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Diverse Discourse: Analyzing the Potential of Public Affairs Magazine Online Forums to Reflect Qualities of the Public Sphere


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Diverse Discourse: Analyzing the Potential of Public Affairs Magazine Online Forums to Reflect Qualities of the Public Sphere

Abstract

Public affairs magazines have expanded beyond their print editions to offer online editions with forums for readers to discuss important public issues. For magazines that cater to ideologically specific audiences, online forums could serve as forms of alternative publics for presenting diverse viewpoints and values. The conversations that emerge also hold potential for portraying characteristics of the public sphere. This study used textual analysis to examine online comments associated with 21 articles from six different U.S. public affairs magazines representing various positions on the ideological spectrum. Using Dahlberg's (2001) six-part assessment of quality public discourse, the analysis showed that moderate magazines serving a broad readership induced a lower-quality discussion. In contrast, liberal and conservative publications, when encouraging diverse and ideologically heterogeneous perspectives, produced quality discourse. These forums showed higher levels of quality characteristics such as exchange and critique of normative positions, reflexivity, sincerity, and constructive dialogue.

Keywords

public sphere, public discourse, public affairs magazines, online forums, journalism

From their earliest days in America, magazines have sought to represent and appeal to the interests of particular groups of readers (Tebbel, 1969). In the last several decades, this focus on specialization has taken on even greater emphasis, as the popularity of large-circulation, general-interest publications has given way to periodicals focused on increasingly specific interests (Abrahamson, 2009). This shift has been evident in not only magazines focused on lifestyle and leisure interests but also on political perspectives.

In a polarized political environment, readers can increasingly turn to niche publications that represent, and legitimize, their positions and ideals. Not only are their views represented in print publications, but readers can also explore websites associated with public affairs publications to consume and comment on content that interests them. In general, these online forums may attract a more heterogeneous discussion, even on controversial topics, than participants encounter in real life (Brundidge, 2010). As such, the online comment sections associated with public affairs magazines hold potential for representing the Habermasian public sphere — publically accessible venues that are diverse, robust, inclusive, and ripe for rational-critical discourse (Habermas, 1962).

This study examines comments on mainstream and niche public affairs magazines' websites about the Supreme Court's June 2013 rulings on same-sex marriage and the October 2013 rollout of the Affordable Care Act health insurance marketplace. An analysis of comments associated with articles on the websites of six magazines, *Time*, *The Week*, *Mother Jones*, *The Nation*, *The American Conservative*, and *National Review*, explored whether the ideal characteristics of the public sphere were evident in these online forums — four of which represent alternative publics, or discourse among individuals with similar political perspectives. The study also considered the differences among online forums associated with alternative publics (*Mother Jones*, *The Nation*, *The American Conservative*, and *National Review*) and those associated with more mainstream publications (*Time* and *The Week*). This paper spells out the quality characteristics of the public sphere in discourse, the forms specialized magazine media take online, and the ways the qualities of ideal speech situations are represented in magazines' online discourse.

Literature Review

The literature grounding this study examines characteristics of the public sphere in relationship to online discourse, the role of alternative publics in the public sphere, the means through which journalism facilitates public discourse, and the implications of political polarization and media segmentation for public deliberation.

The Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas explained the public sphere through an historical analysis of how citizens have come together through public discourse to debate public issues (Habermas, 1962). Habermas believed the public sphere could be realized through inclusive and diverse rational-critical discourse that was absent of state and economic influences (Habermas, 1962). Although his description is idealistic, it places a high level of autonomy and responsibility upon individual actors to take an active role in pursuing effective public discourse.

Self-governance through public discourse represents the “unitary model” of democracy (Mansbridge, 1980), which assumes that individuals have common interests; show equal respect for fellow participants; are interested in reaching consensus; and prefer interaction through discourse (p. 5). Schudson (1997) argues, however, that conversation is often best formed among small, intimate collections of individuals — a quality often lacking in democratic discourse.

Whether the expectations of the public sphere can be applied to discourse online has been subject to ongoing debate. Papacharissi argues that although the Internet may represent a public space, it does not allow individuals to enact change in society (2002). Goldberg suggests that power structures in place on the Internet favor state and economic interests (2010). However, some researchers have found that online political discourse can lead to a more heterogeneous political discussion than face-to-face conversation (Brundidge, 2010) and provide a rational-critical discussion of highly controversial topics (Freelon, Watanabe, Busch, & Kawabata, 2008). Also, a well-structured online forum can adequately represent the democratic ideals of a society (Dahlgren, 2005). However, the ability to structure a forum for public discourse comes from a democratic society that encourages spaces where democracy can be edified.

The structural issues associated with spaces for deliberation can be organizational – how the media set up the space for discourse – and political – how the media set the boundaries for acceptable topics for discussion (Dahlgren, 2005). Dahlgren argues that legal, social, economic, cultural, technical, and web-architectural factors can affect whether the Internet provides forums that serve a civic purpose (2005). Forum participants, however, can also influence structure. Once features such as access to the forum and communicative freedom were established, participants were free to build their own structural characteristics based on their recurring debate and their socially constructed standards of conduct in the forum (Tanner, 2001). However, Dahlgren (2005) argues that the prevalence of new spaces for discourse online, including discussion boards, chat rooms, grassroots advocacy groups, and alternative forms of journalism, have helped to pluralize media and fragment discourse simultaneously.

To examine a forum for the features of the public sphere, Dahlberg (2001) developed a six-part assessment of discourse: exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, discursive inclusion and equality, and autonomy from state and economic powers. These characteristics encompass both the structural factors and content characteristics of an ideal public sphere.

Alternative Publics

The Internet has the potential to create alternative spaces for discourse when individuals with similar perspectives engage in discussion. Habermas (2006), while recognizing the egalitarian potential of the Internet, also identified the potential pitfalls of creating additional publics: “[T]he rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics” (p. 423). These alternative publics, however, could stimulate debate and develop characteristics of the public sphere.

When legitimizing deliberative discourses, researchers often place too much emphasis on the reasonableness of the discourse; “rather, it may depend on the existing power structure within which the discourses are embedded, and the way that structure changes either through direct human challenge or by more indirect or impersonal activities” (Parkinson, 2006, p. 28). The idealistic nature of the ideal speech situation can hinder the realization of any such normative speech situation. Critics argue, “demands of reason, consensus, and the common good may marginalize or exclude members of disadvantaged groups” (Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amengual, & Gastil, 2006, p. 5). Counterpublics, or spaces where like-minded individuals can engage in alternative counter-discourse, may represent a solution to this problem (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). These groups can include women, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups.

This research focuses on more encompassing alternative publics, which are structured around collections of like-minded individuals who engage in counter-discourse but do not represent a marginalized group. Parkinson (2006) argues that discourse “cannot be the property of any one individual or deliberative site, but could possibly be the property of a deliberative system featuring many different deliberative processes” (p. 42), thus legitimizing the role of alternative and counterpublics in producing quality discourse. Researchers have found that when individuals are placed into enclaves of similar individuals, participants are better suited to consider a diversity of viewpoints and improve on measures of political knowledge, efficacy, and trust (Karpowitz, Raphael & Hammond, 2009). In some cases, bringing together like-minded individuals might not reinforce individual perspectives but lead the group to a more extreme position (Sunstein, 2000).

Dahlgren (2005) argues similarly, “cyber ghettos threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative societal function of the public sphere, and they may well even help foster intolerance where such communities have little contact with — or understanding of — one another” (p. 152).

Polarization

Political polarization refers to understanding the difference between individuals’ personal opinions on a given issue and the social or political effects of that difference (DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson, 1996). Researchers have found that over time individuals have become more clustered around specific policy preferences, increasing polarization (Garner & Palmer, 2011). Sunstein (2000) argues that societal influences and a lack of diversity of ideas may cause polarization and ultimately recommends that allowing enclave deliberation would be best while ensuring that those enclaves are subjected to opposing viewpoints. Sunstein later suggested that his fear of extremism in public discourse would be exacerbated by individuals’ increased ability to seek out information online reinforcing previously held beliefs in spaces he called “echo chambers” (2007, pp. 222-223). This research, therefore, considers whether online forums associated with particular media serve as “echo chambers” or provide venues for diverse discourse.

To apply Dahlberg’s six-part assessment of discourse to a burgeoning public sphere — online comment sections associated with public affairs magazines — while also considering the ideological position of the participants, this study addressed the following research question:

RQ1: How do alternative publics associated with niche public affairs magazines exhibit the ideal characteristics of discourse in the Habermasian public sphere?

Magazines and Specialization

Polarization is also evident in the continuing fragmentation of media options. Although print media have been affected by increased specialization, websites are particularly susceptible to this trend. Fragmentation is most likely to occur when audience specialization (how audiences limit their media consumption to certain topics) meets outlet specialization (the extent to which websites attract certain audiences who visit for specific content) (Tewksbury, 2005). Specialization, however, is not limited to blogs and citizen-generated content. Online versions of traditional media outlets also draw larger potential audiences than their print

versions, although these websites may “develop unique identities that have less to do with geography than with content expertise” (Tewksbury, 2005, p. 335).

Specialization is also apparent in the magazine industry, which has seen an increasing shift to specialized, or niche, publications since the 1950s (Abrahamson, 2009). Because of magazines’ unique ability to reflect individual and shared interests, readers looking for media that reflect their interests and sensibilities gravitate toward magazines that “speak the truth to them about the things that they believe matter” (Abrahamson, 2009, pp. 1-2). Magazines also seek out clearly defined audiences and communities through targeting a group of readers, creating content based on readers’ interests, facilitating trust with readers, encouraging community-like interaction between the magazine and readers, and responding to changes in readership through evolving content (Holmes, 2007). Further, specialized journalism is characterized by the expert status of its producers, a professional approach defined by accuracy and rigor in reporting, and an emphasis on in-depth analysis of news (Rabadán, 2011).

Niche publications include magazines focused on political ideologies. Politically focused magazines differ from mainstream magazines in their emphasis on reinforcing and shaping participants’ political beliefs and inciting them to action (Sivek, 2008). These magazines present a clear point of view and select content to support that perspective (Covert & Wasburn, 2007). For example, Covert and Wasburn (2007) found that partisan publications *National Review* and *The Progressive* were ideologically consistent in their coverage of social issues over the 25 years of coverage examined, while *Newsweek* and *Time* maintained a balanced focus. In fact, magazines with a political focus are dependent on connecting with “readers who likely seek confirmation of their minority views” (Sivek, 2008, p. 271). As such, these publications may take a different approach than mainstream media, reducing the speed at which they release information, offering a more reflective take on issues that may be absent from the traditional media agenda, and operating according to a more independent economic model (Rabadán, 2011).

Accordingly, readers tend to seek out publications that reinforce their views. As Grupp (1969) suggested, “Even among nominally nonpolitical magazines, respondents tend to expose themselves to interpretations of political events which are congenial to their own” (p. 104). These specialized focuses may have broader implications, including mobilizing, organizing, and persuading (Navasky, 2005). For example, *National Review*, through aligning editorial frames to issues important to readers and their political perspectives, helped launch the conservative movement in the 1950s (Sivek, 2008). Publications emphasizing a minority view may also gain readership when the opposing party controls the White House or Congress (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010).

Political magazines, particularly their online incarnations, may also attract those seeking alternative perspectives. Barassi (2013) found that websites, electronic newsletters, and social media connected with an activist magazine attracted a different type of participation than the print version of the magazine. These online media “create more flexible forms of political participation, which are individually based, do not stress membership, and are not directly related to the collective identity of the organization” (Barassi, 2013, p. 147).

Like many other news organizations, public affairs magazines have aimed to improve their digital brand and increase the amount of content they publish online (Sasseen, Matsa, & Mitchell, 2013). Some magazines, such as the ones studied here, have also begun including comment sections at the bottom of news stories that encourage readers to engage in conversations with the news organization and fellow readers. Because of the role public affairs magazines play in providing journalistic content in both non-partisan and ideologically specific formats, as well as serving as sites of discourse regarding significant public issues, it is important to empirically study the attributes of these forums and the conversations that emerge.

To address the potential of niche public affairs magazines to produce more idealized discourse than their mainstream counterparts, this study addressed the following research question:

RQ2: How do the characteristics of the public sphere differ based on the political ideology of the magazine?

Study Design

In June 2013, the United States Supreme Court struck down the federal Defense of Marriage Act, providing federal benefits for couples married in states that allow same-sex unions, and rejected a challenge to California’s Proposition 8 on technical grounds, allowing same-sex marriage in the state (Liptak, 2013). On October 1, 2013, the Affordable Care Act’s health exchange marketplace opened, allowing individuals to sign up for alternative health insurance options (Thomas & Abelson, 2013). The online marketplace suffered from numerous technical issues, resulting in difficulties for many Americans signing up for insurance (Bilton, 2013). Not surprisingly, a variety of media outlets covered and analyzed these two public issues. Thanks to their online editions, even public affairs magazines reported immediately on the events, offering in-depth news and opinion coverage.

Support for same-sex marriage in the United States has undergone a shift since March 2012, from a low of 42 percent in favor to 53 percent in favor in March 2013. Support for same-sex marriage among self-identified Democrats was at 63 percent, while support among self-identified Republicans was at just 37 percent (CBS, 2013). Opposition to the Affordable Care Act has stayed relatively steady. In October 2013, 56 percent of Americans opposed the law. In a November 2013 poll, 30 percent of self-identified liberals and 85 percent of self-identified conservatives opposed the law (CNN, 2013). These statistics show the polarized nature of same-sex marriage and the Affordable Care Act. Thus, the comment sections of public affairs magazines catering to partisan readerships can provide insight into how readers share and discuss their views and make sense of controversial news through public discourse. Because the issues studied are domestic, considering readers' perspectives in the U.S. political language is valuable: liberal, moderate, and conservative.

Six national publications were chosen for this study. *Time* magazine is a nonpartisan weekly newsmagazine that covers public issues from a centrist focus (Covert & Wasburn, 2007). *Mother Jones* is a liberal investigative news magazine that is funded by donors and subscriptions and focuses on investigative, political, and social justice issues (What is Mother Jones, 2013). The *National Review Online* is the website of conservative opinion magazine *National Review*, which offers conservative news, commentary, and opinion (Media Kit, 2013). *The Nation* is a historically progressive news magazine (Horowitz, 2004; Radosh & Radosh, 2008) associated with the progressive Nation Institute. *The American Conservative* is a public affairs magazine promoting the traditional conservative values of "peace, community, and fiscal restraint" (The American Conservative, 2014). *The Week* is a nonpartisan newsmagazine that describes itself as "multi-perspective and neutral in tone" (The Week, 2014).

A search on the websites of the two mainstream and four niche public affairs magazines identified coverage related to same-sex marriage and the Affordable Care Act. For same-sex marriage, the search was limited to articles that appeared within a week before and a week after the Supreme Court rulings: June 19 to July 3, 2013. For the Affordable Care Act, articles from October 1 to 31, 2013, were chosen to capture the month following the beginning of enrollment in the new health insurance marketplace. A preliminary review of the results narrowed the sample to 21 articles from the six publications, including about 360 comments for each publication and a total of 2,172 posts from the six magazines.

Although the magazines published multiple articles on the topics during their respective time periods, the study sought to identify those attracting substantial comments from readers. Stories were selected that specifically dealt with the Supreme Court's decisions on same-sex marriage or the rollout of the health

insurance marketplace. Then the researchers limited the sample to conversations that had more than 35 comments and fewer than 350 — that is, conversations that had the opportunity to develop but were not too large to study thoroughly.

The researchers used textual analysis to analyze the comments for ideal characteristics of the public sphere. Dahlberg (2001) developed a six-part assessment to identify characteristics of a public sphere speech situation. The characteristics are defined as:

Exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims. Discourse includes the exchange and critique of normative positions that are founded in rationality and reason.

Reflexivity. Commenters show a willingness to critically review the opinions presented in the forum, the cultural norms challenged by others, and their own personal beliefs and values.

Ideal role taking. Individuals show through participation that they are committed to constructive dialogue by respectfully considering the viewpoints of others.

Sincerity. Participants show a sincere effort to provide all the relevant information necessary to effectively contribute to the conversation.

Discursive inclusion and equality. Every individual has an equal opportunity to participate in, contribute to, and critique the statements in the conversation.

Autonomy from state and economic power. The discourse is driven by the motivations and interests of the self-governing individuals, not by any state or economic power (p. 623).

Guided by the first research question, the researchers examined all 21 threads for representations of the public sphere, specifically instances of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions, reflexivity, ideal role taking, and sincerity. First, the authors engaged in open-coding of the forums to holistically assess the conversations taking place, which was followed by axial coding to identify examples of comments reflecting Dahlberg's six-part assessment. Exchange and critique were evident in comments that presented perspectives rationally without making assertions or assumptions. Reflexivity indicated that commenters referenced and responded to other comments in the forum and/or shared personal insights. Within ideal role taking, commenters engaged with others with differing opinions and thoughtfully and constructively contributed to dialogue. Lastly, sincerity suggested that commenters aimed to provide adequate context and evidence to support their views. Some comments in the forums included evidence of multiple characteristics.

This study used an iterative analysis, which combines existing models with emergent readings of data (Tracy, 2013). After identifying hierarchal codes, or “umbrella” conceptual categories (Tracy, 2013), in the data, the researchers compared their findings to ensure they applied the six-part test consistently. When coding of a post was not consistent, the researchers discussed the relevant post and re-coded it, if necessary. To address the second research question, the researchers discussed their findings in reference to the magazines with which the forums appeared and drew comparisons based on political ideology. Lastly, the researchers collaborated to develop a narrative associated with each political ideology, also selecting comments that well exemplified characteristics of the ideal public sphere to highlight in the analysis.

Discursive inclusion and equality and autonomy from state and economic power are characteristics of the structure of the forum and cannot be adequately studied by simply looking at content. The researchers could not discern whether certain content was removed for either state or economic censorship reasons; however, individuals employed by the news organizations rarely made explicit statements in the comment sections, suggesting that the news organizations take a *laissez-faire* approach to moderating the comments.

Findings

Moderate Magazines

Time and *The Week* attract politically heterogeneous audiences. The forums were connected to articles addressing diverse topics, from what the Supreme Court’s decisions on same-sex marriage meant for gay Americans to a conservative analysis of the healthcare.gov website. The *Time* magazine articles received a total of 359 comments, while *The Week* attracted 351 overall. Of all the forums analyzed in this study, these organizations’ conversations were the least representative of the public sphere. The conversations lacked a serious commitment to constructive dialogue, included only marginal exchange and critique of normative positions, and represented almost no reflexivity.

The low level of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions was evident among commenters who took absolutist positions that ridiculed their political opponents while also attempting to make a normative argument. One same-sex-marriage advocate in a *Time* magazine forum asked opponents to “please explain, in detail, how the marriage of my 2 gay friends ... has adversely affected your life” (eagle11772, 2013). Similarly, a commenter in *The Week* attacked Democrats as trying to blame Republicans for the Affordable Care Act. “In some circles they’re already trying to brandish Obamacare as a Republican

plan. I guess the empty headed Obama worshipers will buy that, but nobody capable of thought would” (Cleet Torres, 2013). Another individual used overly simplistic arguments to ridicule opponents while challenging whether the law truly denies same-sex couples the right to marry: “Marriage is not ‘denied’ to gays. Of course they can marry...they just can’t marry someone of the same sex” (He_Has_Failed, 2013). These comments represent emotional assertions and lack reasoning that would show a true respect for the forum. These commenters show that some might approach the ideal of the public sphere with a normative argument while dismissing their opponents. One commenter on *The Week* asserted that same-sex-marriage supporters endorsed child molestation. “The next step on the agenda is to lower the age of consent. This is so that homosexual men can ‘love’ teenage boys” (svobodnik, 2013). The threads had a noticeable lack of reflexivity, as most of the commenters appeared more eager to attack with emotional assertions than to think critically and reflectively.

The threads from *Time* magazine and *The Week* brought together a diverse set of viewpoints but also included only moderate levels of exchange and critique of normative positions and low levels of commitment to constructive dialogue. Although ideologically diverse, as is expected from moderate publications, the forums fell short of the expectations of the public sphere.

Liberal Magazines

The three articles from *Mother Jones* were news analysis pieces with a normative perspective on either same-sex marriage or the Affordable Care Act, and the five articles in *The Nation* took a liberal approach to providing analysis on the issues. The *Mother Jones* articles elicited 373 comments, while *The Nation*’s articles included 322. The *Mother Jones* threads showed high potential for meeting the requirements of the public sphere but ultimately lacked diverse participation, while *The Nation*’s articles provided diverse ideological perspectives and reasoned normative arguments but lacked high levels of sincerity, ideal role taking, and reflexivity.

In the two *Mother Jones* threads related to same-sex marriage, the commenters agreed on all the substantive issues raised; however, minor disagreements over certain nuanced differences of opinion emerged. This phenomenon led to a conversation that was politically homogeneous and high in ideal role taking. The conversation about the Affordable Care Act included a clearer diversity of voices but also included less exchange and critique of normative positions and lower levels of ideal role taking. Overall, much of the exchange and critique of normative positions took the form of law- and policy-based discussions of how the courts or the government should respond to substantive issues such as same-sex marriage and health care in relation to institutions in society, such as religion.

One commenter cited religious motivations as the impetus for passing laws against same-sex marriage: “The problem supporters of Prop 8 and similar laws have is that they have troubling [sic] describing secular motivations without sounding ridiculous” (Ryan, 2013). This commenter represented the view of a number of *Mother Jones* commenters who showed frustration with individuals who base legal arguments on moral reasoning.

These threads included a relatively high level of sincerity, with commenters citing outside information in their arguments and attempting to provide the necessary context to explain their positions. When one commenter complained about the private insurance options in his or her state under the Affordable Care Act, another commenter corrected the individual:

There are several steps we could take to fix these problems. But each state plays a part. The ACA doesn't force a state to pick any of the insurance companies that I am aware of. If there is a problem then ask the state to allow more insurance companies to operate in your state. (clemans, 2013)

This form of polite exchange of information, intended to correct a fellow commenter, was common in *Mother Jones* and represented an attempt to not only invite a constructive conversation but also one rooted in accurate statements.

In *The Nation*'s forums, commenters focused on engaging in a civil and reasoned discussion of the act and associated online marketplace. Commenters often directly responded to and occasionally quoted one another's posts, resulting in a focused dialogue. For example, in response to a string of posts discussing alternatives to the Affordable Care Act, one commenter (Ken Clement, 2013) wrote, “All of the posters here suggesting that single payer is the answer ought [to] think things over more carefully,” and he provided historical evidence suggesting that problems began when consumers were no longer informed of health care costs. The next comment, from blonderealist (2013), commended Clement's post, noting, “I've expressed many of the same things (in different words) on this and other blogs,” and provided alternatives to the single-payer insurance option. In the second forum, a commenter (DigitalJeffersonian, 2013), praised the discussion that had developed, writing, “We are having a very healthy debate.” However, this commenter and others in the forum remained entrenched in their perspectives, with one commenter (Brooklyn, 2013), in response to a discussion of health care in Canada, suggesting, “I totally disagree with you but we are not going to agree with each other so let's leave it at that.” In particular, commenters called on others in the forum to provide detailed evidence of or explanations for how the legalization of same-sex marriages affected other marriages. Additionally, commenters often expressed their desire for a rational debate, with one (Queer Thinker, 2013) lamenting the “prejudicial/condescending comments” that had emerged on the supposedly liberal online forum.

Of the six magazines, *Mother Jones* had some of the highest levels of sincerity and ideal role taking, as well as a moderately high level of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions. However, this quality dialogue came at the expense of diversity, as *Mother Jones* frequently included viewpoints from only a narrow and liberal slice of the ideological spectrum. In contrast, *The Nation* showed some ideological diversity at the expense of a quality discussion including sincerity, ideal role taking, and reflexivity.

Conservative Magazines

The forums accompanying *National Review Online*, which focused on providing context for the Affordable Care Act online-marketplace launch and the Supreme Court same-sex marriage rulings, included 466 comments. The commenters consistently offered exchange and critique of normative positions, ideal role taking, and reflexivity. Perhaps the most promising characteristic of the forum was the presence of politically heterogeneous participants, including a few self-identified liberals, who diversified the conversation, promoted inclusion, and encouraged rational discourse.

Exchange and critique emerged early in the same-sex-marriage forum when “aemoreira81” (2013) proposed characteristics of “the next DOMA,” which would respect the rights of states and the ability of churches to refuse to perform same-sex marriages. Reflecting the diversity in this forum, the next commenter asked, “Why do individual states have rights here, when marriage, or denying it, impacts individuals?” (gary47290, 2013). The commenter clearly disagreed with the previous post, but, in addition to sharing his opinion, he raised a question, opening the door for others to contribute. An emphasis on making suggestions rather than assertions represented another facet of exchange and critique. Commenters, particularly in the same-sex-marriage forum, often used “suggest,” “perhaps,” or “I believe” when presenting opinions.

When commenters in both forums resorted to assertions, others encouraged them to support their claims with evidence, representing a desire for sincerity. For example, in response to a commenter’s criticism of a position in the accompanying same-sex-marriage article in which he called the authors “not-very-smart people,” “eponymous1” (2013) replied, “This is instructional. Your only argument is that disagreeing with you is ‘not-very-smart,’ without a shred of argumentation.” This commenter addressed the name-calling in the previous post and suggested that additional evidence would result in a stronger argument. In addition to sharing their beliefs, commenters in both forums explained their political orientation, often citing personal experiences. At one point in the same-sex-marriage forum, a commenter (conservative gal, 2013) suggested that others

reflexively consider and discuss “what marriage means to them” as a way to compare the legal definitions of marriage with individuals’ understanding.

Ideal role taking indicated that commenters were committed to considering alternative viewpoints. This characteristic was evident among commenters who incorporated assessments of other perspectives in their comments, with some quoting portions of previous posts. This practice was particularly evident among those professing views that differed from the political ideology of *National Review Online* and the majority of those in the forums. One commenter in the same-sex-marriage forum expressed that he had formerly belonged to the Republican Party, but personal experiences encouraged him to change his affiliation. When this commenter disagreed with another commenter, the two remained committed to constructive dialogue, considering the perspectives presented and providing evidence to support their positions. Commenters also chastised those who expressed assertions, and they praised well-developed posts.

The forums included other evidence that commenters desired inclusion and constructive discourse. Although some commenters made assertions, others presented questions to spur discussion, such as in a comment by T_Edward (2013) in the Affordable Care Act forum:

We are all asking the wrong question. Instead of “How much should the government be paying for healthcare?” the question should be, “Why is the Federal government providing healthcare to anyone but their employees”? If poor people need insurance and a governmental entity must provide it, let the States handle it. They are closer to the issue (and so are their voters).

This comment reflects a desire to understand and respond to previous comments while also proposing new questions to enhance rational-critical discourse.

Like *National Review Online*, *The American Conservative* attracted heterogeneous viewpoints. In this case, commenters reflected conservatively to moderately conservative perspectives, with some frequent commenters eschewing posts that were deemed too radical. The articles associated with *The American Conservative*’s online forums provided insight into potential implications of both the Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage and Republican efforts to defund the Affordable Care Act, with one piece criticizing Conservatives’ comparisons of car insurance and health insurance. The articles attracted 301 comments. Overall, the forums associated with *The American Conservative* were the most representative of the Habermasian public sphere. Participants showed high levels of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions, with commenters providing sufficient evidence to support their claims, indicating high levels of sincerity. Commenters also remained committed to considering and

referencing other comments in the forum so as to develop a focused, robust dialogue. This commitment also resulted in ideal role taking.

The forums addressing the Affordable Care Act were consistently focused and thoughtful, with commenters demonstrating exchange and critique, reflexivity, and sincerity. Commenters shared a variety of views while also critiquing and building upon — often through presenting new evidence — other perspectives presented. In many cases, commenters cited their personal experiences with the Affordable Care Act and the online marketplace. Ultimately, when commenters offered information from other sources, they did not present the information at face value but explained how the new information supported their positions. This commitment to high-quality discourse was also evident in commenters raising questions or challenges within the forum to spur deeper thought. John Mark Ockerbloom (2013) suggested that commenters “try a hypothetical comparison of the state exchange sites that supports [sic] window-shopping, and tell us what you find?” In presenting this question, the commenter seemed to sincerely desire feedback, rather than offering it rhetorically. In another forum, a commenter (balconesfault, 2013) presented theoretical scenarios for others to consider in terms of comparing car insurance to health insurance. Reflexivity and ideal role taking were evident in commenters’ willingness to share personal experiences and indicate when a comment changed their perspective.

A focus on solutions also was evident in the Affordable Care Act forums, as commenters reflexively considered how to better understand and address challenges. In the forum associated with an article addressing the Affordable Care Act online marketplace, commenters provided suggestions for how the site might be improved as well as tips for those struggling to navigate the system. For example, commenter stef (2013) wrote, “Libraries could have carried the paper forms, just like they do tax forms today. Some of these problems come from self-inflicted ‘young turk’ arrogance surrounding computers: that everything has to be exclusively computerized. It doesn’t, and shouldn’t be.” This comment demonstrated a commitment to not only espousing an opinion about challenges with the rollout but also suggesting how the system might be improved. Commenters also addressed broader implications of the Affordable Care Act, considering the effectiveness of the program apart from problems with the website. For example, Stephen Gerrard (2013) commented, “Failure of the website is not the same as failure of the program. This is a logistics problem, not a policy problem.” This comment suggests an ability to think beyond kneejerk reactions and consider broader effects of the health care changes.

Reflexivity and ideal role taking were also associated with articles addressing same-sex marriage. Although the comments frequently invoked religious beliefs,

the discussions were multifaceted and nuanced, with some commenters aiming to reconcile homosexuality and religion. For example, Mtbwalt (2013) commented:

Freedom is being able to do what you want if it doesn't impinge on the rights of others. Two men wanting to call themselves married doesn't impinge on my rights. However, if they try to force my church to change its views and policies, that's a problem.

This comment addressed the dispute between religion and same-sex marriage while also differentiating civil and religious marriages. Commenters also called on one another to support their assertions with evidence and explain ambiguous points. This behavior encouraged commenters to remain engaged in the discussion and progress the dialogue. Reflexivity also was apparent, including commenters describing their political affiliations, religious views, and sexual identities.

Comparing the Forums

The findings among the six public affairs magazines show that the overall quality of a public sphere can differ substantially based on the ideological diversity of the participants in the forum. Based on this analysis, the more homogenous the forum, the less diverse the conversation, but the conversation that emerges will include higher levels of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions, individuals providing information to support their positions, and participants committing themselves to constructive dialogue. Ultimately, this led to mainstream magazines *Time* and *The Week* generally lacking characteristics of the ideal public sphere, while niche magazines *Mother Jones*, *The Nation*, *National Review Online*, and particularly *The American Conservative* came closer to realizing the Habermasian ideal.

The four higher-quality forums differed in how narrow or broad the ideological homogeneity spread. For instance, *The American Conservative's* forum participants appeared to coalesce around consistently conservative positions, whereas forum participants on the *National Review Online* appeared to represent views that spanned from very conservative to moderate. From the liberal and progressive publications, both *Mother Jones* and *The Nation* appeared to draw participants with moderate to very liberal political positions. The conversations on *The American Conservative* included a stronger commitment to constructive dialogue but also lacked diverse viewpoints, while the *National Review Online*, *Mother Jones*, and *The Nation* all included more disagreements and diversity at the expense of constructive dialogue.

Discussion

The six public affairs magazines studied suggest that if the numerous qualities of the public sphere can be present, even if not all at once, a public sphere can exist in online public discourse. The fact that rational, normative arguments were present in all six forums — more in the *National Review Online*, *The American Conservative*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones* than in *Time* and *The Week* — shows that participants developed reasoned arguments.

The differences in the quality of the discourse among the six magazines does not appear to be a function of the organizational structure of the forum but is possibly connected to the target demographics of the magazines. Thus, the diversity of formats in which an alternative public exists can play a substantial role in the type of discourse that emerges. This finding appears to align with Dahlgren's (2005) argument that political structure can influence discourse — specifically that a media organization can help set the boundaries for acceptable discussion topics. Drawing a slightly more diverse public, as was the case with the *National Review Online*, may improve the diversity of the forum without destroying the civility of the conversation. This finding does not mean that the egalitarian public sphere is not the most suitable format for public discourse but that the ideological alternative public might develop arguments and viewpoints more effectively. Similarly, Parkinson (2006) argued that an alternative public could help to restructure discourse in order to challenge dominant discourses. This restructuring, of course, can only happen if those perspectives are brought into the larger, more diverse public forum.

This finding reinforces Sunstein's belief that ideological enclaves can help develop and spread minority viewpoints (2000). This view aligns with the current finding that a slightly more diverse alternative public — like the *National Review Online*, *Mother Jones*, or *The Nation* — can elicit a more diverse and productive conversation. However, the difficulty in structuring a forum that is both politically diverse and civil seems to challenge Dahlgren's (2005) argument that a well-structured online forum should represent the democratic ideals of a society. Rather, this argument suggests that either the civil nature or the diversity of the forum will suffer with any structural changes that support the other ideal.

The forums on *Mother Jones* and *The Nation* both represented liberal, or progressive, publics but included a large number of moderate commenters as well. The consistently liberal positions commenters took in the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court's decisions on same-sex marriage might result from the strong response to that event by liberals in general. The discussions approached the topic in terms of the progress it represented for civil rights and how to strategically approach the issue. These conversations had low levels of ideological diversity

but included high levels of exchange and critique, sincerity, and ideal role taking. In contrast, the comments in response to the government rollout of the Affordable Care Act aligned more with conservative criticisms of the law and therefore included more ideological diversity. In addition to high levels of exchange and critique of normative positions, the comments included more vitriol and petty arguing. This finding aligns with Karpowitz, Raphael, and Hammond (2009), who suggested that enclaves of like-minded individuals would be more likely to consider diverse viewpoints and avoid polarization, while diverse forums would be more ill spirited.

Although the commenters on *Mother Jones* and *The Nation* saw more diversity when confronted with opposing viewpoints during the Affordable Care Act discussions, they were much more likely to engage in rational-critical discourse during the same-sex-marriage discussions, when commenters with similar political perspectives advanced the diverse views. Similarly, Calhoun (2010) found that political counterpublics tend to establish parallel discussions to the hegemonic narrative, rather than opposing it. This phenomenon was evident in the conversation of same-sex marriage in *Mother Jones*, as commenters took a consistently progressive stance.

The diverse public associated with the *National Review Online* may have emerged as a result of several factors. First, issues such as same-sex marriage do not necessarily draw homogenous views from Conservatives. A poll conducted in March 2013 showed that in the prior year Republican support for same-sex marriage had increased from 13 percent to 37 percent — greatly changing the makeup of the party on this issue (CBS, 2013). This shift was evident in the online forum, in that commenters, on several occasions, criticized the accompanying article for a lack of diverse viewpoints. This reaction was not necessarily in reference to the inclusion of Democratic or liberal opinions but perspectives representing other points on the Republican/Conservative ideological spectrum. Additionally, commenters often used “us/our” or “them/their” when addressing others in the forum, suggesting a homogenous community. This finding supports Parkinson’s (2006) argument that discourse legitimization can come from the way the structure of the discourse changes in response to individual participation — in this case, that certain ideological perspectives were advanced to the detriment of others. This finding also reflects public affairs magazines’ ability to attract readers who seek media reflecting their interests, sensibilities, and minority perspectives (Abrahamson, 2009; Sivek, 2008).

Even so, these comments tended to attract posts that disagreed or provided new questions to augment the position presented. Further complicating the consistency of the forum, those with particularly dissident views, such as liberals, tended to self-identify, making seemingly apologetic entrances into the discussion while

also opening themselves to argumentation. This self-identification, however, did not guarantee that the commenter would be met with vitriol, although name-calling occurred, but could invite reflexive dialogue. Thus, online versions of public affairs magazines may attract more diverse readerships than their print editions, creating a unique identity for the publication's online presence (Tewksbury, 2005).

Overall, *The American Conservative's* forums far outshone those of the other magazines in terms of representing qualities of the Habermasian public sphere. Like *National Review Online*, the comments in *The American Conservative's* forums indicated a diversity of perspectives, albeit situated within a conservative ideology. Even so, these forms of conservatism did not necessarily equate with typical conceptions of social conservatism. Rather, the views supported the magazine's emphasis on traditional conservative values, with commenters criticizing views that were deemed overly "radical." Despite the controversial topics addressed in the forums, participants showed high levels of exchange and critique of reasoned normative positions; sincerity; reflexivity; and ideal role taking, a quality not often present in the other forums. Thus, *The American Conservative* forums demonstrated that online public discourse can provide a rational-critical discussion of highly controversial topics (Freelon, et al., 2008).

Commenters also addressed topics using a variety of approaches, including sharing their personal experiences, raising questions or challenges to stimulate discourse, citing other media reports to substantiate their positions, and offering solutions to problems. Ultimately, commenters seemed dedicated to perpetuating a high-quality discussion, with some indicating that they visited *The American Conservative's* forums to engage in a particular level of discourse. As other researchers have found (Mansbridge, et al., 2006), this emphasis on trust, respect, and openness, in addition to ideological homogeneity, may have contributed to the thoughtful deliberation among commenters.

Practical Implications

Magazines are distinctive from other media in their emphasis on cultivating defined audiences who share similar interests, backgrounds, characteristics, and views. Magazine producers also seek to engage with readers through presenting appealing content, encouraging community-like interaction, and evolving alongside readers' changing tastes and habits (Holmes, 2007). This evolution includes magazines' adoption of online editions, which not only make content available to broader audiences but also open up new modes of interaction among readers. Online versions of public affairs magazines geared to specific ideological communities invite not only enclaves representing the magazine's specified editorial focus but also incorporate more moderate voices. Hosting a more

heterogeneous discussion can benefit magazines by spurring pluralist discourse. As a result, public affairs magazines should be considered alongside other public forums, such as those associated with newspapers and online-only media entities, as sites where diverse individuals can gather to engage in rational-critical debates about a range of public issues. These conversations might lead not only to high-quality deliberation but also potentially encourage participants to consider solutions to social problems, offering material implications from discursive engagement.

Public affairs magazines can determine the boundaries of public discourse by setting the topics for discussion. This power can either be used to broaden the ideological interest of the magazine by attempting to attract a more ideologically diverse audience or to self-select a narrow group of like-minded individuals. There is evidence that a slightly more moderate group might spur a vibrant conversation that is diverse; however, the more like-minded discussions developed ideas and perspectives for a small group of people. Rather, the success of like-minded groups depends on whether those positions and opinions are introduced into a more inclusive public sphere. An alternative perspective cannot challenge the dominant or hegemonic perspectives in society unless it is expressed in open debate. Both types of forums can develop alternative perspectives in society and contest prevailing viewpoints. Niche political magazines should recognize their ability to attract either a more moderate audience or a group of like-minded individuals and then attempt to structure their forum either as a space for contestation or a place for the development of cohesive ideological perspectives.

Limitations

This study addresses only two topics among six public affairs magazines at one point in time. Same-sex marriage and the Affordable Care Act were chosen because of their divisive nature but also because they appeared to draw a large number of comments and invoked strongly held values from both ends of the ideological spectrum. Despite the low number of cases studied, the researchers took an in-depth look at a number of comments and conversations in order to increase the number of observations. King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) argue that increasing the number of observations in the research can add legitimacy to a small-*n* study.

Habermas' ideal public sphere includes an expectation that a forum be absent of economic and political powers. There is a concern that corporate institutions that own the public affairs magazines could censor the conversation. *Time* magazine, *The Week*, *The Nation*, and the *National Review Online* are corporate-owned, but *Mother Jones* and *The American Conservative* are associated with nonprofit

organizations. This distinction could result in differences among the conversations.

Future Research

This study addressed two particularly polarizing issues; however, other timely issues that spur politically divisive discourse, such as immigration and abortion, are also worthy of analysis. Researchers should also explore how other ideologically specific media encompass qualities of the ideal public sphere. Beyond the aspects of the public sphere visible within the content, other factors may contribute to the differences among the discourses studied. Future research should consider the differences between discourses dominated by a small group of highly engaged individuals and those that involve many commenters. Forums with varying sizes of comment threads should also be addressed. Additionally, the topic and approach of the article associated with the online forum, such as a news versus an opinion piece, may also play a role in the characteristics of the public sphere present.

Although ideological enclaves might play a part in the polarized nature of public discourse online, this research has shown that spaces for like-minded individuals could promote the development and discussion of new ideas in safe environments. However, ideological enclaves for discourse can only serve their purpose when participants also voluntarily expose themselves to diverse viewpoints and encourage those with differing perspectives to participate. This research has not only shown the potential of public discourse among like-minded individuals but also the quality rational discussion that can emerge when a homogenous group is expanded to include other viewpoints.

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