publicly disseminating thousands of pervy, sexualized shots of women and minors without
6 their consent so perverts can jerk off to them is ok? I didn't get that message. I see "two
7 wrongs don't make a right." *Doxxing* is bad. Jailbait is bad. Don't encourage either. BOTH
8 are part of the 5 rules of reddit. <http://www.reddit.com/rules>

9

10 [-] **verty101 150 points 8 months ago**

11 *How is this doxxing?* Gawker is an, admittedly shitty, news site and the article featured
12 an interview with VA. Does Reddit not understand how *journalism* works? Does *free*
13 *speech* no longer include freedom of the press?

14

15 [-] **FriendlyDespot 50 points 8 months ago**

16 *Free speech* never included the right to be respected for your actions.

17

18 [-] **built_to_elvis 53 points 8 months ago**

19 *Free speech* never included protection against non-government entities regulating
20 that speech.

21

22 [-] **Able_Seacat_Simon 56 points 8 months ago**

23 Oh no doubt, I just find it hilarious that the same people who always cry about
24 free speech whenever SRS is discussed are silent on the reddit admins banning
25 a news article because it dispeases them.

26

27 **[–] rockidol -12 points 8 months ago**

28 They banned it because of *doxxing*. Seriously there are tons of articles
29 about there that are blasting reddit and yet they only ban this one.

30

31 **[–] Able_Seacat_Simon 23 points 8 months ago**

32 > They banned it because of doxxing.

33 A *journalist* interviewing a niche *public figure* \neq doxxing

34 > Seriously there are tons of articles about there that are blasting
35 reddit and yet they only ban this one.

36 Yeah, but how many of them specifically call out the *cronytastic*

37 *relationship between the admins* and their favorite creepy sleazeball?

38

39 **[–] rockidol -7 points 8 months ago**

40 > A *journalist* interviewing a niche *public figure* \neq doxxing

41 He said he was going to publish his real name either way, that's

42 doxxing. The fact that he was given a chance to defend himself

43 doesn't change it.

44

45 **[–] Shampyon 14 points 8 months ago**

46 > He said he was going to publish his real name either way,

47 that's doxxing.

48 Genuine question: *Journalists* investigate and publish that kind
49 of information all the time. What makes this time different
50 enough to be classed as doxxing?

51

52 **[-] rockidol -4 points 8 months ago**

53 I thought he had gotten this information by hunting around
54 the internet for it. I thought that was doxxing.

55

56 **[-] Shampyon 10 points 8 months ago**

57 But how does that differ from hunting for it in any other
58 way? Side note: According to Chen, he didn't have to
59 hunt the internet for violentacrez's real name. *VA has*
60 *attended Reddit IRL meet-ups, using his real name and*
61 *admitting to his online identity.* He asked at the time
62 that the other redditors attending not publish his real
63 name and blur his face in published photos. One of
64 those redditors passed the info over to Chen.

In this example, we again see familiar topics being used as resources to invent arguments: free speech, hypocrisy (see lines 23-25), moderators abusing their power (lines 36-37), violentacrez's carelessness when it came to protecting his anonymity (lines 59-61), violentacrez's status as a public figure, and the question at issue in this example, whether Chen's actions constitute journalism or doxing? As I suggested above, these topoi frequently travel together to aid in the construction of framings for the narrative that justify evaluations or actions based upon them. As with mindaika in example 1, rockidol does not concede the point that violentacrez was not doxed by Chen. The theory of motivated reason predicts this.

Though there is an example of contested framing in lines 4-20, the part of the example that I want to focus on is in lines 22-64 because in that section of the example we see rockidol attempting to defend his framing of the issue but I wanted to include the preceding commentary for the sake of contextualizing the rest. In lines 23-25 Able_Seacat_Simon, in addition to asserting that many users of reddit are hypocrites on the issue of freedom of speech, invokes the journalism frame which is then contested by rockidol, who reframes it as doxing. There is also a contest over the Reddit administrators' motives. As far as I can discover the ban on Gawker links was not initiated by the administrators of the site, but perhaps Able_Seacat_Simon is assuming that moderators on the site were encouraged to do this by the administrators through non-public channels (which is plausible). We see, then, these two framings coming together: what happened is doxing, and Reddit's moderators are reacting reasonably to stand up for the site's guidelines; versus the narrative that Chen is a journalist conducting entirely normal journalistic activity, and Reddit's administrators are encouraging moderators to inappropriately prevent access to the story. In lines 42-44 rockidol attempts to rebut Able_Seacat_Simon's claim; in response, another

user joins the discussion to further challenge the narrative that violentacrez was doxed. As with example 1, we see that rockidol's perception of events is, I believe, successfully challenged (see lines 58-64) but he does not concede the point.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the structure within which, and through which, political discussion takes place at Reddit, I argue that political judgment is not formed through individual discussions of the kind that I have studied here. It is certainly possible that over time, users form political judgments as a result of hundreds of interactions, and I believe a longitudinal study including interview data with users would help us understand the relationship between online environments and political judgment formation better. As I have demonstrated above, there are no examples in my data set of users forging a new judgment intersubjectively, nor of being entirely convinced that their initial judgment is incorrect; the best that I have found is of users lessening the intensity of their commitment to a position. This is certainly promising and does help to qualify the sometimes deterministic perspectives of motivated reason theory, but it should not make deliberative democratic theorists optimistic about the potential of online spaces. Furthermore, it is evident from the results that the structures of Reddit did not go far in eliciting deliberative behavior from users. My findings show that structural features at Reddit are only sometimes used to further deliberative activity. In chapter 4 I will be able to compare Reddit to BSN, which will allow me to say more about how the comment structure contributes to discussions on Reddit, but it is evident from how users took advantage of replying that it was used primarily for recirculating preset frames about the events. Though these frames could be contested, other data show that these discussions did not produce changes in political judgment, further confirmed by the small number of commissives that resulted in genuine concessions.

Chapter 4: BioWare Social Network

In the previous chapter, I found that Reddit's laissez-faire, liberal-democratic approach to the design of their community did not encourage users to co-create new political judgments, of a public character or otherwise. In other words, the outcomes of the arguments there were not obviously epistemic, nor were users engaged in discourse of the kind prized by Habermas and deliberative democrats. Instead, what I observed was argumentation oriented towards strategic communication. Will anything change if there is a markedly different space within which users engage in political disagreements?

My objectives for this chapter are to describe and analyze the BioWare Social Network's (BSN) forum structures available to users and their terms of service and "etiquette" documents. BSN is a more controlled space that values users for their feedback on the company's products. Users are not trusted to the extent that they are at Reddit. In the second major portion of this chapter, I analyze user interactions in the forums at BSN to show, using content analysis, what communicative objectives are typically achieved by using common structures-in-use. Unlike Reddit, where the controversy concerned a matter that was obviously political, here, my data come from discussions concerning game design, specifically, the decision by BioWare to make the four romanceable characters in *Dragon Age 2* available to be romanced by both male and female player characters. For lack of a better word, they were bisexual. I argue that the different affordances at BSN encourage users to insult each other less often and invent arguments with more support, but they do not demonstrate any changes in their judgments. What we see in the conversations at BSN on the issue of bisexual romanceable characters is the circulation of arguments common to the forums rather than reflective interrogation of one's own positions. Thus, as with Reddit, the site's features ultimately facilitate the maintenance of judgment rather

than the formation of judgment, a finding in line with those of other researchers studying argument or deliberation.

Surprisingly, I found that there was more reasoned argumentative activity, measured by content analysis, at BSN than at Reddit. This may be due to the chronological arrangement of messages at BSN, which I speculate could serve as a superior inventive resource for users than the hierarchical arrangement favored at Reddit. Another factor that may influence this result is the high degree of surveillance from moderators, coupled with the threat of penalties as severe as losing access to one's registered games.⁷ In spite of these findings, it was evident from my topological analysis of the discussions that users circulated and recirculated the same topoi that had been developed over time in other threads on similar topics or in private discussion groups that functioned like safe houses (Pratt, 1999). As with Reddit, discussions did not feature communicative action but strategic communication. Repeatedly, in multiple threads, invitations to engage in discussion of side-points that had a clear relationship to the argument were regarded as efforts to derail or troll rather than taken up as genuine (and, to be fair, it is not clear whether this distrust was warranted by past experiences or was another example of a heuristic judgment). Reminiscent of Howarth and Sharman's (2015) discussion of arguments about climate change, users took to labeling opponents as homophobes, which undoubtedly destroyed any possibility for trust to form between them along with any chance for communicative action to take place. For these reasons, all threads discussing the subject of bisexual love-interests in *Dragon Age 2* would eventually be locked by moderators, yet new threads on the same topic continued to appear. Perhaps certain kinds of moderator intervention could have prodded participants into

⁷ Electronic Arts' (BioWare's parent company) do leave open the possibility for suspension of a user's access to licensed content; however, I was never able to establish that the company made good on this threat. Nevertheless, one user did claim that this had happened to him and his account was widely circulated in BSN's forums.

doing discourse—I am thinking here of Zimmermann, Heuer, and Mau’s (2018) use of small face-to-face groupings with knowledgeable moderators who functioned as guides for the conversation rather than merely refereeing interactions—but the kind of oversight required would likely scale very poorly to an Internet forum like BSN. These findings further support my suspicion that the design of these sites, and perhaps of the Internet itself, contributes to polarization.

BIOWARE HISTORY

The organization of the BioWare Social Network is starkly different from that of Reddit. Unlike Reddit, which is a stand-alone website dedicated to content-sharing and discussion, the BioWare Social Network (“BSN”) is the community forum of BioWare, a video game developer founded in 1995 in Edmonton, Canada, with studios in Montreal, Austin, Fairfax, and Galway, Ireland. Where Reddit is a company that was started by two college graduates for the sole purpose of being a link aggregator, the BioWare forums are hosted by BioWare and its parent company, Electronic Arts, which purchased BioWare in 2007. It is certainly the case that as the years have gone by, Reddit has become a more profit-driven enterprise; in the previous chapter I commented on how the liberal-democratic influence over the site’s design facilitated the emergence of comments, links, image-sharing, and users that became a problem as the site became larger and needed to show potential advertisers that their association with the site would not hurt their brand. Some of the energy motivating the argument about violentacrez’s doxxing was likely driven by anger over the changing priorities of the website, priorities that were slowly moving away from those that informed the original design of the site and shaped the cultural norms some users believed were sacrosanct. BSN is different in that it is a commercial concern

through and through, which will become more obvious after I discuss the site's design, terms of service, statements of norms for behavior, and moderation, below.

DRAGON AGE: A BRIEF PRIMER

The Dragon Age games are fantasy role-playing games, drawing inspiration, as so many of these games have, from *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Lord of the Rings*, with plenty of intrigue and realpolitik to propel their narratives. Racial strife, corrupt rulers, violent power struggles, legacies of slavery and imperialism are discussed in the rich lore of the game (available to players through a dense codex and through dialogue with other characters) and continue to inform the events of every game in the series.

There are currently three games in the Dragon Age series: Dragon Age: Origins (2009), Dragon Age 2 (2011), and Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014). Origins required around 100 hours to complete if players chose to do the entire main quest and all side quests, Dragon Age 2 approximately 50 hours for completionists, and Inquisition over 100 hours for players who wanted to do everything in the game. In 2010, Awakening, an expansion for Origins, was released. I include it in this list because it was set in a separate location from Origins, none of the characters from Origins, excluding your player-character (if you chose) and one other character, appeared in the game, and the main storyline did not continue that of Origins, thus it was very much like a separate game in its own right, even though it only required 15-20 hours of playtime to complete the entire main questline and all side-quests.

Origins is set in the kingdom of Ferelden, on the continent of Thedas, during what would come to be known as the Fifth Blight. A blight happens when an Archdemon frees itself from its imprisonment and beckon the darkspawn who inhabit the Deep Roads, vast underground tunnels that connect various parts of Dwarven cities, to go to the surface to destroy all life. The player

may choose to play as a human, a Dalish Elf, a city Elf, a noble Dwarf, or a Dwarf from dust town. Players may also choose to play as a warrior, a rogue, or a mage. After playing through one of six origin stories (which one you play through is determined by your choice of race or specialization), the player is recruited into the Gray Wardens in order to kill the Archdemon and end the blight, saving Ferelden (and possibly the rest of the continent). In order to do this, the player must travel to different towns in the kingdom in order to unite different factions together into an army capable of storming the capital city, Denerim, where the Archdemon has entrenched itself. This is not easy; Ferelden is a place riven by legacies of oppression. The Dalish Elves carry strong resentment towards humans because Elves once ruled Thedas, until human armies drove them off their lands, enslaved their people, and erased their culture. Every city has “city Elves,” an underclass who live in impoverished alienages and often find work as servants for humans. The Dalish are nomadic Elves striving to rebuild their civilization and preserve what is left of their heritage. The Dwarves live underground and battle the darkspawn every day, not just during blights, when darkspawn leave to go to the surface at the beckoning of the Archdemon. For them, a blight is like a holiday. Mages are constantly surveilled by the Templars and kept at the Circle of Magi; human society does not trust mages because their abilities place them at very high risk of demonic possession. Any child with magic is taken by the Circle and raised there; mages who somehow evade detection are considered dangerous apostates. These apostates, or any rogue mages, are killed or made “tranquil.” This procedure severs their connection to the Fade, which removes their magical abilities. Unfortunately, this also results in the elimination of the mage’s personality, desires, and emotions.

There is also the matter of the Qunari, a mysterious race from another continent whose society is organized around dedication to a text called the Qun, which is their religious and

political dogma. The only Qunari the player meets in *Origins* is Sten, who came to Thedas as part of a larger party to investigate the blight.

Along the way, the player is joined by a handful of required companions: Alistair, a fellow Grey Warden; Morrigan, daughter of Flemeth, the mythical Witch of the Wilds and magic user in her own right; and Oghren, a Dwarven warrior with a bit of a drinking problem. There are many other optional characters who can be recruited by the player: Leliana, an Orlesian bard and sister of the Chantry with a sordid past; Sten, mentioned above; Wynne, an elder mage who lives in the Circle of Magi; Shale, a golem with no memory of its past; Zevran, an Elven assassin with a tragic backstory; and a Mabari hound that the player can name. Of these characters, four have romance questlines for the player. Leliana and Zevran can be romanced by either male or female player-characters; Morrigan can only be romanced by male player-characters, Alistair only by female player-characters. You could earn affinity with all of your companions through your choices in the game at key decision points or with gifts; each of your companions would react differently to these choices. For instance, deciding to allow a demon to possess a child at the resolution of one side-quest would earn approval from Morrigan and disapproval from Leliana.

The main quest of *Origins* is very typical of fantasy computer role-playing games, in that there is a powerful foe threatening to destroy the world and it is up to the player and her companions to destroy it by fighting a variety of low-level enemies and completing quests until she has become powerful enough (and looted enough high-quality weaponry, armor, and magical items) to survive her encounter with the final enemy.

Dragon Age 2 chose to tell a different kind of story. Spanning a decade, it tells the story of the player's growing status and influence within the nation-state of Kirkwall. As before, players could choose to play as a warrior, rogue, or mage, but unlike *Origins*, players had to play

as a member of the Hawke family, a human family from the Fereldan town of Lothering who were forced to flee to Kirkwall during the blight, like hundreds of other Fereldans. The presence of these refugees in Kirkwall only adds to the tensions simmering in the nation-state. The Knight-Commander of the Templar order, who is also the de facto ruler of Kirkwall, mandated that all refugees must remain outside of the city unless they can demonstrate they can support themselves or merit entry. Additionally, several hundred Qunari landed in Kirkwall after a storm forced them to make landfall and live in an enclave near the docks. The majority of Kirkwall's public and leadership, either from racist or religious hatred (or both), dislike the Qunari and fear they are plotting to take it over. The final source of tension in Kirkwall is the presence of mages. Throughout Thedas, mages are supervised by Chantries and policed by Templars, and although mages are by and large distrusted everywhere, the relationship between Templars, Chantries, and mages differs from region to region. In Kirkwall, this relationship is particularly antagonistic. Mages in Kirkwall have no freedom to leave the Circle of Magi and rumors are that many mages have been made tranquil. The player character's journey through the narrative is intertwined with all three of these conflicts and her decisions affect their resolution at the end of the narrative. It is because of a treasure-hunting expedition that she participates in early in the game that she is able to rise in status in the city; however, some of the relics she brings back to Kirkwall are possessed with evil magic that exacerbates the megalomania of the city's Templar order and indirectly results in the eruption of a violent conflict between the mages and the Templars that concludes the game.

Dragon Age 2 starts players with Carver and Bethany, the player's siblings. Other required companions are Aveline, a Fereldan soldier who becomes a member of Kirkwall's city guard; Anders, a Grey Warden and apostate mage hiding out in Kirkwall to escape the Circle of

Magi—who is also inhabited by a spirit called Justice; Merrill, a Dalish Elven magic user exiled from her clan for using dark magic; and Varric, a Dwarven rogue who helps the player hire onto the doomed expedition into the Deep Roads. The player also meets a few optional characters: Isabela, a pirate captain whose decision to pilfer a Qunari brings the Qunari-Kirkwall conflict to a head; Fenris, an Elven warrior and escaped slave; and Sebastian, prince of Starkhaven, another nation-state in the Free Marches. Sebastian is only available to players who either pre-ordered the game or purchased a separately-priced \$7 add-on called Exiled Prince. Of these characters, five have romance plotlines. Anders, Fenris, Isabela, and Merrill are all romanceable by player-characters of either sex; Sebastian is romanceable only by female player-characters.

DATA

As with Reddit, my data from BSN was terms of service documentation and any documentation purporting to establish behavioral norms for the site. I looked at 1392 comments from 3 threads: “Does everyone really have to be bisexual,” started by yaw on 3 June 2011, “YES!!! Bisexual Male ROMANCE!!!” started by ForumPortal on 11 June 2011, and “BI companions being BI not playersexual,” started by InfinitePaths on 19 March 2013. My first pass through my comment data was for coding using the coding scheme I described in chapter 2. The unit of analysis was the message as a whole.

SITE ETHOS

BioWare is owned by Electronic Arts, so ultimately anyone using the BioWare Social Network is subject to Electronic Arts’ terms of service agreement. Because this service agreement applies to a wide variety of services, including use of downloadable content, participation in multiplayer gaming hosted by EA’s servers, and posting content to community forums, not much of it is useful for my purposes. However, it provides useful context for

glossing documents on the BioWare Social Network's rules and philosophy, which are obviously subordinate to the terms of service of the parent company. One very important statement in the terms of service is that users who break the rules of conduct (as stipulated in the TOS) can have their account permanently banned, which can result in losing access to one's "entitlements."

Entitlements are defined as:

licensed rights granted, awarded, provided and/or purchased by you to access and/or use online or off-line elements or features of EA Services and/or products. Entitlements include but are not limited to paid and free downloadable content, unlockable content, digital and/or virtual assets, rights of use tied to unlock keys or codes, serial codes and/or online authentication of any kind, in-game achievements and virtual or fictional currency not otherwise governed by a Digital Services Agreement. ("Terms of Service," section 3)

If your account is terminated, you lose access to your entitlements, which can include content that you paid for. One way to lose your account is to compromise the "safety" of the EA environment. Variations on the word "safe" show up in the EA TOS as well as the BSN rules of conduct. The word does not refer to keeping malware (worms, Trojan horses, other viruses) out, although uploading such content to an EA service is a violation of the terms of service.

Specifically, the concern is whether or not your use of EA's services "renders EA Services less safe for others and/or minors [...]" (section 9). The need to explicitly specify minors leads me to believe that they're talking about the language, visual imagery, or ideational content generated or shared by users, since minors are no more vulnerable than any other computer user to attacks on the site's software infrastructure. "Safety" may also refer to this rule in the Rules of Conduct section: "You may violate the Terms of Service if, as determined by EA in its sole discretion, you: [...] Harass, threaten, embarrass, spam or *do anything else to another player that is*

unwanted, such as repeatedly sending unwanted messages or making personal attacks or statements about race, sexual orientation, religion, heritage, etc.” (section 11, *emph. mine*). Note the breadth of this rule; the relevant clause is italicized. You are also not permitted to “[u]se abusive, offensive, or defamatory screen names and/or personas,” to “[d]isrupt the flow of chat in chat rooms with vulgar language, abusiveness, hitting the return key repeatedly or inputting large images so the screen goes by too fast to read, use of excessive shouting (all caps) in an attempt to disturb other users, ‘spamming’ or flooding (posting repetitive text),” or to “[o]rganize, effectuate or participate in any activity, group, guild that is harmful, abusive, hateful, racially, ethnically, religiously or otherwise offensive, obscene, threatening, bullying, vulgar, sexually explicit, defamatory, infringing, invasive of personal privacy or publicity rights, encourages conduct that would violate a law or *in a reasonable person's view*, objectionable and/or inappropriate” (section 11, *italics mine*). The prohibitions run the gamut from the worst examples of hate speech all the way down to using naughty words and the ultimate determining factors are the “sole discretion” of EA and how the affected individual feels or whatever is objectionable in “a reasonable person’s view,” a statement that is at odds with the idea that anything a player doesn’t want constitutes a violation of the terms. EA can make a determination on its own, without consulting either standard, and the standards it provides are at odds. This creates ambiguity for users, who may lose access to content they have paid for as a result of these determinations. Later, I suggest that site moderation may be a significant contributing factor in the amicability of discussions at the BSN. We should keep in mind that behind the rules that moderators enforce is the threat of being locked out of EA services.

A post in the BioWare discussion forum at BSN by user HK-47, a BioWare employee, entitled “Site Rules,” articulates the preferred conduct for users and complements the EA terms

of service. More than that document, the site rules documents provides a clear perspective on how BioWare sees the relationship between itself and forum users and the purpose of the space as a whole. In combination with the design of the forum it's clear that BSN is not as concerned with the organic development of the community, or with users being entertained, as they are with being able to mine the forums for consumer opinions. To demonstrate this, a close reading of the post follows.

The opening paragraph of the site rules establishes fundamental principles that anchor the vision of the document. Item 1 is "Be respectful and courteous." It reads:

The BioWare Forum is a safe and *constructive* space to discuss BioWare Edmonton/Montreal developed video game content and related items. In order to keep this a fun place for all *community* members, there are a few ground rules that must be followed for all methods of communication. ("Site Rules," section 1; emphasis mine.)

Variations on the word "constructive" show up 6 times, "community," 3 times. The words "fun" and "safe" never show up again in this document. What I would like to do is analyze the use of the word "community" and argue that the kind of community BSN envisions is one that is tightly controlled and subordinated to their interests. This community is "constructive" and "productive." It is a community that stays on topic (which, in fact, becomes a predominant topos in forum discussions; see below). As with the terms of service, the invocation of safety at the very beginning of the site rules forces us to ask, "safe from what?" This is not a question that is answered directly since "safety" is never positively defined—neither are "constructive" or "productive," for that matter. "Constructive" is not defined anywhere but the OED defines "constructive" as "having the quality of contributing helpfully" ("Constructive"). BioWare are not hiding their interests from users: the very first sentence states clearly that this is a space "to

discuss BioWare Edmonton/Montreal developed video game content and related items.” One may think, at first, that this is a general guideline, but the fact that users are told in Section 2 that they are to avoid “Off-Topic Commentary,” “non-productive discussions,” “post[ing] communication lacking in meaningful content or posts that do not contribute directly to the conversation,” and “Posting single images or animated .gifs instead of engaging in discussion” makes it clear that BioWare is serious about users staying on topic. Note that in the BioWare forum, each subforum has a topic established by BioWare employees. Users are able to create new threads, but those threads will exist in a subforum that has a fixed topic, such as “Dragon Age II General Discussion.”

Trolling is obviously *not* constructive. The document defines trolling as “posting with the intent to provoke an emotional response from another user.” A series of bulleted items follows that further clarify the kinds of behaviors that fall under the heading of “trolling.” Attacks on others comprise 3 of these items. Using the report tool for purposes it was not intended also counts as trolling, which I find interesting as this strategy manifests a form of user-resistance (perhaps why it is a censurable offense). Also under trolling, “Non-constructive feedback or comments.” In fact, that is the first bulleted item in the list. Although the initial definition of trolling does not limit the kind of emotional response provoked, it seems that the kind of emotional responses trolling provokes are the kind we would expect from being attacked or insulted: anger, hurt, or sadness. That said, we again find a prohibition against being “non-constructive.” If we were to be extremely technical, we could imagine that any communication that is merely neutral with respect to the discussion (which must remain on-topic) technically falls within the category of trolling, such as a joke, as it is not actively helping the conversation along. In practice, one rarely sees moderators take action on humorous posts or posts that are off-

topic, unless the discussion itself begins to focus on an off-topic issue. At that point moderators do get involved to lock the thread.

Moderators' Relationship to Users and the Company

At BSN, some of the moderators are volunteers. Others, such as Chris Priestly, John Epler, and Stanley Woo, are actual BioWare employees. John Epler, for instance, is the narrative director for the Dragon Age series of games. In their site rules, BioWare positively instructs users to “Abide by moderator and BioWare/Electronic Arts employee instructions” and negatively instructs users not to challenge moderators or BioWare employees publicly in posts, but rather to email BioWare privately. Were these policies followed, this would mean that users could not rally support against the ways that moderators or employees were performing their duties on the site; instead, an individual would have to go through official channels and deal with the company on her or his own. This is one element of what I meant earlier when I said that this is a community that is subordinated to BioWare’s interests. BioWare moderators and employees are not really part of the community because they are not on equal footing with the rest of the users; although users can critique BioWare’s products, they cannot challenge moderator or employee practices directly. This is not to say that users do not try, but moderators have the ability to lock threads (that is, make it impossible to anyone to add replies to the thread) and remove posts to prevent further discussion. They can also edit users’ posts to remove parts of messages that violate site guidelines, such as images. There was a time when a post consisting of just an image was not permitted. In my data set there are messages where the post is still there but the moderator has left a note indicating that the offending image has been removed from the post.

Commercial Orientation

In the BSN rules of conduct, the site itself is described as follows: “While these sites are the property of BioWare/Electronic Arts they are here for you, the community.” However, this follows a statement in all caps and in bold: “**READ THIS ALL VERY CAREFULLY AS IT DIRECTLY AFFECTS YOUR ACCESS TO THIS SITE.**” The combination of these two statements establishes very clearly the position of “members” of this site. From the perspective of BioWare/EA, the site is a service they provide and one they control. While the top line is in bold and in caps to get the attention of site posters, it is in the imperative mood. This constructs the company as having authority over users who come to the site. They continue: “In order to keep this a fun place for all, there are certain rules that must be followed.” This is also telling: BioWare/EA have imagined users as seeking fun (entertainment), and they have attempted to justify the rules that are enumerated in the Rules of Conduct as intended to preserve the fun of using BSN. It is also important to note that in this imaginary construction, posters are users: they come to BSN to use their service. Furthermore, there are restrictions on the ways that people can use the service. The first 4 rules are “No Spam,” “No slander,” “No fighting, name calling, taunting or flame wars,” and “Stay on-topic.” The seventh rule is “These forums are for BioWare, video game and related topics discussion,” and is explained thusly: “These forums are run by BioWare and Electronic Arts for the promotion of our games and to assist our customers and Community members.” Finally, at the end of the rules of conduct is this reminder: “The Social site, the forums and all BioWare websites are a central place for discussion on BioWare and our games, both past and present. They are very important to BioWare staff as a direct conduit to our fans. Please respect these sites, staff, volunteer moderators and all community members.” The justification for the request to respect the sites, staff, moderators, and members is that the website is an important conduit to the fans. But the purpose of the conduit is to

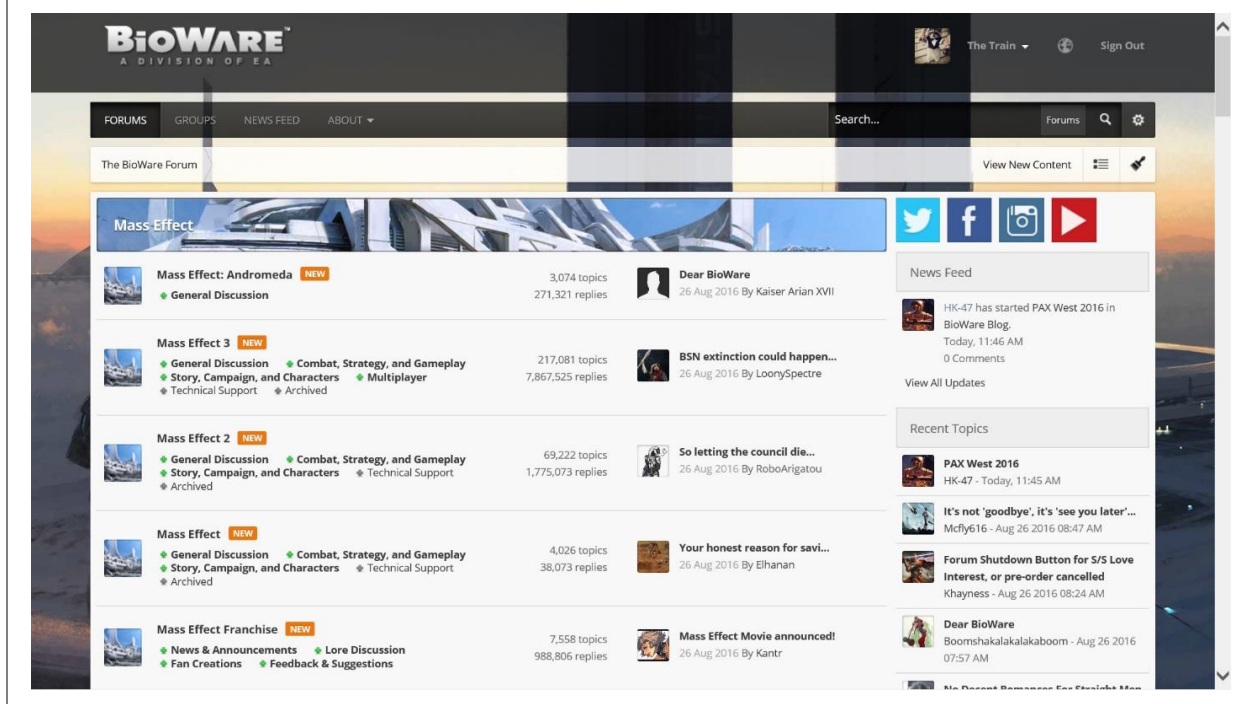
promote their games and to assist customers and community members (who are themselves either customers who have not registered their games or potential customers). Thus, BioWare's interests appear to be largely commercial. The site itself is rhetorically framed as a place for fun. While the word "conduit" can imply bidirectional movement, they do not use it that way: it is a conduit "to" our fans. So BioWare/EA does imagine posters as "receiving" assistance and information from the company.

MACROSTRUCTURE OF THE SITE

The BioWare Social Network is organized very differently from Reddit. When you first arrive at Reddit, you are presented with a list of links, most of which will take you to content hosted elsewhere. These links were shared by users in subreddits, the smaller communities that actually comprise the site itself, and were rebroadcast on the front page, which is actually just a way of displaying what's at the top of the subreddits that you have decided to pull from on your front page; users who do not have an account at Reddit are shown links from a default list of subreddits. So if we think of subreddits as aggregators where users and moderators collaborate to cultivate the list of links, the front page is an aggregator of these aggregators, constructed by both users and an algorithm maintained by the site's administrators. The front page of Reddit is stripped down: there is very little in the way of graphic elements; the links are in blue type against a white background; the user controls are in small type along the top and sides of the page.

The BioWare Social Network has a very different appearance:

Figure 4.1. Front Page of the BioWare Social Network



The BioWare Social Network is organized hierarchically. If I could fit more screenshots here, you would see that after the Mass Effect domain, the Dragon Age domain would follow, maintaining much the same sub-domains (the word NEW indicates that the sub-domain features content that I have not read yet). After that there is a general BioWare domain, which includes help and legacy-game sub-domains (a “legacy” game is a game in a franchise that BioWare is no longer producing new content for; these are basically intellectual properties that are dead from a corporate perspective but still have an audience among the userbase). Then there are domains in French, German, and Polish. Each domain has a graphic header, as you can see here. In the top right, you can see my user name and avatar; clicking on the down arrow to the right of my username will reveal a drop-down menu allowing me to view my profile and adjust my settings. The background image is selected by the user from a range of options provided by the site. Likewise, the user’s avatar can be selected from a range of possibilities provided by the site. If

the user would like to create her own avatar, she has two options. The first, she can choose from the character image from any BioWare games she has played. Dragon Age and Mass Effect games allow players to customize the facial appearance of their PC; these portraits are automatically shared with the BioWare Social network and become available as user avatars. The second option a user has to customize her avatar is to basically cheat by locating the game file where her character's portrait is saved on her computer and substituting that file for another picture, fooling the game into sharing the substituted file with BSN. (This is how I managed to get an avatar featuring a dashing looking raccoon wearing a tuxedo.)

I want to note here that the options made available to the users are all images referring to BioWare's intellectual property. It's not clear what the intent behind this choice is, but it not only limits user choice, it creates a sameness across user profiles. When reading through messages on the forum, one cannot identify a user by his avatar (unless that person has used a workaround). Instead, you have a reinforcement of the fact that this is the BioWare forum. The background images for the forums are all references to BioWare IP, the avatars are all references to BioWare IP.

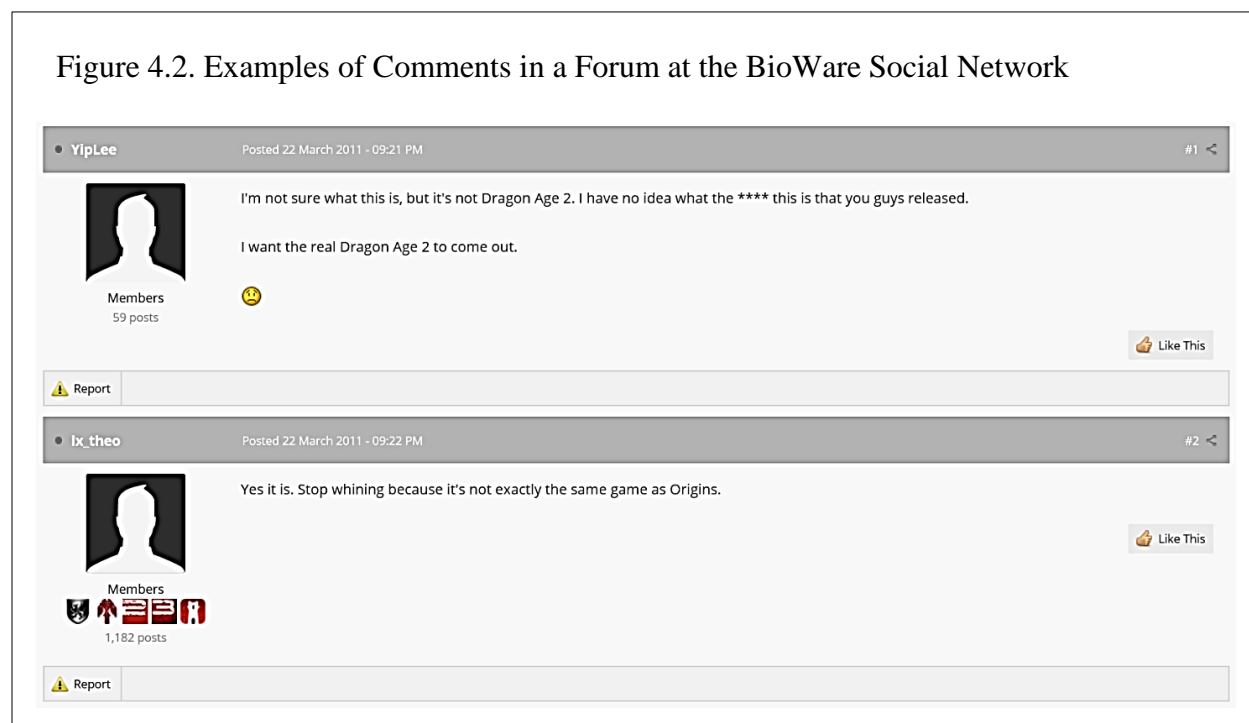
On the left you can see the names of the various sub-domains. The middle column shares the title and link to the post that has been updated most recently. The far right has links for sharing content to various social media sites and a news feed.

Blended Agency: Join Date, Avatar, Registration Badges

Social media networks collect and arrange user information based on their coding and the decisions of site administrators. This is an example of blended agency (Rawlins and Wilson, 2014), since the rhetorical construction of each user's ethos is a joint effort between the user, the site's coding, and decision makers at the site.

In addition, every social media site requires different kinds of information in order for new users to create accounts. At Reddit, although the option exists for a user to provide an email address, a new user is only required to provide a username and a password in order to be able to comment at the site. The BioWare Social Network goes the extra step of asking for a valid email address—there is no anonymous or guest posting on BSN; you must register for an account. In most cases, you do not have to own any of BioWare’s games in order to have an account on the site and, in most cases, you can post without owning their games; the only exceptions to this are “toolset” forums associated with Dragon Age: Origins and the “registered owners only” forum for Dragon Age 2. Users may connect their registered games with their BSN account at any time and doing so will place badges beneath their avatars, as you will see below.

Join dates and registration badges serve as tools for inventing arguments. The following example comes from a thread entitled “Recall the game or change it’s name, this is not Dragon Age 2,” created by YipLee on 22 Mar 22 2011. It had 78 replies before John Epler, a BioWare company employee, locked it—in other words, prevented users from adding new replies.



Users have the option to link their BioWare games to their profiles on BSN. When they do so, the system places an icon, unique to the respective game, beneath that user's avatar. Similar to the way that Jacob D. Rawlins and Gregory D. Wilson (2014) describe the sharing of agency between designers and users, the presence of these icons beneath lx_theo's avatar reflects a blending of lx_theo's agency as well as the agency of the site's designers, who determined that information inputted at one time and place on this site—in the form of alphanumeric sequences called registration keys that were uniquely issued with each physical or digital copy of each game—would be translated into these icons and displayed at other places and times. During what I call the “forum war” over Dragon Age 2, these icons became important, as indicated by whatever's response to YipLee:

Joined: 2011-03-12

unregistered

some old crap.

ignored.

User whatever's reply restates information about YipLee but what caught my eye was the information *about* YipLee that whatever shares. whatever comments that YipLee is “unregistered.” In other words, YipLee has not registered a copy of the game, Dragon Age 2. This is obvious from the absence of any badges beneath YipLee's name in the message above—in contrast to lx_theo's name and avatar, beneath which are badges for Dragon Age: Origins, Dragon Age 2, Mass Effect 2, Mass Effect 3, and Dragon Age Keep (this was a utility that allowed players to record all of the key choices they had made in the first three Dragon Age games so that they could be imported into the next game in the franchise, Inquisition).

whatever also references YipLee's join date. In order to discover this information, one must click on the user's name in the message header (that gray bar above the message content). This links to the user's profile which displays the date when the user's account was created. Once again, the presence of this data demonstrates blended agency between the user and the designer. In this case, the user has almost no control over this. In terms of rhetorical invention, the argument that YipLee is a troll emerges from the discovery that YipLee had joined the site recently and had not registered the game. These topoi were tied to the information architecture of the site itself. In other words, it is at moments like this that we can see the site's information architecture and an instance of user rhetoric coming together. A topos, after all, is a place, figuratively speaking, where one goes to find arguments. At one time, these places may have been literal locations—according to George A. Kennedy (1994), “a ‘topic’ may originally have been the place in a handbook or other written work from which the idea, argument, or form of expression could be borrowed” (p. 28). This idea of a topos is enriched by Desiderius Erasmus (2007), whose *On Copia of Words and Ideas* makes a strong case for the use of stylistic devices as tools for inventing additional things to say (“embellishing”). The claim I am making here is that information architecture facilitates user commentary by providing various topoi to users by literally storing information in various locations and making it available to users. In some cases users are able to build arguments—such as the argument that a user is troll—by going to these common places to find the resources they need.

From having been a participant on the forums during that time, this reminds me of the common argument against people who expressed dissatisfaction with the game that they were just bandwagoners who had not actually played it and thus their evaluation of the game was irrelevant or they were simply trolls. In fact, disputes about the quality of the game were

perceived to be the result of unregistered trolls so often that a movement started petitioning BioWare to create a separate discussion forum for Dragon Age 2 that would be available only to registered owners. Eventually BioWare did just that, creating the Dragon Age 2 Registered Owners Only discussion forum, a move that was unprecedented then and has never been replicated for subsequent games in any of their franchises. They made this decision because of the passionate, and often vituperative, disagreements about Dragon Age 2. These disagreements were not solely about BioWare's choice to make almost all of the romanceable characters available to player-characters of either sex, but extended to many aspects of the game, from the decision to have a voiced protagonist (Origins and Awakening had silent protagonists), to the decision to make fight animations more stylized, to design changes for several races in the game, to the decision to focus the location on one city... and on and on and on. There was nothing about Dragon Age 2 that did not draw out passionate advocates and passionate detractors. Though this level of toxicity in the fanbase was unprecedented, it would sadly become the norm not long after.

For the record, users accused of being trolls because they lacked the appropriate badge beneath their avatars counterclaimed by citing the story of V_ware. To explain that I'll first have to give you some more background. It was possible that you could be inadvertently added to BSN through your game. For instance, when I purchased a physical copy of Dragon Age: Origins for my PC I registered my game because it informed me that I was required to do so by the game's digital rights management software. For most games I had played, it was frequently the case that you had to supply a registration key (typically included with documentation accompanying the physical copy of the game, or supplied by the digital storefront from which you purchased it) so that the game knew that you were not using a pirated copy. When I inputted

the registration key for this game, it created an account for me at Electronic Arts (BioWare's parent company) and, unbeknownst to me, put me into the forum's system. As I stated above, I only became an active user of the forums in the run up to the release of Dragon Age 2; when I went to the forums to discuss the game for the first time, I discovered that I already had an account there associated with my email address because I was in the Electronic Arts system.

This may seem irrelevant, except that around the time that the BioWare community was tearing itself apart over the new game, a user by the name of V_ware, who purchased an online copy of Dragon Age 2 upon its release, reported that he was unable to install the game on his computer because of a ban in the forum. This forum ban somehow suspended his Electronic Arts account, thus preventing the company from authenticating his copy of the game and locking him out of playing his local copy. I was never able to verify this story, but its veracity isn't really important. It had acquired mythic status on the forums in a short period of time even if its details were disputed, and those accused of being trolls because they had not played the game often responded that they had not registered their games in order to be able to criticize the game on the forums without risking losing the ability to play the game that they had paid for. A user going by House_Hlaalu gives this as his reasoning for using a new account in a thread called "Why are threads not wanting S/S romance labeled as trolls?" that he started on 19 Jul 2011. This happened after another user accused him of being a troll by looking at his join date and then going to his profile to see his posting history, which leads nicely into the next section.

In the messages above, users have opted out of selecting an avatar, so the system has provided them with an abstracted, monochromatic image instead. As I stated earlier, you have the option of selecting an avatar when you register for the site, or at any time afterward by editing your personalization settings. Besides a handful of avatars that are generic—like a red

chile pepper or a cartoonish astronaut in blue—the majority of avatars are characters from BioWare games. This seems to perform two functions. The first is that the system offers users few ways—other than their screen name—to distinguish themselves from other users on the site. When you are attempting to follow a discussion in the forums, my experience has been that it takes extra work to figure out who is speaking because it is not uncommon that multiple users share the same avatar. The second is that the system, for the most part, gives you a “face” that is in fact a representation and promotion of BioWare’s games and perhaps a stamp of ownership as well and a reminder to users that BioWare and EA claim the site as their property. While it will not be covered here, I regard the struggle for one’s own avatar to be one site of discursive resistance for users who wish to have a greater role in constructing their online identity and in resisting the extent of BioWare/EA’s authority.

Message Structure—How Messages are Organized and Presented to Users

Upon entering a specific forum – for instance, the Mass Effect 3 General Discussion forum – one is presented with a list of all of the threads that have been recently posted in (see Figure 4.3, below). Each of the titles listed in the screenshot above is a distinct post with replies. The default view is to show you the threads in order of which has been most recently posted in, unless a post has been “pinned” by the site’s administrators, in which case those will appear first regardless of the sort order selected by the user. Users have the option to change the sort order from “recently viewed” to “start date,” “most replies,” or “most viewed.” Users can also create a custom view. Most of these are self-explanatory; “start date” refers to the date on which the thread was created. Because the default view is to show users threads that were recently active, threads created 15 days ago may be found on the fourth or fifth screen of thread topics, while a thread created 4 months ago could be on the first page. The default view is pictured above.

Starting in the top left corner, you can see the sorting options. Beneath that, you can see two pinned threads. These will be at the top of the view, regardless of how the user decides to sort the threads in this forum. Moving to the right, you can see that these pinned threads were authored by BioWare company employees and that users are replying to them quite frequently relative to

Figure 4.3. List of Recently Updated Threads at the BioWare Social Network

The screenshot displays a forum interface with the following elements:

- Page 1 of 953** with navigation buttons for pages 1, 2, 3, and a 'next' button.
- A button to **Please log in to post a topic**.
- Sorting options: **Recently Updated** (selected), Start Date, Most Replies, Most Viewed, and Custom.
- A list of threads with the following details:
 - Thread 1:** **PINNED** Lead Writer David Gaider blogs on Follower Customization. Started by Chris Priestly, 13 Apr 2012. 782 replies, 40,262 views. Author: Thandal Nlyman (04 Nov 2013). Marked **BIOWARE** and **HOT**.
 - Thread 2:** **PINNED** List of Dragon Age II Bonus In-Game Items and where to get them. Started by Chris Priestly, 07 Mar 2011. 625 replies, 96,450 views. Author: Guest_krul2k_* (29 Jan 2013). Marked **BIOWARE** and **HOT**.
 - Thread 3:** Wiseguy Hawke. Started by PSUHammer, 11 Mar 2014. 5 replies, 67 views. Author: Hela (12 Mar 2014).
 - Thread 4:** Is Gamlen Amell Human/Mage-Warden's father? *SPOILERS*. Started by tujmccoy, 16 Feb 2011. 45 replies, 4,506 views. Author: Han Shot First (12 Mar 2014). Marked **HOT**.
 - Thread 5:** How to "fix" 1.04 messing with exiled prince without losing saves. Started by Tyrium, 20 Aug 2013. 6 replies, 505 views. Author: Ferretinabun (10 Mar 2014).
 - Thread 6:** Dragon Age Fandom Survey. Started by Miryai, 11 Feb 2014. 27 replies, 907 views. Author: etherhonky (10 Mar 2014). Marked **HOT**.
 - Thread 7:** Gender Differences in Combat. Started by JohnnyC0820, 31 Dec 2013. 27 replies, 776 views. Author: Remmirath (09 Mar 2014). Marked **HOT**.
 - Thread 8:** Did Patch 1.04 changed a sarcastic dialogue scene with Meredith (minor dialogue spoiler)? Started by dalaughinguy, 08 Mar 2014. 2 replies, 62 views. Author: dalaughinguy (08 Mar 2014).
 - Thread 9:** Help with DA2 profile... Started by Sugarjaye, 07 Mar 2014. 3 replies, 32 views. Author: Sugarjaye (07 Mar 2014).

the age of the posts (“HOT”). Beneath the title of the post you can see the name of its author and the date on which it was created. On the far right is pictured the name and avatar of the last person who replied to the thread. Beneath this information, you can see the date on which this reply was created. This image also contains some examples of old threads making it to the front page due to recent activity. The post entitled “How to ‘fix’ 1.04 messing with exiled prince without losing saves” was created on 20 August 2013, but you can see that the most recent reply

was posted on 10 March 2014. Other posts on the front page were created more recently, but in the default view they are sorted by the most recent activity, not their creation date.

If a post has steady activity throughout its life it survives, but some threads fizzle out and make their way into the back end of the thread list. If users dig through the list of thread topics and dig up an old thread, they can post in it and “bump” it to the front of the list. If the thread is not terribly old this is typically referred to as “bumping” the thread. When a thread is very old and forgotten, it is often referred to as “necromancy”: raising the dead. This is not something the site moderators like and they typically lock threads that have been resurrected, especially when there is no obvious purpose behind doing so. And in fact, it was not an uncommon technique among posters unhappy with Dragon Age 2 to resurrect threads that had predated the game’s release.

BSN’s rules of conduct (“Rules”) indicate that there is a “Thread length house rule,” which states: “We will close threads once they reach a certain length. We want our database engine to run as smooth as possible and long threads will slow down our search engine. These threads will be closed, but feel free to start a new thread if you feel that the previous one didn’t address the issue properly. This is not to censor certain topics but to make the reading of a thread easier.” This rule makes sense given the company’s emphasis on promotion and assistance and it suggests that participant conversations are less important than the smooth operation of the site itself, particularly the search engine, which someone would use to locate information on a topic. It is certainly possible for a conversation to continue when someone starts a new thread on the same topic. What is lost is the entire preceding conversation. Newcomers to the discussion would lack the context and the significant length (presumably) of the previous thread would be prohibitive. Furthermore, you would not be able to quote from

messages in the other thread (without making extra effort to cut and paste and having some knowledge of the system's HTML), making it extremely difficult to truly "continue" the conversation. To be fair to BioWare/EA, in the five months I was a participant-observer at BSN, I never saw a post locked because it had become too long. What I am arguing is that their rhetorical construction of the space privileges the commercial interests of the company above the development of online identities and of community through talk. In contrast, Reddit has no such rule nor is the site coded to do this automatically. Instead, once threads reach a certain length, they prompt users to load more comments if they choose to see them.

Comment System

The messaging structure and interface is very different from Reddit's. Among the functions available to users, QUOTE strikes me as the most different, not only because the user interface at BSN is a What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get (WYSIWYG) interface with a text-entry field that gives users buttons for each function (see Figure 4.4, below), but also because the

Figure 4.4. What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get Text Editor at the BioWare Social Network

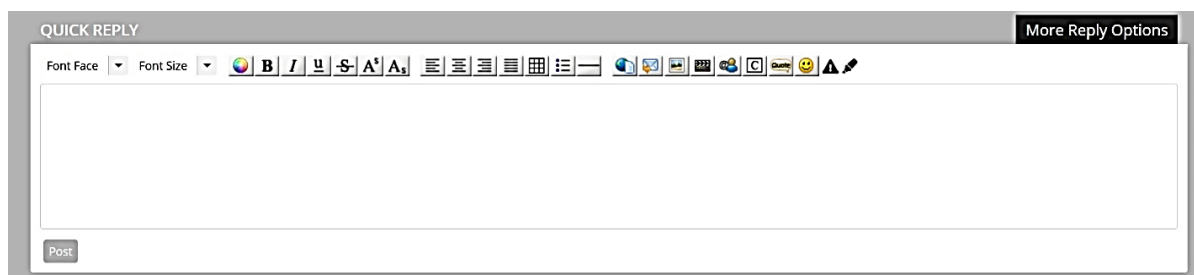


Figure 4.4. In a What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get text editor, the style choices made by users are displayed to them in the text-editing window as they would appear once the comment is posted. BSN provides users with an interface similar to most word processing software.

messages at BSN are organized linearly, based solely on the date and time they were saved by the system compared to the dates and times the other messages in the thread were saved.

This is in contrast to how messages are organized at Reddit, where messages are organized hierarchically based on “top-level” replies to the original post with replies to comments threaded beneath them. Reddit’s system makes it easy to determine what “sub-threads” are taking place within the overall thread of replies to the original post; at BSN, the linear system of displaying replies obscures branching paths of discussion. I assumed, prior to this study, that this basic difference between the two systems would affect how users used the QUOTE function at each site.

A WYSIWYG text editor interface is similar to a modern word processing software interface. It allows users to control the style of their message with button clicks rather than requiring markup language to boldface, italicize, underline, or change the size of the font. It’s named What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get because the stylized text appearing on screen would closely resemble what appeared on the resulting printed page. Although the technology has been a part of word processing since the late 1970s, messaging on the Internet before the development of the World Wide Web rarely featured this sort of interface. The fact that users at BSN have access to a WYSIWYG editor, while those at Reddit have to use a markup language to format their text, may seem inconsequential, but I speculate that it may play a role in how users used the QUOTE feature at BSN when compared to how it was used at Reddit. In chapter 3, I observed that the QUOTE feature was sometimes used to bring language into the discussion from external sources. I also provided examples of users who would use the QUOTE feature to quote those with whom they were arguing, but edit the language to produce different rhetorical effects. An example of this might be altering the language of a discussion partner in order to reveal subtext

to the argument. These uses for quoting are almost nonexistent in my data from BSN, and I wonder if that could be because the WYSIWYG editor obscures from commenters how to manipulate the formatting. Users at BSN *can* adjust the formatting of their comments using standard hypertext markup language (HTML), but not everyone knows HTML, nor does every user know that the text editor allows them to use HTML rather than the WYSIWYG interface. Furthermore, unlike Reddit, no guide for the markup language is provided. Thus, though savvy users would be able to easily take full advantage of the text editor as a resource, most users would likely be constrained by this interface. This is an excellent example of how interface functions as an intentional resource; the different options available to users, and how obvious or easy those options are, make some messages more feasible than others. These affordances can also be viewed through the lens of blended agency (see Rawlins and Wilson, 2014). In effect, decisions made by programmers influence the kinds of messages that are produced, in conjunction with the choices made by the writers of these messages.

Other Avenues for User Communication

Although the focus of this study is the public forums, I think it's important to note that users can communicate in two other ways. First, they can send private messages to each other. Second, there are groups that users can join. These groups are private, giving users control over who is able to participate. The messaging and commenting systems function just as they do on the public forums. One example of such a group is "Fight for the Love," a group created for users to discuss romance subplots in BioWare games (notably, this group favored the decision to make most of the romanceable characters in Dragon Age 2 available to player-characters of both sexes). Both of these avenues provide users with ways to develop arguments outside of the public forums and complicate our analysis of political judgment formation online.

BACKGROUND OF DRAGON AGE 2 RECEPTION

Dragon Age 2 was a controversial release for BioWare. The developers changed a number of features in the game from its beloved predecessor, Dragon Age: Origins. They halved the number of hours required to complete the game; limited players to the confines of one city compared to the previous game which allowed players to move freely between multiple city-sized locations within a large country; reduced the number of options available to players for customizing members of their party; reduced the complexity of the inventory system; changed the camera distance from the player party, affecting the players' ability to zoom out from the field of battle when their party was engaged in combat; and, most importantly for this chapter, decided to enable players to have a romance with five of the nine possible characters in the player's party—regardless of those characters' sexes in four of the five cases. This angered some players who resented being “hit on” by the wrong sex, while other players rejoiced at the new freedom available to them in the franchise. This controversy in particular generated more attention than any other and continued to generate controversy for the next game BioWare released, Mass Effect 3.

Later in this chapter, I provide examples from a thread at BSN entitled “Does everyone really have to be bisexual?” Threads questioning or criticizing BioWare's decision to make most of the love-interests in the game bisexual were common. Some of these threads were apparently sincere, whereas others were clearly efforts to troll the community. Invariably, threads on this topic resulted in similar groupings of arguments forming; commonly, these were accusations of homophobia, concerns about derailing or being off-topic, and requests for moderators to lock the thread. The vitriol on display in these threads was extreme but unfortunately on par with the tone of other conversations at BSN following the release of Dragon Age 2.

CONTEXT FOR COMMENT DATA

The goal of this project is to explore the relationship between structure and political discussion, which I have previously defined according to Beiner (1984), who argues that all “political judgments are—implicitly at least—judgments about the form of collective life that is desirable for us to pursue within a given context of possibilities” (p. 38). In chapter 3, this took the form of judgments about the kinds of content that would be permissible on the site. For this chapter, I chose to focus on a specific disagreement in the community about the representation of sexual orientation in their games, specifically *Dragon Age 2* and *Mass Effect 3*. Although the debate over whether *Dragon Age: Origins* or *Dragon Age 2* was the superior game was a passionate one, the toxicity of which was unprecedented, it’s a conflict that has died down substantially over time. However, users still express concern over how diverse sexualities and genders are represented in BioWare’s games and how they will be represented in the future. Thus, it represents not only a specific issue related to how one evaluates the quality of the game, but also an *ongoing, controversial area of public concern* for people who post at BSN.

One of the problems some players had with *Dragon Age 2* was the way that interactions between the player-character (“PC,” meaning the character that the player creates and controls; other characters are sometimes referred to as “NPC’s” or “non-player-characters”) and same-sex characters. It’s possible that this concern was at times raised by women about Isabella, a bisexual female NPC who is available to be recruited into the player’s adventuring party as well as available to be a love interest for the PC regardless of the PC’s gender; however, the only

instance of this phenomenon that I witnessed was self-identified straight male gamers who were upset about their male PC's interactions with the bisexual male NPC Anders.⁸

There was a very vocal portion of the Dragon Age fanbase complaining about the move to a voiced PC and a dialogue wheel and a very small minority of that group who were upset that the game tricked them into expressing same-sex attraction for the character Anders. ankuu's comment is indicative of one of the problems some players had with the dialogue wheel:

I remember Anders practically jumping on me and giving me 3 options at one time with 2 hearts and a broken one. One of the answers "it is unexpected" seemed to be the best one, but what came out of Lady Hawke's mouth amazed me. So I do not like the paraphrasing that much either. I started looking only at the icons, not what it said in front of them.

ankuu is speaking to a very basic problem with the paraphrasing of the dialogue on the dialogue wheel: it wasn't always an adequate representation of what the PC would say. To better illustrate what I am saying, let me first provide screenshots of the two different user interfaces so you can visualize the issue at hand. First, here is a screenshot of the dialogue interface from Dragon Age: Awakening, which used the same interface as Origins:

⁸ I made no effort to contact individuals offline to determine what their real world gender performance was. It's possible that users were performing genders online that they did not choose for themselves offline. This raises the issue of authenticity in qualitative inquiry of online spaces; see Denise Carter (2005) and Tom Boellstorff (2008).

Figure 4.5. Screenshot of Dialogue Interface from Dragon Age: Awakening



Seneschal Varel, the person with whom the player-character is speaking, is on the left side of the image and the camera is positioned just behind the left shoulder of the player's character (that is the back of the player-character's head you're seeing in the bottom right quadrant of the image). Varel's last statement is printed in the margin above the image. The number of possible responses the player has varies; in this case, there are 5 possible responses for the player to choose from. Because the player-character is not voiced, it can be assumed that the language in each option is exactly what the player-character is saying to these characters.

By contrast, here is a screenshot of the dialogue interface from Dragon Age 2:

The camera position during dialogue varies from encounter to encounter so that players can see their character perform the lines of dialogue in a more cinematic way. In this instance, the

Figure 4.6. Screenshot of Dialogue Interface from Dragon Age 2



player-character is front-and-center in the shot. The list of numbered options from Origins and Awakening has been replaced by the wheel that you see at the bottom of the image. The center of the wheel displays an image meant to convey the tone of the comment: for instance, a heart would indicate a flirty or romantic comment; a black gavel against a red background, a pragmatic (and often unfeeling) one. The purple mask seen above indicates that this will be an ironic or humorous reply. Upon choosing an option, the player-character would speak a line. Importantly, the wording of each option around the wheel is only a paraphrase of what the player-character will say, so first-time players would not actually know what would be said until they made a choice. For example, during a conversation early in the game, the player is given the option to

say “He’s gentle for a mage hunter,” accompanied by the purple mask indicating an ironic tone. The actual line of dialogue spoken by the PC is “The wrath of the Templars is terrible indeed.”

The developers also decided to modify the previous game’s affection metric with a “rivalry/friendship” system. Certain dialogue choices would earn the player “friendship” or “rivalry” points with each respective character. Maxing out either of these categories would unlock a special bonus ability. For instance, if the player maximizes Isabela’s friendship, she will unlock a bonus to attack speed for both the PC and Isabela, whereas if rivalry is maximized, a different ability is unlocked that improves Isabela’s ability to dodge attacks. Each recruitable companion has a unique ability that unlocks at either maximum friendship or maximum rivalry, and only one can be unlocked during a single playthrough of the game. This mini-game motivates players with a strategically-oriented playstyle to pursue particular dialogue choices with specific characters in order to unlock the desired range of abilities for use in combat situations, which can make winning the game on harder difficulties less challenging.

Many players took issue with the change in the dialogue interface from *Origins* and *Dragon Age 2*, for a variety of reasons. The particular problem that I will focus on concerns an interaction between the player-character and Anders that takes place very early in the game, the same interaction Ankuu refers to in the message above. Shortly after meeting Anders, the player finds a letter requesting a meeting at Anders’ quarters. Anders wishes to apologize for sharing some very personal, and, within the world of *Dragon Age*, very worrisome information with the player. In response, if the player avoids any dialogue options with a heart icon but instead chooses friendly or consoling options, Anders will compliment the player in a way that indicates romantic interest, and then apologize for being so forward. Next, he says, “Am I making you uncomfortable?” The player is given three options: YES, NO, and IT IS UNEXPECTED. Of the

three, one, “YES,” has a broken heart icon; the other two have heart icons. Some players (like myself) who try to be nice to all of the digital people in the game felt like there was no good option here, while other players were trying to maximize affinity points (as opposed to rivalry points) because they wanted the bonus associated with maximizing Anders’ affinity, while also trying to avoid setting the romance flag with Anders (because they wanted to initiate that storyline with another character). Players in both camps may have decided to choose the last option (“IT IS UNEXPECTED”). However, when that option is chosen, the PC actually says “Doesn’t mean I want you to stop.” It’s no wonder, then, that ankuu says that “What came out of Lady Hawke’s mouth amazed me.” Although it turns out that choosing the dialogue option associated with the broken heart would only have caused a minor setback to players pursuing maximum friendship with Anders, to be fair to first-time players, it was difficult for them to evaluate how serious the setback would be at the time. And while I myself was pleased to see the inclusion of more same-sex choices in Dragon Age 2, I do understand why some players felt suckered into making a choice they did not agree with.

Imagine, then, how homophobic male players playing male PC’s might react when Anders, a male, comes on to them and, trying to be polite, the player chooses IT IS UNEXPECTED only to find their character saying “Doesn’t mean I want you to stop.” In the following exchange between BSN users ColdbringeR and Russalka, ColdbringeR reveals that his problem stems partly from his own identification *with* his character, which I believe is at the heart of many of the complaints from players about this particular instance from the game:

Russalka wrote...

ColdbringeR wrote...

It's not simply the advances though. It's looking at the responses and wondering why my character would think some of these things if he's supposed to be straight. You aren't choosing your orientation through dialogue as you pointed out. Your character is basically bisexual and the dialogue options just let you explore that. That's the complaint.

Your character does not have to think any of those things.

Of course he does, and so do I thanks to the fact that it's spelled out on my screen.

(Yes, I know my character is not actually *thinking* anything, but that's what I've always interpreted the dialogue options as)

In the message body, ColdbringeR has opted to quote from the message to which he is replying and that's reflected by the nested text boxes. As you can deduce from the conversation, Russalka and ColdbringeR were discussing the topic of the bisexuality of the characters in the game. This specific offshoot of the conversation began because of a suggestion that the game should have included an option during character creation to decide the PC's sexuality, in order to prevent same sex characters from making romantic advances towards Hawke. Others responded to this suggestion by arguing that, as in the real world, the player would define his or her character's sexuality by the choices made in the game—such as selecting dialogue options that communicate romantic desire for NPC's who are male or female, or for both male and female NPC's, or by ignoring the romantic component of the game entirely. This is where ColdbringeR stepped in to make the claim that “You aren't choosing your orientation through dialogue options as you pointed out. Your character is basically bisexual and the dialogue options just let you explore that.”

I chose this example because ColdbringerR brings to the fore what I believe is an important subtext for the argument, perhaps explaining why this particular issue continues to be discussed with each new game in either the Dragon Age or Mass Effect franchises. ColdbringerR says, “Of course he does [have to think any of those things], *and so do I thanks to the fact that it’s spelled out on my screen*” (emphasis mine). A strong reading would say that ColdbringerR identifies his real self with his character, such that if his character in the game thinks (or does) something, it is a reflection of what he would think or do. However, even a weak reading indicates that for ColdbringerR, the problem is that by including options that would enable players to role-play homosexual or bisexual characters, the designers of the game *have forced him to have homosexual or bisexual thoughts*. That in itself is sufficient for some players to feel uncomfortable when they play the game, but we can read further into this since, for ColdbringerR, the evidence that his PC is bisexual is that his “thoughts” (aka, the dialogue options provided to the player) reflect bisexual erotic desire. If that’s the case, and if ColdbringerR is then forced to have those thoughts because of the words on the screen, then, in a sense, there is the threat that for however brief a moment in time, the game has literally *made ColdbringerR bisexual*, in a formulation similar to Judith Butler’s (1997) analysis of the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Against non-heterosexual-players’ requests to be included in the romance elements of the game, then, are those from the likes of ColdbringerR, who see this representation as a threat to their identity—or at the very least, their comfort. This is quite clearly a homophobic, or bi-phobic, response to the game. As Megan Boler (2007) observes, the body has a way of appearing in the metaphorical space of the Internet in spite of earlier claims that the Internet would be the realization of a bodiless, utopic agora. ColdbringerR gives us a sense of just why the issue of the

representation of homosexual (and transsexual) characters in BioWare's games continues to excite a portion of the userbase at BSN.

It is also a political issue. Even though these discussions sometimes seem like a discussion about aesthetics, claims made about how different sexualities and genders should be represented in these games are also demands for how resources will be allocated by BioWare to address the desires of multiple stakeholders within their fanbase. Creating a character with a unique sexuality and gender means creating multiple dialogue trees in order to address a broader range of potential interactions with the PC, depending upon choices the player has made during character creation and how the player has decided to resolve questlines in the game; this is more so the case if the character is designed to have more "demands" in order for the game's programming to set his or her "romance flag." This requires writers to write more lines of dialogue, paying for more studio time for voice actors to record more lines, and longer time spent play testing the game, among other requirements. All of this costs the company additional money and ties up company resources (computing, writers, programmers, and so on) on a project for a longer development cycle, keeping them from working on other projects.

DATA ANALYSIS

My comment data consisted of 1392 posts from 269 users in 3 threads. Before I begin discussion of the comment data, I will discuss some of the differences between the comment system at Reddit, discussed in the previous chapter, and the one at the BioWare Social Network (henceforth "BSN"). These differences impact how the data were coded and analyzed.

Recall that my overarching research question was, do we see evidence that structure mitigates the outcomes of deliberative activity online? To address this question, I posed two sub-questions, which were as follows:

- RQ1: In what ways could quoting/replying, hyperlinking, message structure, and access to users' profiles (and the information made available in them) affect the degree to which political judgments shift through the process of user discussions in comment areas?
- RQ2: In what ways does the tone or ethos of the site, as a product of its design or information architecture, affect the degree to which political judgments shift through the process of user discussions in comment areas?

Prior to responding to any of the research questions, we must address the most basic question: did anyone's positions shift? In other words, did we see anyone move away from their original position towards a different position on the issue at hand?

The answer to this question is no. Instead, what was apparent was how the circulation of arguments within the social network contributed to the invention of new comments in the threads. In one case in particular, from a thread entitled "Does everyone really have to be bisexual?" created by yaw on 3 Jun 2011, we see the coalescence of two teams form over the course of the thread's lifespan. I will explore this in more detail when I analyze the use of replying, after my section on use of the QUOTE and MQ feature.

All of my research questions investigate the relationship between structure and the formation of political judgment online, a process that I have operationalized in my study by focusing on changes of argument position by interlocutors in political discussion. Regarding the political, I have written in chapter 1 about how I am defining "political" in this study, as the good of this particular community is affected by the decisions made by the game developers at BioWare. Consider again Mansbridge's (1980) definition of interests. For Mansbridge, interests can be subjective preferences. She gives an example of a cafeteria deciding what kind of cake to

serve. If an individual has had all of the possible cakes and she prefers orange cake, then that is her enlightened preference. Hence, if the cafeteria needs to cut expenses and can only serve one kind of cake, her interest would be that the cafeteria serves orange (see pages 25-26). This decision is also political. It deals with making decisions that affect everyone in the face of limited resources. Similarly, a video game developer has to make decisions in the face of limited resources. Based on a given budget, writers must create a story, questlines, characters, and branching dialogue trees. Artists must realize this world visually and aurally for the player. Actors must be hired to read every line of dialogue. In addition to all of this, programmers must write the code that will bring these elements to life for the player. Capital limitations will set some of the boundaries for the final product and some players' interests will not be satisfied by the game that is ultimately published. Thus the choices a game company makes can be understood as political.

Returning to the central issue of this study: I found no evidence of any shift in anyone's stance regarding BioWare's decision to make all four of the characters with romance subplots bisexual. The positions each person held when they wrote their first claim did not change throughout their involvement in the messages that I analyzed for this study. In fact, what I observed is in line with what empirical research into deliberation has repeatedly shown: people remain polarized and use reason to support their own positions rather than reflect on their beliefs and consider other evidence. A future investigation into understanding what effect, if any, site features had on the maintenance of political judgments and polarization of users would be helpful. In my concluding chapter I will offer some suggestions for how we might offer forums that challenge users to engage in deliberation instead of recirculating judgments they have arrived at heuristically.

My data analysis section will begin with a discussion of themes in ways users used what I call the “structural codes.” Structural codes refer to elements of the site’s design, including features available to users as well as actions taken by moderators or administrators reflecting terms of service or codes of conduct. I show that there were few differences between the activity at the two sites, though I speculate that the moderation at BSN, when combined with the site norms and especially the threat of being suspended from the forums and losing access to your game (a threat that may have been realized in V_ware’s case), may have changed the language users used when arguing with each other. I also demonstrate that differences in the arrangement of messages, coupled with the WYSIWYG editor, seemed to change how users quoted each other. Furthermore, content analysis reveals that discussions at BSN were actually *more argumentative* than those at Reddit; I believe this is a result of arranging messages in chronological, rather than hierarchical, order. Most importantly for my research questions, though, I argue that users took advantage of the affordances made available to them to draw from special topics that were circulating in the forums and within private groups, rather than being persuaded by the site’s design and arguments on the site to reflect on their positions and arrive at new ones. Thus, perhaps not intentionally, BSN’s design, like Reddit’s, appears to facilitate the conservation of judgments rather than supporting epistemic outcomes of user interaction.

Data Analysis, Section A: Comparing the deliberative activity at the two sites

The codes in Table 1, below, refer to both users’ deliberative activity as well as their use of the site’s affordance in the messages they generated. From these data we can draw some general conclusions about the BioWare Social Network.

Before going any further, let us review the coding lexicon. For a complete discussion, please see chapter 2. My codes are divided into two major categories, “structural codes” and

“pragmatic codes.” The structural codes are: image, link, moderator action, multi-quote, and quote. They are defined as follows:

- Image: The user inserted an image file into her message.
- Link: The user included a functional hyperlink in her message.
- Moderator action: The message exhibited traces of moderator intervention.
- Multi-quote: The message featured the use of BSN’s “multi-quote” feature, which allowed users to quote from multiple posts simultaneously in their replies. (BSN only.)
- Quote: Any message that featured the use of the site’s quoting feature, which allowed users to incorporate some or all of another user’s message in their own.

The pragmatic codes are: acknowledgement, affirmation/NR, claim/NR, commissive, counter/NR, curbing, degrading, directive-informative, expressive, humor, imperative, rebuttal/NR, refutation/NR, usage-declarative. They are defined as follows:

- Acknowledgement: messages containing statements that acknowledged something another user had done or some action another user had taken.
- Affirmation (NR): Messages including a claim, supported by reasoning or evidence, that supported or defended another person’s claim, rebuttal, or refutation. Affirmational claims without supporting evidence or reasons were coded as non-reasoned (NR).
- Claim (NR): A contested statement that is objectively criticizable and can be supported with reasons or grounds. At Reddit, I applied this definition to any top-level comment that satisfied this definition. At BSN, I applied this definition to any *message* that satisfied this definition. Claims without supporting evidence or reasons were coded as NR.

- **Commissive:** messages that included statements that agreed with or conceded a point. For example: “Yes!” or “I agree.”
- **Counter (NR):** messages that introduced claim, supported by reasoning or evidence, that changed the topic of the thread. This category was only used when it was clear that it was not a top-level comment. Counter claims without supporting evidence or reasons were coded as NR.
- **Curbing:** Messages that included statements attempting to limit a user’s participation in the discussion.
- **Degrading:** Messages including statements insulting other users.
- **Directive Informative:** Messages including statements that either asked for or provided information.
- **Expressive:** Messages including statements commenting on one’s own emotional state.
- **Humor:** Any message including statements made in jest.
- **Imperative:** Any messages including statements in the imperative mood.
- **Rebuttal (NR):** messages that included statements that directly challenged a claim or counter and provided reasoning or evidence. Rebuttals without supporting evidence or reasons were coded as NR.
- **Refutation:** messages defending the claim or counter in response to a rebuttal and providing evidence or reasoning. Refutations without supporting evidence or reasons were coded as NR.
- **Usage Declarative:** Any message including statements that attempting to clear up a misunderstanding.

TABLE 4.1: Comparison of incidence of each code at BSN versus Reddit

CODE	NUMBER		PERCENTAGE	
	BSN	REDDIT	BSN	REDDIT
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	11	24	0.8%	1.3%
AFFIRMATION	71	34	5.1%	1.8%
AFFIRMATION NR	22	61	1.6%	3.3%
CLAIM + COUNTER	184	160	13.2%	8.7%
CLAIM + COUNTER NR	244	453	17.5%	24.6%
COMMISSIVE	156	114	11.2%	6.2%
CURBING	4	4	0.3%	0.2%
DEGRADING	15	125	1.1%	6.8%
DIRECTIVE-INFORMATIVE (“DI”)	214	431	15.4%	23.4%
EXPRESSIVE	348	417	25.0%	22.7%
HUMOR	112	109	8.0%	5.9%
IMAGE	6		0.4%	
IMPERATIVE	6	16	0.4%	0.9%
LINK	33	331	2.4%	18.0%
MODERATOR ACTION	7	1	0.5%	0.1%
MULTI-QUOTE (“MQ”)	32		2.3%	
QUOTE	887	238	63.7%	12.9%
REBUT + REFUTE	296	181	21.2%	9.8%
REBUT + REFUTE NR	112	237	8.0%	12.9%
USAGE-DECLARATIVE	26	34	1.9%	1.8%

In the table above, the largest disparity, by far, is the use of QUOTE, but that is unsurprising given the lack of a REPLY feature at BSN. It is hard to attribute any of the other differences to the structure or features of either site; it's very possible that the two conversations simply elicited different kinds of pragmatic behaviors in the users. There is also a much higher incidence of degrading commentary at Reddit than at BSN; although it is true that the different conversation topics could influence this, I think it's likely due to differences in moderation at the two sites. I believe this especially since the topic of conversation at BioWare is one that we would expect to elicit strong feelings, but we see a very small number of comments featuring direct insults. This speaks to the influence of structure on the invention and circulation of messages on the site. This may also explain why users would insinuate things about each other rather than make accusations about them directly—see my discussion later on the arguments jlb524, ipgd, and Siansonea made about Anathemic, Harid, and Akka le vil's motives. They never explicitly call them homophobes. Instead, they ponder openly about what their true reasons are for not wanting bisexuals in the game.

The increased argumentative activity at Reddit versus BSN—the CLAIM + COUNTER NR and DIRECTIVE-INFORMATIVE—could also be due to the different discussion topics. Although both are political discussions, the issues in the discussion at Reddit lend themselves to objective discussion more because the topic itself is based less on subjective preferences about what makes a game fun. Of course, the fact that we see more rebuttal and refutation activity at BSN challenges that interpretation, so let's examine this in finer detail. At BSN, 17.5% of the messages were coded as CLAIM NR or COUNTER NR, versus 24.6% at Reddit.⁹ This is not a

⁹ Remember, this does not mean that 24.6% of messages in my Reddit data set were CLAIM NR or COUNTER NR, and only CLAIM NR or COUNTER NR. These same messages could also have been coded under other codes

large difference, but messages coded as REBUT or REFUTE at BSN were 21.2% of the data set compared to just 9.8% at Reddit—a much larger disparity. Could the definitions for these codes account for these differences? Possibly. Messages coded as CLAIM were initial statements of an arguable position, not replies to other messages. Messages coded as COUNTER were alternate claims that essentially opened up new conversations within the thread. A COUNTER message was not an affirmation or challenge to an existing claim, but a new branch of the discussion. Given that Reddit’s comment system has a hierarchical structure, the analysis could be skewed towards more instances of CLAIM because of the way that a threaded reply system confers that status on the message that initiates a chain of replies. To make these codes comparable across the two sites, I determined it would be best to add the CLAIM and COUNTER together and treat them as one category. The result is one category that accounts for all instances where a new branch of the conversation was attempted. Any responses to either a CLAIM or a COUNTER would be AFFIRMATIONS, REBUTTALS, or REFUTATIONS. I coded any message wherein the user attempts to argue against a CLAIM or COUNTER a REFUTATION; a message where the person who made the claim responds to the user with a defense of her original claim was coded as a REBUTTAL. Because these moves in an argument are essentially the same, I aggregated those as well. After carefully analyzing my approach to coding the data, I do not believe my process produced the results in the table, above.

So what happens if we ignore, for the moment, whether these activities were supported by evidence (“reasoned”) or not (“non-reasoned,” or “NR”)? Then the numbers look like this:

because they may have contained other types of content, such as an AFFIRMATION or DIRECTIVE-INFORMATIVE.

Table 4.2: Percentages of Messages Coded for Deliberative Activity, Compared

CODE	PERCENTAGE	
	BSN	REDDIT
AFFIRMATION R + NR	6.7%	5.1%
CLAIM + COUNTER, R + NR	30.7%	33.3%
REBUT + REFUTE, R + NR	29.9%	22.7%

Based on these results, it is clear that there is little difference between Reddit and BSN where claiming or countering is concerned. Neither is there much difference when making an argument in support of another user's argument ("AFFIRMATION"). The difference between the topics of conversation seems to have had little, if any, influence over these results. Where we do see a larger gap between the results is in the category of REBUT and REFUTE, where it appears that the users at BSN made counter-claims or counter-arguments more often than the users at Reddit. This is a curious finding given that the structure of the comment system is linear rather than hierarchical. In a hierarchical organizational structure, where conversations are groups (and especially like the one at Reddit, where users receive notifications when someone has replied to their comments), I would expect more rebuttals and refutations because those activities are argumentative replies. Instead, it appears that the linear structure at BSN saw users generating more rebuttals and refutations.

But Table 2 obscures another interesting result that can be seen in Table 1. What happens when we focus solely on arguments supported evidence or additional reasoning—what I coded as "reasoned" arguments? In each case—AFFIRMATION, CLAIM + COUNTER, and REBUT + REFUTE—there are more instances of reasoned activity at BSN than there are at Reddit. It is certainly possible that I influenced these results by the threads that I selected; however, I am

surprised that a topic that seems to invite more subjective takes would result in greater amounts of evidence-based deliberative activity. Perhaps this makes sense, though; maybe by dint of the fact that the argument could become highly subjective, people feel that they must provide more evidence in order to persuade others?

What else might explain why more messages at BSN featured REBUTTAL and REFUTATION, and more reasoned activity, than those at Reddit? There is, of course, the reality that the people at BSN are passionate fans of the games they are discussing. That could be the explanation for the results, and a study with a broader range of topics would be necessary to rule that out. However, I speculate that the linear organization of the comment system at BioWare may be a richer inventive resource for messages. A hierarchical organization has the potential to narrow one's focus to just the local conversation rather than the bigger discussion. As a result, it could be that by reading over messages from different, ongoing conversations between multiple sets of users, individuals end up participating in more conversations than they would otherwise, leading to more attempts to refute arguments (and perhaps to more attempts to rebut those refutations). In my next section, I will discuss how users take advantage of the QUOTE feature to provide structure, and how that structure allows for a rhetorical non-QUOTE that can effectively address the whole audience.

Second, I believe that BSN's terms of service and ethos have an influence over what arguments are made and circulated at the site, as well as the quality of conversation overall. The ethos at Reddit is more laissez-faire; this could explain why more of the activity there is "non-reasoned." BSN emphasizes constructive, on-topic contributions, and enforces these expectations with removal of access to the site.

In spite of their differences, the two sites are similar in that neither set of data show changes in political judgment over the duration of the discussion. While BSN's features may encourage users to provide better contributions to conversation, they do not seem to facilitate reflection or persuasion. On the contrary, I would argue that they are neutral towards, or perhaps helpful for, the conservation of one's judgment. My analysis of one thread, "Does everyone really have to be bisexual?" by yaw on 3 Jun 2011, will exemplify this.

Data Analysis Section B: Analysis of users' use of QUOTE

There are a small number of structural codes for BSN: QUOTE, referring to the use of the quote feature; MULTI-QUOTE, abbreviated MQ, referring to the use of the site's multi-quote feature (an example of which is included in my analysis of quoting, below); IMAGE; MODERATOR ACTION; and LINK, referring to the option to insert a hyperlink into the body of a message on the site. Of these features, only QUOTE and MQ appeared with any frequency in my data, thus I will concentrate my discussion on those two.

Theme B1: "Sub-Threading"

Recall that at Reddit, a user could reply to any comment and their reply would show up directly beneath the comment to which they were responding. If the conversation veered off-topic, those smaller conversation chains could develop that near-topic or off-topic conversation through a series of messages that were placed in the same vicinity as the others. Each top-level reply to the original post could initiate a new topic of conversation and, through the placement of the message chain and the use of the reply notification system, participants could easily find each other.

BSN's chronological message system does not facilitate one-to-one conversation, but that does not contain the development of near-topic or off-topic message chains from developing

within a message thread that is purportedly filled exclusively with replies to the original post (although if the conversation veers too far off topic, site moderators will lock the thread to prevent others from contributing). I call these message chains “sub-threads,” message chains that appear to be related to a similar topic but not directly to the topic of the original post.

Use of the QUOTE and MQ features make these sub-threads recoverable to readers who do not wish to read the thread from the very first message or who do not recall every comment in the thread. I am not saying that messages that do not feature the use of these tools should not be considered part of these sub-threads; rather, that when they use QUOTE or MQ, users are constructing a visible history of the conversation as it applies to their contribution. I expected to see this often at BSN due to the fact that messages are presented in chronological order rather than grouped into conversations. Reading messages this way may have some advantages that I speculate about later, but it certainly makes it challenging to figure out what specific conversation the user was responding to.

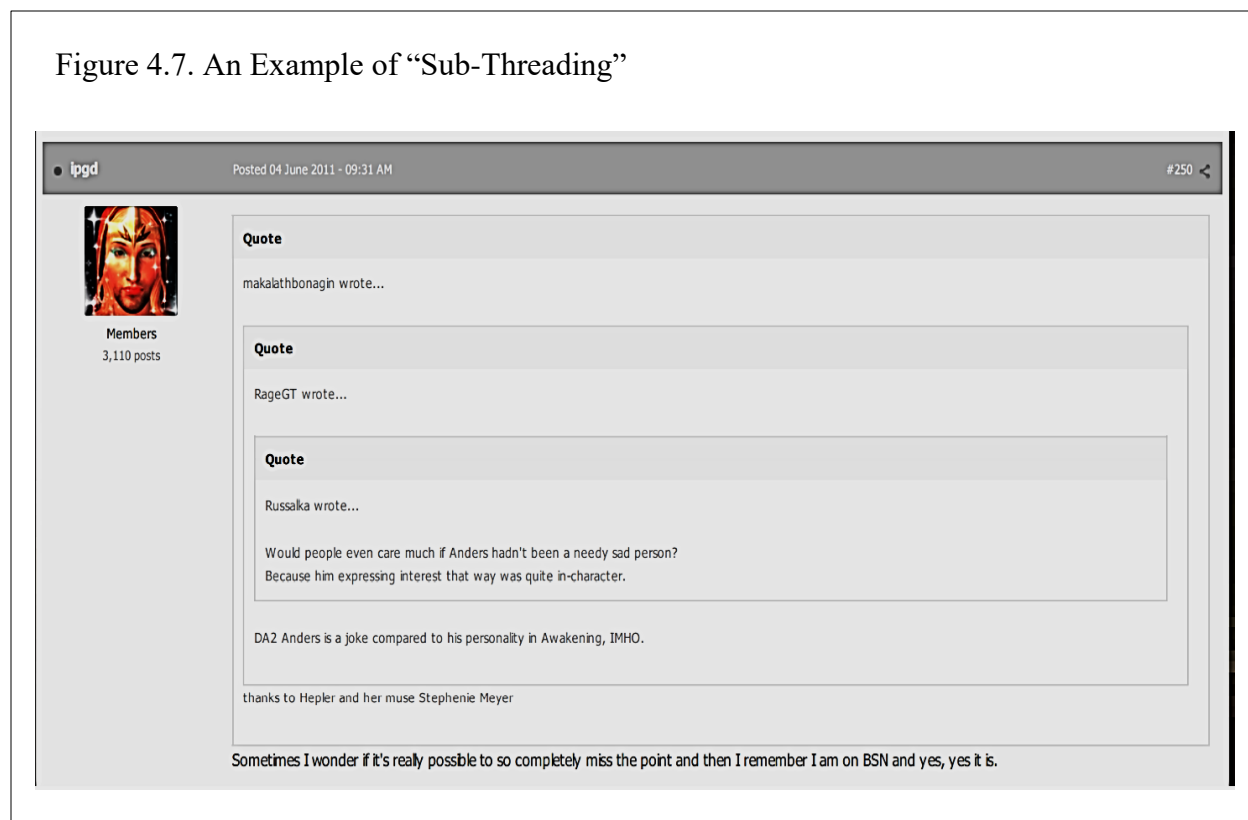
The following example of sub-threading occurs in a message thread beginning with this original post by InfinitePaths from 19 March 2013, entitled “BI companions being BI not playersexual”:

It is so wierd that in DA2 Merill and Fenris showed no real indication that their sexuality is bisexual if they did not romance Hawke.It is so weird that Merill only has a sexual interest in female hawke and no other female charather in the entire game.if you are going to make all companions have a bisexual sexuallity make them express it,their sexuallity is a part of their personallity.Also I think only Isabella had special dialouge with Fem Hawke,saying stuff like girly fun etc... plus she already said that she is BI,this makes her relationship with a femHawke seem real,consistent and just great.Merill treats

Fem Hawke like male Hawke, she also never said that she has an interest in girls, making it so strange and doesn't feel right.

(As an aside, you may be wondering what “Fem Hawke” and “Male Hawke” mean. These terms refer to the different sexes of the player-character. Players can choose whether their character, named Hawke, will be a male or a female when they create their character. The Dragon Age community refers to them as Male and Fem Hawke. There are orthographic variations as well: sometimes this appears as mHawke and fHawke, or femHawke, and so on.)

Figure 4.7. An Example of “Sub-Threading”



ipgd's response to this post provides us with a good illustration of what sub-threading looks like (see Figure 4.7, above). To follow the sub-thread, begin with the innermost message and read from inside to outside. InfinitePath's post made the claims that “if you are going to make all companions have a bisexual sexuality make them express it,” and that “their sexuality is a part of their personallity”. Starting with the innermost message, SongstressKitsune's

expression of joy about BioWare’s “playersexual” characters can be read as a direct response to the original post, but LPPrince’s reply begins a new message chain regarding the likelihood that the “playersexual” approach will continue in future Dragon Age games. This is a good example of how use of the QUOTE feature facilitates the creation of sub-threads. Here, a discussion has emerged – somewhat parenthetically – from the main discussion, which focused on how the sexuality of non-player-characters in the Dragon Age world should be handled by the game developers.

I speculate that sub-threading is an organic byproduct of BSN’s information architecture. Because the site determines where to place message information, users have developed a habit of organizing their side conversations through the use of QUOTE feature. Not all users do this, though; it would be useful to explore, in a future study, whether the newness of a user had any correlation to whether they demonstrated this behavior.

Theme B2: Addressing All

Because the comment system is organized linearly, using the QUOTE function allows users to create a hierarchical organization of the discussion in which they are participating. It also allows users to selectively avoid using QUOTE when they wish to address everyone who is reading. This is possible, of course, in a hierarchical system like Reddit’s. There are plenty of examples of users writing “in this thread” comments, for instance, in which they make a general observation about the kinds of comments that are appearing in the discussion. This is only one example of how users at Reddit use top-level comments that are clearly addressed to everyone. The effect of such a comment is different when one is required to read messages in the order in which they are posted. This allows users to attempt to redirect the conversation or provide their evaluation of the thread as a whole. Since BSN presents messages to users like a book rather than

like a filing system, I argue that the effect of avoiding QUOTE usage to address the audience is more profound at BSN.

The following examples are all from users who understood how to use the QUOTE and MQ features, based on the data I collected. Thus, I believe these are all instances where they consciously chose not to use these features for effect. I will explain the larger context for these comments in my section on bloc formation, below (see Section 3). The first example occurs at message 361, by jlb524:

This is what I see happening: BioWare decided to try a different method for implementing romances in DA2...one that gave more people more options. As I mentioned before, they've done this in the past by removing racial, class, or morality checks. By going this route, people have more control over shaping their PCs story...people like that kind of stuff.

Now, some people say this makes the characters 'weak' and the narrative 'poor' and makes the romances 'unrealistic' even though all these things are still completely optional and have popped up in other games from BW, like the Origins romances (i.e, the bribes gifts, lack of realistic race/class restriction) but nobody really seems to care about these other things nor do they absolutely think it must go in order to maintain some kind of integrity.

That all seems to reek of some kind of double-standard. Anything else goes in romance (no matter how ridiculous it may be) except gender.

The second occurs at message 445 by Siansonea:

This topic is about statistical probability of bisexuals (apparently...) and I made points about much more glaring statistical improbabilities in the game...and....*crickets*

I think that says it all...

These two messages speak to the general audience of the thread rather than to any specific person, even though by this time these users were engaged in an extended dialogue with Anathemic, Akka le vil, and Harid. As will be obvious from section 3, below, these arguments were not only common from other users in other threads on the site, they were also common from *these* users in *this* thread. Both jlb524 and Siansonea had been making these same respective cases over the course of hundreds of messages in the thread before they make these statements; however, I believe there is a distinct rhetorical effect when restating these points without using the QUOTE feature. Messages without that framing read as a judgment intended for everyone reading, as though they are turning to the audience of lurkers or posters not involved in these conversations to convince them that their opponents' messages carry a prejudicial subtext. Furthermore, because BSN's system controls the arrangement of messages in this way, many who are reading along will encounter these messages in the middle of reading multiple posts carrying on multiple, parallel conversations. This can result in new branches of the conversation. Message 361, above, was the first message in a large cluster of replies, for instance.

Data Analysis Section C: MULTI-QUOTING

BSN has a feature that Reddit does not: multiquoting. Multiquoting, or MQ, allows users to integrate comments from multiple posts into their own message. At Reddit, one can REPLY to only one message. If one wishes to reply to multiple messages, one must make multiple comments and the system will attach each of those messages to their respective parent comments. See, for example, this post by Brockololly:

Oh, its this topic again :unsure:

Quote slimgrin wrote...

Not everyone should be so conveniently oriented. That undermines character development. If a character likes the same sex, make them gay. Period. This would take some balls of course. Not sure BioWare will be the one to do it.

This.

Just have gay/bi/straight LIs. No PC pandering Hawke-sexual ones, no conveniently "Bi" situations where every LI will end up going for the PC just to pander to the playerbase.

More defined NPCs, please.

Quote In Exile wrote...

I think that sexuality ought to be something that's addressed. There's absolutely nothing wrong with a character being bi - but it should be the case that a character is consistent. If Karl is an important part of Anders's past, then the player should hear it irrespective of the PC's gender. If Anders is attracted to people and not to genders, he should say that.

And this as well.

I speculated that this feature would affect invention of messages at BSN, but the results did not bear this out. First, MQ was not a highly utilized feature, showing up just 32 times in the data (see Table 1, above). This may be true due to the additional effort users have to invest in order to use this feature: one must go back through the pages of discussion to find the messages one wishes to quote from.

Second, when cross-referenced with users' deliberative activity, we see that there was only one instance where we see a large increase in the number of incidences of MQ versus QUOTING: AFFIRMATION.

Table 4.3: QUOTE and MQ coded messages disaggregated according to deliberative code

DELIBERATIVE CODE	MQ	% OF MQ	QUOTE	% OF QUOTE
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	0	0.0%	7	0.8%
AFFIRMATION	6	18.8%	35	4.0%
AFFIRMATION NR	2	6.3%	15	1.7%
CLAIM + COUNTER	0	0.0%	74	8.3%
CLAIM + COUNTER NR	4	12.5%	115	13.0%
COMMISSIVE	6	18.8%	132	14.9%
CURBING	0	0.0%	4	0.5%
DEGRADING	0	0.0%	11	1.2%
DI	4	12.5%	138	15.6%
EMOTIONAL	2	6.3%	89	10.0%
EXPRESSIVE	4	12.5%	93	10.5%
HUMOR	0	0.0%	86	9.7%
IMPERATIVE	0	0.0%	2	0.2%
REBUT + REFUTE	7	21.9%	219	24.7%
REBUT NR + REFUTE NR	2	6.3%	91	10.3%
USAGE-DECLARATIVE	0	0.0%	20	2.3%

The table above reports on the number of messages that are coded as MQ or QUOTE that are also coded as a deliberative code. For instance, 35 messages coded as QUOTE were also coded as AFFIRMATION, representing 4% of all of the messages also coded as QUOTE. Note that each incidence of the deliberative code does not exclude incidents of other codes. In other words,

a message coded with CLAIM could have also been coded as a USAGE-DECLARATIVE, HUMOR, IMPERATIVE, and so on. What this chart indicates is merely co-incidence: messages where QUOTE or MQ is coded with one of the deliberative codes.

Looking at the numbers side by side in the table above, we can see that in many cases the percentages are close to being equal. Where we see the percentage of QUOTE usage greatly exceed that of MQ is for use of QUOTE with CLAIM + COUNTER, HUMOR, and, much less so, with EMOTIONAL, DI, and REBUT + REFUTE NR.

On the other hand, consider the difference between the percentage of MQ use with AFFIRMATION and AFFIRMATION NR compared to similar uses of QUOTE, or the smaller difference in the use of MQ and COMMISSIVE versus similar uses of QUOTE. I reviewed messages where these codes intersected, but found nothing interesting or different in how users were using MQ to support these activities versus messages where they were using QUOTE.

Obviously, in terms of absolute numbers, users more often chose to QUOTE rather than MQ, but those users who chose to use MQ were most often choosing to either help other users support their arguments or were in some other way being supportive, for instance by conceding entirely or in part to other users' points. Because my sample is so small and because my study is not designed to support an argument about causation, I cannot say whether the presence of MQ in the design of BSN definitively contributed to the rhetorical invention of users, resulting in affirmations or commissives; nevertheless, it is a curious finding. What I can say is that, even though this is an odd and unexpected trend in the data, further analysis revealed nothing interesting about how users were using MQ for the purposes of affirmation. It's possible that it's because of the small number of instances of MQ that there appears to be a correlation worth exploring here. Another reason that could explain the appearance of the data comes from how I

coded it: because my unit of analysis was the message as a whole, an individual message could have multiple codes associated with it. So imagine that a user decides to use MQ. She affirms someone's point but decides to rebut another person's point. That message would show up twice in the table above: first as an instance of MQ and AFFIRMATION and second as an instance of MQ and REBUT + REFUTE. Finally, it could simply be that using MQ gives people an opportunity to engage in a more granular way with the conversation, allowing them to take opportunities to affirm others that are passed over when just using QUOTE. It would be worth exploring just this feature at other online forums in the future with a larger data set to see if there really is a correlation between this structural element and something like AFFIRMATION.

Data Analysis, Section D: Bloc Formation

Key findings in this section:

1. In one thread that I analyzed, high-volume posters coalesced around three basic claims and formed opposing sides.
2. One side drew repeatedly from a special topic I labeled "off-topic," which I believe is influenced strongly by BioWare's terms of service and site rules.
3. The other side drew repeatedly from a special topic I labeled "insincere concern." Arguments made from this topic were often taken up by the opposition as insinuations of homophobia.
4. Both drew from the same special topic, accusing each other of being motivated by an unstated agenda.

By "bloc formation," I am referring to a phenomenon where multiple users appear to borrow arguments from each other during the course of the discussion and ultimately take the same tack during the discussion. These users are not merely arguing from the same topoi, though

that is part of it. In addition to arguing from the same topoi, they are making similar versions of the argument. Another feature of this is that they occasionally step in for others on their side, replying to a message directed at one of their “team-members.” This is not a new phenomenon in on-line forums; see, for example, Lewiński (2010) on collective antagonism in online forums. He demonstrates a phenomenon he calls horizontal criticism or a “tag-team argument”: “tag-team argument can be described as a form of a relay, with one interlocutor taking the baton from the other to carry on the same thread of argumentation” (p. 95), a form of collective antagonism where opponents make different attacks on one position in sequence. He also describes a phenomenon he calls vertical criticism, a pattern of collective antagonism in which multiple users develop a sustained attack on one particular element of the argument or the argument as a whole.

As I noted earlier, I only saw this happen in one thread, though as I will explain later, I believe it’s likely that this effect is facilitated by the broader context in which arguments circulate throughout the BSN. But let me first provide some context and examples to illustrate the phenomenon.

The thread I will be using to exemplify this phenomenon is “Does everyone really have to be bisexual?” created by yaw on 3 Jun 2011. Multiple discussions take place in this thread. In the first post, yaw, the person who started the thread, makes two claims:

- “I just think it's better to have some bisexual, some straight, even some purely homosexual characters all mixed up, instead of having access to every single LI.”
- “I think someone's sexuality, if it's dealt with, is part of someone's character.”

Although many of the users qualify their statements with expressive language referring to internal states (such as “I think”), I coded statements as claims if what they expressed met the

criteria of an objectively criticizable, contested (or contestable) statement that required reasons or grounds for support; so although, technically speaking, no one could contest whether yaw really does think this, I take the claim in the first bulleted point above to be that it would be “better to have some bisexual, some straight, even some purely homosexual characters all mixed up, instead of having access to every single LI.” This is, after all, a statement that is contested in a message thread with 506 posts before it was locked by a moderator.

I believe that yaw intends the second bulleted statement to be support for the first, but I include it as a claim only because a significant portion of the thread engages it. In other words, what yaw is arguing is that one of the reasons that it’s better to have some characters be homosexual and others heterosexual is because sexuality is part of one’s character, and having characters be bisexual purely to allow a PC of any gender to romance them is, in his view, unrealistic.

The six users involved in this phenomenon were Akka le vil, Anathemic, Harid, ipgd, jlb524, and Siansonea. These six users were high volume contributors to the thread, accounting for just over 40% of the total activity in the thread—203 of the 507 posts in the thread. Most of their contributions are related not to yaw’s original post but to the meta-argument about the etiquette of off-topic posting and to claims about each side having a hidden agenda driving its participation. In this thread, I saw the formation of two “teams.” Siansonea, ipgd, and jlb524 form one side, arguing that the flexible sexuality of party members is less immersion-breaking for players than other more egregious examples of unrealistic elements in the game—and insinuating that homophobia was the actual root of their passion for the topic. Akka le vil, Anathemic, and Harid formed the other side, arguing that by insisting on discussing these other examples, jlb524, ipgd, and Siansonea were trying to derail the discussion to get the thread

locked. Akka le vil, Anathemic, and Harid all make the argument that having 4 party members who are bisexuals is statistically improbable and therefore immersion-breaking for players, but this argument is primarily championed by the latter two. Though Akka le vil does make this argument once, he claims that his opposition to having 4 bisexual party members is primarily because it strikes him as a game mechanic designed to make players happy rather than the result of detailed characterization. I include him in this bloc because he joins Anathemic and Harid in opposing the shift to a new topic in the thread.

I define the phenomenon of “bloc formation” as having two observable components. The first is the cross-pollination of ideas from one user to another. The second is responding to statements made to another user who is also making a similar argument. This latter component was so pronounced that some users on each “side” took to using “we” when describing themselves, suggesting that they had begun to identify themselves as a team. See, for example, this message by ipgd to Anathemic (boldfacing in original; italics mine):

Anathemic wrote...

Why would one doubt it, if the reasons I cite directly pertain by me physically stating "see these reasons I cite? This is how they pertain to the discussion" in my posts?

There's is no logical gaps here, I am physically stating "here's my position, and this is how it relates."

Quote me **not** stating that.

Because this is an argument about sexuality, which is a controversial topic. Your evasiveness in the face of challenges to your argument's logical consistency suggests that your argument may be a dummy argument. Nobody wants to waste their time fighting a

dummy argument, given that none of the arguments against said dummy argument would be persuasive regarding the core issue it obfuscates. *We* would rather argue actual issues, and this problem could be resolved if you would either a) reveal the real core argument so it can be addressed directly or verify that is indeed your objection or b) answer some brief logical consistency questions in order to verify that is indeed your objection.

If it could be established that b is the case, we could continue on this topic as normal, but you refuse to do so, so instead we are having this bizarre argument about arguing that is infinitely more off topic than any logical consistency assessments

The second use of “we” is arguably an example of the royal “we,” but the first example, which I have emphasized with italics, appears to refer to the collective of ipgd, Siansonea, and jlb524.

The earliest participants in the discussion were jlb524 and Harid. One of the throughlines for the discussion is jlb524’s claim that the first game in the series, *Dragon Age: Origins*, allowed pairings that were just as, or more, unbelievable than the ones permitted in *Dragon Age 2*. Where the majority of *Dragon Age 2*’s four love-interests characters had undefined sexual orientations, *Origins* allowed players to romance characters with different moral positions than the player. For jlb524, this is a form of pandering that is immersion-breaking. He makes this claim in message 89 of 507 and it informs the arguments that will later be made by ipgd and Siansonea, as I will show. Harid makes the claim that having four party members be bi-sexual is statistically unlikely and therefore unrealistic at message 109 of 507. This will be a dominant argument made by multiple others in the thread and will be taken up by Anathemic later as well. The first message that insinuates that people who claim having that many bisexuals in the party is unrealistic are homophobic comes from a user named Mr. House in message 54, so this idea

occurs quite early in the thread. Another user, jussyr, frames it in a way that will inform the dominant critique made by jlb524, Siansonea, and ipgd after message 300. jussyr writes: “And realism-wise, there are so many more unambiguously contextually unrealistic things in DA2; why is it **this** one that you’re taking issue with, when it’s one of the few that actually has real-life consequences for how included other people feel?” (Message 120). This question, “why is it **this** one that you’re taking issue with,” will be repeated by both jlb524 and Siansonea almost verbatim. Harid and Anathemic both respond to jussyr’s message, drawing from the topos of “on-topic” to do so. Harid writes: “But as far as this issue goes, it’s because this is the question brought up from the topic?” (Message 123). Anathemic writes: “I take issue with the game’s existence [*sic*] in general. It’s this point of taking issue it, because well, I don’t know, it’s the point of this thread?” (Message 125). By this point in the thread, the dominant controversies of the final 200 messages are established. Harid and Anathemic are already arguing from the same perspective while jussyr has introduced the talking point that will be taken up by jlb524 (in message 187), Siansonea, and ipgd at the end of the thread. Anathemic will later take up Harid’s argument about statistics, developing it further and taking counter-arguments from Siansonea, ipgd, and jlb524 during messages 328-411.

Now that I’ve given the starting points for the lines of argument that will dominate the discussion in this thread, let us review some examples of what I’m calling “cross-pollination” of ideas from one user to another. In message 198, jlb524 argues that the romances in *Dragon Age: Origins* were similar; where in *Dragon Age 2*, romanceable NPCs had no “gender-check,” in *Dragon Age: Origins*, they had no “morality-check” or “race-check.” As an example of why a “race-check” would matter, in *Origins*, a human PC could romance an Elf in spite of the game’s lore, which explained that Elves had a very insular society after years of cruelty and enslavement

by humans. Human society, as a general rule, looks down upon Elves, and Elves that do live alongside humans are almost always members of the lower class. “Again, this could also be an issue with the Origins romances, just exchange morality/race for gender,” he wrote. “No one is creating tons of threads complaining that all LIs will romance a dwarf or elf though...” This observation is picked up by Sionsonea and ipgd later in the thread, always framed in such a way that it insinuates a deeper motive driving the argument. For example, ipgd wrote to Anathemic: “But if you do not take issue with the other unrealistic things in the game, it suggests that your argument is a tenuous justification for a different underlying problem instead of an actual argument that stands on its own with logical consistency” (message 382). Later, Siansonea wrote: “If the basis for this topic’s objection truly was conformity to statistical norms in the real world, these same people would be shouting from the rooftops about how underrepresented children are in Kirkwall. And female dwarves and Qunari. But, strangely, I’m not hearing a big ruckus over that so much as the fact that we’ve got four bisexuals in one group. I don’t suppose ‘birds of a feather flock together’ or anything” (message 455). In the midst of these claims, jlb524 states matter of factly, “What’s the real argument against it? Oh, it’s unrealistic!... I’m pretty sure that has been refuted as not being the source of the real issue... Now we are left to guess at what the real issue is...” (message 431). This topos—that there is a “real” argument beneath the surface “realism” argument—circulates through the posts of jlb524, Siansonea, and ipgd. For example, here’s ipgd later in the thread: “We would rather argue actual issues, and this problem could be resolved if you would either a) reveal the real core argument so it can be addressed directly or b) answer some brief logical consistency questions in order to verify that is indeed your objection” (message 483). We see similar examples of this from Akka le vil, Anathemic, and Harid. They argue that jlb524, Siansonea, and ipgd are implying that they are

homophobic and trying to derail the conversation on purpose in order to get the thread locked by moderators.

Another feature of this phenomenon is users jumping into conversations between other discussants to respond to challenges for them. I have already provided examples of how these users began referring to themselves with “we”; jlb524 does it in messages 418 and 421 and ipgd does it in message 474, while Harid does it in message 479, apparently referring to himself and Anathemic. When I refer to users jumping into other conversations, I’m referring to situations like the following. We see Harid responding to jussyr; jlb524 will reply to Harid, followed by Anathemic:

HARID #109

jussyr wrote...

Also what's so weird about a group of 8 people with 4 bisexuals in it? I don't know about the rest of you, but I often find myself in groups with a much higher proportion than that (by chance, with the group getting together for unrelated purposes, that is). And that's only the people whose orientation I'm actually aware of. In a society where sexual orientation is looked upon as a non-issue, I don't think it's at all strange.

Bisexuals aren't a large enough amount of the common population (in game or in real life)for it to be feasible.

It'd be simpler to make non battle npc's gay or bi or straight or asexual so people can get their romance fix without making the whole party bisexual, without coming across as pandering, imo.

JLB524 #110

Harid wrote...

Bisexuals aren't a large enough amount of the common population (in game or in real life)for it to be feasible.

I don't think you can make that assumption.

Harid wrote...

It comes across as pandering.

So what? There's pandering everywhere, like...pandering to people that like playing 'evil'.

Most players go the more heroic route, but they add in the options to play other moralities even when not popular.

Harid wrote...

It'd be simpler to make non battle npc's gay or bi or straight or asexual so people can get their romance fix without making the whole party bisexual, without coming across as pandering, imo.

The whole party isn't bisexual.

ANATHEMIC #111

jlb524 wrote...

Harid wrote...

It comes across as pandering.

So what? There's pandering everywhere, like...pandering to people that like playing 'evil'. Most players go the more heroic route, but they add in the options to play other moralities even when not popular.

I... what? How did you make that assumption of most people going the 'heroic' route? I have the experience of many players going the 'evil' route.

More to the point, pandering in video games is not a good thing. It shows bias and most of all simplicity. If devs are always going to pander to specific elements be it moral routes (good/evil) or sexuality, then there's a unnecessary use of resources going to 'pander' the specific side chosen leaving the other side little to no depth at all.

In this example, we can see Anathemic responding to statements directed at Harid. By itself that is not something noteworthy. I point it out as a component of the phenomenon I observed where these individuals would step in for each other and pick up each other's arguments.

While it is possible that these users arrived at their shared stance as a result of participating in the discussion and revising their tack over time by witnessing the arguments of others in the thread, I believe it is more likely that these arguments were honed over time in a variety of places in the social network. For Siansonea, jlb524, and ipgd, I believe they had rehearsed these arguments in other threads on the topic of same-sex romance subplots in BioWare games as well as in the Fight for the Love group. Likewise, I believe that Akka le vil, Harid, and Anathemic had likely practiced their arguments based on statistics in other threads. One topos that both groups shared was "topic." In fact, the discussion in the thread shifted away from yaw's initial claims to focus on the issue of what made something on- or off-topic. Accusations by users opposed to Dragon Age 2's handling of love-interests, against users who favored it, of deliberately leading a thread off-topic were common in the threads I analyzed for this study, while accusations from those in favor, against those opposed, of homophobia were also common in other threads. So while it is certainly possible that the individual users in this

thread migrated towards the same arguments due to their participation in the thread itself, I think it is more likely that these arguments were already in circulation forum-wide and had become canards by the time of my analysis. That in itself may be worth noting regarding the contribution of public forums to political judgment formation: given that it's possible to be exposed to a high volume of claims and supporting statements by participating frequently in online forums—even if one is just reading and not posting—it makes sense that one could stockpile a panoply of arguments from the ones in circulation and deploy them. This makes sense particularly given that many people arrive at their political judgments heuristically rather than systematically (Cavari and Freedman, 2019). If I am correct then an ethnographic study of a forum, including interviews with research participants, may reveal more about the origins for users' arguments online.

Circling back to the controversy surrounding what can be considered an on-topic move in a discussion, I wanted to point out that this indicated a shift towards a normative discussion. Anathemic and Harid both argued that what jlb524, ipgd, and Siansonea were trying to do was against the etiquette of a discussion forum and needed to start a new thread to take up the issue they wanted to discuss. These three users did not challenge the norm itself but the categorization of their strategy as “off-topic.” The conversation on the original topic stalled because these users could not secure the participation of Anathemic and Harid in their meta-argumentative discussion and refused to discuss the core topic without resolving the side-dispute first. The latter continued to assert the righteousness of their position and sought to persuade jlb524, ipgd, and Siansonea to drop it and resume the discussion. This part of the discussion makes manifest what Asen (2013) has said about the importance of trust in deliberation. Harid makes the claim at the end of the thread that what jlb524, ipgd, and Siansonea are doing is deliberately leading the discussion off-topic so that moderators will lock the thread, while jlb524 and others make the

argument that Anathemic, Harid, and Akka le vil are using arguments about unrealistic numbers of bisexuals in the PC's party or weak writing as cover for their own homophobia. I would have very much liked to uncover, if possible, the origins of the mutual distrust that informed the arguments of these users. As I stated above, these arguments were not unique to the thread I analyzed; I saw them repeated, though not in such a sustained way or with such dedication by a narrow group of users, in other threads that I studied. This suggests that this kind of distrust was part of the culture of the forums at the time of my study. Where did it come from? Was it a reflection of political commitments users held external to the site, indicative of the interpenetration of "off-line" and "on-line" life? A future study would be needed to explore this in greater detail.

CONCLUSIONS

I began this study with the desire to learn about how the design of a forum might inform political judgment formation. By design, I had in mind not only its information architecture and affordances but also how its administrators rhetorically constructed its ethos and norms, because information architecture is influenced by that normative vision and can produce an ethos and set of norms through the kinds of behaviors that architecture permits. Given that internet-communication technologies are ever more pervasive, mediating our relationships like never before (particularly as I now write this, four months into a pandemic that has forced all of us to rethink how we associate with each other), I thought that it was important to understand how the structures of this space influenced how judgments were formed within, for deliberation depends upon spaces. The public sphere is a metaphor for one such space; the ideal speech situation, another. Third spaces, yet again. There is an awareness, perhaps implicit, that how we design our spaces influences the kinds of decisions we can make within them. And, of course, as I said

above, the design of these spaces reflects and reproduces the goals of those who design them, as well as participating in conversation with the broader structures of the culture within which those spaces are situated (Winner, 1980).

The design and stated norms of BSN reflect a commercial interest. Users are positioned as sources of information for BioWare and Electronic Arts to help them design and market their products to consumers. The organic development of the community appears to be less important, evident from the rules and regulations stated by the company and by how those are enforced. These documents, when combined with moderation—especially the ability to lock threads—and the threat of losing access to entitlements, appear to impact the kinds of arguments users will circulate at the site and the strategies users deploy to silence positions they do not agree with. The site's design also affords users some opportunities to resist—not registering your game, resurrecting old threads, creating multiple threads to get your point out are all ways around moderation in an environment where users are encouraged to criticize site moderators in private rather than attempting to organize larger groups of users.

Though BSN does not have the *laissez-faire*, liberal-democratic feel of Reddit, it also appears to have more sustained and more reasoned arguments. Whether this is true for all threads on the site is a matter for further research, but it was true in my study. As for what may have produced this result, I speculate that it could be the passionate fanbase, or perhaps the linear comment system that exposed readers to multiple conversations happening simultaneously, offering a richer resource for invention. In other words, more opportunities for users to get involved in multiple conversations at once rather than being siloed in specific conversation groupings, which could happen in a hierarchical comment system, particularly if there were an

overwhelming number of messages making it difficult to read many outside of the specific conversations one was participating in.

This calls attention to the other major difference between BSN and Reddit, the comment structure. As I argued above, the inclusion of a WYSIWYG text editor in conjunction with the linear organization of comments at BSN may have shaped the ways that users took advantage of the QUOTE feature. Far fewer users at BSN engaged in the kind of power games with quoting that we saw at Reddit, seeming to use it instead to provide others with the ability to see the previous moves in the conversation.

Regarding political judgment formation, I conclude that BSN, like Reddit, effectively conserves or maintains political judgment. Users are able to invent arguments by drawing upon affordances granted them by the site's information architecture, or from the site's terms of service or behavioral guidelines (the "off-topic" topic could have come from the latter, for instance), or from the arguments already circulating in private groups or other threads.

Could we engineer a space that could produce epistemic outcomes? What might such a space look like? In my concluding chapter, I will discuss what we know from investigations into deliberation and how this might be applied to digital spaces.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

I began this project with the suggestion that the Internet may itself, as an unintended consequence of its design, cause anti-deliberative outcomes. Winner (1980) makes the case that any technology reflects the politics of its era and that these technologies, in turn, influence those who use it regularly. More recently, Barney (2007) proposes that the Internet's design encourages its users to relate to the world instrumentally and makes it difficult to challenge the liberal-democratic view of the common good that is built upon and encourages instrumental reason. Such a perspective runs contrary to radical democratic and deliberative democratic perspectives that would allow for greater inclusion in the evaluation and construction of group norms. Arola (2010), Fogg (2003), Hasle (2006), Ito (1997), Manovich (2001), Selfe and Selfe (1994), and Wysocki and Jasken (2004) all argue for the non-neutrality of user interfaces and computer code on users. Their work, particularly Hasle's, can be seen to view technology as a feature of the rhetorical situation, from which the subjectivity of the rhetor emerges at the moment of writing. Rawlins and Wilson (2014), writing about the experience of using interactive data design (IDD) software, describe this interaction between user and software as "blended agency." They write:

While the user makes the final decisions on how the IDD will be completed in data, design, and message, those decisions are influenced and limited by the exercised agency of the original designer, which is expressed and preserved in the IDD. The resultant graphic of the IDD is determined by a collaboration among these three entities—the designer, the IDD, and the user—each of which is operating with outside constraints within a rhetorical situation. (p. 13)

These IDD's are similar to other forms of interface that contribute to the final outcome of the rhetor's message, thus I believe software design and hardware infrastructure merit consideration as influences on rhetorical invention, just as doxa would (see Crowley and Hawhee, 2004). Previous research demonstrates that site design does indeed influence user discussion (Bers and Chau, 2006; S. Coleman, 2008; Freelon, 2011; J. Davis, 2010; Hercheui, 2011; Hess, 2009; Kirshner, 2003; Koerber, 2001; Ley, 2007; Papacharissi, 2009; Radin, 2006; VanLear, Sheehan, Withers and Walker, 2005). Given the growing number of people using the Internet to connect with each other, we must ask how software and hardware influence the political judgments formed online and the quality of deliberation mediated through Internet forums.

According to Beiner (1984), an essential quality of political discourse is the formation of political judgments, i.e. "judgments about the form of collective life that is desirable for us to pursue within a given context of possibilities" (p. 38). We should keep in mind that political discourse is always situated in a physical space, and more and more it's situated in a digital space that is the product of code. Many scholars have contributed to our understanding of how political discourse should be conducted to produce just outcomes. Habermas' discourse ethics provides a non-transcendental ethical process, grounded in the pragmatics of language, according to which groups can test norms that they would be governed by. According to Habermas (1975, 1984, 1990), language presumes an ideal speech situation wherein

the bracketed validity claims of assertions, recommendations, or warnings are the exclusive object of discussion; that participants, themes and contributions are not restricted except with reference to the goal of testing the validity claims in questions; that no force except that of the better argument is exercised; and that, as a result, all

motives except that of the cooperative search for truth are excluded. (Habermas 1975, pp. 107-8)

Deliberative democrats attempt to create a practical structure for just political discourse from Habermas' counterfactual ideal and Rawls' theory of justice. Most do away with Habermas' mandate that norms achieve the rational consensus of all who would be affected (see, for example, Cohen, 1997a; Dryzek, 1990; Fishkin, 1990; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004), though Dryzek (1990) does not rule out the possibility that a group with much in common could achieve such a goal. Cohen (1997) allows for groups to try for consensus and, failing that objective, settle matters by vote. However, discourse ethics have been critiqued for being too exclusionary (see Fraser, 1992; Negt and Kluge, 1993; and Young, 1990, 1996, 1997). Young critiques Habermas because his discourse ethics, in insisting upon rational evaluation, excludes people who communicate differently. More significantly, by asking individuals to bracket out everything except for the matter at hand, discourse ethics asks individuals to universalize their particular interests and omit their social perspectives. This has the effect of screening out, or attempting to screen out, group perspectives on systemic oppression, making it impossible for the ideal speech situation to yield outcomes that would achieve justice. Young's critique is driven by her belief that difference is an irreducible element in political life, and she is not alone in this basic disagreement with Habermas; Cohen (1997a), Crowley (2006), Dryzek (1990), Fleming (2008), Hauser (1999), and Mouffe (2000) all, to varying degrees, recognize difference and propose revisions to discourse ethics that incorporate difference to varying degrees.

Qualitative research into how people form political judgments reveals that the process is influenced strongly by social factors such as identity formation (see Stern and Ondish, 2018). The maintenance of friendships or shared perspectives on reality often outweighs rational

evaluations of positions. Furthermore, many people rely on elites to form opinions for them (Cavari and Freedman, 2019). This so-called heuristic opinion formation is cognitively “cheaper” than the more “expensive” systematic opinion formation, which requires research and weighing of evidence. Rhetorical framing has also been found to significantly influence how people evaluate an issue (see Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1990; Jackson, 2019; and Ventura, Rodriguez-Polo and Roca-Cuberes, 2019). These framings can circulate through democratic publics or be produced and reproduced by mass media. Regardless of the extent to which difference is prioritized within democratic publics, the process of deliberation is less common.

Furthermore, researchers have found that people’s use of reason is much better at criticizing perspectives that challenge their own than it is at generating good reasons for one’s own position (see, for example, Mercier, 2016). It follows from this that having a democratic public that includes multiple positions would be best if we wanted to produce the best possible arguments. Unfortunately, due to the social factors associated with political judgments, people naturally drift into echo chambers.

If it is true that people tend to assemble themselves into echo chambers due to both social and cognitive factors, it is not surprising that the Internet, as well as any overtly liberal-democratic Internet spaces, would facilitate the formation of enclaves, particularly considering the reality of difference, as noted by Dahlberg (2007) and Sunstein (2007). There are some benefits to enclave formation: Mary Louise Pratt’s (1999) safe houses are one such kind of enclave, though they are meant to co-exist with contact zones; and Dahlberg (2007) argues that these enclaves permit the creation of perspectives that may not have been possible in a heterogeneous public. On the other hand, Sunstein (2007) argues that balkanization, taken to extremes, will make it increasingly difficult for pluralistic societies to address social problems.

The totality of the work on democratic publics provides us with a good picture of what kind of discourse yields just outcomes. Following Gutmann and Thompson (2004), we can begin with a reason-giving requirement, accessibility of reasons given to all addressees, the intention to create a group norm or decision, and the ability to reconsider the decision at any time. This accessibility requirement incorporates Habermas' dictate that anyone capable of participating be allowed to do so—and that no one can be barred from participating. From Cohen (1997) and Dryzek (1990), we can add that rational consensus, while ideal, is not required. From Young (1996) and Cohen (1997b), we add allowances for alternative communication styles, such as storytelling, in addition to rational evaluation of evidence.

Graham's (2008) coding system incorporates many of these elements, which is why I chose to use it when analyzing deliberation at Reddit and the BioWare Social Network. Graham's coding lexicon includes categories geared towards recognizing both non-reasoned contributions and attempts to prevent people from participating in discussion. I added codes for structures-in-use to capture how users drew upon these features when inventing contributions to discussion. In order to get a better sense of the background out of which their subjectivities emerged, I reviewed the site's structure (including structures-in-use, visual design, information architecture, site policies, and policy enforcement) in order to get a sense of how norms were described and how users were positioned. After analyzing the site's design and information architecture and performing content-analysis based on my modified codebook from Graham, I made two additional analyses: first, I performed a thematic analysis of what users did with the design features of the site; and second, I performed frame and topoi analysis (for examples, see Biswas, 2009; Carlin, Schill, Levasseur and King, 2005; and Goss, 2007) on the conversations that took place between users.

I chose Reddit and the BioWare Social Network for this study because they are very different websites. This contrast, I had hoped, would enable me to draw conclusions about effects of structure on deliberative activity; however, though there were some differences revealed by content analysis, frame and topological analysis of user interactions showed that users were not more likely at either site to engage in what Habermas would call communicative action.

At the time of my study, Reddit was undergoing a slow shift away from its laissez-faire roots, towards a structure that would be more friendly for corporate advertisers. It had been experiencing growth in its user base every year for several years and these new users brought with them a different set of expectations compared to those who had been with the site from the very beginning. The sudden attention focused on the site as a result of Anderson Cooper's coverage about the jailbait subreddit caused a crisis at Reddit; rather than dying down, the crisis was only exacerbated by subsequent coverage of the creepshots subreddits and the revelation of violentacrez's identity, first through Adrian Chen's expose at Gawker and then on CNN. These stories caused many users to question the liberal-democratic approach towards speech norms at Reddit. Ironically, these speech norms were questioned by both sides of the argument; there were users who wanted content like creepshots banned from the site, while other users supported the decision by moderators in multiple, popular subreddits to ban any link to any site within the Gawker network because they believed Gawker's Chen had doxed violentacrez. This clash was very clear in the discussions that took place in two of the three discussions I analyzed (the MensRights community was much more homogeneous; their concern in the discussion I analyzed had to do with fear that Reddit's administrators would target their community next). The BioWare Social Network, or BSN, was experiencing a kind of crisis as well. BioWare had

just released Dragon Age 2, the sequel to the highly regarded and much-loved (by its community) Dragon Age: Origins. Dragon Age 2 introduced many changes to the game that upset fans of the original that upset fans of the original game and spurred ongoing clashes between fans of the first game and fans of the new game. One change was the decision by the developers to make the four “romanceable” characters available as love interests for all players, regardless of the sex of the character they had created. The bisexuality of these love-interests was celebrated by some and criticized by others, and their reactions to this decision were the impetus for many new discussion threads in BSN’s Dragon Age 2 General Discussion forum. There was so much vitriol in these discussions that the site’s administrators, in an unprecedented move for the community, created a separate General Discussion forum strictly for those who had registered a copy of Dragon Age 2 with the site due to concerns that people who did not own the game were going to the network to troll users or pick fights. Both of these discussions, I believe, meet one of the characteristics of political discourse: they concern judgments about the form of collective life that is desirable for these communities to pursue (Beiner, 1984). Users at BSN were engaged in an argument about whether, and to what extent, players would be permitted to express their real-life sexualities within the game while still being able to access the totality of the game’s content, given real limitations on the resources at BioWare’s disposal (such as developer time, budget for voice actors, and other constraints). At Reddit, users were engaged in debate regarding privacy and speech norms at the site.

After my analyses, I concluded that structures did correlate to differences in user behavior. Before I describe these differences, I would like to review the structural differences between the two sites. Reddit’s structure appears to minimize the individual user in favor of calling attention to the links those users share. The absence of avatars, the smaller font size and

lighter color of the user's name relative to those of the content shared, and the de-emphasized links to comments as compared to the links leading to the shared content all suggest that the linked content is of greater importance than the conversation about the link or who shared it. This is emphasized by the absence of a profile page for users to compose; a user's profile page is simply a place that the site deposits information about the user rather than a space that can be cultivated to communicate a particular ethos. Furthermore, users are not required to provide real names or email addresses to register for an account. This allows any individual person to have as many user accounts at Reddit as she wishes. The fact that Reddit de-emphasizes the user provides users the capability to engage in play, as evidenced by the appearance of novelty accounts. Far from discouraging this, Reddit awards this behavior with trophies displayed in the user's profile.

Although there are site-wide norms at Reddit, user behavior is most often policed by the moderators of the individual communities. These moderators have a great deal of autonomy and, due to the site's laissez-faire approach to user behavior, are able to create confederacies that enable them to enforce what amounts to de facto rules across multiple subreddits if they choose. Moderators have the ability to temporarily or permanently ban a user from their subreddit; in practice, a ban due to a user's behavior in one subreddit can result in bans across multiple subreddits if the moderators are friends or if a moderator in one community is also on the moderator team of other subreddits.

I argued that the structure of Reddit, inclusive of the site's information architecture, visual design, norms and enforcement, and features for users to take advantage of when using the site and commenting, construct an ethos of negative liberty, freedom of speech, and playfulness. Through its visual design and arrangement of information, the site communicates to its users that

the content matters more than the individual user who shares it, and through its descriptions and soft regulations of the voting mechanic the site imagines a user who is invested in the community, both the small subreddit community and the broader community of the site as a whole, the way one would expect a citizen to be. But within the site's descriptions of its expectations there is tension between users' freedom and responsibility. Tensions regarding the use of voting reveal this conflict. Some users reject the soft demand from the site to use voting in ways that conform to the requests of either the administrators or the moderators of individual subreddits, choosing instead to take advantage of voting in ways they see fit. What this shows is the kind of normal multiplicity of visions regarding the kind of community within which we want to live. This tension between freedom and responsibility is also, I believe, one of the underlying tensions that informed the passionate discussions that erupted after a user known as violentacrez deleted his account following an article written by Adrian Chen for Gawker revealed his identity.

Structurally, the BioWare Social Network is a very different space for users. Unlike Reddit's emphasis on playfulness and freedom, BSN emphasizes control. Unlike Reddit, where the site's moderators volunteer to govern communities, BioWare's moderators are employees of the company. Additionally, BioWare advises users that violations of the site's norms could result in penalties as extreme as denial of access to content licensed from Electronic Arts and BioWare, should users choose to register their content with the website. Users who do register are given badges for each game they own. These badges are displayed beneath the user's avatar displayed to the left of every message the user posts. Another difference from Reddit is the emphasis BSN places on the one-way relationship between users and BioWare. BSN describes the forum as an

avenue for the company to obtain feedback from players on their games. The community, though described as both “fun” and “safe,” is described foremost as a commercial endeavor.

The two sites provide very different messaging interfaces and architectures as well. Reddit arranges replies hierarchically, so that a reply is positioned beneath its parent message and indented. BSN arranges all replies chronologically. Where users at Reddit are presented one hierarchical grouping of messages after the next, users at BSN are presented a series of replies to be read in order of posting. When users post at Reddit, they are given a guide to hypertext markup they can use to format their message, whereas at BSN they use a What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get text editor (see chapters 3 and 4, respectively, for more on this). I believed that these differences could be a reason for some differences in user activity at the site. To explore that further, let us now consider the results from the content-analysis.

The results of the content analysis are as follows:

TABLE 5.1: Comparison of incidence of each code at BSN versus Reddit

CODE	NUMBER		PERCENTAGE	
	BSN	REDDIT	BSN	REDDIT
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	11	24	0.8%	1.3%
AFFIRMATION	71	34	5.1%	1.8%
AFFIRMATION NR	22	62	1.6%	3.3%
CLAIM + COUNTER	184	161	13.2%	8.7%
CLAIM NR + COUNTER NR	244	457	17.5%	24.6%
COMMISSIVE	156	115	11.2%	6.2%
CURBING	4	4	0.3%	0.2%
DEGRADING	15	126	1.1%	6.8%

DIRECTIVE-INFORMATIVE (“DI”)	214	435	15.4%	23.4%
EXPRESSIVE	348	421	25.0%	22.7%
HUMOR	112	110	8.0%	5.9%
IMAGE	6		0.4%	
IMPERATIVE	6	16	0.4%	0.9%
LINK	33	334	2.4%	18.0%
MODERATOR ACTION	7	21	0.5%	1.1%
MULTI-QUOTE (“MQ”)	32		2.3%	
QUOTE	887	240	63.7%	12.9%
REBUT + REFUTE	296	182	21.2%	9.8%
REBUT NR + REFUTE NR	112	239	8.0%	12.9%
USAGE-DECLARATIVE	26	34	1.9%	1.8%

In the table above, the largest disparity, by far, is the use of QUOTE, but that is unsurprising given the lack of a REPLY feature at BSN. It is hard to attribute any of the other differences to the structure or features of either site; it’s very possible that the two conversations simply elicited different kinds of pragmatic behaviors in the users. There is also a much higher incidence of degrading commentary at reddit than at BSN; although it is true that the different conversation topics could influence this, I think it’s likely due to differences in moderation at the two sites. I believe this especially since the topic of conversation at BioWare is one that we would expect to elicit strong feelings, but we see a very small number of comments featuring direct insults. This speaks to the influence of structure on the invention and circulation of messages on the site.

Upon closer inspection (see chapter 4), in spite of what appears to be increased claiming and countering or affirmation at Reddit, this is not actually the case. The difference between the topics of conversation seems to have had little, if any, influence over these results. Where we do see a larger gap between the results is in the category of REBUT and REFUTE, where it appears that the users at BSN made counter-claims or counter-arguments more often than the users at Reddit. This is a curious finding given that the structure of the comment system is linear rather than hierarchical. In a hierarchical organizational structure, where conversations are groups (and especially like the one at reddit, where users receive notifications when someone has replied to their comments), I would expect more rebuttals and refutations because those activities are argumentative replies. Instead, it appears that the linear structure at BSN saw users generating more rebuttals and refutations.

Surprisingly, there are more instances of reasoned activity at BSN than there are at Reddit. It is certainly possible that I influenced these results by the threads that I selected; however, I am surprised that a topic that seems to invite more subjective takes would result in greater amounts of evidence-based deliberative activity. What else might explain why more messages at BSN featured REBUTTAL and REFUTATION, and more reasoned activity, than those at reddit? There is, of course, the reality that the people at BSN are passionate fans of the games they are discussing. That could be the explanation for the results, and a study with a broader range of topics would be necessary to rule that out. However, I speculate that the linear organization of the comment system at BioWare may be a richer inventive resource for messages. A hierarchical organization has the potential to narrow one's focus to just the local conversation rather than the bigger discussion. As a result, it could be that by reading over messages from different, ongoing conversations between multiple sets of users, individuals end

up participating in more conversations than they would otherwise, leading to more attempts to refute arguments (and perhaps to more attempts to rebut those refutations). Second, I believe that BSN's terms of service and ethos have an influence over what arguments are made and circulated at the site, as well as the quality of conversation overall. The ethos at Reddit is more laissez-faire; this could explain why more of the activity there is "non-reasoned." BSN emphasizes constructive, on-topic contributions, and enforces these expectations with removal of access to the site.

In spite of their differences, the two sites are similar in that neither set of data shows changes in political judgment over the duration of the discussion. While BSN's features may encourage users to provide better contributions to conversation, they do not seem to facilitate reflection or persuasion. On the contrary, I would argue that they are neutral towards, or perhaps helpful for, the conservation of one's judgment. Both sites allow for users to coordinate with other like-minded individuals, circulating and cultivating rhetorical frames to use when discussing issues with others who do not share their take on issues. At Reddit, this happens in any number of other subcommunities. At BSN, this happens in groups like the Share the Love group, an invitation-only community.

Upon reflection on these results, I am reminded of Asen's (2013) emphasis on the importance of trust in deliberation. A common refrain in both sets of data, but moreso in the data from BSN, was challenging the sincerity of the other party. Perhaps this was simply another move in a strategic (as opposed to communicative) endeavor, but perhaps this was a sign that on matters of such high value to the participants, neither felt confident that the other side could be trusted to engage the questions honestly. Asen observed that "[t]rust strengthens deliberation not by ensuring an outcome, but by committing participants to the process of producing a

deliberative outcome, namely, a judgment” (p. 8). Though I do believe that Castells (2000) is correct that the Internet, in general, is designed around entertainment and commerce, and therefore, discourages communicative action and political discourse, perhaps site designs that promoted trust could result in sustained deliberative engagements between users, and possibly in changes in political judgment as a result. For Asen, trust is not a precursor to deliberation, but an outcome of deliberation, and consists of four dimensions: flexibility, forthrightness, engagement, and heedfulness (see p. 9). These values place the relation between interlocutors above the arguments themselves. Without them, Asen argues that deliberation is too risky because it asks people to be open to the possibility of abandoning a position that is very meaningful to them. Stronger moderation might accomplish this, but I believe it would take more than that. The factors that Asen believes are crucial to producing trust require a willingness to be vulnerable and an orientation towards considering other points of view. To develop that willingness to be persuaded would require, I believe, a preliminary stage. Crowley (2006) articulates four strategies for persuading fundamentalists. Recognizing that dominant groups are typically able to resist hearing alternate points of view, she proposes that outsiders use storytelling, conjecture, appealing to beliefs that challenge part of the targeted belief system, and reframing issues in such a way as to leverage an accepted ideology against the targeted ideology (see pp. 197-201). The latter two approaches are strategic forms of communication and I doubt they would inspire a willingness to be vulnerable; however, the first two could build a rapport upon which to develop further trust through deliberation, as Black (2008) found. I believe there is some promise in this approach, but it would require overt management of the conversation, similar to the overt management of deliberation we saw in Zimmerman, Heuer, and Mau’s (2018) study on the influence of deliberative forums on opinions towards Germany’s welfare policies. I believe such

an approach would be particularly beneficial when approaching inclusive deliberative settings seeking to address the policy concerns of oppressed groups. Further research into the promotion of trust in online spaces is warranted and would be beneficial.

I also believe that a longitudinal approach to the subject of political judgment formation online, coupled with an interview component, would be helpful. I studied discussions that unfolded over brief periods of time. The only traces of movement in political judgment were later moves in the conversation, but this is not a realistic model for how political judgments evolve over time. Presumably, engaged users encounter many messages over long spans of time; it is possible that these users' judgments undergo small revisions throughout their experience with the site. Following individual users as they engage with a site over time and being able to obtain their perspectives on how their judgments were influenced by interactions with others, as well as their reflections on how the expression of their ideas may have been influenced by the site's design, would be a useful perspective on my research questions. It would also provide a better view of how users identify and negotiate difference, whether that difference is understood in terms of the body or in terms of status within the world of the online environment. I touched lightly upon the idea of user positioning based on my reading of terms of service and other documents intended to police user behavior or explain expectations, but interviews would expand and enrich this investigation.

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