

5-12-2015

## Context and Medium Matter: Expressing Disagreements Online and Face-to-Face in Political Deliberations

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### Recommended Citation

Stromer-Galley, Jennifer; Bryant, Lauren; and Bimber, Bruce (2015) "Context and Medium Matter: Expressing Disagreements Online and Face-to-Face in Political Deliberations," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.  
Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol11/iss1/art1>

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# Context and Medium Matter: Expressing Disagreements Online and Face-to-Face in Political Deliberations

## **Abstract**

Processes of disagreement are important to public deliberation, but research has not examined the dynamics of disagreement in deliberation of political topics with respect to effects of the channel of interaction. This study analyzes the discussions generated via an experiment in which discussants were randomly assigned either to deliberate online via synchronous chat or face-to-face. The study compares the initiation of disagreement, its qualities, and how long it is sustained in the two environments. Discourse analysis suggests that in the online environment initial expressions of disagreement were less frequent, less bold, and were not sustained as compared with the face-to-face discussions. Reasons include the lack of coherence in synchronous chat, which may challenge interlocutors and prevent them from pursuing a disagreement over multiple turns. Implications of these findings for scholars and practitioners are discussed.

## **Keywords**

disagreement, deliberation, discussion, computer-mediated communication, politeness, media richness theory

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank Teresa M. Harrison, Anita Pomerantz, Robert E. Sanders, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. SBR-9802335.

Research on public deliberation events since the late 1980s has focused on effects of deliberation on citizens (for example, Fishkin, 1991; Gastil & Dillard, 1999a, 1999b; Pincock, 2012; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Steiner, 2012), and on *how* people deliberate (Dutwin, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006). Although much of the foundational research has focused on face-to-face deliberation (Fishkin 1991; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Mansbridge, 1983; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Mutz, 2006) and on deliberation by political elites (Steenbergen et al, 2003), several studies have examined deliberation through computer-mediated communication (CMC; Albrecht, 2006; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Xenos, 2008), in part because of concerns that the channel of communication can affect communication processes and outcomes (*c.f.* Herring, 1999; Manosevitch, 2014).

A few studies have directly compared online and offline deliberations. Baek, Wojcieszak and Delli Carpini (2012) surveyed a random sample of U.S. citizens and found that online deliberators were significantly more likely to be young, male, and white. Min (2007), using an experimental design, found that both online and face-to-face deliberations produced similar knowledge gains for participants but did not produce significant opinion change. Neither study examined the actual discussions to understand the nature or differences in the interactions.

One potential consequential difference between online and offline deliberations that is not well understood involves *expressions* of disagreement. Although important studies have looked at the climate of opinion and disagreements around policy (Mutz, 2006; Huckfeldt, Johnson & Sprague, 2004), these studies survey participants about their perceptions of disagreements and their opinions of policy matters relative to the opinions of others. We are more interested in the *discourse processes of disagreeing*. Disagreement can have important functions in good deliberative decision-making, especially by challenging deliberators' assumptions (Janis, 1972; Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001). In face-to-face social interaction, expression of disagreements challenges people's sense of themselves, their *face* (Goffman, 1967). Interlocutors have a tendency to avoid assertions that threaten face for themselves or others (Pomerantz, 1984). This implies that potentially productive disagreement may be inhibited in face-to-face deliberation. Whether online deliberation is different in this regard has not been established. The research is mixed, with some suggesting that disagreements are more likely to occur (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998), while others suggest that the online environment can still facilitate social norms and by extension mitigate disagreement, especially if the discussion and forums are designed well (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Manosevitch, 2014; Walther, 1992;). At this point, it is unclear whether disagreement differs between online and offline environments, and, if so, just what factors drive differences.

This paper explores this issue by conducting a qualitative discourse analysis of the dynamics of political deliberation online and offline, focusing on expressions of disagreement. We examine via close readings of interactions how disagreement is initiated, what qualitative differences in disagreement expressions might exist between one form of online deliberation and a parallel form of offline deliberation, and also whether disagreement is more likely to be sustained in the online setting. To answer these questions, the paper draws on an experimental research design with online and offline conditions in which 70 college students discussed clean air policies and search and seizure laws. The results suggest that differences exist in both the volume and the kind of disagreements. Contrary to the stereotype of incivility online, subjects in the online deliberation format who communicated using synchronous chat software exhibited fewer expressions of disagreements, and fewer bold disagreements than did the face-to-face groups. There were fewer initiations of disagreement in the online groups, and these were less likely to be sustained. Deliberators avoided personal attacks online, just as they did offline. The results raise questions about the challenges of digital affordances for deliberations.

### Theory and Research Questions

Deliberative theory and practice presumes political and demographic diversity as an essential component of an effective deliberation (Gastil, 2000). Normatively speaking, U.S. society values the expression and engagement of diverse viewpoints (Mutz, 2006). Empirically, research suggests that being exposed to alternative perspectives leads to a deeper 'argument repertoire' of both one's own and the other side's perspectives (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002).

Despite the desirability of diversity in deliberation, expression of disagreement in a conversational context is complex. Social-psychological forces can work to inhibit disagreement that might be productive to deliberation. Goffman's (1967) concept of *face*, which is "an image of self—delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (p. 5), is relevant in the context of political deliberations. Interlocutors tend to expend effort to preserve theirs and others' face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Locher, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Pomerantz's (1984) ethnomethodological research on statements of assessment suggests that disagreement is the *dispreferred*

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Brown and Levinson (1987) distinguish between positive face and negative face. Positive face is one's self-image. Negative face can be thought of as the right to be free of imposition from others. Negative face is important in their conceptualization, because politeness can be thought of as an effort to not impose one's self on another in undesired ways.

response to an initial statement. Disagreement is typically influenced by the norms of interaction, including cooperation, politeness, and considerateness of face.

Whether online environments should be more or less conducive to productive disagreement in deliberation has been unclear. Early research on social norms in online environments suggested that online communication channels lack richness for communicating social cues (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Walther's (1992) theory of social information processing (SIP) suggests that context-building relational signals are exchanged in CMC, albeit at a slower rate than face-to-face talk. Moreover, people orient to the norms of their online groups if that group's characteristics are highly salient for the individual, in what researchers call the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation effects (SIDE) (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). The implications for disagreement expressions given the theories of SIP and SIDE are unclear, however.

What is clear is that deliberation scholars should attend more actively to design and affordances of the communication channels through which deliberation occurs. Deliberations conducted in chatrooms, for example, are less coherent than those that might occur in threaded message boards or over email. Herring (1999) identifies turn taking and sequencing as two specific problems that potentially impede understanding in chat. Moreover, text-only chat rooms offer visual anonymity, while the online affordance of using pseudonyms or remaining nameless offers discursive anonymity (Scott, 1998). This may lessen a speaker's evaluation apprehension, which is the self-restraining fear arising from the anticipation of negative reactions to one's expression (Valacich, Dennis, & Nunamaker, 1992) because of the speaker's possible belief that others will be unable to accurately attribute his or her messages (McLeod, Baron, Marti, & Yoon, 1997; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Hutchens, Cicchirillo, & Hmielowski, 2014). The affordances of online environments have an impact on the nature of discussions. Research has found that online deliberators are less willing to compromise their personal convictions (King, Hartzel, Schilhavy, Melone, & McGuire, 2010), for example, yet are more likely to provide justifications for their positions (Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2012).

With these considerations in mind, we focus our inquiry into disagreement in anonymous online deliberation compared with face-to-face deliberation. Based on the prior scholarship, the study aims to fill a gap in the research by examining through close discourse analysis the nature of online as compared with face-to-face discussions, specifically around expressions of disagreement. To that end, we investigate the following questions:

- 1) How is disagreement initiated in a synchronous online chat setting compared with a small-group face-to-face setting of the same size?
- 2) What is the nature of the disagreements in the online setting as compared with face-to-face setting? Are there more bold disagreements online?
- 3) How long is disagreement sustained in the online setting as compared with face-to-face?

### **Method**

Our data comes from an experiment conducted at a major university on the west coast of the U.S. Undergraduate students of all grade levels were recruited through an advertisement in the campus newspaper, a booth during student orientation, and announcements in courses other than those of researchers involved in the project. We offered a financial incentive of \$20. Seventy participants were assigned to either of two treatments: five groups of seven meeting in face-to-face settings, and five groups of seven conversing using synchronous chat software. We employed random assignment, using a rule to avoid the unlikely event of a group containing only one male or female by continuing to draw the sixth and seventh group members at random until the condition was met.

### **Procedure**

Deliberations were on two topics, clean air policy and the Fourth Amendment, which participants discussed sequentially. At the outset, participants were told that the experiment involved studying how students felt about important public issues. They were provided a two-page issue brief on each subject, which presented neutral facts and considerations. For the clean-air case, the issue briefs focused on proposals for cleaner automobile fuels, more efficient engines, and tighter standards for trucks and sport-utility vehicles, and on the costs of these to consumers. For the Fourth Amendment case, the briefs covered a wide range of search-and-seizure issues involving automobile stops by police.

Participants in the face-to-face condition met in a university meeting room and were seated around a conference table. Their discussions were audio-recorded only. Participants in the online conditions met in a large university computer lab and were seated at computers distributed around the room. Students not part of the study who were using computers in the lab were therefore interspersed among study participants, such that participants were not adjacent to one another or in a

position to communicate with other participants except online. We employed synchronous chat software without photos, video, or other identifying information, creating a deidentified conversational space to facilitate a sense of anonymity. Because participants were all college students, there was a likelihood they tuned into the norms of the group, as suggested by the SIDE model of online interaction.

For both online and face-to-face groups, a member of the research team instructed participants to discuss their views on the issues, and then observed, kept time, and guided them to stay on task when needed, and prompted them to move to the second issue either after 45 minutes of discussion or if the group reached a natural end point at which no further discussion was being initiated. The same rule was used to end the deliberation on the second issue. Groups deliberated for an average of 93 minutes on the two issues. The procedure was intended to maximize free interaction among participants in both groups. The groups were not instructed to make a group decision, vote, or come to a consensus, as would occur in a jury.

### **Transcription**

For transcription and analysis, we examined four online groups and four face-to-face groups.<sup>2</sup> For the face-to-face groups, there were no identifiers on tape, except distinct voices, to determine who was speaking. Every effort was made to track speakers, and each was given a unique identifier: "P" for person, followed by their number, based on when they began speaking at the start of the discussion. Each turn by a member of an online group had a unique name, the student's first name associated with it. To protect the identity of the online discussants, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms. The transcripts from the chat sessions are reproduced verbatim, including typographical errors, so that the conversation as produced by the participants is reported.

### **Analysis**

Our method for analyzing the deliberations was discourse analysis. We carefully and closely examined the online record and transcripts of the face-to-face discussion, focusing on turn-taking. The advantage of an interpretive, ethnomethodological approach here is that it allows a close focus on the surrounding contexts within which disagreement expressions occurred, rather than emphasizing counts or other quantitative measures as in quantitative content analysis. We found the task of understanding the conversations to be highly

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<sup>2</sup> Due to technical errors, one of the face-to-face groups was not properly recorded, and for another group only half of the discussion was recorded. The half that was available was transcribed and analyzed. Also, the archived transcript of one online group went missing. Thus, four online groups and four face-to-face groups were analyzed.

interpretive, especially in the case of the synchronous online condition, where multiple participants sometimes “spoke” at once, making turn-taking difficult to code into a reliable scheme quantitatively. The discourse approach allowed us to untangle sometimes complex exchanges that undoubtedly were meaningful to participants at the time but which left a written record that was complex.

We were especially concerned with classifying types of disagreements into polite versus bold expressions. We were guided by prior research on expressions of disagreement from Kuo (1994), Pomerantz (1984), and Rendle-Short (2007). We considered polite expressions of disagreement to be those that softened the disagreement through phrases such as *well*, *but*, and *I agree, but*. These phrases are forms of predisagreement that occur prior to the actual expression of disagreement. They demonstrate the preference for agreement in that they delay disagreement (Goodwin, 1983). Bold expressions of disagreement were those that lacked such hedges: *I disagree*, *no*, *you’re wrong*.

Our classification of bold vs. polite is related to the common use of civility in deliberation research. Although the two concepts are related, they are not the same. Our concern with bold vs. polite disagreement involved a different kind of assessment, and it emphasizes the ways people express their views in dialogue with others whose views are not aligned. Analysis of civility requires a judgment about whether the expression has the intent or the effect of showing or failing to show respect for individuals or groups (Steffensmeier 2008). An expression of civil disagreement may be bold or polite. An uncivil expression is never polite. Although bold disagreements may have the effect of showing disrespect, we limit our analysis by not placing value claims on the expressive work participants are doing. Instead, our focus is on examining the expressions themselves and the ways that disagreements are conveyed to others, namely whether disagreement is couched in prefatory terms that signal a desire for agreement. In taking this approach, we sidestep the traditional focus on flaming and other aggressive, disinhibited conflict online in order to look for the more subtle indicators that people who state disagreement are signaling awareness of social norms of cooperation, politeness, and face.

## Analysis

### Initiating Disagreement

The first research question asked whether there are any differences in how disagreements are initiated online as compared with face-to-face. The analysis suggests that differences emerge, with fewer initiations of disagreement occurring in the online group. One of the primary reasons for this is the difficulty in

articulating a range of opinions in the online condition.

One of the first challenges that deliberating groups on- or offline must deal with is arriving at some understanding of the initial opinions of members of the group. In face-to-face deliberations this is often done by a "round-robin" approach where each participant in turn states a perspective on the problem, or where one participant or the facilitator solicits the perspectives of each person at the table. In synchronous chat, a "round-robin" approach is difficult since people are not organized around a table, and there are no non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, to indicate who should speak next.

Two of the online groups approached this initial sense-making task by voting. This significantly suppressed the amount of disagreement that was initiated in their groups. Group 18, in particular, primarily voted their way through the task, which in effect substituted for deliberation. Twenty-eight percent of their turns were taken up with voting. By contrast, online group 15, which ranked second in number of expressed disagreements, devoted only 5% of their turns to voting.

To illustrate a voting approach, in the discussion of the Fourth Amendment, Group 18 approached each question on their task sheet by calling for a vote. If one or more people voted differently, then there would be some discussion, often people saying why they voted the way they did, without taking up and examining differences in the opinions expressed, and then moving to the next item on their discussion sheet. If there was accord, then they simply moved to the next scenario without further discussion. By comparison, online group 15 approached their task by voting, but they generally voted first and then discussed their reasons as a way of establishing whether there was indeed consensus on the current issue before moving on.

None of the face-to-face groups voted as a way to measure consensus. Instead, there were periodic statements or questions that one participant raised to the others to establish whether there was agreement on the current topic. For example, the students in Group 5 discussed clean air and whether there should be a timetable for developing electric and other non-gasoline burning vehicles:

237. P3: So, a timetable is unrealistic, but it would be something, like EPA needs to start – or the government needs to start putting that money to getting people actually working on the problem actively.

238. P4: Yeah.

239. P3: Is that what we're saying?

The question "Is that what we're saying" invited the others to agree or disagree

and then to move to another topic. Because no video was recorded, it is difficult to be sure, but in the face-to-face groups generally only one or two speakers would vocalize their assent before someone else would take the floor and shift the conversation, suggesting that participants were using visual cues, such as a head nod, as an indication of their agreement. In the online group, every participant had to type a vote in order for their views to be known.

### **The Nature of Disagreement**

Our second research question pertains to the character of disagreements expressed online as compared with face-to-face. We observed that overall there were more disagreements expressed face-to-face than online. Moreover, a large portion of those disagreements were boldly stated, meaning that the speaker did not minimize the potential face threat of a disagreement by softening the expression. Analysis suggests that two of the four face-to-face groups produced the largest amount of bold disagreements. Group 14, for example, produced 40 instances of a bold expression of disagreement. The next highest group, group 5, produced 18. By comparison, the highest number of instances of an online group is 14.

To illustrate the dynamic of a bold disagreement face-to-face, in group 14 P2 contested the idea that people are impaired when they have been smoking marijuana or drinking.

477. P2: It's proven that alcoholics can function at the standard rate as normal people.

478. P7: No.

479. P6: Sweet.

480. P2: And I'll testify that I drive better when I'm high.

481. P7: No.

In this exchange, P7 did not offer any counter argument—just expressed disagreement with P2's position ("No"). In the subsequent turns, P2 did not respond to P7, and instead P6 brought the conversation back to the main topic of when it is legal for a police officer to search a car.

Although there is less disagreement online, more of those disagreements include vulgarity. These manifested as swearing, typically to underscore the emotional strength of an opinion. The vulgarity of interest in this analysis, however, is that which marks strength of disagreement. One example of this occurs in group 15 during a discussion about police abuse of power. The participants had a prolonged conversation regarding if and when police should be trusted.

193. Nathan: Most cops don't abuse their power but we should try and set guidelines that protect against those who do.

199. Amanda: moving on . . . .

200. Scott: bullshit, most cops abuse their power

Scott's expression, *bullshit*, is a strong form of disagreement with the opinion expressed by Nathan.

In addition to the use of profanity, utterances that border on personal attacks also occur more frequently online than in the face-to-face discussions. Moreover, repair work is done to mitigate face-threats by those who are facing a negative assessment on their own notion of self. For example, group 11 contemplated solutions to air pollution that included living closer to work and services so that people could walk to their destinations:

115. June: you can leave an hour early to walk

118. Cindy: that is not a matter of life or death. You could work closer to home

119. Allyson: yeah leave early and walk

120. Valarie: Sometimes you can not

121. Christy: try transporting a victim to the hospital on bike. Driving is sometimes a necessity.

122. June: yeah but that's why it's a convenience, you should be able to make time or find a closer doc

127. Valarie: That is stupid June

134. June: I'm just saying that it is not impossible to live without driving

135. Sharon: no, but it's a major hassel

136. June: I know

137. June: it is

Valarie at line 127 says "that is stupid June," which is a face threatening move because it implies that June is making an unintelligent suggestion, which is typically viewed as a negative characteristic especially in a college context. June's reply attempts an explanation: "I'm just saying," in an effort to protect her face,

and then she agreed with Sharon who had also objected to the idea of finding services closer to where one lived. Thus, in the online condition, even when there is theoretically greater anonymity of participants, concerns of face and efforts to protect one's face still occur.

### **Sustaining Disagreement**

The third research question addresses whether there are differences in how and whether disagreements are sustained online as compared with face-to-face deliberative groups. The analysis indicates that there are differences between the two conditions, with the online groups exhibiting shorter exchanges where disagreements are expressed. Because of the chat environment and the likelihood for multiple topics to be available for uptake participants tended to drop or ignore the contentious topics.

As noted before, all groups showed evidence of disagreements. In a few of these groups disagreement expressions were primarily produced by one individual initiating and sustaining them through the entire session. For example, in online group 11, Jake introduced and continued disagreements throughout the deliberations by often taking the contrary position from others. In the following excerpt about when a passenger in a car should be searched, Jake's early turns challenge the claims others made but without making explicit that he disagreed with the claims, while later he more directly states his disagreement:

169. Cindy: should the passenger be searched or administered a test?

170. Joe: If the DD [Designated Driver] passes and passenger fails, I think they shouldn't be searched, but if both pass, search.

171. Jake: Why would the passenger need to be administered a test?

172. Christy: whoever fails should be searched

173. Joe: because then there is evidence for an open container in the car

174. Allyson: yeah whoever fails should be searched

177. Jake: It is not illegal for a passenger to be intoxicated.

179. Valarie: What if they pass though, should they be searched?

180. Christy: no

181. Allyson: no

182. Sharon: no

184. June: no, but if the cop smells alcohol, he might want to search the car for open containers

186. Joe: But if both are sober and there is the smell of alcohol, there is probably an open container, so yes

187. Allyson: agree with Joe.

189. Cindy: agree with Joe

190. June: agree with Joe

191. Jake: Being drunk and a passenger is not cause to search for an open container in the car

Jake's strategy early in the conversation was to query others to explain why the passenger would need to be given a sobriety test. No one answered him; instead, they answered Cindy's question. Cindy, who posed the original question, also ignored Jake. He then noted that it is not illegal for a passenger to be intoxicated. He provided no signal of disagreement, however. He offered instead an apparently factual statement that rejects a premise in Cindy's original question that there might be some legal grounds for searching a passenger who is intoxicated. Finally, in line 191, Jake offered a negation statement, rejecting the prior claims that the presence of a drunk passenger is grounds to search a car.

Several lines later the conversation continued on the topic. Jake wrote:

216. Jake: So why should I be searched

224. Joe: because being drunk in a car could be considered probable cause for searching for an open container in that car.

225. June: Joe is right, it just depends on how the cop wants to handle it

226. Jake: I disagree

227. June: the cop has the right to search

228. Cindy; so, a passenger should never be searched? Is that what people are agreeing on?

229. Jake: I still disagree

Jake offers another question in the beginning of this excerpt that serves as a pre-disagreement turn. However, by line 226, Jake has become blunt in his signal of disagreement, simply stating and re-stating "I disagree" in response to the

claims others make in the discussion. Jake's initial responses to the claims of his discussion partners were to ask questions and offer hypothetical scenarios. The others in the group noted his scenarios and challenged him on the assumptions he was making. He, in turn, used the hypothetical scenarios to highlight what he believed were the problematic assumptions and implications of their arguments. When that failed to get them to agree with him, he escalated his objections by offering blunt disagreements.

It should be noted that at the end of this exchange, Cindy, in line 228, asked a consensus question attempting to understand if the group now says that the passenger should never be searched. At this juncture there are two lines of discussion on the table: Jake's disagreement with the others in the group, and Cindy's question. The participants take up Cindy's question and drop the argument with Jake.

While for some groups, a single individual primarily expressed and sustained disagreement, in other groups, no single individual took on such a role. In those cases, multiple people expressed disagreements, but what is noteworthy is they did not typically sustain them. The participants seemed to experience the problem of not being able to determine if a disagreement was occurring. The online group that offered the most disagreement, group 11, illustrates this. During an exchange on the topic of driver and passenger searches during a traffic stop, Jake offers a hypothetical scenario that challenges the claim made by other participants that the passenger should be searched if there is a smell of alcohol in the car:

141. Jake: If I am driving home from my mother's house and I just sprayed binaca in my mouth that may be construed as alcohol. In addition, I have my pocket knife on the passengers seat. I do not think that I should be searched.

142. Valarie: What if the cop just believes that you are under the influence and pulls you over and searches your car?

143. Joe: What if he finds something else, but no alcohol?

144. Cindy: but if you fail the sobriety test, why would any of that matter?

145. Allyson: agree with Cindy

146. Valarie: I think cops late at night purposely pull people over because it is late at night

147. Jake: I am getting too confused. There are too many questions being asked at once. We should handle one at a time and then move to the next

topic.

Cindy takes Jake's suggestion and re-asks the question whether the officer should administer a sobriety test to the driver and the passenger if there is a smell of alcohol in the car, and the students take up the issue again. Jake, who had been offering a protest to the argument that passengers should be searched, gets lost in the barrage of questions his fellow participants offer. Each question would take the conversation down a different path, and if a few students each took to answering a different question, the conversation would fragment. Jake's observation is both a signal that the conversation is getting fragmented and serves to regroup the conversation with Cindy's help a few turns later. To start and then to keep a disagreement going, it takes the efforts of at least one if not more participants who make an effort to help steer the conversation when it is becoming fragmented.

As another example, online group 2 discussed the issues without voting, without many clear signals of disagreement, and produced the fewest expressions of disagreement. The participants were routinely discussing at least two different "threads" at the same time. We suggest that this dynamic minimized the number of disagreements that could be raised and sustained. As an example, the participants in the discussion of clean air were brainstorming ways to reduce driving. At the same time, there were two other discussions: one about whether other countries care about air pollution, and another about where an increased tax on gas should be spent:

50. Amy: our culture is so car based we need to take that into account, with sprawling suburbs and decentralized services.
51. Rico: "free to drive my property"
52. Celeste: how do other countries deal with their problem?
53. Paul: yeah, but the money we pay for gas should go to helping the environment, not the CEO of Chevron . . .
54. Laurie: that's why it's called "earth day" like a holiday type thing
55. Laurie: other countries don't really care
56. Brittany: then the car co. should help by giving money to clean the environment
57. Amy: other countries don't have our transportation history
58. Paul: I don't think that's true

59. Celeste: I don't think you can tell a person what car to drive. If John Doe wants to drive a Suburban, then he will not accept driving a little car

60. Celeste: I think other countries do care

61. Paul: yeah

62. Brittany: we could do the earth day thing, lots would participate, some wouldn't but those who do would be helping

63. Celeste: then that means some get to be "free riders"

What is especially noteworthy is the attempt at a disagreement by Paul in line 58. There, he said "I don't think that's true," which signals a rejection of a fact made in a prior message. The difficulty is in determining to whom he responded. In reading back through the exchange, it seems he expressed disagreement with the statement by Laurie that other countries do not care about the environment. He might, however, have disagreed with Laurie's statement about Earth Day, or he could have disagreed when Amy said that other countries do not have the transportation history of the U.S. Given that ambiguity, it likely was difficult for the participants to take up Paul's disagreement, and to understand what and why he disagreed. Moreover, no one asked Paul to clarify his statement, suggesting a desire to avoid the more contentious talk.

In a different part of the discussion, Celeste, unlike Paul, is clearer in her statement of disagreement. She offers a direct negation to Laurie's claim that other countries do not care about the environment. Brittany responds three turns later, and the other discussants focus in on this topic:

66. Brittany: 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries have enough probs, I don't think they worry about the earth as much as Americans.

67. Laurie: I agree

68. Celeste: I'm not talking about the 3<sup>rd</sup> world

69. Celeste: like in Europe.

70. Rico: we find problems to worry about

71. Amy: they definitely care, but survival has to come first

72. Paul: that's hard to say.

Then, in line 79, Brittany asks if there should be more rail transportation, and the group shifts to discussing public transportation until line 86 when Amy states that

the U.S. must minimize its car culture. For the next several lines, there are again two topics being discussed.

The example from group 2 illustrates that if online chat groups do not maintain some discipline to discuss only one topic at a time, they risk multiple topics co-occurring. This dynamic increases the cognitive burden on discussants to sort out the discussion they are following and to ignore the turns that pertain to other threads. Moreover, it requires that participants be clearer in signaling with whom they are discussing. That additional cognitive work and increased linguistic confusion, both in following and in participating in the discussion, seems to minimize the willingness and ability for online groups to sustain a disagreement over multiple turns.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The discourse analysis reported here builds on the small body of works that examine offline and comparable online deliberations (Min, 2007; Wojcieszak & Delli Carpini, 2012), examining closely the volume and kind of disagreements between these two deliberation environments. The online groups exhibited fewer overall expressions of disagreements, fewer bold disagreements, and they were less likely to be sustained than the face-to-face groups. These results indicate that the medium affects expressions of disagreement, but not in the ways one might expect based on the academic literature. Prior CMC scholarship suggests that online we might find more and bolder expressions of disagreement (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998) because of increased anonymity (Scott, 1998) in a reduced cues environment (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Suler, 2004; Christopherson, 2007). Although our research indicates that there were more profane instances in the online groups, the face-to-face groups, contrary to expectations, produced more and bolder disagreements over longer exchanges. Political CMC research has not investigated whether uncivil political conversations observed online also manifest offline. Our research suggests that swearing occurs in mediated *and* unmediated political deliberation. It is possible that vulgarity manifests more commonly in the online groups because of disinhibition and the fairly common norm among college students for casual speech, which includes swearing.

Our analysis suggests that the reasons for differences in expressed disagreements on-and offline rests on the difficulties that the medium of synchronous chat introduces. Issues of coherence, as raised by Herring (1999) seemed to make it more difficult for participants to sustain disagreements. When participants could choose to continue a disagreement, answer questions, or return to the larger task, they opted not to continue the disagreement. Moreover, the difficulty in

identifying the perspectives held by participants in the online deliberation led to voting as a means to expressing the views of the members in the group. Voting minimized the amount of deliberation, which in turn minimized initiating disagreements for two of the online groups.

Given the literature on politeness and face concerns in face-to-face interaction, we might expect the face-to-face deliberations to exhibit fewer disagreements overall, and fewer bold expressions of disagreement. As Holmes and Stubbe (2003) indicate, however, in their research on disagreement expressions in the workplace, context matters in shaping what is acceptable and appropriate behavior. If people are tasked with deliberating an issue, the notion of *deliberation* invokes an expectation that there be disagreement, because there are multiple perspectives that need to be understood and examined via discussion. This expectation may override concerns of face and politeness that are otherwise at work face-to-face, as suggested in the politeness scholarship (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

As well, the rich communication environment face-to-face may enable expressing more bold disagreements while using nonverbal cues to soften those disagreements. One limitation of this work is that we do not have video of the interactions of the in-person groups to examine nonverbal cues in order to ascertain whether these were used to potentially mitigate face-threat. The online groups only have their text and the element of time (how quickly someone replies to someone else, for example) to express their views and manage politeness norms. People may express fewer bold disagreements online as a way to ease face threats given the inability to use other communication cues, such as eye contact or smiling, to moderate the strength of the disagreement.

It is important to recognize that the conclusions reached here necessarily must be tentative. Because of lower conversational coherence online as compared with the face-to-face condition (Herring, 1999), it was sometimes difficult to tell whether a disagreement was occurring. Some apparent signals of disagreement, such as *but* and *well*, are not necessarily always signals of disagreement. In some discussions it took effort to determine from the context who was speaking to whom and whether signals were indeed meant to express a disagreement. Also, deliberations were conducted in the context of an experiment with students engaging in the deliberation, which necessarily limits generalizability. The tradeoff, however, is the opportunity to directly compare comparable groups of online and offline interactions. Future research needs to examine the nature of disagreement more carefully in organic deliberations, both off and online. As well, the findings should be reproduced in experimental settings with more groups to determine whether the patterns identified here remain. Finally, it would be of great benefit to also examine the patterns of expressions of disagreement in other online channels, such as asynchronous message board forums, or social media forums, such as

Facebook groups. The patterns we found here may not hold, given that it is likely that the affordances of the communication channel structure the ways that interaction occurs.

Nevertheless, what does this research entail for actual deliberations? We echo the concerns raised by Weger and Aakhus (2003), Wright and Street (2007), and Manosevitch (2014), in highlighting the importance of the design and affordances provided in the online environment for productive deliberations, including the ways that the social pressures for politeness and *face* manifest. Our research suggests that the medium matters, although not in the ways one might expect. If researchers and practitioners who are conducting deliberations choose CMC, we urge caution. The medium of synchronous chat may minimize the articulation of the full spectrum of opinions that people hold because of the challenges the less coherent communication context poses to discussants. That is, all things being equal, face-to-face deliberation may be preferable to online, pseudo-synchronous deliberations. The deeper articulation, coherence, and disagreement apparent in the face-to-face condition may better achieve Gastil's (2000) criterion that public deliberation consider issues in depth. Although one of the online groups did produce a healthy number of disagreements, the disagreements were not always carried to a conclusion because of the multiple threads and lack of turn-taking in the online environment. Two groups adopted a strategy of voting as a way to identify the perspectives held by the participants. Voting is a useful way to hear all voices and assess where disagreements lie; however, if participants do not then discuss those disagreements, there is no genuine deliberation.

This research also suggests that scholars and practitioners need to be attentive to the dynamics in face-to-face groups. Practitioners usually ask deliberation participants in advance to be courteous to others. Given the dynamics in the groups that were part of this research project, such instructions are appropriate and necessary to encourage groups to maintain a level of civility in the face of genuine and important disagreements.

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