

## **Catharsis and Community: Divergent Motivations for Audience Participation in Online Newspapers and Blogs**

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This article examines political talk practices in two different contexts: online newspapers and blogs. It draws on a mixed-methods study that combines a survey of participants in both spaces with interviews with bloggers and moderators at news websites. The survey indicates that participants have divergent motivations to contribute to both online forums. Whereas participating in blogs was mostly linked to discussion and socialization motives, posting comments in online newspapers was usually associated with self-expression needs. In turn, interviews revealed that bloggers welcome interaction with readers and appreciated their comments, whereas newspaper moderators did not participate and had a low opinion of the quality of users' contributions. These findings suggest that online discussion is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the motivations and practices of participants and facilitators.

Political theorists often highlight discussion about public affairs as a fundamental component of democracy (Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1989; Manin, 1987). Mediated discussion has been posited as a valid substitute for face-to-face discussion (Coleman & Götze, 2001; Habermas, 2006; Page, 1996). Empirical studies about Internet discussion have examined the characteristics of online political talk, with various and often conflicting results (Benkler, 2006; Goss, 2007; Price, 2006; Schultz, 2000; Sunstein, 2001). However, with few exceptions (Jensen, 2003; Wright, 2006), most studies analyze single spaces of discussion, and focus on the nature and effects of online political talk (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Sunstein, 2001), which does not allow comparison of either the participants' motivations to engage in discussion in different sites or of the varying contextual conditions at these sites. Uses and gratifications theory, which proposes that individual needs and motivations are the driving force behind people's interaction with media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), could inform examination of online discussants' motives and interpretations. Yet, with few exceptions (Stromer-Galley, 2003), prior scholarship has not fully engaged with the question of motivations for engaging in political conversations online.

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To help overcome these limitations, this article examines online discussions by analyzing participants' motivations to engage in political discussion in two different contexts: online newspapers and blogs in Argentina. It pursues this goal through a mixed-methods research design that combines a survey of participants in the comments sections of public affairs blogs and online newspapers with interviews with bloggers and moderators at news sites. Based on research conducted in Argentina, this article complements the existing tendency to study participation in online media by focusing almost exclusively in developed countries (Dahlgren, 2005; Domingo, 2008). As Vergeer and Hermans (2008) argue, "research on political discussion groups has been conducted mainly around sites focusing on events in the United States, but this political-media system is not necessarily reflective of other systems" (p. 39).

The analysis indicates that online discussion is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by discussants' and moderators' understandings, motivations to participate, and practices carried out in different online forums, and not solely by the technological affordances of the Internet. Participating in blogs was mostly linked to discussion and socialization motives, and bloggers welcomed interaction with readers and appreciated their comments. In contrast, posting comments in online newspapers was usually associated with self-expression needs, and newsmen did not participate in the discussions and had a low opinion of the quality of users' contributions. This article takes advantage of these findings to contribute to two areas of scholarship in media and politics: uses and gratifications of online audience participation; and the influence of context, including organizational and professional norms, on online discussions. These contributions shed light on the factors that may lead to richer online interactions among citizens.

### **Motivation and Context of Online Political Discussion**

Several scholars have proposed that both face-to-face and mediated talk among citizens is the cornerstone of democracy (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1946; Fishkin, 1991; Page, 1996). The Internet allows audiences to become producers of content, potentially transforming the traditional one-way model of mass communication (one sender broadcasts his or her message to various receivers) into a dialogue among members of the public (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2003; McCoy, 2001; Tremayne, 2007). One of the ways that citizens can contribute to the public sphere—understood as the space where people engage in debate over political issues (Habermas, 1989)—is through participation in online discussions. However, research on whether online discussions function as a public sphere where citizens can exchange opinions about public affairs has yielded conflicting findings. On the one hand, some authors contend that only a minority of the public participates (Boczkowski, 2010; Davis, 2009; Goss, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002; Schultz, 2000), and that online discussions lack civility and rational argumentation (Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007; Lee, 2005; Singer & Ashman, 2009). On the other hand, scholars argue that the Internet facilitates participation in public discussions for a wider section of the citizenry (Benkler, 2006; Coleman & Gøtze, 2001; Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Stromer-Galley (2001) argues that the physical distance between interlocutors created by the Internet "may liberate some people to express views and ideas that they would not do face-to-face because of the perceived risk of social repercussions" (p. 36).

The lack of conclusive findings is linked to two limitations in past empirical work. First, most research has been conducted on a single space for political talk, which does not allow researchers to

compare how different contextual conditions and procedural mechanisms influence the discussions (Albrecht, 2006; Jankowski & Van Selm, 2000). As Anstead and Chadwick (2009) argue, ignoring "the role of non- or pre-Internet organizational structures, norms and rules in mediating technological forces" (p. 59) hinders explanation of online phenomena. For instance, Wright (2006) analyzed two forums in Britain—one in which civil servants engaged in the discussion and one in which moderation consisted only in removing inappropriate messages. He found that, although in the first, users' contributions were relevant and informed, the second became "a haven for . . . offensive and meaningless messages" (p. 557).

Second, with few exceptions (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), the conclusions are based solely on content analysis (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Witschge, 2008), which does not allow an examination of participants' motivations for, and interpretations of, the type of discussions they undertake. Uses and gratifications theory proposes that individual needs and motivations are the driving force behind people's interaction with media (Blumler, 1979; Katz, Blumler et al., 1974; Levy & Windhal, 1984). This approach to the study of media audiences has been criticized for assuming self-awareness and purposefulness in every instance of media consumption (Ruggiero, 2000; Webster, 1998). But interactive practices, including content production, such as writing and posting messages online, are purposeful actions that tend to demand higher levels of cognitive effort and intentionality than does mere content consumption. Sundar (2004) proposes that "by calling for user action, interactivity . . . invites users to think about their communication behavior . . . therefore . . . responses to interactivity are necessarily strategic" (p. 388). Examining users' motivations, then, to discuss public affairs in different online forums might provide clearer evidence of the extent to which users' goals influence the selection of media outlets and the type of interaction enacted within them.

Although several studies have examined audiences' motives for and the gratifications obtained from using the Internet as a medium (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), few researchers have analyzed the motives and gratifications associated with user-generated content online (Leung, 2009). For instance, Stromer-Galley (2003) interviewed participants in online discussion forums in the United States and found that they value interacting with a heterogeneous group of people, as well as finding an audience for their opinions. Ancu and Cozma (2009) surveyed voters who "friend" candidates on MySpace and concluded that "the main incentive seems to be social interaction" (p. 577). A survey of online newspaper readers by Chung and Yoo (2008) confirmed that socialization is one of the gratifications sought by users engaging with interactive features such as message boards, although online news audiences "consider online newspapers to serve similar goals as traditional media" (p. 391). However, no studies have examined whether audience members' motivations to participate in online discussions varied according to the online space in which they participated. Thus, the first research question is posed:

*RQ1: How do users' motivations to participate in online discussions in different online forums, such as online newspapers and blogs, vary?*

The institutional setting of online discussions and moderators' practices and motivations could also influence the type of dialogue (Anstead & Chadwick, 2009; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Jensen, 2003;

Vergeer & Hermans, 2008; Ye & Li, 2006). Although some scholars propose that journalists may serve as facilitators of political discussion (Bohman, 2004; Deuze, 2003; Moe, 2008), by adopting a community-oriented model of journalism (Mensing, 2010), research indicates that newsmen are not enthusiastic about interacting with members of the public (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Robinson, 2007; Wright, 2009). Singer and Ashman's (2009) interviews with journalists from *The Guardian* in the UK found that "many were taken aback by the tone of the online discourse and responded by seeking ways to establish distance from users" (p. 19). This reluctance could be linked at least in part to the challenge that users' participation poses to journalists' occupational jurisdiction (Bruns, 2008; Domingo, 2008; Lowrey & Anderson, 2005). Deuze (2003) analyzed different types of online journalism and concludes that the fact that "ongoing levels of interactivity undermine the 'we write, you read' dogma of modern journalism" (p. 220). In contrast, bloggers tend to enjoy engaging in discussion with their readers (Froomkin, 2004; Koop & Jansen, 2009; Woodly, 2008). Wall (2005) proposes that audience participation does not pose a challenge to bloggers' identity because "blogs are not a closed text with their intended meaning already fully inscribed but instead come into being through this performance between the blogger and the audience" (p. 166). Research on online discussion has focused on either facilitators' or participants' practices, but not on both within a single study. This precludes analysis of how both groups might influence each other and, therefore, the characteristics of political debate on the Internet. Therefore, the second research question asks the following:

*RQ2: How do bloggers' and news workers' motivations to moderate online discussions, and their interpretations of reader's comments, vary?*

### **Methods**

To overcome these two limitations, this study compares participants' and moderators' motives to participate in and their interpretations of online political discussions in two contexts: online newspapers and blogs. It uses data from a survey of participants in both online forums, as well as from interviews with news workers and bloggers in Argentina. Therefore, it examines two different actors in online political conversations: bloggers and journalists who produce articles and then post and facilitate the discussions, and readers at online newspapers and blogs who post comments. The survey provides insight into the characteristics of people who contribute comments to blogs and newspapers, their motivations to participate, and their opinions on both discussion spaces. The interviews with discussion facilitators allow the examination of differences in moderation styles between blogs and newspapers, as well as moderators' views and practices. The combination of the survey results with the interview responses enables this analysis to link users' motivations and interpretations to varying discussion facilitation styles. By focusing on online newspapers and blogs, this study compares political discussion in two different venues: mainstream media settings in which moderation is enacted by newsmen, and user-generated sites that are moderated by amateurs (bloggers) or are not moderated at all.

#### *Survey of Participants*

Data for this study come from a survey of participants in online newspapers and blogs in

Argentina conducted in summer 2009.<sup>1</sup> Participants' e-mail addresses were gathered from the messages they posted or their online profiles. An e-mail with a link to the online survey was sent to 648 e-mail addresses and follow-up requests were sent three weeks later.<sup>2</sup> Of these, 206 resulted in fully completed questionnaires used in this analysis; an additional 22 resulted in partially completed interviews, which are not included; another 67 e-mail addresses were not functional; and no response was received for 353 contacts. The AAPOR response rate (RRI) is 32% (AAPOR, 2008).<sup>3</sup> As part of the survey, respondents were asked to confirm their participation in online discussion groups at the time the questionnaire was administered: 38 reported not participating in the past month, leaving a sample of 168 respondents. The sample was older (age  $M=43$ ,  $SD=15$ ) than that of the general population. It was also better educated (93% had attended at least some college) and mostly male (82%). Within the sample, 51 respondents had posted messages only on online newspapers, 66 had posted comments only on blogs, and 51 had posted messages on both spaces (Table 1).

The survey asked each respondent about his or her main reason for posting messages on online newspapers and/or blogs (there were separate questions for each space of participation). To avoid influencing respondents, the first question was open-ended; to obtain as much information as possible, it was followed by a probe to think of any additional reasons (Cannell, Miller, & Oksenberg, 1981). The first question asked: "Please think about this question carefully. Why do you post your comments on online newspapers (blogs)? Write down the main reason why you post your opinions." The second item inquired: "Can you think of any other reasons?" The two open-ended items were followed by a multiple choice question that used standard wording about uses and gratifications of media participation (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Garramone, Harris, & Anderson, 1986; Leung, 2009). The options were: "to make my opinions known," "to discuss issues with other readers," "to blow off steam," "to get to know people or make friends," "to publicize my blog or personal webpage," "because it is fun," or "other." Options were rotated at random to avoid primacy effects.

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<sup>1</sup> Spaces from which to retrieve users' e-mail addresses were selected in two ways. First, online newspapers were selected according to online readership as measured by *Alexa Rankings* and *Google Web Trends*. The most read print and online newspaper in Argentina—*Clarín.com*—did not allow reader comment on stories about politics and, thus, was excluded from the sample. Comments from the four online newspapers that followed *clarín.com* in readership—*lanacion.com*, *infobae.com*, *criticadigital.com*, and *perfil.com*—were included. Second, the weblog sample was constructed purposively, given that there is no complete record of all blogs in Argentina. Two rankings of blogs in Spanish discriminate by country of origin and topic: *Alianzo* ([www.alianzo.com](http://www.alianzo.com)) and *Bitácoras* ([www.bitacoras.com](http://www.bitacoras.com)), which were used to create a sampling frame of blogs whose main topics were politics or news. That process yielded 42 blogs. All the e-mail addresses collected ( $N=648$ ) were contacted.

<sup>2</sup> The recruitment e-mails and the survey were in Spanish, the language spoken in Argentina. Responses were translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> This recruitment method creates sampling error, as people who post comments, but do not provide an e-mail address have no chance of being selected. Sampling error is a common problem in web surveys (Couper, 2000). To avoid it, a random sample of the Argentine population, sufficiently large to capture a relatively rare behavior, should have been recruited, but such a procedure was too costly for this project.

**Table 1. Gender, Age, and Education of Participants by Space of Participation.**

	<b>Age (SD)</b>	<b>Education (% attended college)</b>	<b>Gender (% male)</b>
Newspapers (n=51)	50.14 (14.71)	90.20%	73.47%
Blogs (n=66)	37.62 (13.09)	93.75%	89.06%
Newspapers and blogs (n=51)	45.22 (14.45)	96.08%	80.00%
Total (n=168)	43.48 (14.63)	93.37%	81.67%

The survey also included questions about interaction with bloggers, moderators, journalists, and other participants to measure to what extent participation constituted a real discussion (Graham & Witschge, 2003; Janssen & Kies, 2005). Moreover, respondents' attitudes toward users' comments in each space of participation were gauged by asking participants to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "messages posted by users on online newspapers [blogs] are interesting" and "messages posted by users on online newspapers [blogs] are civil." Response options were organized on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 1 (*strongly agree*).<sup>4</sup> To examine the perceived influence of online discussion on political interest and competence, respondents were asked whether their participation in newspaper comments made them more interested in politics and caused them to feel more competent to answer questions. These questions were drawn from a study by Jensen (2003) that compared participants in two Danish forums.

#### *Interviews with Bloggers and Moderators*

Media persons and bloggers who moderated political discussions in the outlets from which participants' e-mails were retrieved were contacted by e-mail. Six moderators from newspapers and 22 bloggers agreed to be interviewed personally. The interviews took place at a location chosen by the interviewee, lasted for an average of 52 minutes, and were transcribed in their entirety. They were analyzed to identify converging and diverging practices and interpretations. Interviewing 28 actors from different outlets permitted the study to assess whether differences in behaviors and attitudes between the two groups of interviewees could be related to the institutional settings of moderation rather than to idiosyncratic characteristics.

<sup>4</sup> The remaining statements with which respondents had to express agreement or disagreement were: "Messages posted by users on online newspapers [blogs] provide reasons for their assertions," "messages posted by users on online newspapers [blogs] respond to the article [blog entry]," and "messages posted by users on online newspapers [blogs] add value to the newspaper [blog]." Options were rotated at random to avoid primacy effects.

*Participants in Online Discussions: Motivations, Interaction, and Interpretations*

The survey results indicate that people who post comments on online newspapers and blogs are better educated and more likely to be male than is the general population of Argentina. This mirrors findings about participants in online discussions in other countries such as Germany and the United States (Albrecht, 2006; Davis, 1999). The differences in gender and education level between newspapers and blog participants are not statistically significant, which suggests that variations in their motivations are not due to demographic disparities (Table 1). Online newspaper participants tend to be older ( $M = 50.14$ ) than are blog participants ( $M = 37.62$ ), which could be because blogs are a relatively novel medium.

*Motivations*

Participants in blogs and newspapers gave divergent reasons for posting comments. In the open-ended questions, nearly three quarters of those who posted comments in newspapers (74 of 102) mentioned the wish to express their opinion, with answers such as "to express my dissent or support" and "to give my opinion." Among these, four explicitly mentioned that they post comments because they do not agree with others readers, for instance, "I generally do not agree with most of the readers and I want to express my point of view." Participation in discussions was mentioned by 22 out of the 102 newspaper participants who answered, for example, "I like to discuss ideas and political positions," and "exchanging opinions leads to learning." The two reasons are not mutually exclusive, and participants sometimes combined the two in the answers. For example, one participant wrote, "I post comments so others know what I think and we can debate about a common topic." There were 16 respondents who also mentioned the need to curb media bias ("I feel powerless vis-à-vis the media's lack of objectivity"); another 14 indicated the need to blow off steam, using terms such as "it is a visceral reaction," and "catharsis." Only two online newspaper participants mentioned "fun" as a reason.

In contrast, less than half of participants in blogs (52 of 117) mentioned the need to express their opinion and gave answers such as "make my opinions public" and "add my point of view about the topic of the post." Approximately one-third (37) mentioned "debate" or "discussion" as a reason ("to participate in the debate," "because there are very interesting discussions"), and among those, three mentioned that debates in blogs were more interesting than those in newspapers. About one-fifth of the respondents (20) referred to feelings of community as a motivation to post comments in blogs. They gave answers such as "I feel part of a community," "I can establish long distance relationships with people I would not be able to reach otherwise," and "a sort of blogger solidarity." Entertainment was a reason for seven of the respondents, who wrote, for instance, "It's a fun activity," or "I enjoy political discussions." Only two of the respondents mentioned catharsis as a motivation to post comments in blogs.

The differences between participants' motivations to comment in newspapers or in blogs were also evident in the answers to the multiple-choice questions. Whereas 76% of those who posted comments in newspapers did it "to make their opinions public," only 63% of those who posted comments in blogs did it for the same reason ( $p = 0.043$ ). Conversely, whereas 75% of blog participants chose "discuss issues with others," 62% of participants in online newspapers selected that option ( $p = 0.034$ ).

Contributors to online newspapers were more likely to do so to "let off steam" (32%) than were those who commented in blogs (22%) ( $p = 0.097$ ). In contrast, blog participants were more likely to post comments "because it was fun" (31% compared to 15%), to "promote their blog" (27% compared to 14%), and to "meet people" (20% compared to 5%) than were participants in newspapers (all significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). These differences suggest that commenting in newspapers is usually related to self-expression motives (make opinions public, let off steam), whereas participating in blogs is mostly linked to communication with others (discuss issues, meet people) and entertainment motives (fun).

The 48 respondents who participated in both spaces had different motivations to post comments in online newspapers than to post comments in blogs (Table 2). Although differences between "discussion" and "making opinions known" diminished, only 23% of this group post comments in blogs "to let off steam," compared to 38% who post comments in newspapers for this purpose. People who commented in both online newspaper comments and blogs were also more likely to participate in blogs because it was fun (35%), and to meet people (17%) than they were to participate in newspapers for the same reasons (21% and 2%, respectively).

**Table 2. Reasons to Post Messages on Online Newspapers and Blogs for Respondents Who Participated in Both Spaces.**

	Online Newspapers (N= 48)	Blogs (N=48)
Make my opinions public	70.83%	64.58%
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p = 0.3224$	
Discuss issues with other people	64.58%	72.91%
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p = 0.2524$	
Let off steam	37.50%	22.91%
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p = 0.0333$	
It's fun	20.83%	35.41%
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p = .0068$	
Promote my blog	18.75%	29.17%
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p = .0579$	
Meet people	2%	16.67%
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p = 0.0068$	

#### *Moderation and Dialogue*

The majority of participants in both online newspapers and blogs believed that users' comments were moderated (Table 3). However, there were differences in the level of agreement with moderation decisions. More than two-thirds of the respondents who believed comments in blogs were moderated agreed with the bloggers' decision "every time" (22%) or "most of time" (47%), while more than half of

the respondents who believed comments in newspapers were moderated agreed "some of the time" (44%) or "never agreed" (13%) with the moderators' decisions (Table 3). Participants in blogs were also more likely to interact with other participants and with bloggers. Almost all participants in blogs had received a response from another user to a comment they had posted (96%) compared to 84% of participants in newspapers. Likewise, almost all respondents who had posted comments in blogs had received a response from a blogger (96%) compared to about half of newspaper users (51%) who had ever received a response from a journalist or moderator.

*Opinions about Users' Comments*

**Table 3. Perceptions of Moderation Practices.**

	<b>Are comments moderated?</b>		<b>Do you agree with moderation?</b>	
	<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>Blogs</i>	<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>Blogs</i>
	N = 99	N = 115	N = 64	N = 72
Yes	65.66%	61.74%	Yes, every time	9.38% 22.22%
No	24.24%	24.35%	Most of the time	34.38% 47.22%
Don't know	10.10%	13.91%	Some of the time	43.75% 29.17%
			I never agree	12.50% 1.39%
t-test	p = 0.4797		t-test	p = 0.0000

Participants in blogs tended to evaluate user's comments in blogs favorably (Table 4). On a 5-point scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 1 (*strongly agree*), respondents believed comments in blogs were interesting, civil, responsive to the blog entries, provided reasons for their assertions, and added value to the blog. Respondents who participated in online newspapers had less positive evaluations of users' comments. Participants in online newspapers also agreed, although at lower levels, with the statement that users' comments in online newspapers were interesting and responded to the news story. They also tended to disagree with the statement that comments were civil or gave reasons for their assertions. However, they were still likely to agree that reader comments "add value" to online newspapers.

*Political Interest and Competence*

Posting comments in both online newspapers and blogs appears to increase participants' interest in politics. More than two-thirds of newspaper users reported having become "a lot" (42.27%) or "somewhat" (27.84%) more interested in politics due to their participation. In comparison, almost two-thirds of blog participants also answered they had become "a lot" (43.75%) or "somewhat" (29.46%) more interested in politics. Participation in blogs appears to lead to higher perceptions of political competence than does participation in newspapers. More than two-thirds of blog users reported feeling "a lot" (31.25%) or "somewhat" (36.61%) more competent to answer questions about politics, compared to more than half of newspaper users who answered that they felt "a lot" (27.84%) or "somewhat" (27.84%) more competent. In response to RQ1, the survey reveals that participants have divergent motivations to

participate in, and understandings of, both online discussion spaces. Whereas participation in blogs is linked to discussion and socialization motives, posting comments in newspapers is associated with self-expression needs. Moreover, people who post comments in blogs tend to value these sites more highly as spaces of discussion than participants in news sites value newspapers. Bloggers also report higher levels of interaction with other participants and facilitators. The interviews with bloggers and newsmen shed light on the association between these divergent experiences and motivations and different facilitation practices.

**Table 4. Opinions About Reader Comments in Online Newspapers and Blogs.**

Comments in . . .	Newspapers (n = 99)	Blogs (n = 112)
Are interesting	0.59	0.72
SD	(0.23)	(0.17)
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p < 0.0000$	
Are civil	0.43	0.6
SD	(0.21)	(0.19)
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p < 0.0000$	
Respond to the news article or blog entry	0.56	0.68
SD	(0.20)	(0.19)
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$P < 0.0000$	
Give reasons	0.46	0.61
SD	(0.25)	(0.21)
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p < 0.0000$	
Add value	0.73	0.85
SD	(0.23)	(0.17)
Double-sided <i>t</i> -test	$p < 0.0000$	

### **The Moderators of Online Discussions: Motivations, Interaction, and Interpretations**

#### *Motivations*

Interviews reveal that bloggers and newspaper moderators arrived at discussion facilitation through different paths. Bloggers had decided to begin blogging for several reasons; some had started their blogs as personal notebooks and discovered communication with their readers later on. For instance, Gustavo Arballo, a lawyer, explains that his blog was originally "a series of research files on Constitutional Law," but its purpose changed when he started "interacting with people who visited [his] blog" (personal communication, July 3, 2008). For others, "participating in the public discussion," as economist Rollo Tomassi puts it (personal communication, June 26, 2008), was one of the main reasons for starting a blog. María Esperanza Casullo, a graduate student, states, "My arrival to blogging was related to my weariness with academic writing. . . . I was disappointed by the lack of discussion in academia. . . . I am

interested in polemic and discussion, and that's why I have a blog" (personal communication, August 4, 2008).

Bloggers also followed different strategies regarding discussion facilitation. Half of those interviewed actively moderated the comments because they felt a responsibility for the content of the blog. Or as attorney José Benegas explains, "The blogger is responsible for the quality of the blog, and comments are part of it" (personal communication, June 25, 2008). Bloggers who did not practice active moderation cite two main reasons. The first is that moderation takes up too much time. Homoeconomicus (personal communication, July 14, 2008) said that when he started his blog, he established prepublication approval for comments, but he quickly abandoned that requirement because it was "a job" and participants complained because their comments took too long to appear. The second reason is that participants moderated the discussion themselves through collective sanctions. Diego Faure, a film editor, noted that the discussion "moderates itself," because if "someone says, 'You are a jerk,'" the others either don't pay any attention or say, 'Hey, why are you saying that?'" . . . The social sanctions that prevent us from running naked down the streets also deter people from swearing in a blog" (personal communication, July 2, 2008).

In contrast, facilitating public discussion was not a choice for newsmen. Four of the six newspaper moderators had joined the newspapers as journalists and were later assigned moderation duties. In most cases, they moderated comments on articles that other journalists had written. Guillermina Ríos, at *criticadigital.com*, noted, "The task was assigned to me" (personal communication, July 31, 2008), and one of her coworkers said, "The editor asked me to do it" (personal communication, August 5, 2008). Another moderator at a different newspaper was blunter: "Nobody chooses to perform this function; it is boring" (personal communication, July 28 2008).

### *Interpretations*

The divergent paths by which bloggers and moderators arrived at discussion facilitation may be related to their interpretations of the task. Bloggers tend to enjoy reading comments. For instance, Lucas Arrimada (personal communication, July 18, 2008) says he feels "curiosity" about reader comments, and Gerardo Fernández (personal communication, July 10, 2008) describes comments as his blog's *raison d'être*. This is how Alejandro, a graduate student, recalls his first interaction with readers:

I published my first post and I loved it, because I saw the possibility of discussing issues. The comments to what I had written started to arrive by e-mail and I thought it was crazy, I was very happy. . . . I refreshed my e-mail constantly to check whether I had a comment. (personal communication, July 8, 2008)

Newspaper moderators, in comparison, do not enjoy reading and moderating reader comments. Natalia Zuazo, an editor at *perfil.com*, said "I think it is ridiculous that reporters or editors moderate [reader comments]. It a grueling task, which takes up a lot of time that could be employed in other things" (personal communication, July 30, 2008). Vanessa Patrignani, a moderator at *lanacion.com*, explained that she is usually "disappointed" by reader comments because there is "no space for reflection.

It is really a way of blowing off steam; they are not willing to discuss issues" (personal communication, August 12, 2008). One of the interviewees said moderating was a "thankless job" in which he had to "absorb feelings of bitterness and hatred" present in reader comments (personal communication, August 5, 2008). Guillermina Ríos (personal communication, July 31, 2008) said that her main feeling when moderating is anxiety: "I see I still have a pile of 500 comments left, and I want to go over them quickly to do other things, but it is not moving, so I become anxious."

Both bloggers and news site moderators have identified a series of regular participants. Elemaco, who writes a blog about economics, said, "It is always more or less the same people who post comments" (personal communication, July 1, 2008). Santiago Alles, a university professor, contended that the existence of a community of participants "generates bonds of trust" (personal communication, July 3, 2008). Although newsmen also identify regular participants, they tend to have a less positive assessment of the phenomenon. When describing stable participants, Guillermina Ríos said, "They have an opinion on every story, on sports, on entertainment . . . I don't know what they do with their lives" (personal communication, July 31, 2008). Natalia Zuazo believed that the existence of a "community of participants . . . has no intrinsic value" (personal communication, July 30, 2008). The coordinator of "participation" at *lanacion.com* noted that a poll of participants was conducted and "something like 75 or 80 percent of the people visited the site to say what they thought, but not to make any friends. . . . I think it is still a very individualistic activity" (personal communication, August 12, 2008).

#### *Participating in Online Discussions*

Bloggers and online newspaper moderators had different levels of participation. Most bloggers participated in the discussions for two main reasons. The first is "courtesy," as Arballo put it (personal communication, July 3, 2008). Elemaco explained, "A guy visited the blog, he posted a comment, he deserves a reply" (personal communication, July 1, 2008). The second reason for participation is that they enjoy the discussion. Alejandro said, "What motivates me to participate is the love I feel for my argument." Martín said he always answered reader comments because he "enjoys fighting. It is part of my nature" (personal communication, July 10, 2008). Bloggers also posted comments in other blogs, either because they were interested in the discussion or because they felt it was part of their blogging activity. Escriba, a political scientist who blogs about current affairs, said that commenting on other blogs "is a tool to make yourself known" (personal communication, August 19, 2008).

Online newspaper moderators do not participate in the comments sections in the outlets for which they work. Zuazo, from *perfil.com*, said that she "never participates" because "it is not my function to do it. In the same way that I would not allow a reader to write a story, I will not reply to their comments" (personal communication, July 30, 2008). Patrignani said that she does not intervene because "the idea is that [participants] learn to self-regulate" (personal communication, August 12, 2008). Even in the very few cases in which newsmen moderated comments about articles they had written, they did not participate. A moderator at a different newspaper explained that participating would compromise his objectivity, because "the moderator is supposed to be unbiased . . . not influenced by personal matters" (personal communication, August 5, 2008). Newsmen rarely participated in other online forums. The coordinator at *lanacion.com* reflected, "I don't have much of a virtual life. It must be a matter of self-

defense. . . . I protect myself from being always around the same stuff, and it also gives me a certain distance to think" (personal communication, August 12, 2008).

In response to RQ2, the interviews revealed that bloggers performed discussion facilitation tasks willingly, and they enjoyed interacting with their readers and valued participants' contributions. In contrast, newsmen who were assigned moderation tasks did not participate in the discussions and tended to have a low opinion of reader comments.

### **Discussion**

This study indicates that commenters' motivations to contribute to online discussions and interpretations of those discussions vary according to the space of political talk. It also suggests that blog commenters and moderators influence not only each other's practices, but also the character of online discussions. Whereas posting comments in blogs tended to be linked to the wish to discuss issues with others, meet people, and have fun, posting comments in newspapers was related more to self-expression motives, such as making opinions public and blowing off steam, even among citizens who participated in both spaces. Discussion facilitators' perceptions also varied. Bloggers welcomed interaction with readers, valued their comments, and participated actively in their own blogs and in other online places, in no small part because they enjoyed receiving feedback on the texts they had posted. In contrast, for newsmen, moderating comments was a task assigned to them which they did not enjoy, and only exceptionally did they moderate comments on articles they had written. Thus, they tended to have a low opinion on the quality of users' participation, which they perceived mainly as an outlet for readers' feelings and did not participate in online discussions. In turn, participants in blogs tended to have a higher level of interaction with bloggers, while participants in newspapers were less likely to interact with moderators or agree with their facilitation decisions. Moreover, respondents who posted comments on blogs reported higher levels of agreement with moderators' decisions than did participants in online newspapers. These findings indicate that online discussion should be understood as a multifaceted and contextually-dependent phenomenon.

This research makes conceptual and methodological contributions to the study of online political participation. Conceptually, the findings suggest that online discussion is shaped by participants' and moderators' motivations and practices, rather than by the technological affordances of the Internet. Therefore, online discussion should not be characterized as a single phenomenon, either conducive or deleterious to democratic dialogue, but as a multifaceted practice that varies according to participants' uses of the medium and facilitators' practices of moderation. Methodologically, this study's research design indicates that the examination of both participants' and moderators' views of different spaces of online discussions contributes to a better understanding of the differences between various types of political talk. The analysis of commenters' and facilitators' attitudes indicates that the practices of both groups are linked. Bloggers have chosen to initiate public discussion, and thus they are personally invested in online talk facilitation. In turn, the discussion- and socially-oriented comments in blogs elicit more enthusiastic facilitation by blog owners. In contrast, newsmen are assigned moderation tasks, and users' comments—motivated mostly by self-expression and catharsis—contribute to moderators' disappointment with comments and frustration with their jobs. These findings would have not been elicited

if the study examined either participants or moderators alone and inferred the characteristics of facilitation or discussion practices from the responses of one of these groups.

There are at least two limitations in this work that should be addressed in future research. First, it focuses on people who post comments in blogs and online newspapers in Argentina, which may not be representative of blog and online news participants in other countries. Comparing online discussion in different spaces in other nations would provide a more comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon. Second, the survey results are based on a small and non-random sample, given that only those participants in blogs and online newspapers who chose to make their e-mail address public could be contacted. This recruitment method suggests that the survey respondents were among the most outspoken and sociable of both online newspapers and blog participants and thus may not be representative of people who participate in online discussion as a whole. However, even among this small group, there were significant differences between online newspaper and blog participants. Future work should conduct a random sample survey to address this limitation and examine whether the findings from this work could be generalized to all participants in online discussions.

The analysis presented in this article contributes to research on uses and gratifications of media participation. This stream of communication scholarship indicates that users' goals and interests shape interaction with media more strongly than do medium attributes and affordances (Blumler, 1979; Katz, Blumler et al., 1974). This study reveals that users' motivations are crucial for the type of participation enacted and the gratifications obtained. Moreover, it suggests that there is not one fixed set of goals for posting comments about public affairs in online media, but several motives and expected gratifications that vary according to the space of interaction and the needs of the participants. Participating in blogs was related to discussion and socialization motives, which echoes Stromer-Galley's (2003) study of online forums and Ancu and Cozma's (2009) findings on MySpace participation. In contrast, participating in online newspapers served mostly self-expression needs, which resonates with Chung and Yoo's (2008) conclusion that online newspapers tend to serve similar goals as traditional media.

The differences between levels of participant satisfaction with the two types of online venues studied underscore the importance of institutional setting and moderation practices for online political discussion (Anstead & Chadwick, 2009; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Jensen, 2003; Vergeer & Hermans, 2008; Ye & Li, 2006). Some scholars contend that journalists may serve as facilitators of political discussion (Bohman, 2004; Deuze, 2003; Moe, 2008). However, this study reveals that newsmen were not enthusiastic about the moderation practices assigned to them, did not participate in the discussions, and did not perceive the comments section of the news organizations they worked for as spaces for community building. This echoes studies conducted by Hermida and Thurman (2008), Robinson (2007), and Singer and Ashman (2009). In contrast, bloggers welcomed interaction with their readers and valued their comments highly, which confirms findings from Wall (2005) and Woodly (2008). The findings from this study suggest that mainstream media organizations and professional journalists tend to adhere to their pre-Internet norms and rules (Anstead & Chadwick, 2009), and therefore online newspapers, with newsmen as facilitators, may not be the sole, or even the best, venue for political discussion.

The differences between the two types of political talk that are nevertheless conducted in online

discussion forums with similar technological affordances underscore the importance of discussants' understandings, their motivations to participate, and the practices carried out in different online forums. They also suggest that there is much to gain from studies of different instances of audience participation that focus on the conditions of production of user-authored content, as well as on the interests, perceptions, and motivations of participants.

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