'Ooh, politics. You're brave.' Politics in everyday talk: an analysis of three 'non-political' online spaces.

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Civic culture requires a talkative electorate, where discussion is a way of making evident a sense of connection between citizens and the democratic process. Yet despite the apparent benefits of political talk (Dahlgren 2006; Crick 2000) evidence suggests that for many people political talk is limited, or avoided. In this chapter we consider the political component of what might be characterised as 'everyday talk' amongst citizens occurring in online spaces. Our focus is online because the Internet is considered a place providing ample opportunity for political engagement (Norris 2002) and offers a transparent window into some of the processes of political talk (we refer to online discussion as 'talk', even though we acknowledge that participants are actually typing). Unlike much previous research we do not consider websites that are explicitly presented as being for political discussion, instead we use both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of three popular, general interest, UK-based online discussion forums: *HotUKDeals, Digitalspy,* and *Mumsnet*. These websites cover salient aspects of contemporary culture: consumption, media and family; and offer a broad representation

of everyday topics of conversation. Together they claim over 1.5 million registered members and archive over 70 million individual posts from which we aim to provide a sense of the character of political talk within everyday conversations. Our findings shine a light on both the possibilities and barriers for civic and audience empowerment through participating in everyday talk online.

Political talk and political engagement

Dahlgren (2006) argues that in a healthy democracy all must feel able to participate and that without a sense of civic-ness resonating with the choices we make, democracy may lose moral authority. His widely-cited work notes a circuit of six dimensions required in order for participatory democracy to thrive: knowledge, values, identities, affinity, experience and *discussion*. The latter - talking about politics - is envisaged as the lubricant keeping the circuit alive. This is because conversations involve not only exchanges of information but also interpretive frameworks that help to process that information. By allowing people to critically engage with ideas and construct arguments, conversations are a rich form of political information (Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zuniga 2011). This is supported empirically, particularly in the election context, where studies have found that talking about politics promotes mobilisation and engagement in political activities (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Shah et al. 2005; Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000; Semetko and Valkenburg, 1998).

However, a decline in the worth placed on citizenly action and in political institutions has been noted (Marquand 2004). This view is succinctly articulated by Dahlgren (2003: 151): 'the formal systems seem stagnant ... and citizens are dropping out as manifested in declines in voting ... and in some places a marked growth in civic cynicism'. Eliasoph (1997, 1998) reveals how this political disengagement can stifle political talk. She claims that in a privatised public sphere citizens increasingly 'assume that talking politics in a publicly mannered way is wrong and out of place' (1998: 245). For Eliasoph, people avoid having to face concerns considered to be public and distant in character, instead focusing only on terrain where they feel personally attached. Scholars have therefore documented a decline in political talk, with widespread use of commercial language in everyday talk reducing the connectedness between individuals and the political system (Clarke 2006). Couldry's work in the UK (2005) supports the argument for this decline, noting a lack of perceived opportunity and proficiency as reasons for a disconnection with politics and related conversations. Public discussion has thus become small-scale, local, and practically-oriented, contradicting grander notions of the public sphere (Habermas 1992).

Political talk online

Within the climate of perceived decline in political engagement the Internet is often positioned as a new and important location for igniting political interest (Bohman 2004; Janssen and Kies 2005). Evidence supporting such an assertion has demonstrated that against highly individualised ways of living, the web connects large networks and can

enhance social capital (Shah et al. 2001), increase political participation (Wellman et al. 2003), and civic engagement (Jennings and Zeitner 2003).

Political talk forms part of this activity online. Coleman and Blumler (2008: 117) argue when referring to online spaces that 'there is a vast sphere of autonomous interaction taking place within and between publics'. They argue that democratic citizenship is enhanced by online participation, increased information-sharing and confidence gained through being part of a network or community. For example they claim: 'There is something manifestly democratising about women having the capacity to find and share information without needing to depend upon expert services. Democratic citizenship is clearly strengthened as a result of the enhanced confidence experienced as a result of being part of a community, albeit dispersed and virtual' (2008: 130).

However, there is a danger here of assuming online groups always equate to 'community' and then equating this with democracy, thereby ignoring the limitations in individuals' ability to gain the sort of empowerment that online talk promises. For example, according to Mutz (2002) the heterogeneous nature of the web results in a desire to avoid dispute and disagreement and that results in a disincentive for contentious political talk. Then there is the commercial focus of some large forums that place limits on the types of issues that can be discussed, and can discourage fights and the use of complex language. Witte and Mannon's (2010) review of online social inequalities also reminds us of the continuing need to recognise a 'digital divide' that is no longer just an issue of access, but also about the skills and competencies individuals

possess. Far from a level playing field of participation, the tendency of the Internet to both fragment, and to produce special interest groups may worsen inequalities in political power, especially for those who lack confidence, competence and efficacy in expressing their views. This is recognised by Coleman and Blumler (2008) who, like Witte and Mannon (2010), conclude with the possibility that only those already politically active may have the skills and motivation to seek out online political spaces and that these individuals are already over-represented in political participation.

Nancy Baym (2007) further notes a need to question whether online community could be taken for granted as an outcome of online groups, recognising that online groups themselves may vary greatly in their character such that the emergence of 'community' cannot be assured. Coleman and Blumler's (2008) analysis of political activism online suggests that even many democratically-oriented forums are only partially successful. They acknowledge potential weaknesses in 'e-democracy from below': the disconnect between these sites of political discussion and institutional politics; the likelihood that online networks reproduce groups with similar interest rather than bridge connections with others and their interests; and the spontaneous, episodic nature of any political engagement. What this suggests is that normative assumptions about what happens online can too easily result in an overstatement of the degree to which the Internet produces widespread political engagement.

The character of political talk

There are a range of views about what might constitute political talk and this definitional work is crucial because depending on the criteria used, very different levels

of engagement with politics may be found. Broader definitions may reduce a feeling of 'crisis' in political talk by seeing it everywhere; narrower definitions may alternatively seem to exacerbate the problem by finding little or none.

Plummer (2003) argues that politics is personal and therefore that such things as sexuality, gender and lifestyle choices are inherently political, therefore suggesting that 'everything can be political'. Alternatively Graham and Harju (2011: 22) suggest that political discussion emerges only when 'a participant makes a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue or topic in general to society, which stimulates reflection and a response'. Schudson (1997) argues that not all political conversations are meaningful for democratic participation, and calls for a tighter definition of political talk that excludes casual conversation and focuses on goals, issues, problem-solving, public interests (as opposed to private) and on persuasive and/or informative qualities. He therefore privileges use of logic, evidence and reasoning in that discussion should facilitate reaching agreements on the problems or issues that need to be addressed through government or collective action.

Nevertheless, as Scheufele (2000: 778) notes, 'it is reasonable to assume that casual conversation makes political talk more likely'. It is therefore surprising that most research into online political discussion has focused on explicitly political forums (Dahlberg 2001; Tsaliki 2002), thus favouring those with the motivation to visit such sites and so telling us little about how political talk finds its way into everyday conversations. By locating our analysis in general interest online forums, we investigate

some of the dynamics between the everyday and the 'political'. We examine how much everyday online talk can be considered political; how such talk responds to political events, political communication and media coverage of politics; and how individuals make connections between their everyday experiences of life and politics through talk. We also investigate the character and quality of political talk: whether it is goal-oriented, reasoned, short-lived or deliberative.

Methods

We have used a quantitative content analysis approach in order to find the extent of political talk in everyday discussion, its location and duration. In addition we have also used a netnographic approach, now well established in consumer research (Kozinets 2002) allowing us to say something about the quality, character and motivation for such talk within everyday life. We selected forums which have a broad interest in important aspects of everyday life: HotUKDeals, a consumer 'deal' forum; Digitalspy, a media website that has a large discussion forum; and Mumsnet, a forum that focuses on family life. Our forums therefore cover a wide range of potential conversations important to everyday life.

Built around a forum, HotUKDeals allows users to share details of anything they consider to be a good purchase. In was founded in August 2004, and since then there have been at over 1 million threads and 12 million posts (as of September 2012). The site claims 600,000 registered members (September 2012) and typically has over 20,000 people online at any one time. In addition to 'deal' posts there is a 'for sale' category, a

voucher category, and a 'misc' section for discussion outside specific deals. It is in this misc section that most of the political talk was located.

Digitalspy is the UK's largest independent entertainment news and discussion website, and in the top 30 English language forums in the world. Starting in 2001, it has over 475,000 members and 60 million posts (September 2012). More than 12.5 million people visit the site every month (Google Analytics). The site is primarily about entertainment, showbiz, movies and music, but there is a dedicated 'politics' sub-forum on the site.

Started by a 'mum' in 2000 as a social enterprise, Mumsnet is a UK-based website that aggregates knowledge, experience and support for parents. Since its inception it has grown significantly and extended its remit to writing guides and books related to being a mother. Whilst it has acquired political connotations due to its apparent influence and the presence of politicians in webchats (such as the three main party leaders in 2010), the forum remains overwhelmingly focused on parental advice and product reviews. There is a politics section under the category of 'other' discussions.

Although exact demographics cannot be known, the general interest nature of the sites suggests that they are broadly representative of Internet users, with a subsequent bias towards ABC1, less than fifty years old, in full time work and urban based (New Media Trend Watch 2011). It is also important to recognise the scale of these general interest forums, especially when compared to explicitly political ones. As an indicative

comparison, PoliticsForum.co.uk has a total of around 200,000 posts, 2865 members (September 2012) and typically 15 users online at any time.

As part of an on-going netnography, the authors monitored the sites between 1 September and 30 November 2010. This three-month, non-election period captured some of the ebbs and flows typical in the political cycle, and did not include any seismic news events that might tilt the amount and nature of talk on these forums towards politics. Given the volume of new posts and threads it was not possible to monitor every one. Threads were therefore collected from the site on different days and at different times to minimize any temporal bias in conversation type. Both Mumsnet and Digitalspy have areas specifically inviting political talk and these were included in our analysis to the extent that reflected their relative size in the entire forum. In total, 1620 threads were analysed (Digitalspy: 430, Mumsnet: 460 and HotUKDeals: 730) equating to 9.5 per cent of the total posts during the period of data collection. These were initially categorised according to whether the opening post (OP) of each thread appeared to invite 'explicit' or 'implicit' political discussion; or whether it was non-political. 'Explicitly' political talk in our study makes direct reference to an MP, Parliament, government (national or local) or government department, election, politician or name of politician, law-making, policy, Westminster, political party, manifesto, protest, campaign, pressure group, QUANGO or public body. 'Implicit' political talk makes only indirect reference to any of the above. We were not language literal here; instead we looked for words and expressions that, read in their context, referred to aspects of mainstream political systems, structures and participants; see Hay (2002) for a fuller discussion of this. In line with Schudson (1997), our operationalization of 'political'

talk therefore favours that which is goal-oriented, problem solving and public interest-tilted; and is therefore quite conservative when compared to some other studies. The amount of political talk one finds online can potentially be vastly overestimated or underestimated based on the tightness of the definition. Whilst accepting that anything *can be seen as* political, because it can be linked to something that politicians talk about, it does not mean that it is seen that way by the participants involved. We therefore coded 'political' talk as where the person makes some link to the political process (both formal and informal), either explicitly or implicitly.

All opening posts coded as either explicitly or implicitly political (115 were found) were analysed qualitatively. The research team then randomly selected every tenth thread from the entire sample of opening posts coded as non-political (resulting in a sub-sample of 156) to see if either implicit or explicit political talk *emerged* within the thread. Each forum was analysed by a different author to identify key themes, then reassessed by another author. Multiple independent analyses reduced the chances of us missing something important and allowed us to identify both commonalities and differences in our interpretation of each theme. Our research design therefore produced a quantitative data set on the extent of political talk in each forum and three sets of narratives that relate to the actual political talk that emerged within everyday talk about consumption, the media and the family.

FINDINGS

Looking at the headline quantitative findings first (Table 15.1), a weighted aggregation of this data to take account of the different universe and sample sizes means that of all

OP's (which are invitations to start a discussion on a topic) approximately 7 per cent are either explicitly or implicitly political. This extent of talk with a political character is remarkably similar to that found in seminal work on civic culture over forty years ago (Almond and Verba 1965) and possibly acts as a reminder of the limits of technology (such as the Internet) to re-invigorate political engagement.

Table 15.1: The amount of political talk

	Non-political	Explicitly political	Implicitly political
HotUKDeals	95%	3%	2%
Mumsnet	87%	7%	6%
Digitalspy	91%	3%	6%

Although Digitalspy and Mumsnet have a 'politics' category in their forums (HotUKDeals does not) of all opening posts we classified as political most (80 per cent for DigitalSpy and 84 per cent for Mumsnet) are located under forum categories *other than* the politics category. This suggests that for many people their political talk is contained *within* their discussions about other issues; they have no direct interest in seeking out political discussion. Or, perhaps people don't consider such talk as political at all (see Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000). This is further evidenced by the fact that of all the political talk we identified nearly half (ranging from 40 per cent for HotUKDeals to 66 per cent for Digitalspy) the opening posts were considered implicit (Table 15.1).

Table 15.2: The average number of posts per thread for political opening posts compared to the overall forum average

	Average No. of posts per thread for all OP's	Average No. of posts per thread for political OP's
HotUKDeals	30	54
Mumsnet	27	19
Digitalspy	34	41

We also looked at the volume of responses opening posts generated. Here the comparison is made with the forums' own figures for average posts. No clear pattern is found in Table 15.2, though at a macro level this indicates that political talk online is at least just as likely to generate response as talk on other subjects. However we did find that when the opening post referred to an issue that was in the media there were more posts in the thread than when it didn't.

We looked at every tenth non-political opening post to see if and how political talk emerged in a discussion that clearly did not begin as either explicitly or implicitly political. There were no instances where this occurred in HotUKDeals and only one (2 per cent) in Mumsnet. The relatively high number of times we found political talk developing within non-political opening posts in Digitalspy (20 per cent) is, in part, explained by the fact that in these forums people talk a great deal about their media exposure, which is often political. Political talk would also appear to be more permissible on Digitalspy, as it offers a specific invitation on its forum homepage.

We make no normative judgement here about whether the overall frequency of political talk emerging is a cause for concern or celebration since such positions are inevitably

wrapped up in the value afforded to such practices. However, in our qualitative analysis we can further attempt to understand characteristics of political talk and what they tell us about issues of empowerment and political engagement.

Framing political talk

A sense of shared understanding of politics appears, in the talk we found, to be significantly framed by political events and the subsequent media coverage of them. Over 40 per cent of all political OP's were directly attributable to a story in the news media, and there was typically a link to this story in the OP. Links between media exposure and political talk are strong and long-established, with a number of studies finding news media as *the* universal trigger of conversational topics of the day (e.g. Kim, Wyatt and Katz 1999).

Although mediation of politics provides an impetus for talk, we found that it also acts to limit it in a number of ways. The coverage itself often becomes the focal point, rather than the detail of policy or the complexity of the argument. The most accessible aspect of such coverage, and so likely points for discussion, are the elements of spectacle in the programme. For example, when discussing an episode of Question Time on Mumsnet, the topic of conversation is George Galloway's appearance, but more specifically his performance as a debater.

Chill1234: 'Galloway may be good telly but he is a terrible debater.'

Looktowindward: 'Agreed, Galloway is an excellent orator but his arguments tend to be a little on the thin side.'

Six people contribute to the discussion (with a total of 19 posts), and two of them attempt to make links to policy (debating whether Galloway was right about Blair and Iraq in particular). However, focus soon turns to how another Question Time panel member – the footballer Clarke Carlisle – performed.

GabbyLogonn: 'Clark carlisle was ok for a first try. He did get a bit lost. I cant match his exam results.'

This highly mediated political talk contributes to making any subsequent discussion highly temporal; another day means another story to talk about.

A second key framing device evident in OP's (across a range of topics) was to invite others to agree with an expressed opinion. Such framing tended to narrow the scope of subsequent posts to the thread; most simply express agreement or disagreement with the original statement. In threads that are explicitly political, participants typically take an initial position on an issue and then maintain it, providing little or only selective evidence to support their view. Discussion of climate change (prompted by Ryanair boss, Michael O'Leary's claim that global warming does not exist) in Digitalspy is typical of this. Despite the complexity of the subject matter and the potential of discussion to inform the views of the participants, discussion was about firming-up and defending a point of view, rather than looking for compromise or new perspectives. People were keen to post their view, but few asked questions or sought clarification, thus there is little evidence of people trying to understand this issue or move from an originally stated view. Instead, we see political point-scoring – selectively picking up points from your opponent and then discrediting them, often signed off with an emoticon. In this sense we witness citizens performing political debate as many

politicians do, where conceding ground or looking for consensus is often seen as a weakness. When surveyed, citizens often cite such macho point-scoring as a reason they avoid politics (Children and Young People's Unit 2002), yet when they are given the platform to talk politics, they adopt some of the same practices. Studies have shown how incivility in political exchanges can depress political trust (Mutz and Reeves 2005) and deter political participation online (Valenzuela et al. 2011). Conversely, discussions with an orientation towards 'understanding', can be a significant predictor of measures of civic and political engagement (Rojas 2008), and can encourage greater frequency of political conversations (Kim, Wyatt and Katz 1999).

A third broad category of OP framing was to ask a question of other forum members. Sometimes this was seeking specific advice on what they should do about a specific personal issue (e.g. 'Am I too old to have another child? Please be honest', Mumsnet). Other times the question was non-personal, but just something that was on their mind (e.g. 'have you ever stalked anyone?' or 'how much driving is too much?', Digitalspy). Sometimes people asked about political issues. Asking why the Labour government never tackled Lords reform (Digitalspy) or what the alternative vote (AV) system is about (Mumsnet) demonstrate both an interest in these topics, and a sense of empowerment within the online network that it is acceptable to have such talk. The limited response to these invitations (21 and four replies respectively) on the face of it indicates a lack of willingness and ability to discuss genuinely complex issues. In the case of the AV question, however, one very straightforward explanation meant there was no need for extended discussion. Whilst there was no clear conclusion to the Lords

reform thread, the collective responses outlined a number of explanations that addressed the OP's question.

Looked at in certain ways, the ability of these forums to collectively solve problems is impressive, and chimes with recent celebratory accounts of the power of online communities to work together (Shirky 2008; Leadbeater 2009). Nevertheless, we must keep in context the scarcity of political problem solving within this. HotUKDeals for example, is a remarkably successful network of intelligence-sharing on saving money. However, very rarely is this energy applied to politics. Finally, and importantly, questions in the OP invariably resulted in making discussions personalised, feeding the individual-oriented nature of talk. Viewpoints and arguments are thus conceived and articulated as issues that one has personal rather than collective interest in.

The direction and duration of political talk

The textual nature of these internet forums results in communications that are deprived of the nonverbal cues typical of face-to-face interactions. According to Berger (2009), this can result in discussions that are more goal-oriented than in offline networks. Consequently, we may conceive computer-mediated discussions as being more efficient at mobilizing individuals to participate in political affairs. Whilst evidence for such a process has been found in the context of explicitly political forums (see Gil de Zuniga and Valenzuela 2011), there was little evidence of it in our study.

Discussion was rarely goal-oriented and was largely about how to *react*. The Mumsnet and HotUKDeals discussions about government-announced cuts in child benefits were

typical of this. Here discussion was framed by those for and against the policy. It was often individualised, with people giving personal accounts of 'abuse of the benefit system' and also declaring their own skill at managing their own finances (without the need for benefits). Sometimes there was a call for action by those opposing the policy, but the call was couched in vague reference to what 'others' should be doing (such as government and politicians), but here people seemed to accept that the government or local council makes the decisions and thus they simply agree or disagree in their conversations, seldom recognising that policy might respond to their collective wishes. A sense of 'implicit passivity' towards the political system therefore pervades. Politics is something that happens to them, rather than something they feel empowered to shape.

Much of this political talk lacks both focus and direction and many discussions go off topic. OP's seldom attempt to manage or chair a discussion, hence a sense of 'randomness' prevails. There is baiting, trolling and joking, and threads often lack any clear purpose beyond simply having a chat (or even just wanting to provoke an argument). A culture of 'light', frivolous and playful chat pervades these forums, therefore serious and reflective contributions are often ignored. Indeed when these were introduced the conversation often ended. Very few ever reach a conclusion and this does not seem to matter to most of those involved.

This distancing of the political is further maintained by an underlying culture of cynicism towards politics and politicians, particularly on HotUKDeals where political talk is least acceptable. For example, on HotUKDeals an OP starts a thread titled 'how do we solve a problem like Pakistan?'. It then lists Pakistan's nuclear weapons

programme, failure to deal with recent floods, a lack of law and order, Islamic terrorism, and calls for sanctions before asking the opinions of others on the forum. The first reply is 'We should give the president a knighthood, like Mugabe'. Then there is a joke about sending Oprah or Jeremy Kyle to deal with it (who are used to discussing dysfunctional relationships). These responses set the tone for further discussion, which is punctuated by cynicism and humour. One response seems to encapsulate the attitude of forum members to politics: 'Ooh, politics. You're brave'.

Discussion

We found talk of all kinds, including politics, is typically framed as personal and individualized. It is primarily *not* being used to understand issues or unpack them, nor is the conversation about synthesis or compromise. There is an underlying passivity towards the political process in the talk generated online. Much of the talk that does take place actually serves to help keep the political system and process at a distance.

The media agenda-setting found in many discussions also adds, albeit more subtlety, to this distancing of politics from everyday life. Because much political talk was *reactive* in nature, many citizens performed the passivity to the political world that is constructed for them in news media (Brookes et al. 2004). Whilst media coverage of politics offers a sense of accessibility and permission to talk politics, it frames and limits subsequent discussions. Appearing in the media is used as a surrogate for a topic having high conversational appeal. It allows the discussion to be about the way the issue was covered; the spectacle of the media event rather than substantive policy talk. It also means that what appears in the media is used (sometimes verbatim) instead of the

individual offering their own argument. This accords strongly with our own recent study of how the 2010 British General Election leadership debates generated a certain 'type of talk' amongst the electorate (Scullion, Jackson and Molesworth, forthcoming). Whilst talking about and understanding the spectacle of politics undoubtedly has its value in a democracy, it must also be balanced with some understanding of the issues or policies at stake (see Jackson, 2012). Recent analyses of news coverage of politics suggest a shift in the balance towards political performance at the expense of policies (Jackson 2011), and this would appear to be reflected in the way that mediated politics is talked about.

The structure and cultural practices of Internet forums

In part, our findings can be accounted for by the very structure of the sites and the internal culture this fosters. Where a separate politics sub-forum exists, it is presented as an 'enclave' for specific interests; elsewhere there is little to invite political talk emerging, and a culture that resists complex and broad debate. Supporting this notion of purposeful separation, if the original post is non-political it is rare for a political post (implicit or explicit) to emerge in the subsequent thread. Informal moderation processes mean that when politics emerges within everyday talk, it is likely to be considered 'off topic' so inappropriate. This impedes spontaneous linking of political talk to other topics.

Previous research has found 'weak-tie' networks such as ours to have positive benefits for political learning and engagement (e.g. Valenzuela et al. 2011) because they expose individuals to information and resources that they do not find in their immediate environment of relatives and close friends. Whilst this may be the case, the sheer scale

and breadth of the general interest forums we examined suggests that some of the benefits of weak-ties may be compromised. As our netnography revealed, many people are typically involved in multiple discussions at once, which helps explain some of the trends we have observed. For example, on one typical day in November 2010, *IslandNiles*, a Digitalspy user, was simultaneously contributing to discussions on Coronation Street, how to lock a fuel cap on a Fiat Punto, BBC programme starting times, the growth of Blu-Ray, the Orange and T-Mobile network connection, and censorship on ITV. The thread on ITV censorship was implicitly political and so came to our attention, but by examining users in more detail we get a sense of their online behaviour in context. When people are dipping in and out of threads, it is very difficult for the discussions to have any sort of direction.

A second effect of the size and breadth of the popular general interest forums is the amount of traffic they generate. In some threads, conversation moves so fast as to impede any sense of collective progress or understanding. With some of these threads typically having hundreds of posts dispersed over dozens of pages, people do not have time to read what was said before in detail. Instead, they often will pick up on a point raised by another user, then affirm or challenge it. The pace of some threads means that lengthy, detailed posts that do not refer directly to a previous post can get lost in the traffic, hence most participants keep their points short. This makes for fragmented, chaotic discussion, with numerous splinter discussions taking place simultaneously and many participants simply talking past each other.

Politics and the overwhelming burden of everyday life

A more holistic account of our findings is rooted in the dominance of a culture of consumption evident in contemporary society (see Ewen 2001). Oldenberg's (1989) findings about how social spaces are used in our everyday lives offer value here. He argues that talking and thinking about the social, the collective and the distant future are both difficult to do and considered less important in consumer culture. Instead, the immediate, pressing, pleasurable and accessible are valued (manifest in talking/thinking about the self and the present). Spending time in the forums highlights their enormous capacity for socialising, pleasure and collective problem solving. Their members are very good at everyday talk: the sense of involvement, knowledge and empowerment felt towards personal things (such as finding and sharing great deals, or advice on parenthood) was at times remarkable. Whilst we witnessed – and some literature continues to vaunt – the *potential* of such forums to be a fillip to declining levels of formal political engagement, our study demonstrates that political talk constitutes a very small part of where most people choose to invest their time and energy. Furthermore, the confidence and efficacy evident when talking about everyday matters was invariably absent when discussing politics.

Most prominent to us is a sense that the sheer weight of everyday life means most people have relatively little inclination or time to get or stay involved in political discussion. By 'everyday' we refer to the all-pervasive routines and rhythms of our established arrangements that constitute it (Bull 2000). It is the practices that have a 'taken-for-granted' quality in which people engage with the material they encounter; the flux of responding, coping, managing, and controlling both the things that happen to

them and the situations they face. This everydayness is experienced as *separate from* politics and this is important because it supports the notion that we choose how to engage in politics through how we incorporate it (or avoid doing so) into our everyday life. Our findings suggest that for most people, to perform everyday-ness, they do not need politics.

Conclusion

In many ways our findings tell a familiar story of political cynicism and disengagement that are well documented in many Western democracies. But by examining everyday talk online this process is given greater transparency, as we can see both the opportunities and challenges that ordinary citizens have in doing political talk and engaging in public life. Our study laid bare the distance that exists between citizens and the political process. People could chat about politics as part of socialising, but lacked the motivation and resources to link with collective outcomes. It showed that while the barriers to talking politics are reasonably low in permissive online environments, having discussion that is meaningful for democracy is much harder.

This is where we return to definitions of politics and the political. We do not dismiss the value of talk that fits within the very loosest definitions of politics, as in itself talk can have many individual benefits, not all of which can be captured by analysing forums. Still in line with Schudson's (1997) admonition that not all political talk is meaningful for democracy, we deliberately set the bar quite high by requiring there to be some mention of the formal political process for posts to be considered political. Our findings

should therefore be read with this in mind: one could find as much or as little political talk as one liked by applying different definitions of 'politics'.

How might a greater sense of political empowerment and purpose be ingrained into everyday talk? We do not believe there are easy solutions to the concerns our findings raise. As we have argued, there are deep-rooted cultural and social trends at play that operate to distance politics from everyday life. The values associated with consumer culture that so pervade everyday life are not easily reversed. Whilst political parties, candidates and institutions are adapting to suit the needs of the contemporary electorate their effect is not always to make better connections between the citizen and the political process. Yes, the discussion forums could operate differently in order to encourage greater reflection, focus and goal-orientation, but we cannot expect technology to transform political engagement. People firstly need to feel institutions of power are sufficiently accessible, and that their voice does matter in politics. Until that happens, then political empowerment – the ability to act or take decisions in ways that affect one's self and/or others – will only be felt by a 'brave' minority.

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