

# Retoryka ruchów społecznych

## Rhetoric of social movements

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**Addressing audience through defining action: a rhetorical examination of civility and audience engagement on two online discussion forums**

**Wskazywanie audytorium przez definiowanie działania: retoryczna analiza obywatelstwa i zaangażowania odbiorców na przykładzie dyskusji online**

### Abstract

Web 2.0's progressive use of personalizing algorithms has dangerously situated users into filter bubbles, or digital habitus. This insulated nature leaves users with an inability to engage civilly with others during online dialogues. This work examines how users on the sites Facebook and Countable frame and address online audiences, paying attention to the correlation between civility and action beyond the online dialogue. Through careful analyses on the respective comment threads, this work finds that the coupling of fewer personalizing algorithms and the inclusion of an established action beyond the dialogue can better ensure civility online.

Użytkownicy Web 2.0 wskutek działania algorytmów i personalizacji znaleźli się w internetowych bańkach czy cyfrowych habitusach. To odizolowanie sprawia, że nie są w stanie angażować się w dialog z innymi osobami. Niniejsze studium przedstawia wyniki analizy, w jaki sposób uczestnicy dyskusji na stronach Facebook i Countable ramują i wskazują odbiorców, zwracając uwagę na korelację między obywatelstwem i działaniami poza dyskusją online. Dzięki starannej analizie poszczególnych wątków komentarzy, Autor dowodzi, że połączenie mniej personalizujących algorytmów i uwzględnienia działań podejmowanych poza internetowymi dyskusjami może lepiej służyć wspieraniu postaw obywatelskich w sieci.

### Key words

Social Networking Sites (SNS); Instrumental deliberation; Dialogic deliberation; Addressed audience; Civility

strony społecznościowe (SNS); deliberacja instrumentalna; deliberacja dialogowa; publiczność; obywatelskość

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## Addressing audience through defining action: a rhetorical examination of civility and audience engagement on two online discussion forums

### Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) have demonstrated their worth regarding action-oriented social movement organization, their connected nature seems more troublesome than helpful when hosting open, public dialogues with no actions beyond the dialogue defined. In comparison to SNS social movement organization, general dialogues concerning civic issues (oftentimes the same issues that individuals eventually organize in response to) on SNS are criticized for their tendency to produce unfocused, uncivil dialogue<sup>1</sup> regarding political action and oppression. In fact, SNS complicate 21st century applications of democratic dialogue in the public sphere, specially the idea that successful democratic dialogue is in-part dependent upon an informed citizenry guided by a specific goal or objective.

By design, SNS dialogues (manifested most commonly through comment threads and shared posts) do not typically associate an action beyond the dialogue itself. Though not as frequently utilized as SNS, there are digitally networked spaces like SNS that define clear action beyond the dialogue itself. In fact, some of these platforms extend the dialogue to elected or appointed public officials who can act upon the arguments shared on these public digital dialogues. Contributions to these dialogues demonstrate that the action explicitly presented to participants on digitally networked platforms influences a participant's argument structure through the subtle, yet critical, establishment of the addressed audience. Furthermore, the lack of a defined action beyond the dialogue itself on digitally networked forums is more likely to result in uncivil argument structures among participants, thus

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1. The term "dialogue" will be used throughout this text to refer to exchanges occurring on the platforms analyzed. In section 3 ("Online (In)Civility"), it is occasionally used interchangeably with "comment thread." I am using it as defined by Gregory Clark in his work *Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation: A Social Perspective to the Function of Writing*.

questioning the promise of these spaces as avenues for meaningful public dialogues regarding social and political issues. I will examine this claim by assessing the definition and treatment of the addressed audience on two online public dialogues: the first discussion thread analyzed comes from Facebook, a popular social networking site that facilitates dialogue though limits the public nature of the dialogue to the walls of the SNS; the second discussion Countable, a political-based website that encourages participants to compose and publicly post their opinion which can then be sent to the appropriate public official.

### 1. “Instrumental” vs “Dialogic” Deliberation

A key difference between dialogues occurring in the physical space and those in the digital space would be the end goal or objective associated with the dialogues at hand. Traditionally dialogues occurring in the physical public sphere are often grounded by an agreed-upon goal, resulting in an action or decision; digital spaces, on the other hand, are often not guided by this concrete framework, but rather by the mere act of engaging in the conversation itself. To put another way, those who engage in public dialogues on digital platforms like Facebook and other SNS do so not for reaching a tangible decision but rather to publicly state their opinion and engage with others.

Recognizing the presence and influence of *just talking online*, researchers Jooan Kim and Eun Joo Kim (2008) developed the concepts of “instrumental” and “dialogic” deliberation. And while these terms do differ greatly in their applications, they both require basic democratic philosophies to inform the dialogue, specifically guaranteeing these dialogues occur within the public sphere and all participants have equal opportunity to engage. With that similarity noted, Kim and Kim go on to define the two rather different forms of deliberation, which, for this work, we can equate to the term “dialogue.”

“Instrumental” deliberation closely resembles more traditional understandings of the public sphere: a space in which informed citizens rationally discuss a predetermined topic affecting a specific public. During instances of instrumental deliberation, participants are to coherently and thoughtfully contribute both by sharing their own opinions and responding to others. The dialogue, though, must be guided by and result in tangible actions carried out by the participants or another body with the power to act (Kim & Kim 2008, 52).

Before closely examining “dialogic” deliberation in their work, Kim and Kim recognize the difficulty some may demonstrate when engaging in a more formal “instrumental” dialogues, as its insistence for seemingly emotionless rationality may stifle a participant's ability to thoughtfully incorporate any emotional ties

they may have to the topic discussed. “Dialogic” deliberation, they explain, can help account for such concerns. Described as “everyday political talk,” like two neighbors discussing recent legislation, dialogic deliberation provides participants the opportunity to “understand what their own interests are, what others want, and what fits the common good” in a comparatively low stake setting (Kim & Kim 2008, 53-54). Since dialogic deliberation is compared to “everyday political talk,” instances of dialogic deliberation find themselves unbound by the harsh structure and protocol found in instrumental deliberation. Participants prove more likely to speak freely and pose questions that both compliment and challenge the discussion topic at hand; however, participants are not obligated to act upon any decision, nor is a decision or consensus required at any point. Even though dialogic deliberation was rarely tethered to tangible action, like instrumental deliberation, the informal discussions had between community members through “everyday political talk” functioned as a key prerequisite for later participating in thoughtful instrumental deliberation. Dialogic deliberation, they found, helped participants become familiar with cultural protocols regarding public discussions and deliberation, as well as better situate the topic’s impact on certain publics (Kim & Kim 2008, 55-57).

## 2. Online Audiences and Situating the Self

Regardless of whether an individual finds themselves engaged in instrumental or dialogic deliberation online, they must still compose their thoughts and responses with a public audience in mind. Unlike original status updates in which Facebook users initiate a discussion that remains within the confines of their personal network, engaging in publicly accessible SNS posts, like those shared by public pages, requires participants to address anonymous participants in ways that respond to the topic at hand and engages others responding to the topic as well. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford explain that an “addressed audience” represents the “concrete reality of the writer’s audience” (2009). Furthermore, the participant addressing their audience must enter the discussion assuming they share the audience’s “attitudes, beliefs, and expectations” on the topic. The addressed audience, is an audience the participant not only recognizes exists, but an audience who they are calling to action through language (Ede and Lunsford 2009).

The concept of “going public” online, according to Phyllis Mentzell Ryder (2009), requires participants to envision new audiences and news ways for understanding. As the digital venue changes from one dialogue to the next, participants must carefully and critically reconsider the topic at hand the ways to best engage other contributors. Publics in general are not fixed entities but are always in flux and calling themselves into being, thus requiring each user to envision, respond to,

and persuade a new audience of removed, anonymous users each time they enter an online discussion. To engage these ever-changing audiences and better produce valuable public dialogue, online discussion participants need to stress the urgency of their argument, as well as provide “a particular solution that requires the participation of others” (Ryder 2009, 211). On some websites, including SNS, the “solution” component can prove difficult to achieve as engaging in the dialogue itself serves as the objective, rather than using the thread as a dialogic space for advocating for a tangible, observable solution.

David Beard extends upon Ede and Lunsford’s work by examining the “conversational interactivity” audiences demonstrate during online dialogues (Beard 2009, 91). This work speaks to the simultaneously immediate and distanced nature of online audiences, regardless of this audience lives on a SNS, like Facebook, or on another online dialogue platform, like Countable. The interactive audience indicates that “direct dialogue is possible” even when participants are geographically separated (Beard 2009, 91). The online dialogue participant then, is not only accountable for an audience who can read their contribution but an audience who can respond in various ways to that contribution.

### **3. Online (In)Civility**

Online dialogue platforms, including SNS, seem like ideal spaces to host public discussions, much like those seen in the physical public sphere. These sites allow users to engage in dialogues on public issues with those occupying different geographical spaces, thus hypothetically increasing diversity in perspectives and experiences related to the topic at hand. However, due to the heavily filtered and personalized nature of many of these platforms, including Facebook, dialogue participants usually engage with information and audiences that reinforce established beliefs (Sunstein 2007; Lovink 2011). Ryder argues that “while Lunsford and Ede suggest that the Internet will make writers more aware of broader views, narrowly focused Web 2.0 feeds can also produce citizens who don’t distinguish between their specialized public and the larger ‘public.’” (Ryder 2009, 211). Due to limited exposure to diverse audiences and their unique considerations, participants in online dialogues commonly utilize uncivil language when responding to others in the dialogue.

Online civility is often examined in the space of comment threads, found both on Facebook and Countable, as well as a multitude of other digital spaces. These threads are typically public, thus allowing users to more directly communicate with other who share some degree of interest in the same topic. Though comment threads be an ideal, unmonitored space to share thoughts and exchanges, Geert Lovink reminds us that such comment cultures

are not self-emergent systems but orchestrated arrangements. This is not always obvious, even for insiders. Most of us, pleasantly blinded by techno-optimism, believe the sheer availability of open-reply functionalities will result in animated discussions and lead to a deeper, higher, and richer understanding of the topic. But writers, editors, and moderators play a vital role in establishing a culture of frequent commenting (Lovink 2011, 52).

This illustrates that while dialogue-facilitating features may appear open to and tolerant of all information and voices, these spaces ultimately escape the control of participants and rely on the designs of both algorithmic and human gatekeepers to determine the tone and trajectory of the dialogue's contents.

Though personalizing algorithms are largely invisible to everyday users, they ultimately play a large role in designing a user's online experience. Eli Pariser explains, "[personalizing algorithms] create a unique universe of information for each of us--what I've come to call a filter bubble--which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information" (Pariser 2011, 6). Though personalizing algorithms were initially developed to help users sort through items on sites like Amazon, Pariser explains that that is no longer the case. Now, personalizing algorithms greatly dictate the "flow of information," including the content a user is presented and the other online individuals a user engages with.

Though her work does not focus on the relationship among participants of online dialogues, we can, for this work, turn to Chantal Mouffe's *On the Political* (2005). Exploring the ways in which speakers can situate themselves in dialogue to yield the most ideal democratic results, Mouffe writes, "what democracy requires is drawing the we/they distinction in a way which is compatible with the recognition of the pluralism which is constitutive of modern democracy" (2005, 14). As such, those engaging in public dialogue should ideally view other participants as "adversary" rather than "enemy" (Mouffe 2005, 14-15). The term "adversary" closely relates to Mouffe's use of the term "agonism," a framework in which participants recognize ideological differences presented in a specific dialogue, as well as appreciate the legitimacy of such difference (Mouffe 2005, 20). In terms of online dialogues, this means that participants can and should recognize and respond to difference presented by others with language that legitimizes the experiences and rationales informing them. While Mouffe doesn't mention the term civility explicitly regarding agonism, the successful applications of agonism are predicated on all participants utilizing conventions of civil discourse.

Examining Mouffe's work in a Web 2.0 environment, Joss Hands explores the applications of agonism online. Using agonism as a framework for better conceptualizing a "radical e-democracy," Hands notes that the user's decision to reframe an "enemy" as an "adversary" is grounded in reciprocity, meaning that in order for one user to frame another as adversary they must see those same efforts made by other users regarding their own views and contributions (Hands 2007, 93). Since

Web 2.0 spaces allow for direct engagement among site users, we can then assume that they will inform their language and methods for addressing audience with established discourse practices already demonstrated in the thread. This further assumes that if other participants demonstrate a tendency to frame those expressing difference as “enemy,” it is likely that so too will other participants.

In *Toward a Civil Discourse*, Sharon Crowley examines the language structure of fundamental Christians to gauge the status of civility in Western culture. She finds that those who demonstrate a difficulty engaging with any degree of difference do so because they are too heavily situated in a “habitus.” Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu, Crowley describes the habitus as “the system of structured, structuring dispositions...which is constituted in practice” (2006, 62). Concepts like history, ideology, and memory greatly contribute to and constantly reinforce an individual’s habitus, and while this can provide comfortability, Crowley warns that isolating oneself within a habitus restricts access to difference in perspective, depleting opportunities to navigate the content and conventions of other perspectives regarding pressing public social issues (2006, 62). As online dialogue participants are initially situated in a digital habitus produced by personalizing algorithms, venturing to more public digital dialogues (be it for instrumental or dialogic deliberation) brings with it several pressing concerns, the most pressing being an inescapable single-mindedness that prevents discussion participants from viewing others as adversary, rather than enemy, likely leading to hostile language ultimately insufficient for public discussion.

Brining Crowley’s understanding of the habitus and civility under consideration of digital spaces, Sunstein performs a close evaluation of affordances and drawbacks personalized sites present to users. Sunstein, like Crowley’s concerns regarding the physical space, warns that the internet’s personalizing tendencies place users into ideological echo chambers that breed extremist in part due to lack of exposure to and interaction with contrary views (Sustain 2009, 69). Often times, these ideological echo chambers, or digital habitus, are informed by a site’s specific personalizing algorithms that present users with post and other content that reflect and radicalize existing beliefs. In the case of online dialogue, Lovink reflects on the constant never-ending nature of comment threads, noting “comments are also text...what distinguishes comments from texts is their unfinished nature. There is no end to a comment” (2011, 55). Speaking to Sunstein, Mouffe, and Crowley, Lovink cautions that while these dialogues may be great in mere quantity, they often end in hostile debates as users “no longer hear what others have to say.” Unfortunately, because many SNS like Facebook insulate their users, in part ideologically, they lack the opportunity to navigate difference civilly and “view one another as fellow citizens” (Lovink 2011, 117).

## 4. Methods

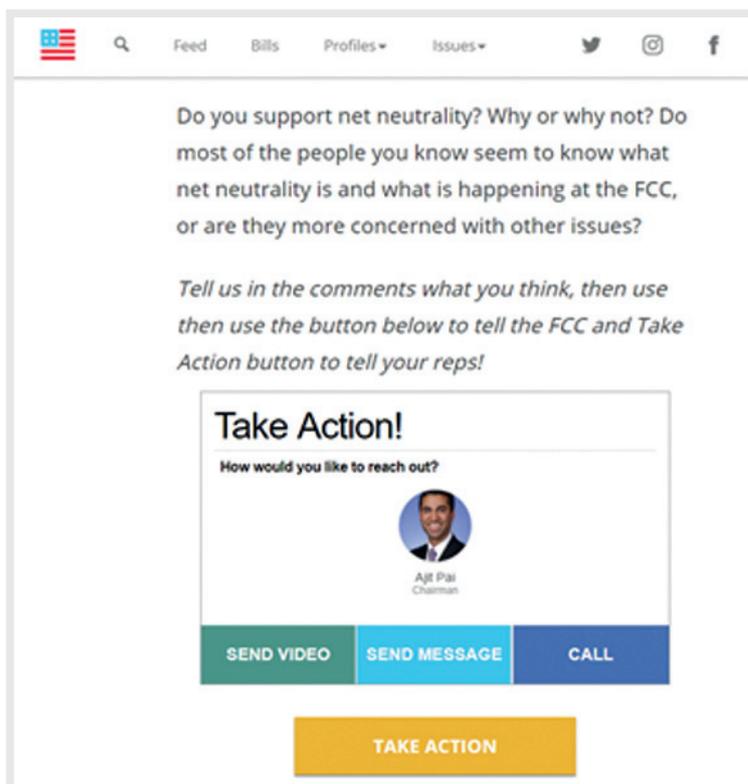
With online civility being greatly informed by a site's algorithmic designs and available features, it's important to consider how actions associated to, but possibly existing outside of, the online dialogue influence the ways in which participants situate themselves among others, as well as the language they utilize to engage with their addressed audiences. This analysis aims to understand how a digital platform's stated or implied action (or tangible consequences that occur from the dialogue) influences their argument structure, specifically who a participant addresses and the language they use in response to that addressed audience. Furthermore, since (in)civility is often associated with online public discussions, this analysis also aims to explore the relationship between a platform's action and the civility extended to the addressed audience.

**4.1 Platforms Analyzed.** For this analysis, I chose to analyze comment threads on the social networking site Facebook and the political discussion website Countable. These sites were chosen based on their overall popularity and traffic, as well as their noticeable difference in action associated with the discussion.

**4.2 Data Sources.** Over the past five years, Facebook has sustained a questionable reputation as a space to thoughtfully gather information and engage in informative discussions with those in various geographical locations. Problems regarding the prioritization of post focusing on certain political leanings, promoting fake news, and situating users into algorithmic-based ideological echo chambers have caused many scholars and researchers to question Facebook's contribution to public democratic discussions. Regardless, thousands of active users flock to Facebook daily to venture outside of their personalized profiles to engage with those on publicly accessible posts and the resulting comment threads. Facebook was selected over other SNS (including Twitter and Reddit) due to its relatively open discussion nature, numbers-based popularity, and lack of character limitations for posts.

Countable is a political discussion website that provides users with critical information regarding ongoing legislation and policies at the national level. Users are asked to provide their mailing zip code to pair them with their elected national officials (both senators and representative). As users read on the issues of the day, Countable presents them with a nonpartisan summary, as well as links to further information and (if available) a PDF to the legislation itself. Once users read through the information provided, they are asked to "take action" by publicly posting their responses to the topic on the topic's discussion board. That response is then both posted publicly for other users to read and engage with and sent directly to

the appropriate official (for example, if a bill is currently in the Senate, the post will be emailed to the user's two senators). Countable also encourages users to utilize modes aside from writing by providing them an opportunity to call their official's national office or record a brief video that is then emailed to their elected official. Countable was selected over similar sites (like Kialo) due to its unmonitored nature and clear action related to dialogue. On similar sites, a user's comments are not immediately posted or shared, rather must undergo opaque evaluations by site administrators to determine if the post is worthy to be made public.



**4.3 Topic Selected.** To most accurately compare the arguments presented and the audiences addressed on both Facebook and Countable, this analysis examines initial posts discussing the ongoing debate of Net Neutrality in the United States. In 2012, President Barack Obama classified the internet as a utility, removing it from larger corporate interference and manipulation. In 2017, FCC Commissioner under the Trump administration Ajit Pai moved to have the internet reclassified and Net Neutrality repealed, thus hypothetically providing ISP's the ability to prioritize various sites differently. The topic of Net Neutrality allows this research to focus more exclusively on the argument structure rather than having to account for theories regarding race, gender, or socioeconomic status, as other ongoing American political discussions might require.

**4.4 Key Points for Analysis.** The following analyses began by examining general argument structures utilized by participants of online dialogue on public posts shared on both Facebook and Countable. More refined examinations have led me to specially discuss the following elements of the dialogues in this work:

- The audience the writer intends to “address” based on their language;
- The ways in which the writer situates themselves among their addressed audience;
- The implications of having a defined action beyond the online dialogue on the civility extended to members of both the addressed audience.

The posts analyzed from both Facebook and Countable were both publicly accessible to all users with active accounts on the respective sites. In fact, to better compare how the presence of an action beyond the dialogue influences the discourse utilized by dialogue participants, the Facebook post analyzed is from Countable’s Facebook page, sharing the link to the Countable thread also analyzed in this piece. Both discussion threads were made publicly available to active users on December 5, 2017.

## 5. Results

**5.1 Facebook.** Facebook as a platform is heavily personalized through filtering algorithms and does not emphasize an action outside of the online dialogue itself, rather producing content for the dialogue is the action associated with the composition. Consequently, the content (including argument structure and audience framing) a participant contributes during these online dialogues is not held accountable for promoting or producing tangible changes in any public sphere. Participants, then, are led to perceive one another as voices in a dialogue as opposed to actors for change and progress; however, it is the users who define and situate those roles. The analysis on the Facebook thread yielded the following noted observations regarding the addressed audience and the overpowering use of (in)civil language during the dialogue.

**5.1.1 Emphasis on current American political binaries.** Initially, it seems as if the participants direct their critique to the role of the federal government in general, not necessarily putting the onus on one presidential administration over another, nor one political party over another.

For example, dialogue contributor Michele P. writes, “Our government is in bed with big corporations, whoring themselves to the highest bidder. The two can’t be separated.”

Following suit, Karen G. writes, “So - the majority of Americans don’t like

the tax plan just passed - don't think the government cares anymore what we the people think.”

These examples illustrate that there are some contributors to this Facebook dialogue who situate themselves among their fellow participants, rather than removed from fellow contributors based on expressed political ideology. In fact, the use of terms like “your,” “the majority of Americans,” and “we the people” suggest that these contributors situate themselves among a community of fellow citizens, paying little rhetorical attention to political affiliation among other users.

Conversely, many participants used difference in political party affiliation as a means for situating themselves among their addressed audience. More specifically, users referencing political party affiliation do so to create a clear separation between themselves and other participants. We see this in the following instances:

Robert S. writes, “Bullshit. Get the government back out [of the internet]. This was just one of obama’s (sic) criminal actions to control the population.”

By participants identifying key figures of both political parties, they rhetorically address those who identify as Democrat or Republican, or in a broader sense, liberal or conservative. The language utilized by these participants (among others in the dialogue) negatively frame those holding political affiliations opposite to theirs.

**5.1.2 Enemies over adversaries.** Returning to Mouffe’s definitions of the terms “adversary” and “enemy,” we can note several instances during this Facebook dialogue in which participants view and treat others as legitimate threats whose views must be unapologetically discredited with no sufficient evidence to support the critiques made. Furthermore, the language utilized in contributions reflect the intention of “winning” an argument, rather than using the thread as an opportunity to learn about differing perspectives and shaping actions according to the ideas presented. The following examples demonstrate another way Facebook dialogue participants situate themselves among their addressed audience, as enemies rather than adversaries.

For instance, Benjamin N. writes, “Those that support net neutrality are fools. Net neutrality is government regulation of the internet. The LAST thing we need. Regulation is the antithesis of liberty. More bullshit.” To which Sandra C. immediately responds, “Benjamin [N.] you must work for Comcast or some other tech company that wants to squash net neutrality.”

**5.2 Countable.** Purposed as a political information-sharing and discussion platform, Countable frames each dialogue as an opportunity to “take action.” While some “Take Action” links (like the one shown above) encourage participants to contact

non-elected/appointed officials, oftentimes, the “Take Action” feature directs users to means for contacting their nationally elected senators or representative. Participants contribute to the dialogue by leaving “comments,” similar to Facebook, but the content they share publicly on the site is predicated through the site’s design that the information presented will go beyond their online experiences, thus translating to tangible change in physical public spheres. The analysis on the Countable thread yielded the following noted observations regarding the addressed audience and use of (in)civil language during the dialogue.

**5.2.1 Participants as comrades.** While many participants in the Facebook dialogue situated themselves opposite of other participants (who also served as the addressed audience[O7] ), participants in Countable’s dialogue situated themselves among their fellow participants regardless of expressed political affiliation. A few key ways we see this demonstrated is through the use of words like “we,” “people,” and “Americans.”

Kate, responding in greater detail, writes,

“This is an issue that should be an absolute no brainer because keeping net neutrality benefits all American citizens regardless of their politics. YOU REPRESENT US, not corporations. STOP THIS MADNESS, the vast majority of Americans don’t want [sic] this to happen. Furthermore, I seriously worry about Trump supporting the repeal, while waging an unceasing war on the media. Bad road to go down. PLEASE RESIST THIS.”

Participants like Kate seemingly disregard political difference to unite all participants as “Americans,” or citizens who share an interest in the progress of US domestic policies. More specifically, these contributors do not seek to discredit nor exclude participants rallying against net neutrality from the positive outcomes of their perspective.

**5.2.2 Political Difference for Unification.** Unlike the dialogue on Facebook, participants in the Countable dialogue mostly disregarded the existing, polarizing political party binary. Rather than focusing on the rhetorical divide between conservatives and progressives (or Republicans and Democrats). In fact, only six of the 73 posts analyzed directly identified party by name. For example,

Chester writes, “I am against whatever the Obama Administration put in place for the internet because the Democrats continue to take away any freedoms we have with their Government control. Democrats are Fascist Socialist Communist!”

While posts like this directly place blame with a specific political party, these participants still position themselves among the other dialogue participants, rather than in opposition to them. In none of the above posts, nor the others noted in the data set, did participants reference political parties as a means to belittle or

discredit other participants; in fact, the primary role of utterance, in this case, is to unify one faction of the addressed audience (the dialogue participants) to speak to the powers accessible to another faction of the addressed audience (elected/appointed public officials). Even in Chester's above post, while he does reference the broader Democratic party, as opposed to citing specific politicians, he still does not rhetorically alienate Democrat dialogue participants as his language suggests he places blame on Democratic officials, not necessarily Democratic voters.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 *Situating the Platforms*

**6.1.1 Facebook as “dialogic deliberation.”** On Facebook, users engage in dialogue for the sake of engaging in dialogue on a specific topic. There is no clear external goal or action associated with the content. The addressed audience is among the user in the comment thread; however, these audience members prove just a systematically unable to enact change regarding the status of Net Neutrality. The fact that the addressed audience is immediately participatory (in comparison to the addressed audience on Countable) may lead one to assume that participants would utilize civil discourse during their exchanges, however, because there is no goal other than expressing a power-restricted one's own thoughts, the stakes for thoughtful dialogue are relatively low.

Returning to Kim and Kim (2008), we can quite clearly argue that Facebook dialogues, as demonstrated through the above analyzed comment thread, function as an instance of “dialogic deliberation.” Facebook's interface does not define or promote any action beyond the dialogue itself. Instead, the goal of the comment thread is the volume of dialogue contributions. At no point does any participant in the analyzed Facebook dialogue address an elected or appointed official (or even allude to them, for that matter) to consider the changes the participants suggest. Furthermore, the direct responses to previous dialogue contributions to the dialogue indicate that the addressed audience is limited to those participating in that specific dialogue. By failing to address an audience who can enact the changes discussed, public Facebook comment threads prioritize the back-and-forth nature of dialogic deliberation.

**6.1.2 Countable as “instrumental deliberation.”** By its design, Countable clearly establishes a purpose and goal for each dialogue on the site. The repeated phrase “Take Action” frames the dialogue as a means for not only assessing a larger public issue through the avenue of online discourse, but also as a means for prompting change in the physical space through outreach to elected and appointed

public officials via the site's contact features. As participants contribute thoughts, opinions, and information about the topic at hand, they do so with the intent of crafting persuasive, rationale arguments for both other online dialogue participants and removed public officials.

Kim and Kim stress that, unlike dialogic deliberation, instrumental deliberation values a goal external to the dialogue itself (2008, 52). The more civil exchanges between contributors, then, is a mere result of working towards the external goal by and through online discourse. We can see this most clearly when examining how participants to the Countable dialogue situate themselves among their addressed audience. Rather than the participant positioning themselves *against* others with insults or other hostile rhetorical practices that target or belittle dissenting members of a dialogue (like we see with the Facebook data set), Countable participants position themselves *among* their fellow participants. This rhetorical approach demonstrates that Countable participants recognize the need for unity when advocating for large-scale changes in an online setting. Furthermore, this attempt at unifying the addressed audience under a common identity (e.g. "we," "Americans," "people," etc.) hints to a value of consensus, a common component to effective instrumental deliberation. Consensus, in this sense, encourages participants to "take action" by contacting the appropriate public official as they are not only advocating for themselves, but for their fellow Countable dialogue participants.

## 6.2 Situating Audience

**6.2.1 Facebook: Audience as Disposable Other.** The above Facebook dialogue demonstrates that while participants will likely interact with others--who they may or may not know in the physical space--on a specific civic topic, like Net Neutrality, there are no features on the site that encourage or require participants to view others as *adversary*. In fact, the language utilized by most participants indicate Facebook users view those with differing perspectives as *enemy*, or, to recall Mouffe's words, as those expressing views inherently dangerous and thus easily dismissed (2005, 14). Mouffe, though not explicitly influenced by the digital environment, speaks well to both its potential and shortcomings, with this specific Facebook dialogue certainly demonstrating the shortcomings. Dialogue participants, rather than situating each other as *adversaries* in which they extend respect and civility to, elect to situate others, especially those with differing views, as enemies who merely function as disposable other. As such, these participants rely on antagonistic rhetorical tactics that results in harsh, uncivil language, as opposed to viewing other participants as those to share information with, learn from, and thoughtfully engage with.

**6.2.2 Countable: Audience as Actors of Change.** Due to its emphasis on action outside of the immediate online dialogue, Countable users do not frame other participants as dismissible enemies, rather, as fellow actors of change. The presence of two different, yet equally important, addressed audiences requires participants to carefully assess their position among each. The direct correspondence between user and elected official is private in nature and thus difficult to determine the use of civility. Their presence, nevertheless, inspires participants to view the corresponding comment thread as a space for change rather than a space to aggressively present and defend existing beliefs. As such, participants prove more likely to treat others on the thread, regardless of the views they present, as *adversaries* not *enemies*. The use of unifying nouns and pronouns (“we,” “Americans,” etc.) to reference others in the dialogue demonstrates that, while each participants does recognize the possibility for difference in perspectives, the presence of an action beyond the dialogue, and seen through the connected nature to public officials who can sanction the contributions made to the dialogue, encourages participants to view themselves, and others, as fellow actors of change. As such, they seek to create comradery in this digital space as a means to facilitate consensus among citizens.

### **6.3 Action and Filters**

**6.3.1 Facebook: Filters and Habitus.** Putting the works of Crowley and Sunstein into more direct conversation, we can reasonably argue that heavily filtered SNS that prioritize personalization, like Facebook, situate users into a digital habitus. The digital habitus differs from the physical habitus as explained by Crowley in that the digital habitus is not exclusively defined, created, or maintained by the individual, rather, the habitus is significantly controlled by a specific site’s algorithms that create a user’s online experiences based on their click-history, language utilized in public posts, and content shared and engaged with. While users do possess some ability to push back against the site-developed habitus, they cannot do so entirely. Recalling Lovink’s, Pariser’s, and Sunstein’s works, personalizing algorithms almost force users to engage with certain materials and perspectives that typically reify existing beliefs rarely will they be exposed to and be encouraged to engage with considerable difference (Lovink 2011; Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2007). As both Crowley and Sunstein warn, the dearth of difference - be it in the physical or digital space - removes opportunities to agonistically navigate opposing and challenging perspectives, consequently contributing to hostility and aggression among users when they do find themselves confronted with difference in online environments (Crowley 2006, 62; Sunstein 2007, 69). We observe the effects of this frequently in the analyzed Facebook thread, as users, not viewing the comment thread as a means to understand and engage with different views

regarding Net Neutrality, see it as a space to extend the beliefs of their habitus and impose it aggressively upon others. Specifically, we can note this behavior with the consistent employment of othering language (e.g. the use of antagonistic rhetoric directed towards members associated with opposing political parties) that ultimately creates a clear division between the users holding dissenting views.

This observation stresses the need for understanding how an algorithmic habitus can influence the civility extended to others during online public dialogues. If the user is not entirely responsible for the nature of their online environment (a common reality when using Facebook and similar SNS), then it is imperative to explore methods for overcoming such digital hurdles to fully realize the potential for digitally networked sites to serve, to some extent, as a form of the public sphere.

**6.3.2 Civility, Filters, and Action.** Filtering algorithms that prioritize personalization over exposure have been credited with contributing greatly to the incivility seen online; however, this practice does not bear responsibility alone. Many scholars have also noted that lack of physical presence among dialogue participants and the potential for complete anonymity also contributes to the use of hostile language. Regardless, algorithmic-sanctioned habitus do seem to provide users with a false understanding of other present voices, perhaps even subtly encouraging users to embrace their toxic practices when dialogue participants do not occupy the same physical space. As such, we can view this as an opportunity to turn to less-personalized digital dialogue platforms to best understand their approaches for managing civility among dialogue participants.

To assume that sites like Facebook would do away entirely with their personalizing algorithms is foolish, as these algorithms, designed with the intent of pushing outside advertisements, serve as a primary source of income. Understanding that these habitus-producing algorithms will still (and may always) play a large role in a user's online experience, we should explore means for overcoming incivility within this environment. Based on the Countable dialogue analyzed above, we can reasonably suppose that fewer filters coupled with an action beyond the online dialogue itself can promote civility among participants.

We cannot ignore that Countable is personalized to an extent: users enter their geographical zip code to connect with their elected officials and can select which issues interest them most (e.g. "Wages," "Veterans Affairs," "Women's Health," "Internet," etc.). Nevertheless, once they enter a topic's forum, contributions are first sorted by top comments representing both the "yea" and "nay" perspectives, then are subsequently organized chronologically. Unless a post includes clearly harmful or threatening language and is flagged as such, each user is introduced

to a wide spectrum of beliefs and perspectives regarding the topic. Nothing is filtered out to accommodate the interests and opinions of the individual user. This approach expels users from their online habitus and encourages them to confront, consider, and navigate difference. In fact, by reviewing and engaging with the diverse Countable population, users can more thoughtfully consider and speak to the concerns when corresponding with elected officials via the “Take Action” feature. Advocating for not only themselves but others in the thread seemingly has led users to perceive and frame other dialogue participants, still functioning as the addressed audience, as adversaries in advocating change as opposed to enemies challenging existing beliefs. Since there is a need to show solidarity among common citizens on the issues being discussed, Countable participants must extend respect and civility to others in the thread as a means to have their views best represented to those corresponding with other elected officials.

## Conclusion

Over the past decade, many scholars have praised digitally networked spaces for their abilities to connect diverse, geographically distanced audiences to discuss pressing social issues. While many of these platforms have more than proven their worth regarding the successful organization of major social movements, their use of hosting public, civic discussions has proved far more problematic as users not united under a common action (as we see with organizing protesters) demonstrate a greater likelihood of incivility towards their addressed audience. We can note from the above analysis of Countable that civility towards the addressed audience online is in fact possible. In comparison to Facebook’s dialogue, Countable’s emphasis on a specific action creates a sense of unity among ideologically disparate participants that better allows these participants advocate change for the common citizen, rather than a specific group within the common citizenry.

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