Global Media Journal
German Edition

From confrontation to understanding: In/exclusion of alternative voices in online discussion[1]

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Abstract: This article examines the potential and limitations of the internet's use for democratic debate. Academic literature on the potential uses of the internet to enhance democratic discussion in Western democracies almost always falls exclusively on one side of the optimist/pessimist divide. This article responds to the need for more situated knowledge, using an in-depth critical discourse analysis of the public debate on immigration in the Netherlands. The Dutch public debate on immigration and integration has been dominated in the past decade by a sense of deep ideological differences. The analysis conducted in this article reveals the power relations between the dominant and alternative discourses on immigration. It shows the ways in which online alternative voices deemed too radical by the mainstream public are excluded from participation in the public debate. The paper furthermore addresses the potential for understanding and for meaningful interaction across difference and illustrates the role of alternative styles of communication in online discussions. As such it contributes to our understanding of cross-cultural communication as well as that of online interaction. The study, though limited to case studies in the Netherlands, addresses a question relevant beyond the specific case and national context examined: how to establish meaningful interaction in light of difference?

Keywords: Online discussions; immigration debate; internet and democracy; alternative voices; discourse analysis

Introduction

This article examines whether and how alternative voices find inclusion in the online public domain. Conducting an empirical analysis of online debates on a contested issue, I seek to provide insight into the potential and obstacles that online interactions hold for democracy, thus establishing the place of the online debate in the changing mediascape. By way of discourse analysis, I critically interrogate the extent to which alternative voices are able to challenge dominant

discourses online. The Dutch debate on immigration as mediated through mainstream has centred on conflict and 'populist demagogues' have been granted airtime over those with more nuanced or moderate views on the issue (Hajer & Versteeg, 2009). In this light it is important to consider whether the internet provides a space to counter such tendencies and provide a more plural public domain.

Media play an important role in voicing opinions and are needed to make 'contemporary contests' visible (Couldry, 2010: 148). However, even though the public, now more than ever, features in different media formats, in mainstream media 'it does not control its own image' (Coleman & Ross, 2010: 5). News organisations are inevitably 'embedded in networks of commercial and political power' (Couldry, 2010: 148) and the representation of the public and its concerns is informed by political, institutional, economic, and cultural factors (Coleman & Ross, 2010: 3). This could hamper the realisation of the media's potential for publics to constitute themselves, resulting in a situation where 'the major media groups and the institutions of the state endeavour to create a public opinion that amplifies, or at least, does not challenge, their own power' (Hind, 2010: 7). The 'public' as represented in mainstream media 'does not include the overwhelming majority of us' (Hind, 2010: 97); only a limited range of voices is included and thus they build on and reinforce traditional rather than alternative discourses (see for instance Coleman & Ross, 2010: 49; Butsch, 2008: 141).

Given the discontent with the mainstream media's representation of the public and the public's concerns, it is no surprise that the rise of the internet brought the hope that not only more voices, but also different types of voices would be heard (Witschge, 2004); a general process of democratisation would occur due to 'new forms of interactive and participatory media' (Livingstone, 2005: 27). Because of the low costs of publishing, participation in the public sphere is considered attainable for people 'beyond elites in wealthy societies' (Bohman, 2004: 137), and for those outside the centre of politics:

> It is clear that the internet permits radical groups from both Left and Right (…) to construct inexpensive virtual counter-public opinions (…). The opinions of these groups have traditionally been excluded or marginalized in the mass-media public sphere. The internet offers them a way not only of communicating with supporters, but also the potential to reach out beyond the 'radical ghetto' both directly (disintermediation) and indirectly, through influencing the mass media.
> (Downey & Fenton, 2003: 198)

The Internet is thus seen as a new discursive space that allows groups normally silenced in traditional media to 'voice themselves and thus become visible and make their presence felt' (Mitra, 2004: 493). It is seen as being able to challenge traditional media because societal groups, institutions or states do not have to compete for access; it 'can be used by anyone, at any time, from any place on the planet' (Karatzogianni, 2004: 46).

Given the importance of participation in public debate for democracy[2] and the obvious limitations of the mainstream media in providing access to a diversity of voices, many scholars[3] have examined the internet's potential for democratic debate. However, recent studies examining this potential more and more show the limitations of the internet as providing a great disruptive force towards greater democratisation and an inclusive public sphere yet at the same time acknowledges its potential in certain contexts (see for instance: Fenton, 2010; Hindman, 2009; Morozov, 2009).

This article moves beyond the binary positions that have long dominated previous work considering the internet's democratic potential, and instead critically examines the way discursive practices on the internet both reinforce and challenge dominant discourses. In overcoming the pessimistic/optimistic divide, this article views discursive practice in context and uses a case study approach to see where the potential of the internet for public debate on contested issues lies and what the obstacles to inclusive discursive practices are. The central question this paper seeks to answer is: how open is online debate to difference?

Debate, democracy and discourse

Public debate, or discussion is understood here as 'public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interest and values that are engaged' (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002: 9). It constitutes an important part of democracy and citizenship, especially in polarised societies as provides a political method to incorporate and respond to differences in discourse (whether they pertain to difference in perspectives, experiences or ways of speaking). Such public discussion takes place within the public sphere – a virtual space constituted by all public communication on political issues (for a discussion of deliberative democracy, see for example: Dryzek, 2000).

A number of concerns have been expressed regarding traditional, rational, accounts of deliberation and public sphere (most notably Habermas' 1962 (translated 1989) account of the 18th century bourgeois public sphere), specifically where it concerns the inclusion of difference in the public sphere (see for instance Fraser, 1992; Bickford, 1996; Young, 1996, 2000). Reflecting these criticisms, the account of deliberation taken on here focuses on openness and equality in the interaction between different discourses, where openness refers to openness of the debate to different participants, types of discourses and positions.

The concept of openness is similar to the criterion of inclusion and equality in rational deliberative democracy theories, but is different in the sense that it does

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[2] See for example: Dryzek (2000), Bohman (1996), Bohman and Rehg (1997), Elster (1998).
[3] See for example: Albrecht (2003); Dahlgren (2005); Janssen and Kies (2004); Liina Jensen (2003); Papacharissi (2002); Wiklund (2005).

not merely seek the inclusion of all those affected, but also of different types of discourses and different forms of communication (besides or beyond what the majority would argue to be rational). It is also different in what is meant by equality. Here, equality means that everyone has the right to raise issues, open up debates, provide information, and question others. This does not involve the bracketing of one's identity or interests as is the case with traditional deliberation, but rather sees the discourse to be informed by these identities and interests.

Considering conflict and contestation as inherent to politics (see for instance: Mouffe, 1999, 2000), this article views the aim of public discussion not as the elimination or suppression of difference but rather as a constant negotiation of it (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999: 135). Public discussion is thus viewed as one of the 'arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics' (Fraser, 1992: 122). It allows people to 'appreciate the plausibility of seeing the world from a different perspective' (Valadez, 2001: 34). Ultimately, 'this dialogue enables people to navigate and interact across cultural and racial boundaries' (Streich, 2002: 138).

Because of the importance of public discussion in pluralistic societies, Chouliaraki and Fairclough argue that more research is needed that focuses on dialogue 'with the objective of arriving at detailed accounts of practices of dialogue in late modern societies which can discern the obstacles to, practices of and potentials for non-repressive dialogue across difference' (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999: 135-6). With this aim in mind, this article employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the obstacles and potential for open discussion online (for a detailed discussion of the methodological approach, see Witschge, 2008). CDA considers language to be social practice, views the context of language use as crucial to the analysis of it and takes particular interest in the relation between language and power (Wodak, 2001: 2).

The main idea behind the methodological approach taken on here is that context matters, specifically the context of the production and consumption of texts. Online political discourse, like other texts and genres such as for instance 'news,' is a product of 'specific (…) practices and techniques' which are 'based in particular social relations, and particular relations of power' (Fairclough quoted in Richardson, 2007: 40). Easy access to the online discussion and increased possibilities to obtain a speaker's role in the online discussion, have led some scholars to neglect the power relations that affect who gets to say what. In this article I analyse the extent to which online discussions provide an open and equal exchange, and discern the obstacles and potential for reaching such exchange, while taking into account the context in which the text is produced and consumed. Hence, the analysis in this article is not limited to an analysis of the breadth of discourses uttered, but rather focuses on the interaction between different discourses.

Ertan.nl: An alternative voice online

This immigration debate that forms the focus of the research reported on here took place a time of tensions and anxieties that intensified after such incidents as 9/11; a shift in Dutch politics initiated by the late Pim Fortuyn;[4] the Madrid bombings in 2003; the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist in 2004; and the London bombings of 2005.

In this time, public debate about minorities increasingly focused on issues of social cohesion. The driving question in Dutch society has become whether long-time residents and recent immigrants can live together in a peaceful manner (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2005: 66). The differences between different groups in the Netherlands are taken to be so substantial and fundamental that public debate seems at an impasse. The focus in the discussion on differences makes it difficult for a constructive exchange of ideas to take place on how to deal with the problems that face contemporary society. Different groups seem reluctant to give each other occasion to speak of their respective experiences and opinions.

Ertan.nl,[5] a critical web logger, operated in this context of the changed and polarized public debate in the Netherlands and forms an alternative or radical voice. Ertan provided a 'satirical view on Dutch Society by a Muslim, every Sunday, when the Christians are having a rest day.'[6] His columns are confrontational and distressing to some, while appreciated by others. He insults and provokes, but also initiates and feeds debates.

Ertan self-identifies as a Dutch Muslim of Turkish descent. He takes a very specific and unique role in Dutch public discourse on the issues of immigration and integration. His website 'provides an open medium for the Dutch Muslim society,' and aimed at 'voicing opinions that are not presented or that are distorted in the media.' In addition to his website, Ertan participated in public discussion on forums elsewhere, such as websites for Dutch people of Moroccan and Turkish descent, Islamic websites, a Dutch school forum, the Young Socialist website, and a website for young homosexuals.[7] Due to the content of his website and the posts on several forums, Ertan has become a well known and, as becomes clear from the responses to his writings, for many an unwelcome presence in the online discourse

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[4] A Dutch politician who openly expressed his contempt of Islamic culture.

[5] At the time of study (May 2004), the website was hosted on the *Ertan.nl* domain, but the website temporarily moved to *Ertan.biz* (visitors to Ertan.nl were redirected to this site) before moving back again to *Ertan.n*l. Ertan was requested by his web host to take this route as a consequence of the commotion about his columns. This was not the first time he had to move to a different domain; before *Ertan.nl*, the domain was *Ertan.tk*. He has several websites that redirect the visitor to his page, or contain the contents of his columns. These sites are: http://ertan.reallyrules.com/; ertan.ontheweb.nl/; ertan.blogspot.com; www.ertan.tk; http://home.planet.nl/~cihat/. The website continues to shift domains and URLs and at the time of writing no current version of the website was live.

[6] *Ertan.nl*. All quotes have been translated from Dutch by the author.

[7] I used the search engines google.nl and ilse.nl to search for Ertan on other Dutch language websites.

on immigration and integration in the Netherlands.

Despite the disclaimer that accompanies his text, arguing his writings should be read as sarcasm, in 2006 he was sentenced to community service for inciting hatred and violence against homosexuals and insulting and threatening then Minister of Integration and Immigration (or, if we translate her portfolio: 'Alien Affairs'), Rita Verdonk (NRC Handelsblad, 2008). Even though this raises interesting issues relating to the limits of freedom of speech, I will not address these here (for an exploration of some of the issues involved, see Witschge, 2005).

Murat, I love you: Or how contestation comes about

The post of Ertan that is the focus of this article deals with a fatal shooting at a secondary school. On 13 January 2004 a 17-year-old student, Murat D., shot his teacher in the head. The boy, born in the Netherlands and of Turkish descent, had been suspended from school a few days before the killing. When word got out that the shooting concerned a boy of Turkish descent, the public as well as the media quickly framed it as an immigration or integration issue.

Five days after the shooting, Ertan wrote a column in which he sympathizes with Murat. He posted the column, entitled 'Murat, I love you' on his website and on a number of web forums (for the full text see appendix A). His column starts with an expression of empathy with the perpetrator ('You could have been my kid brother') and a condemnation of the Dutch ('the so-called tolerant Dutchmen'), which sets up the stage of putting the blame with Dutch society, rather than attributing agency to the perpetrator ('What you did is not your fault, son'). It continues this line of thinking with an analysis of the outsider position that Muslims have in Dutch society (summarised in the last sentence of the second paragraph: 'Holland apparently isn't our country'). The third and fourth paragraphs further the lack of agency ('What choice do you have when this society leaves you no other way out?') and claims there are more youngsters in this situation ('there are a lot of Muslim youngsters out there like you with a lot of suppressed feelings of hate towards everything that is in any way related to Dutchmen'). In contrast, the last phrase then glorifies the actions of the teenager –suggesting he took action rather than passively succumb to the structures Dutch society enforces on him.

The message was posted on Ertan.nl,[8] and on (at least) the following three discussion forums:[9]

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[8] The post got almost a thousand reactions on the website. The messages were very polarized, ranging from 'I will kill you and all Muslims' to 'I completely agree with you Ertan' The majority of the posts were of the first category. As a result, Ertan was requested by his provider to seek a new provider. After doing this, Ertan decided to limit the possibility of reacting to his website and all of the reactions to his column were deleted.
[9] I have used the search engines *google.nl* and *Ilse.nl* to find the sites where this specific post of Ertan was posted. I acknowledge that the fact that I could not find other websites containing this

- Newsgroup *nl.politiek*: a general political newsgroup in which Ertan (using the nickname ErTaN) initiated a thread, titled 'Murat, I love you' on 18 January 2004, at 6:48. The last post appeared the next day, at noon, and by that time 53 messages were posted by 30 participants.
- Web forum *Leefbaar Nederland*: a web forum on the website of a small populist political party called Leefbaar Nederland (Liveable Netherlands). Again, Ertan (this time using ertan.nl as nickname) started a thread titled 'Murat, I love you.' He posted the message on 19 January 2004 at 12:24. The thread closed the next day at four o'clock in the afternoon. There were 33 messages in total, posted by 18 participants.
- Web forum *Fok!*: a very popular Dutch discussion website, with a diverse range of topics. *Salvation* started a discussion thread, containing Ertan's column 'Murat, I love you,' referring to www.ertan.nl as the source. The thread is called 'Ertan.nl: Too sick for words' and started on 24 January 2004 at 21:36 and ended one hour later, with 55 messages posted by 29 participants.

Ertan's website is not included in the analysis, as even though people initially could post reactions, the format of his site (a web log) is not directed at a discussion between participants.[10] I examined the 139 reactions on the three forums specified above to Ertan's column using a CDA approach. I find that, overall, most people employ one or more of three dominant strategies that all function to downplay his voice.[11] The analysis demonstrates that there is no meaningful interaction between Ertan's position and that of the other participants: no engagement with his position can be found, nor any other discussion of actual positions or arguments in this particular debate.

Online strategies of dealing with difference

The reactions to Ertan's post show remarkable similarities, despite the fact that there are notable differences in the three discussion forums. *Nl.politiek* is a general political discussion group that is not affiliated to any political party or movement and generally has quite a diverse public. *Leefbaar Nederland* is specifically connected to a political party and attracts a specific audience in support of its positions regarding immigration and integration (which becomes clear from the issues addressed and the opinions voiced on the website and the web forum as a whole). *Fok* is not a political forum per se: the website hosts discussions on all sorts of topics, from music, philosophy, and gardening to political matters.

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message does not mean that it does not exist elsewhere on the Net.

[10] Interestingly this is one of the reasons for his conviction: The Court did not consider he provided 'space for public debate' seeing there was no space on his weblog to respond (http://zoeken.rechtspraak.nl/resultpage.aspx?snelzoeken=true&searchtype=ljn&ljn=BD7024&u_ljn=BD7024).

[11] 85% of the posts use one or more of the strategies. The other 15% are off-topic.

Despite these differences in the forums, there is substantial homogeneity in the reactions. One striking similarity is that no reactions on any of the forums discuss the *content* of Ertan's post. Table 1 specifies the types of expression present in the debate. One third of the posts (46) contain personal attacks, like the ones quoted below:

> [Ertan is] a nutcase. (*Ahimsa, nl.politiek, 19 January 2004, 00:41*)

> So piss off, asshole. (*PietHein, nl.politiek, 18 January 2004, 07:16*)

> Ertan, you are a filthy Muslim. (*cor, LeefbaarNederland, 19 January 2004, 12:40*)

The second most frequent type of expression consists of reactions to others in the discussion (18 out of 141 posts), but few of these deal with the topic at hand (the murder that Murat committed, and the possible causes for it). Of the eight statements that do deal with it, only three are supported by arguments. Alternative approaches to viewing the murder committed by Murat and its causes are only provided in two messages. Information was rarely provided (in ten posts) and hardly ever asked for (in two posts).

Table 1: Types of expression on web forums

	Frequency			
Type of expression*	Leefbaar Nederland	Politiek.nl	Fok	Total
Personal attack	17	23	6	46
Reaction to others**	6	10	2	18
Meta-talk about the discussion	3	5	5	13
Providing information	2	6	2	10
Statement about the issue	3	5	0	8
Argument for statement	1	2	0	3
Asking for information	0	0	2	2
Alternative approach to issue	2	0	0	2
Total number of messages	**33**	**53**	**55**	**141**

*Not every message contained one of these types of expression, and some contained more than one type of expression.
** Quotations combined with related own content, or otherwise referring to previous posts.

Thus very little interaction between participations and discourses can be found and the ways in which people respond does not indicate a recognition of Ertan as an equal participant in the debate, nor a recognition of his position. Rather, the three most common themes or 'strategies' of response are: (i) attempts in finding ways of 'eliminating' Ertan; (ii) discussing his authenticity; and (iii) stereotyping. These strategic themes can be found at all stages of the discussion, and often more than one strategy can be found within one single post. In descending order, the theme 'eliminating Ertan' is most common, followed by the discussion of his authenticity and, the recurrent strategy of stereotyping.

Eliminating Ertan from 'our' society

The most common type of reaction to Ertan's post is an attempt to silence or, even literally, eliminating Ertan. This includes: (i) statements to the effect that Ertan does not belong to our society; (ii) calls for the use of violence against Ertan; and (iii) discussion of the more technological possibilities for silencing him (eliminating his voice from the Net).

Twenty posts by 17 participants fall within the first category, stating that Ertan does not belong to 'our' society.[12] Thirteen posts (by 12 participants) ask or argue for the use of violence against him.[13] While the latter is plainly undemocratic (not to mention illegal), the first is also highly problematic even though accepted in Dutch discourse. In this specific debate too it is seen as a legitimate argument. It seems that because Ertan is of Turkish descent, he can be 'sent back' whenever the 'real' Dutch people want him to (even though his writings suggest he was born here and is a Dutch citizen). The same argument was used against Murat, the boy that killed his teacher, in some letters to the editor of newspapers:[14] he should be sent to prison, in Turkey rather than in the Netherlands. This discourse aimed at exclusion by way of 'othering' is rather extreme as both legal rights are denied to him and violence proposed.

Whether this is merely rhetoric used to exclude opinions, and to make the author feel that s/he has fewer rights, is not clear. What is clear is that it plays a major role in the discussion. Ertan is not allowed to speak his mind on the subject. If he is unhappy with the situation he should 'just go back to Turkey'. Ertan himself anticipates this very response in his posted column: '[If a Muslim gives his opinion] he is censored or confronted with the question why he doesn't return to his own country, if he doesn't like it here. Holland apparently isn't our country.' Those responding to Ertan's post confirm his expectations, arguing in effect that freedom of speech has limits and people with Ertan's ideas and 'mentality' operate outside of these limits and thus do not belong in 'our' society. The following ways to deal with such dissent are proposed:

> There will be a time, dear Ertan, that we are going to eliminate people like you from our society. Passport or no passport, born and bred here or not. Your mentality doesn't belong here!
> (Arno, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:09)

> These sort of undesirable elements should be eliminated from our society immediately. Rebelling against a society of which you are a part is not done.
> (indahnesia.com, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:03)

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[12] Ten of these were posted on *nl.politiek*, seven on *Leefbaar Nederland*, and three on *Fok forum*. This means that relatively there were more on *Leefbaar Nederland*.

[13] Again, the *Leefbaar Nederland* forum had relatively more posts in this category: five, against three on *nl.politiek*, and five on *Fok forum*.

[14] See, for instance: Metro brieven (letters), 15 January 2004, 'Laat de schutter zijn straf in land van herkomst uitzitten (Make the killer serve his time in country of origin).'

> Well, with these ideas they should lock you up or withdraw your passport and have
> you leave the country.
> (Cor, *LeefbaarNederland*, 19 January 2004, 13:57)

The third way of trying to silence Ertan is through depriving him of the possibilities to speak on the Net. Participants discuss different technological and social steps that can be taken to exclude him from web forums and from the web in general. One participant of *nl.politiek* sends a message to the moderator of the newsgroup stating that Ertan's post is abusive, and suggests he should be excluded from the forum.[15] There is no indication whether the moderators honoured this request, by either closing down the thread or excluding him.

The other two forums, however, did close the discussion after a short period. After one day, *Leefbaar Nederland* put the post of Ertan and all the replies in the 'trash' (a separate place on the forum where the thread can still be accessed but which indicates that the discussion is seen as peripheral and not wanted). Ertan himself was banned from the site, as were two extreme right-wing participants, *White Angel* and *ProudtobeWhite*, whose messages did not differ much from other messages in the debate in terms of *what* was said, but rather *how* it was said. The forum administrator explained that Ertan's post was provocative, did not serve any purpose, and showed no respect for the friends and family of the deceased teacher.[16] The web forum *Fok* closed the thread after one hour, stating that: 'everything has been said,'[17] making it impossible to further discuss Ertan's post.

Both on *nl.politiek* and on *Fok* other ways of silencing Ertan were discussed. Some participants wanted to 'get his site offline,'[18] or predicted it would be hacked soon,[19] or cease to exist altogether.[20] Only few participants (including Ertan himself) argued that Ertan only uses his right to freedom of speech, and that he is not violating any laws. As Ertan states in the *Leefbaar Nederland* forum:

> You cannot withdraw my passport, let alone lock me up, as it is my right as a
> Dutchman to use my freedom of speech.
> (Ertan, *LeefbaarNederland*, 19 January 2004, 15:19)

Ertan's authenticity

A considerable number (18) of posts do not react to the content of the post but only talk about Ertan as an individual and whether he is real or a 'troll,'[21] and should

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[15] Francina, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:12.

[16] Victor Reijkersz, Administrator, *LeefbaarNederland*, 20 January 2004, 16:13.

[17] CartWOman (Forum Admin), *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:42.

[18] AltamirA, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:55.

[19] Jan Peter, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004. 11:38.

[20] xstatic1975, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:33.

[21] A troll is someone who deliberately tries to frustrate the discussion.

thus be ignored altogether. The fact that Ertan shows contempt for non-Muslims and non-Turks,[22] has a website[23] registered by S. Asuk,[24] and has expressed himself fiercely against homosexuals in the past,[25] suggests to the participants that Ertan is real and a Turk. The main reason people do not believe he genuinely is a Turk, is his use of the Dutch language: 'his Dutch is too good to be a Turk.'[26] A number of people are convinced Ertan is not who he says he is and even speculate that he is a Dutchman who wants to provoke and polarize Dutch society. Or as one participant puts it:

> It seems inconceivable that the Turkish community, apart from a few nutcases, will approve of such a dirty message. It will have a huge impact, however, on Muslim haters. This causes me to suspect we are dealing here with an ancient propaganda trick, which we will often come across, especially given the possibility the Internet offers in this respect.
> (Henk Senster, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 17:25)

Here, one of the features of the Internet, anonymity, leads to suspicion and moreover, to ignoring some of the messages on the Internet. However, many believe that Ertan's post truly represents the ideas of a section in society, even if he is not who he says he is. Because of the discussion about his authenticity, the content of his post is not addressed as much as the 'phenomenon' that is Ertan. In this way, the possibility of having a genuine debate on the issues raised by Ertan is annulled.

Generalization

In contrast to the above quoted participants who question Ertan's authenticity, a number of participants 'expose' Ertan's stance as the 'true' Muslim attitude, and see it as evidence that politicians should monitor Islam.[27] This generalization or stereotyping reveals the feeling of superiority of the Dutch or Western beliefs and values, as the following quote shows:

> There truly is a group out there, that thinks in this way, a way that is completely logical for them, namely out of a culture of honour, which we discarded after the Middle Ages
> (idontlikepizza, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:25).

Countering this strategy of generalization there are a considerable number of posts

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[22] Bartels, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 08:01.
[23] Yew Betcha, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:45. Even though it is interesting that some people apparently feel that if one has a website, this thus means one exists, it does not fit the scope of this paper to further address this issue.
[24] salvation, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:00.
[25] R@b, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:54.
[26] For instance: Job, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 16:55.
[27] Cor, *LeefbaarNederland*, 19 January 2004, 13:42.

arguing that Ertan is *not* representative of all Muslims, Turks or immigrants. Some are a direct reaction to these posts, and question the lines of argumentation. Other messages that counter generalizations of Ertan's position plainly state that Ertan is bad for Muslims or Turks. A few examples:

> I know many Turks and they condemn this deed [the murder]. With this expression of sympathy many Turks will be disgusted by you and will feel ashamed that you are of Turkish descent.
> (bbw/cno, *LeefbaarNederland*, 19 January 2004, 17:51)

> Your post is unworthy for a Turk, you are doing your brothers and sisters more harm than good with this.
> (Van Vliegen, *nl.politiek*, January 18 2004, 07:30)

> [Ertan is] working hard to confirm prejudices. (…) They are the ones who really ruin it for their 'group' in society.
> (blieblie, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:42)

These participants, even though they do not view Ertan as representative of the larger community he is deemed to be part of, still paint a picture of a Dutch-Turkish, or Muslim 'community', homogenising this group and attributing particular views to them. Again, such discussion diverts attention for the content of the debate at hand (which, of course, is not to suggest that Ertan's post is not 'guilty' of stereotyping in his own initial post).

Engagement with the 'other'

The discussion does not result in interaction or engagement between different discourses, as the alternative position is not heard and thus not properly included, and dialogue between discourses not present. The debate is instead dominated by personal attacks and none of the participants really acknowledges Ertan's position or makes an effort to address it in one of the 139 reactions to his message. The closest it gets to acknowledgment of his stance, is when one of the participants asks (after someone reports Ertan to the forum administrator for being abusive):

> Why? This is a very useful contribution. We should know how people really think about Dutch society? Very useful information, and he means it, you're not prohibiting that, are you? (…) You won't hear this if you let the professional foreigners speak, affected as they are by the Dutch welfare bureaucracy.
> (Yew Betcha, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:19)

The participants disagree with Ertan's position, but no one addresses the content and substance of his arguments. There is thus neither inclusion nor engagement with his discourse. The participants' only concern seems to be with finding a way of eliminating him and his point of view, either directly or through doubting his

authenticity and representativeness.

It could be argued that it is Ertan's position in support of Murat that closes the door to dialogue. But this would suggest that public debate is rather limited in terms of the content that can be discussed, as well as in the way this content needs to be presented. If public debate can only take place in ways tolerated or proscribed by the dominant public, and can only portray what the dominant public allows, the limits of public debate are rather narrow and its role in democracy not optimal, if not to say restricting the space of thought and discourse.

As mentioned earlier, there are various views on democratic debate, ranging from the view that it should follow strict criteria (such as the traditional account on deliberation proposed by, for instance, Habermas (1996)) to the view that the most radical, unmediated and proscribed forms of debate should be included (as argued, for instance, by Mouffe (2000)). The first account has been criticised for not being inclusive of difference (see for instance, Fraser (1992) and Asen (1999)), but the question is, whether radical accounts of democracy do allow for such inclusion. There is more at stake than mere inclusion or tolerance of different positions. Rather, *engagement* is needed between different discourses; recognition of the other's position involves reflection upon the content of one's *own* discourse by an encounter with the other's discourse. Thus, different discourses should not merely coexist, but interact. In the discussion of Ertan's support for Murat as analysed above, there does not even seem to be space for the different discourses to coexist (rather the one discourse is directed at excluding the other) let alone space for interaction. Difference functions as opposition and polarization.

To overcome such opposition and polarization, debates on deeply divided topics may need types of communication different than rational communication. Young (2000) identifies a number of bridging expressions, such as narratives and greetings that would allow for a meaningful interaction between different discourses. With contested issues like immigration in the Netherlands, these types of communication may help to create understanding of the 'other.' However, in the analysed debate none of these other types of communication were present. We have Ertan's testimonial, and even though he shares some of his experiences being an immigrant struggling in today's Dutch society, no bridging replies follow that in one way or the other show some understanding of his position.

The use of alternative types of communication to establish engagement

The question is how can alternative types of communication benefit public discussion on contested issues? A discussion on *Maghrebonline*, a website set up for Dutch Moroccans but frequented by a wide range of citizens, indicates potential discursive bridges. On this website a discussion started after a demonstration by a group of adolescents at Murat's school. Two days after the murder, they were

demonstrating to show their support for the boy who shot his teacher, because they felt there was too much negative information about him in the media. They used a banner stating the same as Ertan's heading: 'Murat we love you'.[28] The day after this demonstration, *Yesmina* started a discussion thread on *Maghrebonline* called 'Murat' (Friday 16 January 2004).[29] She is very outspoken about the youngsters' actions in her initial post, and writes:

> I do not feel sorry for Murat and have no mercy either! He did not have mercy when he pointed the gun at that teacher!! **I** feel very ashamed that something like this CAN HAPPEN in the Netherlands. To applaud someone who is disturbed!! They should throw all these disturbed people in jail! And his friends go on to applaud him as if he did not commit a crime and is not responsible for a death and he deserves his punishment. To then shout on TV We love you Murat (...) as if he has done nothing wrong.
> (Yesmina, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 2004, 00:18; emphasis in original)

The point of departure for this discussion is thus very similar to the discussions that start with Ertan's post: There is an expression of support for Murat that starts off the discussion followed by a strong condemnation. However, what then happens is of a very different nature than in the discussions examined before. A dialogue develops with interaction between different discourses. The most prominent element in this discussion is the use of narrative, greeting and other personal addresses.

The first three messages are by *Yesmina*, the first of which is quoted above. They reveal a fierce disapproval. The first reaction to *Yesmina*'s writing is a post in which the author tries to establish some understanding of the youngsters that were demonstrating by using narrative:

> Regarding the demonstration, you should not forget they are teenagers who are trying to come to terms with what happened. Of course, it is strange to demonstrate in that way and on that place, but this you can expect from youngsters. They probably knew Murat well and considered him to be a good friend. I'm not trying to justify it, but I view it as a struggle with their own feelings. Such an experience is difficult even for adults that are involved.
> (HenkM, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 04, 01:01)

It becomes clear that this participant tries to shed light on the experiences of the friends of Murat, and that he tries to come to an understanding of their situation and their subsequent actions. The discussant furthermore acknowledges that his view is not the only view (*I* view it as ...), expecting that it will also be met with disapproval (*I'm not trying to justify it*, but). He does, however, try to create an atmosphere for understanding the youngsters' actions, by linking them to the

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[28] The original text on the banner was English.

[29] Fifteen participants (a third to half of the participants appear to represent immigrants) post 61 messages in six days, after which the discussion dies out. Three participants dominate the discussion, writing over half the contributions, among them the initiator Yesmina.

situation of the participants of the discussion, to the situation of 'adults' for whom such an experience would be equally difficult.

Others in the discussion similarly try to relate the experiences of the youngsters to their own situation. In the following example, the discussant does not try so much to identify with the youngsters, but rather with their parents:

> I'm sorry henk, but I do not agree with you; if it were my children that were confronted with such a situation, I would be present and available myself for the process of dealing with it.
> (PeterJan, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 2004, 12:13)

This participant feels that the demonstration is not the appropriate way of dealing with their grief, and that it is important that parents are there for them during this difficult time. In this way, the discussant acknowledges the difficulty of the situation for the youngsters, without condemning them (as was done by *Yesmina*), pointing rather at the responsibility of the parents in this matter. He comes to this position by considering what *he* would do, if *his* children were involved. The method of personalizing the incident helps to determine one's opinion on the matter and plays an important part in understanding the other's situation.

Another important element that affects the tone of the discussion is present in this quote: personal address. Although this participant undoubtedly knows that *Henk* is not the only person reading his comment (six postings by three people precede it) and probably does not have the intention of solely addressing *Henk*, he starts his posting with 'I'm sorry henk, but I do not agree with you.' This personal address suggests that *PeterJan* has weighed *Henk*'s position and only then decided he does not agree. It even suggests that it is not so much his unwillingness to agree, but that their views on the issue are different. To apologize for this disagreement suggests that both views can coexist. He ends his post with 'I know that I touch upon a sensitive issue [the responsibility of immigrant parents] here, but it really disturbs me.' These types of expression soften the tone of the discussion, and make differences seem less fundamental, and thus more easily surmountable.

Another response of *PeterJan* combines a personal address as well as experiences from his personal life and that of his family members:

> No, Ann; my secondary education started at a LTS [Lower Technical School] (~40 yrs ago) but was/is not comparable to what constitutes VMBO at this time. (…) What I fear (and I even notice it at home) is a hardening of natives against immigrants. My wife is working at buro jeugdzorg [institute for youth care] and is regularly confronted with similar situations [the terrible situation a number of Turkish families are in, according to one of the other discussants]. The shocking percentage of immigrants in their caseload and the inaccessibility/language problems are enormous.
> (PeterJan, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 2004, 12:59)

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All these pieces of information, personal experiences, narratives, and efforts to empathize with others, can help to come to grips with highly complex, contested, and emotional issues. Personal address, respect, acknowledgements and other ways of letting the other know that you have listened to the other's position and considered it softens the tone of the discussion, which starts off very harsh.

I am not denying that these forms of address could be 'mere' rhetoric, aimed at convincing the other of one's own position. However, if such rhetoric is what is successful in connecting people and has them consider positions and experiences different from their own, then rhetoric does more good than harm to the discussion. Neither do I wish to imply that these types of address are all that is needed in public debate, or that the differences between people or disagreements will vanish because of them. Instead, I argue that these types of communication are necessary conditions for starting an open debate on contested issues. They create an atmosphere in which people feel respected and comfortable enough to open up to other (and 'foreign') positions and are not reserved with sharing their own personal experience and opinions. Sharing personal experiences or other narratives just might be a prerequisite for understanding. In this sense, of course, online debate is not different than offline debate or conversation. When people feel heard and recognized there is less incentive to revert to more polarizing ways of communicating.

However, that such a bridging of discourses can be very fragile becomes clear in the second part of the discussion. The discussion turns from an open discussion into a debate in which personal attacks and off-topic contributions have free play. In the twenty-first post, Jena starts to rant against one of the other participants, whom she accuses of being a Jew hater.

Table 2. Types of expression on Maghrebonline

	Frequency		
Type of expression	Before first personal attack	After first personal attack	Total
Reaction to others	13	13	26
Statement about issue	13	3	16
Alternative approach to issue	12	2	14
Argument for statement	9	3	12
Providing information	6	5	11
Personal attack	0	6	6
Asking for information	2	2	4
Meta-talk about the discussion	1	1	2
Total number of messages	**20**	**41**	**61**

While many of the contributions before this first personal attack deal with the actual topic (see table 2), only 3 out of 41 posts deal with the topic after Jena's posting. Even though there are still quite a number of reactions to other posts, the discussion loses its direction and focus on content.

Before this particular post of Jena, 9 out of 20 posts provide arguments for their statements; after, only 3 out of 41 provide arguments. Also, the amount of information asked for and provided decreases rapidly. But most importantly, whereas in the first phase of the discussion participants genuinely present alternative ways of viewing the matter (12 out of 20 posts), these are no longer provided in the second phase (only in 2 out of 40 posts). Thus, where the discussion started to facilitate some understanding of possible different positions, a specific instance of personal attack changes the course of the discussion. After this the participants who contributed to the debate in the first phase with their personal experiences do not return to the discussion.

Conclusion

In this article I examined the obstacles and potential for interaction between different discourses in the online public sphere. Voice matters, but these cases show that this not only requires expression of voice, but also a recognition of it (see also: Couldry, 2010). Even though Ertan constitutes an alternative or radical voice online, he is unsuccessful in opening up the discussion on immigration and integration. No dialogue came about on the basis of his column. Instead, the participants were unanimous in trying to find ways of excluding him. They do so, not by addressing the content of the message, but rather by trying, in one way or another, to 'eliminate' his voice. Neither Ertan as a participant, nor the content of his post is acknowledged by the other participants.

Thus, even though the discussion platform initially allows for inclusion of Ertan's voice, the participants are not open. The dominant discourse aims to homogenize the discourse by seeking exclusion of the alternative voice, a tendency pointed out by Asen (1999). The different levels of inclusion identified by Young (2000) are helpful here: In the case analyzed, there is only external inclusion (Ertan has access to the debate) but no internal inclusion (he does not have an equal position in the debate), as others do not grant him equal status nor equal capacity to effectively influence the debate. As a result there can be no engagement between the positions, as he only has formal access to the debate, not a meaningful access. Also, no understanding for the 'other' comes about, as the debate and participants are lacking in openness. Thus, the technology may allow for Ertan to have a voice in the public domain, but what happens with this voice depends on the other 'inhabitants' of this space.

The question is whether it is Ertan's emotional appeal that is perhaps bound to attract strong reactions or that the discussants did not try hard enough to be open

to it. Most likely it is both. If one wants to listen to an alternative voice, there is enough in Ertan's message to deal with in a serious manner. But if one cuts oneself off from the other, there is likewise material in the post to foreclose any serious discussion.

However, that bridging of discourses is possible online became clear from the analysis of a discussion on *Maghrebonline*. This debate featured alternative positions and featured strong contributions, as in the Ertan discussions, but here a number of participants were open to 'connect' to the other, and tried to understand the other's position. They tried to establish understanding between different perspectives in different ways. These discussants determined the tone of the debate (and softened it) by acknowledging the other discussants, particularly those with whom they disagreed. The debate featured inclusion of difference, engagement between different positions, and through the dialogue, some level of understanding seemed to be established.

This case empirically shows the role that greeting plays in debates on contested issues, as is theorized by Young (2000). Particularly in an environment where participants cannot see one another, such greetings have an important function. They show that someone has acknowledged one's presence, hereby showing that s/he has taken one's post seriously. This acknowledgement of presence is even more important because the discussions do not have to take place synchronously. As such, greetings can provide for some sort of continuity in a space where this may otherwise feel unnatural; greetings may help to establish a feeling for the discussion. One only exists for the others in the debate when s/he contributes through posting. When someone acknowledges the other and considers his/her post, this also tells one s/he is willing to discuss it with you. Greetings and other forms of personal address grant the other a voice in the debate.

Of equal importance is the sharing of personal experiences and connections to one's everyday life. These testimonials and narratives allow for understanding between different perspectives and they allow participants to view the person 'beyond' their nickname online. The greetings created an open atmosphere between people in which participants felt free to share personal stories. But even though participants can work hard to create this comfortable atmosphere, others can always come and 'crash the party.' This case showed just how fragile the openness of online debate is.

Of course there were major differences in the three debates centred on Ertan's post and the latter case discussed. In the debates of Ertan's statement of support it concerned a direct reaction to the one proclaiming support. Moreover, in the case of Ertan it concerns an adult, whereas the others were adolescents, who were directly involved, being friends of Murat. The discussants who try to establish understanding take a pedagogical tone in their messages. The fact that the youngsters are not attributed full responsibility may be an explanatory factor for

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the understanding that was established.

The analysis points to the importance, or necessity of openness of the debate and discussants and thus shows the limits and potential of online debate. As such, it helps us to move beyond the binary positions of optimism and pessimism that have dominated academic writing on the internet's role for democracy. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the use of narrative, greetings, and testimonials can function in public discussions on contested issues, furthering our insights into the ways in which meaningful interaction can take place between alternative and mainstream discourses. This analysis provided an empirical account of the way in which 'contestation among a plurality of competing publics' takes place (Fraser, 1992: 122), highlighting the exclusions as well as potential for understanding. As such it aimed to at least partially answer the highly relevant question of how the internet may be used as a platform through which alternative voices can find a channel and mainstream, dominant discourses can be challenged.

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Appendix A: full text of Ertan's post (source: Ertan.nl)

Murat, I love you,
You could have been my kid brother. What you did is not your fault, son, it is the fault of this rotten society in which we, unfortunately, live. The dirty tricks of the so-called tolerant Dutchmen I know better than anyone else. They get under your skin and do so in a very sly manner. But who gets blamed in the end, yes, our culture, that supposedly is no good, whereas it's their culture that is rotten to the bone.

Even though we are born and bred here we are treated differently. My declaration of support to you was mercilessly removed from discussion forums of the public broadcaster. When a Dutchman gives his opinion this is called freedom of speech, but if a Muslim does so, he is censored or confronted with the question why he doesn't return to his own country, if he doesn't like it here. Holland apparently isn't our country.

Belittled, oppressed and mentally abused, you are not the only one, Murat. You did not see any other way to vent your suppressed feelings of hate than to shoot a bullet through the head of your teacher. What choice do you have when this society leaves you no other way out? To let them belittle, oppress, and mentally abuse you? Anyone with a little bit of honour doesn't allow that.

Believe me, there are a lot of Muslim youngsters out there like you with a lot of suppressed feelings of hate towards everything that is in any way related to Dutchmen. Therefore, I fear this won't be the last of it. On the contrary, it will only worsen, especially when a youngster like you can only feel safe with a gun in his pocket.

Hang in there, Murat and turn to Allah. I, as a Turkish Muslim brother, love you and find you a true hero, as you stood up for yourself.

Ertan.nl