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Abstract

Comments in online news could be the contemporary enactment of the eighteenth-century *cafés* that founded public sphere. This article assesses to what extent do these forms of digital discussion fit in Habermas' principles for democratic debate, using his discursive ethics as a demanding normative benchmark. The sample of more than 15,000 comments was selected from the online versions of five national newspapers of record from different political and journalistic contexts: *The Guardian* (United Kingdom), *Le Monde* (France), *The New York Times* (United States), *El País* (Spain), and *La Repubblica* (Italy). The ethical guidelines and legal frameworks set up by the newspapers as well as their moderation strategies were considered to understand the different settings of the conversations. Two models of audience participation emerge from the analysis, one where *communities of debate* are formed based on mostly respectful discussions between diverse points of view and another of *homogenous communities*, in which expressing feelings about current events dominates the contributions and there is less of an argumentative debate.

Keywords

audience participation, participatory journalism, comments in news, user-generated content, public sphere, discursive ethics

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Online journalism was quick to incorporate mechanisms to transform their audiences into active contributors of content to news websites. Research has found that professionals try to make sure they keep their gatekeeper role when dealing with user-generated content (Hermida and Thurman 2008; Singer et al. 2011) and that the main motivations to develop audience participation are business driven—to increase user loyalty rather than to foster democracy (Vujanovic et al. 2010)—. Despite this, so-called participatory journalism in digital media enables public arenas for citizen debate that are far more open, accessible, and efficient than the mechanisms of participation in legacy media. So far, there has been little scholarly attention toward the nature of these conversations and their implications for democracy. This article proposes looking at the most popular form of audience participation, comments in news, from the perspective of Habermas' theory of the public sphere (Habermas 1992). If bourgeois cafés were the scenario of democratic discussions in the nineteenth century, and newspapers played a crucial role in mediating public opinion in the twentieth century, it is time to assess whether online newspapers provide a new incarnation of the public sphere, becoming the *digital cafés* of a *Public Sphere 2.0*. To do this, we will evaluate the quality of user debates in online newspapers using the normative approach of Habermas' discursive ethics.

Research on participatory journalism has focused on the attitudes and strategies of journalists in developing user-generated content (UGC) spaces in news websites. Results are consistent in different countries: United States (Chung 2007), United Kingdom (Williams et al. 2010), Netherlands (Bakker and Pentti 2009), and Germany (Neuberger and Nuernbergk 2010). The interviews with online editors show that newsrooms try to protect their brand when opening up for audience participation. They establish filters, rules, and workflows that guarantee that user contributions meet the standards of journalistic quality.

Among the multiple forms of UGC (from polls to forums, blogs, crowdsourcing, and citizen reporting), comments in news is the most widespread in online news sites and usually the most popular in quantitative terms. The Biving Group (2008) reported that in 2008 already 75 percent of U.S. online media offered this feature. Reich (2011) analyzed the management strategies of twenty-four European and North-American online newspapers and identified two main attitudes: an "interventionist" one, where the newsroom performed moderation prior to publication of comments taking more responsibility on the quality of the debate, and a looser one, where moderation was performed after publication and understood comments as the audience space, separate from the news production process. This second option requires less human resources and is coherent with the ideology of most of the journalists interviewed in the study, who preferred to see the audience as audience rather than as a co-creator of the news product. But the accumulation of insults and derogatory language in poorly overseen comments in news is making part of the media industry debate the need to devise stricter restrictions for participation—registration, eradication of anonymity (Peacock 2008)—or cancel the feature altogether (Rieder 2010).

Comments in news are, therefore, a controversial form of UGC. Analyzing the dynamics of the debates in online newsrooms is a substantial step to assess what do comments in news contribute to the development of a more vibrant and healthy public sphere. There are few studies of these user discussions in news websites. Goss (2007) used Ellul's framework of sociological propaganda and van Dijk's discourse analysis to expose the common ground of participants in the U.S. online opinion magazine *The Nation*. Xiang et al. (2008) took the concept of public sphere to analyze the debates in the forums of the Chinese news portal Dayoo.com. Habermas' theory is also the theoretical framework of a similar research by the authors of this article, which studied the quality of comments in news of six Catalan online newspapers (Ruiz et al. 2010).

Theoretical Framework: The Rules for Democratic Debate

If we look back in the history of Western civilization and inquire what are the inventions that made possible the most radical changes in society, the printing press is necessarily going to be among the answers. There is an undoubted link between technology and civilization, between Gutenberg's invention, the Protestant Reform, the Enlightenment, and Liberal Democracy. When the relevance of the press is discussed, there is a social institution that also was enhanced by it that is often neglected: debate. Public debate was one of the crucial mechanisms of the American Revolution and the French Revolution in the eighteenth century. George Steiner (2005) summarizes the central role of discussion in Western societies: "Europe is made of coffee shops."

Debate is therefore a method of reflection, the core substance of the Enlightenment. Through the exchange of different points of view, the society of old was shaken to its foundations and the principles of the new era were defined (Craveri 2005). Two hundred years later, web 2.0 gives back the prominence to the public discussion. Some authors have celebrated this digital incarnation of debate with enthusiasm. Others have been more skeptical and consider that the Internet immerses citizens in a "cultural-communicational regime" (Fumaroli 1998). This new regime, according to the French thinker, provokes severe "collateral damage," to liberal democracy, to the autonomy of individuals' will, and to the dignity of spiritual productions. We live in "commercial democracies." This is at the core of the fiercer sociological debates about digital technologies: Do they foster democracy or the market, the citizen or the consumer? Sunstein (2002) warns that confusing the consumer sovereignty with political sovereignty can cause dire social problems.

If we go back to the discussion about public debate, the bottom line is not whether citizens are saying things (i.e. producing content) or not. What we have to assess is what is being said and how. From a normative perspective, we cannot be satisfied with the buzz of the Web. Sartori (2003) concludes: "Noise is irrelevant for democracy."

The analysis of online conversations is very relevant from a democratic point of view: "The essential democratic relationship is not between leaders and citizens but between citizens and citizens" (Barber 2006: 6). Barber, and before him Dewey

(1991), argues that the problem of our democracies is the lack of opportunities for citizens to discuss among themselves. The horizontal architecture of the Internet, which connects us one to one and many to many, enables this public debate. However, for democracy, even more important than the ability to communicate is the quality of the conversation: "Real democracies are defined by our capacity and competence to talk to one another" (Barber 2006: 6).

Lincoln Dahlberg is another author that considers that the Internet can foster political debate and citizen participation. And he points out three areas for development of these opportunities: at the community level, it fosters the value of sharing as a collective; from an individual-liberal perspective, it fosters individual interests to be expressed; from the perspective of deliberation, he argues that the Internet is an extension of the public sphere, where critical and rational discussions are to be held (Dahlberg 2001). This is the perspective that our study focuses on.

For a healthy democracy, we want a discussion where participants are engaged and try to understand each other, respecting basic principles such as pluralism and tolerance. These attitudes require behaviors that adhere to a rational and ethical protocol for conversation. The discursive ethics proposed by Habermas offers a solid normative grounding for the analysis of the most recent form of public debates, comments in news.

Habermas considers that public debate is an ethical and rational process for social construction, a tool for change (Habermas 1992). His theory tries to enumerate the requirements for rational argumentation based on a moral behavior of participants in a debate. For this study, we are concerned with the rules that enable the discursive ethics. Habermas (1984) distinguishes three sets of rules, and each set has a different purpose. The first aims to ensure a logical and coherent argumentation. The rules are:

No speaker may contradict himself.

An argument applied to an object must be applied to any other object with similar characteristics.

Different speakers may not use the same expression with different meanings.

The second set of rules considers the argumentation as a procedure for the cooperative search for truth. The rules are:

A speaker may assert only what he believes.

A person who disputes a proposition or norm that is not under discussion must provide a reason for wanting to do so.

Lastly, the third set of rules is aimed at the agreement being based on the best argument. The rules are:

Any individual is allowed to take part in a discussion.

Anyone is allowed to question any assertion.

Anyone is allowed to express his or her opinions, desires, and needs.

The choice of the theory of discursive ethics as the model for the analysis of debates in online newspapers is based on its centrality as a normative framework for the discussion of communication and democracy. Current theories on the democratic legitimacy of the media still stem from the Enlightenment. Habermas' theory is one of them, grounded in a critical approach to Modernity, which reinterprets the Enlightenment rather than rejecting it.

We are aware that the work of Habermas has received many criticisms. They can be organized in three different groups. The first one rejects his proposal of a community of debate as being too idealistic and not reflecting real communities (Heller 1987). This criticism is weak, because Habermas himself insists that the community he describes—ruled by the ethical norms he proposes is a transcendental one, that is, a possible achievement for the real community, a normative framework toward which the real community can evolve. Habermas is surely aware that in real life communication is interfered by power struggles and dissensus (rather than consensus) is always going to be present *de facto*. However, *de iure* his theory is completely valid. For our analysis, we needed a theory dealing with legitimacy and validity, not factuality. It is precisely because we are critical with the current situation of democratic debates in contemporary societies that we are searching for legitimate instruments to analyze them to foster improvement. Online newspapers themselves have a normative discourse in their rules for participation that aims at improving the quality of debates among their readers.

A second area of criticism addresses specific aspects of Habermas' theory without challenging its overall validity (Rorty 1985; Taylor 1991; Wellmer 1986). They criticize the strict formalism of the argumentation rules, and the relationship between strategic and communicative rationalities. Another group of critics confront Habermas' political and intellectual positions, in debates such as the one he held with Sloterdijk.¹ These two groups of criticisms show that any contemporary academic debate on the mechanisms of public opinion necessarily discusses the theory of communicative action by Habermas, and he has actually improved his proposals following suggestions from his critics. We chose his theory aware of the alternatives, considering that Habermas is the referential author for normative theories of democratic debate. We do not expect comments in news to comply with the discursive ethics proposed by Habermas, but we take the theory as the benchmark to assess the quality of debates and propose how the participation conditions could be improved to strengthen the contribution of online debates to a more democratic public sphere.

To discuss the results of our analysis from a multinational comparative perspective, the models of media systems proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) provide a fruitful framework. Their conceptualization of the relationship between political systems and journalistic culture in different Western countries is an appropriate tool to contextualize the differences between the reader debates in the online newspapers analyzed. The media system of each country—understood as a specific culture of journalism principles and practices—is defined by the authors, among many other elements, by the nature of pluralism in news media. In two of Hallin and Mancini's models, the

“Liberal” and the “Democratic Corporatist,” media tend to offer a higher degree of *internal pluralism*, giving voice to a wide array of points of view in their news coverage. In the “Polarized Pluralist” model, media have greater political parallelism, aligning themselves with specific political positions, and there is *external pluralism*, with the coverage of each newspaper being less plural in itself (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 29-30). In our sample of online newspapers (see below), there are cases from both of these pluralism scenarios.

Aims and Methodology

This study assesses the quality of comments in news of five online newspapers from the normative perspective of Habermas’ discursive ethics. Specifically, the research aims were as follows:

1. Comparing the ethical and legal norms that regulate audience participation in online newspapers.
2. Assessing the dynamics of comments in news and their adherence to the rules of democratic debate.

The sample was selected from the online versions of five national newspapers of record from different political and journalistic contexts. Two belonging to the “Liberal” model as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004: 143), *The Guardian* (United Kingdom) and *The New York Times* (United States), and three belonging to the “Polarized Pluralist” model (2004: 89), *Le Monde* (France), *El País* (Spain), and *La Repubblica* (Italy). The choice of “quality press” for the analysis is based on the rationale that they portray themselves as the main arena for public opinion formation, and comments in news of their websites could be understood as a central space for the digital public sphere.

We compared the legal texts and participation guidelines of the online newspapers and captured a sample of stories and associated comments using software designed *ad hoc* for this project. Data were gathered from the homepages and the sections of Politics, Economy, International, Sports, Culture, and Society of each online newspaper at 12 A.M. and 12 P.M. (GMT+1) between November 2 and 8, 2010. The week was randomly selected. Planned events such as the midterm U.S. elections and the visit of the Pope to Spain did not seem to significantly affect the volume of comments. *El País* has a news comments community that is much more productive than those at the other newspapers, regardless of this specific event: five of seven of the analyzed stories were more than 1,000 comments, and only one of them referred to the visit of the Pope.

We collected 3,349 stories with 60,653 comments—an average of 8,664.7 comments daily. ElPaís.com was the website that produced more comments: in average, half of all the comments in the sample were from the Spanish newspaper (Table 1). Guardian.co.uk was the second with more comments, with an average of 2,356 every day. NYTimes.com got 1,251, LeMonde.fr 591, and Repubblica.it 311 comments on

Table 1. Number of Comments Collected per Online Newspaper

	October 02, 2010	October 03, 2010	October 04, 2010	October 05, 2010	October 06, 2010	October 07, 2010	October 08, 2010	Total
EIPais.com	4,519	3,288	4,968	3,921	5,390	5,050	1,951	29,087
NYTimes.com	1,284	1,956	1,884	1,078	882	1,673	0 ^a	8,757
Guardian.co.uk	3,807	3,125	4,509	2,360	456	965	1,271	16,493
Repubblica.it	924	394	337	276	0 ^b	0 ^b	246	2,177
LeMonde.fr	658	627	797	711	459	600	287	4,139

^aA technical problem prevented capturing the comments of NYTimes.com the last day of data gathering.

^bFor these days, there were no news open to comments on Repubblica.it.

Table 2. Proportion of Comments and News Stories per Online Newspaper

	News Items	Comments	Comments/ News Item	News with Comments	% News with Comments	Comments/ News with Comments
ElPais.com	1,235	29,087	23.6	231	18.7	125.9
NYTimes.com	713	8,757	12.3	57	8.0	153.6
Guardian.co.uk	629	16,493	26.2	237	37.7	69.6
Repubblica.it	269	2,177	8.1	13	4.8	167.5
LeMonde.fr	503	4,139	8.2	318	63.2	13.0
Total	3,349	60,653	18.1	856	25.6	70.9

daily average. Registration rules, moderation strategies, and the culture of online participation in each country can explain the differences in volume of comments, as is discussed later.

Almost 75 percent of the news stories did not get any comments during the period analyzed, but we must be aware that almost all of the online newspapers select only some stories to open to debate. Repubblica.it is the most restrictive in opening up stories to user commentary, and only 5 percent of the stories had comments. LeMonde.fr, that keeps every story open to debate, had comments in 63 percent of the news pieces. Among stories with comments, Repubblica.it got the highest number of contributions in average (168), followed by NYTimes.com (154) and ElPais.com (126; see Table 2). The higher average in the Italian online newspaper could be because users would participate more intensely in the few stories that were open to comment, while in other websites participation is more spread over a wider range of stories.

From the initial sample, we took the story with more comments in each website each of the days for a total of 32 stories and 15,314 comments. We considered the comments to each news story as a conversation and applied the principles of discursive ethics to do a qualitative assessment of how each of the comments contributed to the debate. Specifically, we asked the following questions about each contribution:

1. Logic and coherence: Does it focus on the topic of the news story? Does it try to argue the point?
2. Cooperative search for truth: Does it contain insults or derogatory remarks? Does it provide a different point of view than other comments?
3. An agreement based on the best argument: Does the comment show interest in other contributions? Does it adhere to them? Does it provide sources to back the points it is making?

We operationalized these questions into an analysis grid, and a coding book defined the categories to be assessed in the comments. Coding consisted in noting the presence or absence of discursive elements in the contributions. The team of coders was trained to apply the analysis grid consistently. It had been previously used for a study of Catalan online newspapers (Ruiz et al. 2010). During the current study, intercoder

reliability tests based on Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen 1960) were performed with satisfactory results.

Ethical and Legal Implications of the Participation Rules

From an ethical and legal perspective, audience discussions in news are not just about journalism becoming more participatory. As online newspapers incorporate UGC to their production routines, an ethical approach must consider which are the criteria that guide participation, and a legal analysis will reveal how media companies consider user input as part of their products.

Ethical Guidelines

The five news sites have guidelines that orientate conversations in a moral sense, in order to make citizen contributions comply with democratic principles. NYTimes.com and Guardian.co.uk are the most explicit regarding the aims of their participation rules. The British newspaper wants² to achieve "intelligent discussions" and states that they "welcome debate and dissent" within the limits of respect to "other people's views." Achieving this goal is both a responsibility of the newsroom and the readers: "The platform is ours, but the conversation belongs to everybody." In the case of the U.S. newspaper, they argue³ that comments need to be moderated to guarantee a fruitful debate: "Our goal is to provide substantive commentary for a general readership. By screening submissions, we have created a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed commentary that enhances the quality of our news and information."

Guidelines, therefore, try to find the equilibrium between freedom of speech and mutual respect, the essence of democratic ethics. Implicitly, the text of the rules considers that freedom of speech is not an absolute freedom, and they define its limits by seeking to foster respect. That's the only way a conversation can become a fruitful democratic debate. LeMonde.fr puts it nicely in its forums FAQs: "Arguments can be criticized, people can't."⁴

The requirement for the users to be responsible for what they contribute starts with registration. The online newspapers want to know who participates in the debate. They usually require users to provide their name, gender, email, country of residence, postal code, and date of birth. Repubblica.it also asks for a landline and a cell phone number. ElPaís.com is the one that asks for less data: just a nickname and an email address in every comment, without generating a database of contributors. LeMonde.fr is the strictest one, as only paid subscribers can send comments. In all news sites, users sign their contributions with their nickname. LeMonde.fr forbids users to hypothesize on the real identity of other commentators, while the NYTimes.com takes the opposite approach, recommending the following: "We have found that people who use their names carry on more engaging, respectful conversations." ElPaís.com's ombudsman thinks that the anonymity allowed by nicknames dilutes responsibility and fosters "a climate of impunity that fosters excess."⁵ She is very critical with her own newsroom

and advocates for stricter participation requirements that would reduce the number of participants but foster “a much richer conversation.” This seems to be an open debate in online journalism.⁶

So far, communication ethics tried to protect the audience from inappropriate content, considering the citizens as the weakest subject in the communication process. The Internet has turned the tables, as now ethics needs to acknowledge that the audience also needs to be protected from itself: the new *prosumers* (Bruns 2005) are active subjects in the communication process, and whether they had mainly moral rights as an audience, they now also have moral duties. The guidelines for participation try to educate users in their new obligations as active content producers. The bottom line is for users to acknowledge that they must be responsible for the consequences of the content they provide. The responsibility of the news site is to oversee that users hold on to their responsibility, and expel those that do not respect the principles. Moderation teams enact the medium responsibility. Users are aware of this framework, as this comment from our sample shows:

“I do wish that the Guardian would suspend the community standards for the duration of this government so that we could say what we really think. I do resent having to be polite about these Tory runts (excuse the typo).” (roachclip at *The Guardian*, November 8)

Guardian.co.uk argues vehemently why moderation is needed:

Of course it would be lovely if we didn't need to have anyone looking out for the quality of conversation on the site. But the fact is that as a big media organization we have a responsibility to maintain the quality of content which appears on our site and so we employ a small team to monitor and manage community participation. The aim of moderation is not censorship, but ensuring that the community participation areas of the site remain appropriate, intelligent and lawful.⁷

The strategy defined in the newsrooms for the management of audience participation is a crucial factor to determine to what extent does an online newspaper take its responsibility toward the quality of the debate seriously (Domingo 2011). Only with enough resources and the adequate workflows comments in news can be a tool for democratic debate. Not all the reporters and editors in the newsroom are responsible for comment moderation tasks. In fact, there are online newspapers where moderation is not performed in the newsroom. While NYTimes.com and Repubblica.it have a team of journalists within their staff to deal with comment moderation, Guardian.co.uk opted to hire the members of the moderation team from readers that apply for the job and telework for a salary. The editor of the online newspaper oversees their work and they have to apply the guidelines defined by the newsroom. ElPaís.com and LeMonde.fr outsource comment moderation to a company that also follows the criteria set by the newsroom.⁸

The online newspapers have different approaches to comment moderation: NYTimes.com, LeMonde.fr, Repubblica.it, and ElPaís.com moderate comments before they are published. Guardian.co.uk prefers postmoderation. At the U.S. newsroom, they admit that the decisions of what gets posted are “subjective,” and promise to “make them carefully and consistently as we can.” They admit that publication timeliness “can be less frequent in the evening and on weekends.”⁹ The Spanish newspaper’s ombudsperson explained¹⁰ that they can handle 10,000 comments daily and that is why they do not open all news stories to user debate, and accepts that they are usually overwhelmed. In another article,¹¹ she published complaints of readers dissatisfied with the volume of hate speech in the comments and admitted that 50 percent of the comments were actually published without any more than a software filter. At Guardian.co.uk, comments are published right away and the community team reviews them with the help of the readers, who can use a link to “report abuse” in every post. Users can specify how they think the comment breaks the rules (“personal abuse, off topic, legal issue, trolling, hate speech, offensive/threatening language, copyright, spam, other”). The British newspaper, as well as the NYTimes.com, has another instrument to empower users in fostering the quality of the debate: Each comment has a “recommend” button and a counter for the votes it has received.

Online newspapers admit to their users that moderation of the comments is a challenge. But the rules for moderation themselves are quite straightforward and homogeneous in all of the cases. They are based on the basic rights of liberal democracies and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Guidelines tend to be redundant: “Respecting the law” would already cover many other rules such as the prohibition of “incitement to racial hatred,” which is a crime in most countries. This redundancy highlights that there are aspects that deserve special attention as they are prone to generate most of the conflicts in the sites. We have grouped them in relationship to the elements of Habermas’ discursive ethics.

Rules to foster coherence and logic of the debate. All guidelines except for LeMonde.fr forbid commercial advertising in comments. Some will delete messages discussing the moderation decisions. NYTimes.com and ElPaís.com strive for well-written and articulated contributions. LeMonde.fr does not want users to repeat the same message saturating the debate, nor mocking messages or “irrelevant” postings. Guardian.co.uk and ElPaís.com explicitly repudiate “trolls,” users that want to distort the debate provoking the others. Both ElPaís.com and LeMonde.fr don’t accept personal data to be posted in the messages. Guardian.co.uk will delete off-topic messages, even though they are very flexible about topicality:

Off-topic refers to contributions which are not related to the specific matter under discussion. Obviously, this is contextually-flexible; sometimes conversations are wide-ranging, and so more things can be perceived to be appropriate, topical and relevant. . . . While it’s always possible to introduce new topics into a conversation, they should at least bear some relevance to the primary discussion. Contributions will be perceived as off-topic if they veer substantively and

wildly from the current conversation topic, either as an attempt to derail the conversation or as completely irrelevant.

Rules to foster the cooperative search of truth. These rules strive for mutual respect between participants, and respect to legality: Those who do not follow these rules are surely not seeking consensus. The most widespread norms are “respecting the law” and the rejection of pornography, libel, discrimination and offensive language. LeMonde.fr and NYTimes.com also condemn aggressive language, obscenity, blasphemy, and personal attacks to other users. LeMonde.fr and ElPaís.com forbid the incitation to violence and racism, while Guardian.co.uk and NYTimes.com label this more generally as “inciting to hatred.” Repubblica.it mentions public order and morality as values to preserve, and it is the only one to mention explicitly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights besides ElPaís.com. The Spanish newspaper has the longest list of forbidden contributions, including the celebration of drug consumption, fostering the use of weapons, and humiliating comments.

Legal Framework

Online newspapers state the legal framework of their relationship with their audience through texts usually available at a link at the bottom of all pages in the site. The text is a contract with the corporate entity publishing the news portal that users implicitly accept when they access the website. The fact that the legal rules are public, as the participation guidelines are, means that users cannot argue they were not aware of them. In the most extreme situation, ElPaís.com reserves the right to block the access to the website to users (IP addresses) that do not respect the rules.

Legal texts agree in setting on the users the legal responsibility of content provided by them. In most cases, they are articulated by denying responsibility of the media company “in any case.” This clause tries to avoid any liability for the company if despite the filters and participation rules some UGC ends up being sued by a reader. Beyond the possible legal consequences of the content of comments, users have the responsibility of assuring that the content they submit to the news website is their own, and no third party holds rights over it.

Nonetheless, after stating that users are responsible for their submissions, in terms of intellectual property the online newspapers declare to own the rights to all the content published in their websites. That does not include the material produced by news agencies, but does cover UGC and grants them the right to republish the materials without economic compensation to the user. Some legal texts recognize contributors as legal subjects of intellectual property rights, but they state that users transfer all rights to the media company when they submit their comments. NYTimes.com has the most comprehensive reference to UGC in their legal texts. Although other newsrooms mainly deal with participation from an ethical perspective in their community guidelines, the U.S. newspaper embeds many of the rules in a section of the legal text.

In Continental Europe, the transfer of intellectual property does not take away from the contributor the moral rights as an author, and therefore the media companies

cannot claim full freedom to alter or edit the content of comments in news. Instead, NYTimes.com users accept that their submissions “may be edited, removed, modified [. . .] and you waive any rights you may have in having the material altered or changed in a manner not agreeable to you.” Other newsrooms reserve the right to not accept or delete a comment, with different legal implications for each of these actions. Not publishing content is unproblematic, as the corporate entity can declare to do it “to our sole discretion,” as is the case in Guardian.co.uk. The right to delete comments is less justifiable depending on regulations in each country.

To prevent the problems that globalization poses to legal systems, the online newspapers mention explicitly in their legal texts what are the laws that are applicable to the contract. They try to “attract” to their own national jurisdiction any legal conflict that may arise from user participation, and users comply with this when accepting the contract.

Conversations in Action

The analysis of conversations in the sample reveals to what extent the moderation teams manage to keep the debates within the limits the newsrooms have set. The length of debates varied widely, between 2,826 comments in a story at EIPais.com and 60 at pieces by Repubblica.it and LeMonde.fr. Considering that we selected the stories that attracted most comments each day, it is evident that politics (in some cases with connection to economy) was the most discussed topic that week in the online newspapers. Only Guardian.co.uk had sports news as the most commented during the weekend, and EIPais.com has few stories of a more social than political profile.

There was a numerous pool of contributors to each of the thirty-two discussions: The 15,314 comments were produced by 12,309 nicknames. The registration systems of the online newspapers do not prevent one user to have several nicknames registered, and therefore it is not possible to ensure that there were actually more than twelve thousand participants. Nevertheless, it is clear that most users (82.5 percent) just contribute once to the debates, therefore not really engaging into a conversation. Eleven percent of users participate twice. Only Guardian.co.uk and EIPais.com have users that contribute more than a half dozen of times, a core of between 2 and 3 percent members of the community that tends to participate in almost every story we analyzed, which is not to be found in the rest of the online newspapers. In the stories of the British newspaper, three users contributed more than twenty-one comments, and EIPais.com had six users over that rate (Table 3).

Logic and Coherence

Participants mostly stay on topic in the discussions, following the explicit recommendations of most of the participation guidelines: 86.4 percent contribute ideas about the news story, its protagonists, the precedents or consequences, or compare it to similar cases. Pre-moderated comments are the ones that have the higher rate of focus, with Repubblica.it bordering the 100 percent (Table 4). On the contrary, Guardian.co.uk had

Table 3. Frequency of Comments per Users (%)

No. of Comments	ElPaís.com	Repubblica.it	Guardian.co.uk	NYTimes.com	LeMonde.fr
1	72.2	88.2	88.6	93.6	95.9
2	17.6	8.5	5.1	4.6	4.1
3	3.7	2.0	2.2	1.2	0.0
4	2.5	0.6	1.2	0.4	0.0
5	1.1	0.4	0.6	0.1	0.0
6	0.8	0.2	0.5	0.1	0.0
7	0.6	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
8	0.4	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
9	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0
10	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0
11–15	0.3	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0
16–20	0.2	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
21–25	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
≥26	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0

Table 4. Do Participants Focus on the Topic of the News Story?

	Total No. of Comments	Focused Comments	%
ElPaís.com	8,247	7,060	85.6
NYTimes.com	2,804	2,647	94.4
Guardian.co.uk	2,019	1,445	71.5
Repubblica.it	1,524	1,519	99.7
LeMonde.fr	720	557	77.4

conversations evolve away from the story of the day to more general issues, such as the economic crisis or the government policies. Still a lively discussion, but some threads in the conversation ended up having scarce direct relationship with the events of the day.

The topicality of most of the debates did not always imply that users had the intention of arguing their points: The overall percentage falls to 59.5 percent. There is much more divergence among newspapers on this aspect, with the NYTimes.com almost having 80 percent while LeMonde.fr barely surpasses 40 percent (Table 5).

Cooperative Search for Truth

A crucial element for the democratic qualities of a debate is that speakers acknowledge each other as valid interlocutors. The degree of mutual respect in the conversation can be measured by the presence of insults and derogatory references to other

Table 5. Do Participants Try to Argue Their Points?

	Comments	Argumentative Comments	%
ElPaís.com	8,247	4,793	58.1
NYTimes.com	2,804	2,213	78.9
Guardian.co.uk	2,019	1,324	65.6
Repubblica.it	1,524	871	57.2
LeMonde.fr	720	306	42.5

Table 6. Presence of Insults and Derogatory References (%)

	Insults	Derogatory References
ElPaís.com	1.1	13.4
NYTimes.com	0	3.16
Guardian.co.uk	0.64	2.38
Repubblica.it	1.77	7.09
LeMonde.fr	0.98	42.64

participants. Moderation has clearly achieved the goal of keeping insults off the comments in news: Less than 1 percent of all comments contains dirty language. Derogatory language is a bit more prevalent, with up to 10 percent of contributions, but it is mostly used against the actors in the news stories (politicians, most of the time) and political institutions in general, rather than against other participants. Journalists and the newspapers themselves also get criticism that reaches derogatory tone in some cases. The volume of derogatory references varies greatly among online newspapers and depending on the topic of the news stories. LeMonde.fr is the one that has more, followed by ElPaís.com and Repubblica.it (Table 6). Acknowledging that there is a very low rate of deleted comments in the online newspapers (data not shown), it seems evident that users try to avoid openly insulting and try to express their rage or hatred with other rhetorical strategies, such as irony. While insults are easily detected by filtering software and spotted by moderators, derogatory language requires a more subjective assessment.

We have seen that not all participants make the effort of arguing their positions. The fact is that in most of the online newspapers there is actually few different points of view being shared in the discussions. The U.S. and U.K. websites are those that both have the most argumentative participants and most diverse contributors. In the other online newspapers, disagreement is an exception. The Guardian has a 23.8 percent of comments that challenge the majoritarian leftist profile of their readers, openly defending neoliberal solutions in the economic debates. Few users do ask others to develop their arguments further. NYTimes.com is the one where this is more prevalent, with 8.7 percent of the contributions (Table 7).

Table 7. Do Participants Offer Different Points of View and Ask Each Other for Clarifications?

	Presence of Diverse Points of View	Comments Asking for Clarifications
ElPaís.com	1.6	4.34
NYTimes.com	11.95	8.74
Guardian.co.uk	23.85	1.83
Repubblica.it	1.5	1.97
LeMonde.fr	2.87	2.36

Table 8. Do Participants Show Interest on Other Contributions, and Do They Adhere to Them?

	Interest in Other Contributions	Adherence to Other Contributions
ElPaís.com	10.25	1.78
NYTimes.com	8.7	7.10
Guardian.co.uk	40.85	4.23
Repubblica.it	1.47	0.37
LeMonde.fr	5.26	3.16

An Agreement Based on the Best Argument

Only 11.4 percent of the participants show interest for the arguments of other contributors, in order to counterargue or adhere to them. There is big difference between news media as well in this category. The Guardian.co.uk community is the one where more dialogues emerge between different users, sometimes interactions of several messages involving two or more participants. This pattern involves 40.5 percent of the comments, from which one in ten is to adhere to the other contributor's idea. Far from this number are ElPaís.com and NYTimes.com, which has the singularity that almost all the references to other users' messages is to second them. Participants at Repubblica. it do not seem to care about other contributions.

Discussion: Dynamics of Audience Participation

Readers in NYTimes.com and Guardian.co.uk consider themselves part of a community for public discussion on current events. Different opinions are welcome and mostly respected, and contributors try to support their views with arguments. This does not mean that they seek consensus, but they try to beat opposed views with the

strength of reasons instead of with the rule of intimidation. In the U.S. newspaper, users stay more focused on the news story topic, while in Guardian.co.uk they are more active in engaging in dialogues, but both are clearly apart from the dynamics of the other newspapers.

The *New York Times* is usually regarded as one of the most influential public opinion setters globally. Its community values that comments contribute elaborate reflections: “Wow—each response here is like an article unto itself—that’s the outpouring of the masses I suppose” (Ashwin Kalbag, November 4). Debates are on topic and well argued, with a wider range of opinions than in most of the other news websites. A relevant number of users contribute their personal or professional experience to support their opinions. Many other contributions offer data without quoting the source, and those who do tend to use *New York Times* itself or other news media (*The Guardian*, C-Span) or A-list blogs as reference. Most comments are critical with the Obama administration in the context of the U.S. midterm elections, but a small percentage end up being derogatory (8.3 percent was the maximum in a story about the president’s policy priorities). Some users promote their own weblog in their comments, taking advantage of the visibility of NYTimes.com as a public arena.

The dynamics of discussions at Guardian.co.uk tend to be similar in all the stories analyzed. The first contributions focus on the topic of the article and then they spin off to related topics that connect to broader themes. Many of the contributors appear in different stories and some write several times in each story, having a serious conversation on how to address the economic crisis that transcends each story but that starts again with the new material provided by each news piece. A significant number of contributors try to elaborate arguments for their points. As in the NYTimes.com, some use their professional expertise and others their personal experience as a case:

I work for the Ministry of Justice and they have been pretty open about the cuts. The internal comments they have made reflect the comments that have been made here. (joffle, November 3)

A small amount of comments uses sources, mainly online news articles, but also specific pieces of legislation and specialized data. In every conversation, especially in the ones with political implications, there are two clear positions confronted: The majority has a left-wing perspective on the situation, very critical with the current coalition government. A significant minority (about 24 percent of the comments) has neoliberal positions. In football stories, the diversity of opinions is smaller, as mainstream clubs’ fans dominate on the chronicle about their team, but there are still analyses and arguments, though less than in the other stories. Most of the times the debate is an intense dialogue of arguments, but it tends to be very civilized and users have the habit of quoting another user’s sentence before counterarguing, and sometimes acknowledging the good point made by a likeminded poster or even an opponent:

That's rubbish DrJazz and you know it—you are just being provocative again. The workforce in 1979 was totally different than today. I would think there are 6 or 7 million more in employment today than in the seventies. (tycroes65)

Unemployment is set to rise to 5m as RochdalePioneers has pointed out. (DrJazz)

DrJazz—yes, apologies—I did not explain myself correctly. The point I was trying to make was that you were not comparing like with like—as your subsequent figures show. (tycroes65)

In the other three online newspapers, the situation could be described as that of a dialogue of the deaf, as very few users contribute more than one comment and there is very little diversity of opinion. That is not to say that users do not make elaborated arguments (between 42.5 percent at LeMonde.fr and 58.1 percent at EIPais.com, with Repubblica.it close to the latest), but they do not seem to listen to each other. Interestingly enough, the amount of derogatory messages is higher than in the more plural communities of NYTimes.com and Guardian.co.uk. Considering the fact that the amount of comments trying to argue their position is much lower than in the U.S. and U.K. online newspapers, we could characterize audience participation in the rest of the sample as more prone to express the frustrations of citizens, without contributing to create a community of debate.

The stories at EIPais.com vary a lot in the focus of comments and their argumentative strength. One story on new orthography regulations has almost a 100 percent of topical contributions, with only 20 percent elaborating their point, while 80 percent tried to argue their position in the story about a legal reform that aims to stop the dominion of the father's surname. An actual dialogue is almost nonexistent, with few users making more than one contribution. Comments are mostly a monologue by the hegemonic opinion among the readers of the newspaper, coincidental with the editorial perspective of the newsroom. Contributions comfortably replicate the ideological positions expressed by *El País* in its reporting.

Despite this lack of diversity of points of view, EIPais.com has the second highest volume of derogatory language. It represents 13.4 percent, and considering that they have one of the most comprehensive sets of participation rules, it is not surprising that the newspaper ombudsman is not satisfied with the quality of the debate. In the aforementioned article (see note 11) she accepted that they had to improve the moderation system because “we can't accept that any space under our brand is below the standards of quality” of the newspaper. Half of the comments with derogatory tone attack the actors of the story. Participants in the debate with a different ideological background than the majority of the readers of *El País* are the second target, followed by the newspaper, which, as is the case in the other media analyzed, is accused of being politically biased. The moderation team was unable to filter messages that were clearly breaking the participation rules set up by the online newspaper. We could find comments celebrating

terrorism, insinuations about the sexual orientation of the opposition party leader Mariano Rajoy (an ideological antagonist of the newspaper), and severe libelous references to the Pope and the Catholic Church: “Vete a la mierda, Benedicto. Protector de pederastas y nazis” (Guillermo, November 6).

At LaRepubblica.it, moderation seems to be efficient in keeping the debate focused, but not necessarily clean of derogatory language or developing a dialogue. Few stories are open for comments and the high level of topicality of contributions suggests that users are aware that they have to stay focused on the story. A fair deal of messages tries to argue their point, between 47 and 61.7 percent depending on the story. Despite the fact that insults are low in average, there is one story where they reach 10 percent and another where derogatory tone is found in 18.3 percent of the comments. Again, politicians and political institutions are the target of most of the hatred, accordingly to the editorial position of the newspaper, very critical with Berlusconi and his government. Moderators delete out offensive insults, substituting them by “. . .,” and in our sample one user accused them of censorship. A third of the contributions on a story about the victory of Republicans in the U.S. midterm elections were written in capital letters, something usually unacceptable according to netiquette, as it suggests the user is screaming: “MABASTAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” (Ugolino01, November 3).

Just 1.3 percent of the contributors post more than three times, and there are few interactions between participants in the debate. They seldom ask for more details about the position of other contributors, and almost never support someone else’s views. The fact that there is little diversity of opinion may discourage a more intense dialogue, like in ElPaís.com. Sources are used in less than 1 percent of comments. Among hundreds of users with curiously twisted nicknames, we surprisingly found an economist stating his full name and city of residence.

As the possibility of making comments is limited to subscribers only, the comment community of LeMonde.fr is very homogeneous. Users express freely their opinions sometimes in a very elegant way, with quotes of the classics of French literature and national songwriters: “Le premier qui dit la vérité, Il doit être exécuté’ . . . réécoutez Georges Brassens!” (Jacques Vuillemin, November 4, 2010). This is the medium with fewer users trying to argue their position. Irony—for example, “Nous allons combler le déficit en exportant des bananes (pourquoi pas à Berlusconi)” (November 2, 2010)—and exclamations and rhetorical questions are far more common: “Echanger un travail contre une rémunération, c’est pas le principe du salariat théoriquement? Sont pt’être en train de le réinventer? Faudrait alors dire à tous les chômeurs de se transformer en bénévoles pour avoir de quoi vivre” (Bourrique, November 8, 2010). Sources are scarce, and sometimes are a mere quotation of some other newspaper, an official data source (broadly known, in fact), or even an auto-mention: “Sur les conséquences diplomatiques (et autres) de Sarkozy: <http://ekaminski.blog.lemonde.fr/> (Eric Kaminski on November 7).

Discrepancy is accepted and the newspaper itself is criticized, always in name of democracy (“la République”). The *res publica*, in fact, is a common value that both the medium and its public—at least, those conscious enough to participate in a public

debate through comments to news—are happy to maintain, contributing to a very coherent collective discourse in the comments, despite the fact that there is little dialogue between contributors. The high volume of derogatory comments (more than 40 percent of the total) are mainly addressed to the French president and the politicians in general in a moment of highly volatile social conflict in the country, where the audience—aligning again with the editorial position of the newsroom—feels that the foundations of democracy are being endangered.

Conclusions: Models of Online Public Debate

The two models of online public discussion that our analysis clearly delimitates are mainly characterized by the diversity of points of view, the amount of argumentation and the volume of actual dialogue between the participants. In the *communities of debate* of NYTimes.com and Guardian.co.uk, these aspects rank significantly higher than in the other online newspapers. LeMonde.fr, ElPaís.com, and Repubblica.it have *homogenous communities* that we have described as having a dialogue of the deaf. In all the cases, the majority of users adhere to the ideological principles of the newsroom, but while in the first two the presence of an alternative minority perspective is tolerated and fosters debate, in the other three contributions tend to be a coherent collective reproduction of the same positions.

The results of this study suggest that the cultural context is relevant to the democratic quality of the debates we analyzed. Corresponding to the context of internal pluralism found in the media of countries belonging to the Liberal model, conversations at NYTimes.com and Guardian.co.uk showed a greater deal of argumentation, respect among participants, and diversity of ideas than the other online newspapers in the sample. Comments in news on these websites are closer to the principles of Habermas' discursive ethics and could be—paraphrasing Steiner (2005)—part of the new foundations for the Europe of Internet cafés, contributing, from the digital public sphere, to consolidate democratic processes in Western societies. On the other hand, the online discussions where there is less respect between participants and less pluralism are to be found in the cases from countries of the “Polarized Pluralist” model (ElPaís.es, LeMonde.fr, and Repubblica.it). The tendency for external pluralism in the media systems of these online newspapers could be the reason why participants are mostly aligned with the ideological perspective of the newsroom: Citizens participate in the spaces provided by their news website of choice, mostly finding similar positions to theirs and editorial content that fosters political polarization.

While the relationship between media systems and political systems seems to affect the quality of democratic debate, it is a surprising finding that differences in moderation strategies have no direct impact on the dynamics of online news comments. Moderation strategies of the different newsrooms do seem to be effective in almost eradicating insults in the comments, but the different solutions adopted (pre-/postmoderation, in-house/outsourced) do not seem to direct the quality of the debate in a clear direction. Repubblica.it and NYTimes.com share a similar workflow, with

premoderation being done in the newsroom by journalists, but the dynamics of the debates are radically different. Guardian.co.uk, which has the most off-hands approach to moderation (is the only one doing postmoderation and hiring members of the public to oversee the debates), is actually the news website with less derogatory language. It is not uncommon to read comments of users telling another one to calm down when the tone of a contribution gets too harsh. It would be advisable that comment moderation, especially in the media of the Polarized Pluralist model, would adopt more effective strategies to bring conversations closer to Habermas' ideal model of discursive ethics.

This study analyzed a very limited sample of comments in news stories to assess the quality of the debates in online newspapers from the normative perspective of Habermas' discursive ethics. More extensive research, during a longer period with a bigger sample, would allow offering more nuanced details on the two models and the differences between them and within them, as they do not have clearly defined boundaries. In-depth case studies combining content analysis with ethnographic methods could reveal how moderators make their decisions and how do newsrooms relate to the debates (only one journalist in our sample participated with comments in one of his stories) and explore the motivations of users that engage in the discussions. Demographic data about the readership of the online newspapers may also be helpful to understand the social background of participants.

Further research should also explore in more depth the relationship between media pluralism and the quality of debates in comments in news, suggested by our findings. Comparing the pluralism in news stories with the diversity of perspectives in reader debates would provide empirical evidence to this purpose. Hallin and Mancini (2004) point out that there is actually diversity within media in a given country; their models just identify patterns and no country perfectly fits a model. A bigger sample of media in different countries—including media representing the third model proposed by the authors (the "Democratic Corporatist" model found in North and Central European countries)—would help better assessing how the internal/external pluralism trends in news media shape comments in news. The sample should also assess debates in other news formats, like the websites of the "popular press."

The choice of "quality newspapers," despite being deliberate, may have left out of the analysis different dynamics to be found in more popular oriented media. The tendency of journalism to produce stories on the dialogical tension between two actors (mainly in politics and sports, reproducing sound bites rather than reporting on facts) should be specifically addressed, as it seems to foster a polarization of positions in the citizen debates on the news. The analysis of the reactions of citizens to the reporting of a specific global event in different online media outlets could be fruitful for more direct comparisons of cultural and media format divergences.

Beyond the differences deriving from the journalistic model of each country and news outlet, broader cultural aspects may play a role in shaping the tone of the debates in comments in news. A complementary approach to the analysis of the discursive ethics of the conversations would be a linguistic analysis of written orality (Pérez-Sabater et al.

2008; Yates 1996) as a discourse register with its own rules (Ferrara et al. 1991), similar to the fruitful comparative analysis of hard news by Thomson et al. (2008).

While the results of the study suggest a rather bleak overall picture of comments in online news as a space for the reproduction of hegemonic points of view and the expression of the citizen frustrations with the ruling class, they also provide evidence that some users do engage (more in some online newspapers than others) in thoughtful discussions enjoying the exercise of trying to provide the most convincing argument. Public Sphere 2.0 is not perfect either.

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Notes

1. The debate was mainly held through public lectures by both philosophers in 1999, receiving a lot of media attention at that time.
2. www.guardian.co.uk/community-standards.
3. www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/faq/comments.html.
4. forums.lemonde.fr/perl/faq_french.pl?Cat=.
5. www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/Comentarios/poco/edificantes/elpepiopi/20091220/elpepiopi_5/Tes.
6. www.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/technology/12comments.html.
7. www.guardian.co.uk/community-faqs#204.
8. The data in this paragraph are based on what online newspapers state on their websites and interviews conducted in another research project in some of the newsrooms (Author, in press).
9. www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/faq/comments.html.
10. www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/Comentarios/poco/edificantes/elpepiopi/20091220/elpepiopi_5/Tes.
11. www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/incumple/propia/norma/elpepuopi/20100704elpepiopi_5/Tes.

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