

'We need to get together and make ourselves heard': everyday online spaces as incubators of political action

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ABSTRACT

This article examines to what extent, and how, people engaging in political talk within 'non-political' discussion forums – online lifestyle communities – leads to political (or personal) action or calls-to-action. The analysis is framed in the context of wider questions of citizenship, civic engagement and political mobilization. To capture everyday political talk amongst citizens requires us to move beyond the now widely analysed online spaces of formal politics. Instead, we focus on online third spaces concerning lifestyle issues such as parenting, personal finance and popular culture. Drawing on a content analysis of three popular UK-based discussion forums over the course of five years (2010–2014), we found that (for two of the three cases) such spaces were more than just talking shops. Rather they were spaces where political actions not only emerged, but where they seemed to be cultivated. Discussions embedded in the personal lives of participants often developed – through talk – into political actions aimed at government (or other) authorities. The article sheds light on the contributing factors and processes that (potentially) trigger and foster action emerging from political talk and provides insight into the mobilization potential of third spaces.

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Introduction

Over recent decades, much has been said about the potential of the internet for enhancing civic engagement and political participation in the public sphere (see Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002). However, much of the theoretical and empirical research to date has focused on formal and/or extra-parliamentary processes and forms of political engagement, such as how political parties and elected representatives engage voters; government-citizen consultation and deliberation; and how activist groups and networks use new media. We argue that to better capture the impact of new media on participation practices, researchers must not only adopt more inclusive typologies of political engagement, but also move beyond conventional political spaces by analysing everyday political talk in formally non-political, online third spaces: public spaces beyond the home (first space) or work (second space) where people can meet and interact informally and where political

talk, organizing and action can occur (Wright, 2012). Such third spaces are not intended for political purposes, but rather – during the course of everyday talk – become political through the connections participants make between their everyday lives and the political and social issues of the day.

50 Analysis of third spaces seems particularly pertinent in a time of austerity in the UK, because government cuts to advice and services and an apparent push to roll back the state means that citizens are increasingly expected to fend for themselves, and third spaces appear to be a potentially important avenue for this to happen. Thus, the aim of this study is to see how, and to what extent, such spaces activate citizens – triggering a
55 shift from everyday talk to political action.

To this end, the article uses a content analysis ($n = 20,762$ posts) to examine how (and the extent to which) political participation and engagement emerge in three popular (3.5 m members and over 114 m, posts) online third spaces grounded in everyday and lifestyle needs: Netmums, Money Saving Expert (MSE) and Digital Spy (DS). In the context of
60 everyday political discussion, the analysis focused on identifying those moments when participants indicated (via posting comments to threads) that they would take action or reported back that they recently took action (e.g. contact an MP, join a protest and boycott), post a call-to-action or use the thread to organize action. In most cases, this captures intent to participate or the encouragement of participation, and we do not know
65 whether any actions were actually taken; we have to take such information at face value. That said, the analysis reveals that at least two of the studied spaces are very effective at translating political talk into (alleged) actions (both within and beyond the forum). By examining the interplay between political talk and a range of actions, we find that discussions embedded in the personal lives of participants often develop – through talk – into
70 actions aimed at impacting/influencing government (or other authorities) or community/society more broadly.

Revisiting the ‘crisis’ of political participation

75 For the past two decades, there has been a widely held perception that the UK – like many of the ‘old’ established Western democracies – is afflicted by a crisis of democracy, evidenced by declining metrics of political engagement and party identification; a feeling of distrust between citizens and politicians; and eroding public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy (e.g. Hansard Society, 2012). Whilst recent UK electoral turnouts and the surge in Scottish Nationalist Party membership have abated some of these worries, there remains deep concern over the apparent disconnect between the
80 everyday lives of citizens and the realm of formal politics. As Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 69) argue, ‘There is a pervasive sense that politicians and the people they represent inhabit different worlds, speak mutually incomprehensible languages and fail to respect one another’.

85 While the crisis thesis remains prominent, numerous scholars have presented evidence of an alternative thesis that emphasizes a growth in non-electoral forms of political participation (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995; Norris, 1999). One area that has received ample attention is the rise of an increasingly personalized lifestyle politics where people undertake political actions that are not captured by traditional measures and are often outside of
90 the formal political sphere (De Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013; Hay, 2007; Stolle &

Micheletti, 2013). Here, individuals increasingly organize social and political meaning around their lifestyle values as opposed to traditional structures and institutions (Beck, 1997; Bennett, 1998).

This short overview highlights the complexity of the debate surrounding political participation and civic engagement in contemporary Western democracies. For example, how do we identify, define and measure participation/engagement in a climate of flux? How do these two theses connect? To help us make sense of this voluminous and at times contradictory literature, we have identified what we believe are two key areas of contention: the scope and place of political action.

The scope of political action

According to Hay (2007, p. 71), the often starkly different perspectives on the health of representative democracy occur because the definition adopted directly impacts the conclusions that are drawn:

Those with a narrow and formal understanding of politics are likely to detect in current trends a decline in levels of political participation, whilst those with a broader and more inclusive conception of politics are more likely to detect a change in the form of political participation.

Hay argues that the definitions adopted, to date, have been unduly narrow, while others have made similar claims about the conceptualization and methodological application of civic engagement (see Adler & Goggin, 2005). Only relatively recently has scholarship caught up with the emerging repertoires of participation citizens are increasingly engaging in such as consumer participation, (online) protest activity and contacting organizations about public matters.

Ekman and Amna (2012) argue that even still, important aspects of citizens' political (or pre-political) engagement are systematically overlooked using the standard definitions. In response, they have developed a detailed and expansive typology of political participation and civic engagement. They draw a distinction between manifest political participation such as formal political participation and activism (extra-parliamentary participation); and civil participation (latent political participation) such as social involvement (attention) and forms of civic engagement (action). Regarding the former, this includes all actions directed towards influencing/impacting the political elite, governmental decisions or political outcomes. Such actions may be within the formal institutional framework and aimed towards the conventional actors within that framework. But they might just as likely be (legal or illegal) extra-parliamentary political actions, such as joining social movements, civil disobedience, boycotting or consumer activism, which have seen growth in recent years.

An important dimension that distinguishes their typology from others is the inclusion of latent forms of engagement. Latent engagement focuses on people's propensity and capacity to act (there may be no actual political act) such as consuming political news, and civic engagement in which there are actions but these are directed at society rather than formal politics such as making charitable donations. Such engagement may be regarded as 'pre-political', or what Dahlgren (2009) describes as 'proto-political', and includes activities not directly aimed at influencing the people in power, but nevertheless activities that entail involvement in society and current affairs. As Ekman and Amna

argue, these are ‘activities and forms of engagement that could very well be of great relevance, for example, future manifest political action, even if “pre-political” or “potentially political” rather than directly political as such’ (2012, p. 297). A question, then, is what role online third spaces can play – as potential facilitators of political deliberation and discussion – in enabling political actions, in both the formal political sphere and broader societal sphere.

The spaces of political action

Internet and mobile technologies have become one of the driving forces of the new heterogeneous political landscape, as they provide citizens with new ways to participate, network and collaborate on issues of public concern. These developments on the ground (or over the network) are constantly renegotiating the boundaries between producers and consumers, public and private, political and popular culture (Papacharissi, 2010) and provide considerable challenges for researchers to capture sufficiently. This is especially true for more latent forms of engagement. It is not only a question of what to look for, but where to look.

This brings us to the second key area of contention: what spaces scholars should examine when trying to understand the extent to which people take political actions. If it is correct that people have moved away from formal politics and now take political actions in relation to their everyday life, then it seems fair to suggest that we need to look in these spaces to understand contemporary political action. However, much of the research on e-democracy and e-participation has focused on either explicitly political online spaces such as political party websites (e.g. Gibson, Margolis, Resnick, & Ward, 2003), political discussion forums (e.g. Kies, 2010) or e-democracy projects (see Smith, 2009 for an overview). Whilst much has been learned, we argue that there is as much to be gained by investigating how political actions emerge in everyday online, third spaces: again, public spaces beyond the home or workplace where people meet and interact informally and where political talk, organizing and action can occur (see Wright, 2012). They include online communities devoted to a variety of topics from television, music and sports, to parenting, relationships and personal finance. Such spaces allow scholars to explore the ways citizenry is connected and intertwined with various aspects of everyday life.

While there are studies that have begun to analyse latent forms of engagement across a more encompassing range of spaces, this has largely focused on young people via the use of survey and/or interview data (Harris & Wyn, 2009; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). For example, drawing on a representative national sample, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009, p. 45) found that the most frequently visited types of online groups/communities – those revolving around non-political interests such as hobbies – were in essence political with 53% of American participants engaging in political talk within these contexts. Similarly, Vromen, Xenos, and Loader (2015, p. 95) concluded that everyday sociality and friendship connections – inherent features of social media – are becoming key in maintaining contemporary political engagement among young people. While these studies provide us with important insight into why people turn to third spaces, it tells us less about what is actually taking place in them.

A growing number of studies have focused on analysing the nature of, and communicative practices in, third spaces; for example, those attached to reality TV (Graham, 2010,

2011, 2012; Graham & Harju, 2011); film communities (van Zoonen, 2007); and personal finance, media and family (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, in-press; Graham & Wright, 2014; Jackson, Scullion, & Molesworth, 2013). These studies focus primarily on the quality and nature of political talk. While this research has shown that a considerable amount of political talk emerges in these formally 'non-political' spaces, and that it can be deliberative, we still know little about what happens as a consequence of such talk. As Coleman and Moss (2012, p. 11) have argued, 'for most online deliberation researchers it seems as if the political process ends when civic talk stops'. Thus, an important research question still remains: how, and to what extent, does engaging in political talk within third spaces lead to political action or calls-to-action? Unlike the survey/interview-based research discussed earlier, such an analysis allows us to see how action emerges from political talk in real social settings, providing insight into the organizing and communicative practices that take place in third spaces.

Research design and methodology

In order to address these issues we adopted a content analysis of three UK-based third spaces. We chose to analyse three of the most popular and ostensibly non-political forums in the UK. Whilst they are ostensibly non-political, research has shown that approximately 7% of all discussions turn political at some point (Jackson et al., 2013), and that political talk can be extensive (Graham & Wright, 2014).

First, we selected the MSE forum, which was set up by the finance guru, Martin Lewis, but sold in 2012 for £87 m. The forum has 114 sub-forums, largely focused on personal finance but with other chat areas. The forum has a sense of community, with many active super-participants that largely perform positive discursive roles and generate significant political talk (Graham & Wright, 2014). At the time of the analysis (May 2013) the MSE forum had received 34.6 m posts from 1.3 m members across 2.5 m threads.

Second, we analysed Netmums, a non-profit parenting website (not to be confused with the for-profit Mumsnet) set up in 2000. The main website facilitates a network of local on/offline groups across the UK. The Netmums discussion forum – the Coffee House – is central to the community with 154 sub-forums, and it had received 9.3 m posts from 1.7 m users. It is worth noting that the forum has a professional Parent Support Team, made up of internal trained staff and counsellors alongside external support and advice from bodies such as Relate and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Finally, we analysed DS, the UK's largest independent entertainment news and discussion website, and in the top 30 English language forums in the world. Started in 2001, it had received 70.8 m posts from 548,759 members at the time of the analysis, and operates in five countries (the focus here is on the UK site). The forum has 75 sub-forums, largely focused on entertainment, showbiz, movies and music, but there is a dedicated 'politics' sub-forum on the site. It has a large editorial staff providing content for the news sections, but moderation of debates is 'light touch'.

Sampling procedures

The sampling was based on an earlier study, which analysed the topics and nature of political talk in the three forums discussed above (Graham et al., in press). Through a

keyword search, 3000 threads ($n = 1,081,989$ posts) active during 2010–2014 were included in the initial analysis. The search consisted of 29 keywords, which can be categorized into four groups: politicians (e.g. David Cameron, Nick Clegg), parties (e.g. LibDems, UKIP), institutions (e.g. Westminster, parliament) and general terms such as democracy and politics. Threads where the keywords had no political connotation/context were not included. Based on this initial sample, a random sub-sample of 150 threads (50 per forum), which focused on austerity (threads concerning issues such as benefits, cuts and banking) were selected for analysis.² Additionally, an even split between those threads that start off as political (where the intention was to talk politics) and those that did not (where politics emerged during the course of everyday talk) were taken. The total sample consisted of 20,762 messages (MSE $n = 7242$; DS $n = 8157$; Netmums $n = 5363$) posted in 39 different sub-forums (MSE $n = 22$; DS $n = 5$; Netmums $n = 12$).

Coding procedures: deductive

A content analysis, which used both deductive and inductive coding techniques, was employed as the primary method for analysis. We created a coding scheme based on Ekman and Amna's typology of political participation and engagement. The coding scheme was tested for functionality during a small pilot study where categories were modified, merged or deleted until a final coding scheme was deduced.³

The coding scheme focused on identifying and analysing political actions. In this study, political actions refers to the various forms of manifest and latent political participation as set out by Ekman and Amna (2012); that is, we use it as an umbrella term for the various forms of political participation and civic engagement. Operationally speaking, political actions were defined as posts that contained statements whereby a participant explicitly indicated that he/she will take action (present or future tense) or made calls-to-action. The threshold for actions was deliberately set high to avoid including ambiguous comments, which might have implicitly referred to political action or a call-to-action. In all cases apart from personal actions (discussed below), such actions needed to be framed in the context of the collective good and be social/political in nature.

As discussed in the theoretical section, Ekman and Amna categorize political actions into four groups: formal political actions; extra-parliamentary political actions; social involvement; and civic engagement. However, some actions were not possible to capture through our chosen methodology. In particular, social involvement-based actions (attention to and interest in political/societal issues) were not included in the analysis as these types of actions are difficult to capture properly with a content analysis. Along with the changes made during our pilot study, 19 political actions were identified, which can be categorized into 3 groups: formal political actions; extra-parliamentary political actions and civic actions (see Table 2). Additionally, we added an action code to the civic actions category: forum-based activism. This consisted of forum specific actions aimed at influencing/impacting forum members, such as when people used the forum to educate each other on the workings of the political system in order to facilitate political actions. Finally, in order to capture links people made between the private sphere and public policy, we also coded all political actions for whether the individual made a connection to their personal lives in the post.

Reliability

Inter-coder reliability was conducted on a random sample of 75 threads (25 per case) by three coders. Using the keywords to identify political talk within each thread, 10 posts – in sequential order – per thread were included in the test sample ($n = 750$). The unit of analysis was the individual post. Calculated using Cohen's Kappa, coefficients met appropriate acceptance levels: presence/absence of political action (.90); classification of the type of action (.87) and personalization (.73).

Coding procedures: inductive

Online forums are spaces where the private and public are deeply intertwined. Every day people are using these forums to 'meet' new people, help solve personal dilemmas and learn from other peoples' experiences. A great deal of help and advice takes place on these forums, which prompts many actions in peoples' private spheres (Graham & Wright, 2014). During our pilot study, we started to see trends in such behaviour, but were unable to create precise coding definitions, rules and procedures. To overcome this, we used inductive coding techniques to capture personal actions: coding and recoding via feedback loops until a final coding scheme was deduced (Mayring, 2002). Personal actions are defined as when participants engaged in actions directed towards political institutions (such as government services, local councils) or (for-profit) service providers (or other companies) but for their own personal gain rather than to influence policy or wider societal outcomes. We considered these types of actions worthy of capturing because they (potentially) provide an opportunity to uncover how actions in the private domain may lead to actions in the public domain. Or as Hay (2007, p. 70) has argued, personal actions are political if the action has a public consequence for others (e.g. activating them to talk politics or take other political actions).

Findings

The analysis revealed that everyday discussion on the three forums led to all sorts of personal and political actions. In this section, these findings are discussed, starting with personal actions.

Personal Actions

Unlike political actions, personal actions had no explicit connection to the collective good; rather, it was about taking action for personal gain. As Table 1 shows, there were 183 personal actions (or calls-to-action) identified within 38 of the 150 threads (25%). Contacting government agencies and QUANGOs was the most common type of action, accounting for more than a quarter of all actions. These were typically grounded in (requests for) advice giving and support. Participants were using the forums to get/provide support on an array of social and financial issues from how to get a crisis loan and social housing to how to manage debt and find a job. Such actions were generally geared towards information acquisition such as finding out what form to fill out in order to apply for a crisis loan or checking whether one was required to pay the 'bedroom tax'.

Table 1. Type and frequency of personal actions (n = 183).

	# of actions	% of actions
Contact government agency/QUANGO	52	28.4
Challenge/appeal	25	13.7
Contact MP	21	11.5
Legal action/advice	19	10.4
Contact local council	18	9.3
Contact government	11	6.0
File complaint	8	4.9
Contact police	8	4.9
Tax avoidance	6	3.3
Boycott	3	1.6
Forum-based action	3	1.6
Contact media	2	1.1
Join union	2	1.1
Other	5	2.7

The remainder of the personal actions were more manifest in the sense that they were taken to change/impact a specific outcome, decision or bureaucratic process more generally as the example below illustrates:

Example 1 (MSE): What I forgot to add was that in my case I arranged a face to face with the MP after a couple of phone calls and discussion with their PA and the MP has now taken the problem down to Westminster. MPs are all individuals and lucky for us, this one seems to care (AND understand). So don't be put off your MP as a source of support, they're paid to serve the people even tho you wouldn't know it sometimes!

There was significant evidence of people encouraging other individuals to engage in personal acts with the formal political process.⁴ The difference, however, was that most of these were when people faced problems with an apparently faceless bureaucracy that would not listen to their concerns. MPs, for example, were considered to be effective at getting answers and delivering change, because it was perceived that the agency would have to listen and respond.

There was a clear distinction between the cases. In DS, personal actions were infrequent; 13 personal actions were identified. In MSE and Netmums, on the other hand, personal actions arose in 36% (n = 109) and 34% (n = 61) of their threads, respectively.

Though the focus of such talk was on helping and supporting individual needs, it often triggered political discussions that led to actions on behalf of the public – political actions. More specifically, 68% of personal action threads triggered political talk, activating and mobilizing participants to take political actions, as the example below exemplifies:

Example 2 (Netmums): My ex [...] sends his girlfriend to Poland to study and pays for flights and courses. He seems to fly out there about twice per month ... he has rental flats, shops, business premises, a home, a second home and 3 vehicles. Yet he is still over 5 k in arrears with maintenance, and pays nothing towards the childcare ... It is shocking and the CSA [Child Support Agency] is inept, their staff unable to work with the stupid complicated processes that they have, and they are unable to even maintain tabs on the most simple of cases ... i mean how hard is it to respond to the fact someone hasn't paid, without the resident parent having to ring up multiple times and be told different things every time. Personally i only get anywhere when i get my local MP involved. They should be seizing his assets, selling them and putting the money in trust to make sure my daughter gets his share of her upkeep, as the only reason he doesn't pay is because he doesn't want to. It seems they will not do that. They even took him to court, and it didn't even result in a ccj [County Court

Table 2. Type and frequency of political actions (n = 810).

	# of actions	% of actions	
Manifest forms of political participation			
Formal political actions			
365	Contacting MP	186	23.0
	Voting	39	4.8
	Volunteering: political party/organization or trade union	19	2.3
	Joining a political party/organization or trade union	3	0.4
	Running for public office	6	0.7
Extra-parliamentary political actions			
	Boycotting and consumer activism	110	13.6
	Signing petition	79	9.8
370	Starting/organizing campaign/protest	72	8.9
	Joining/participating in campaign/protest	66	8.1
	Creating petition	19	2.3
	Civil disobedience	9	1.1
	Other formal/extra-parliamentary political actions	46	5.7
Civil participation (latent political participation)			
Civic actions (civic engagement)			
375	Contacting the media	76	9.4
	Forum-based activism	38	4.7
	Donating money to a charity	9	1.1
	Volunteering: social work, charity work or faith-based community work	9	1.1
	Participating in community-based activities	6	0.7
	Joining/participating in a group with a societal focus	1	0.1
	Other civic actions	17	2.1

Judgement] against him. I kept asking them to take his driving licence, he values that more than his daughter, but no.. thats for tough cases.. excuse me, hasnt paid in 18 months, over 5 k in arrears, how bad does it get!!! We need to get together and make ourselves heard for the benefit of our children and get the law changed because more and more children are born into families where one parent will run off and abandon them.

In this thread, participants were discussing their experiences and (financial) difficulties with 'deadbeat dads' and the Child Support Agency – the agency in charge of collecting and managing child maintenance. As this example shows, discussions on very personal issues often ignited (calls for) political action by forum participants – especially in MSE and Netmums.

Political Actions

The first striking finding was that in 49% of all threads some form of political action emerged. As Table 2 indicates, there were 810 individual actions identified by our analysis. When taking a closer look at the types of threads that led to political action, we find that those which started off as non-political were just as likely to lead to political actions as political ones (49% vs. 51%). Moreover, as Table 3 shows, actions emerged in a variety of everyday conversations with threads on sports; personal finance; news and current affairs; and parenting and childcare accounting for more than 6% each.

There was a clear distinction between the cases. In DS, political actions were infrequent, appearing in 14% of threads, while in MSE and Netmums, they arose in 72% and 62% of threads, respectively.

What types of political actions emerged? The most common types were manifest forms of political participation, representing 81% of all the actions identified. Extra-

Table 3. Initial topics of threads that led to political action (n = 74).

	# of threads	% of threads
Politics	38	51.4
Sports	8	10.8
Personal finance	8	10.8
News and current affairs	6	8.1
Parenting and childcare	5	6.8
Health and well-being	3	4.1
Family time	2	2.7
Work	2	2.7
TV and film	1	1.4
Home improvement	1	1.4

parliamentary actions, which accounted for 50% of all actions, were most common: joining and/or organizing a campaign/protest (17%); boycotting and consumer activism (14%); and signing and/or creating a petition (12%). Strikingly, 61% of all actions arose through everyday talk. Participants would start discussing a political/social issue and through the course of the debate begin to organize collective action or take other actions, as the example below illustrates:

Example 3 (MSE): I run a small limited company – just me – no employees, and I pay £15,000 to £20,000 corporation tax each year, which is 20% of my profits. I would rather keep the lot, but I don't because tax is a fact of life which keeps this country going. However, Amazon made £7 bn profits in the UK last year (allegedly) and managed not to pay any UK corporation at all. Is this fair? I think not! It has become all too easy just to click and buy from Amazon and I am guilty of it probably several times a month. But I have decided to try and have an Amazon-free Christmas this year. It won't be easy ... Black Friday is coming up ... but it just doesn't seem fair that they can take such a large slice of sales in the UK without putting anything back. Anyone want to join me? We are going to have to work just that little bit harder to match or beat Amazon prices on what we want to buy.

This thread was ignited by news coverage of tax avoidance by large corporations in the UK and led to a political discussion on corporate responsibility from which discussants began to organize collective action – boycotting in particular.

Participants also used the forums specifically to organize action, starting threads with calls-to-action. For example, in one MSE thread, participants organized a campaign against the government's proposed cuts to the Financial Inclusion Fund, which provides money for non-profit debt counselling where there is none: 'I've been trying to start a twitter hashtag campaign. see #savethecab [Citizens' Advice Bureau] for details!' On several occasions, in both Netmums and MSE, participants created e-petitions or used the forum to promote and garner support for a specific campaign.

The second most common types of participation were formal political actions, accounting for 31%. Contacting MPs – which represented 23% – was most common:

Example 4 (MSE): ESA [Employment and Support Allowance] is the same for everyone and having physical disabilities doesnt mean that the assessment is any easier, it should be easy to pass if you have serious disabilities either mental or physical but it isnt and anxiety and depression is the bad back of mental illness. And ESA dosnt work for many serious, life threatening illnesses. My husband has stage 4 kidney failure and a suspected endocrine tumour yet he was passed fit for work in his assessment for the reasons you state, he can pick up a pen ect. but our MP has more sense and hes now in the support group, contact your MP and they should help but even if they dont if everyone contacts there MPs they should realise that

ESA isnt fit for purpose and maybe things will change in the next parlement. I have no time for lazt, bone idle sherkers but when someones worked since they left school then becomes ill for any reason the system should be there to help and support them, thats what its for.

455 As the example shows, these types of actions were personalized; participants were making connections between their lived experiences and particular public policies. These types of personalized posts were present in 43% of all political actions. The connection between personal experience and public policy helps to explain why many threads turned political. In threads such as this, it was common for people to be advised to contact their MP, but it also led to campaigns. For example, in Netmums a thread discussing bad experiences with job centres led one poster exasperatedly to state: 'I feel so strongly about this I wish that I knew how to voice my opinions', which led to a direct reply from another poster: 'I'm thinking of setting up a website/Facebook page so that people can voice their opinions and relate their experience of the staff at Job Centres'. After encouragement, and a suggestion to 'Complain to your MP', a Facebook group is started, while 460 another poster points to her blog on this subject and asks for support.

465 Discussion and Conclusion

470 This article has taken forward a new agenda for online deliberation by examining the dynamics of political mobilization across three popular, UK-based, lifestyle forums. For two of the forums, we found substantial levels of political mobilization – showing that third spaces can be more than just talking shops – and thus the paper further develops our understanding of the political role of 'non-political' online spaces. The first finding of note was the role of personal actions – something which emerged from observing the forums at close quarters, but might have broader consequences for conceiving political participation beyond this study. We found that when participants engaged in actions that would be of benefit to them – such as navigating the benefits system or overcoming government bureaucracy – quite often this acted as a trigger to political actions that were of societal benefit. Placing this in the wider literature on political participation, where Ekman and Amna (2012) make the case for latent forms of political participation such as civic engagement as an important pathway to future manifest political actions, we would propose that future research examine the role of personal actions too. For us, the role of the forum was important here, as a space where the private and public regularly overlap; a point we take up below.

480 The second, and main, finding in this study highlights the importance of political talk for triggering both manifest and latent political participation.⁵ Of course, we are not the first to establish such a link (see e.g. Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000) with research increasingly examining the role of online talk in this process (e.g. Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela, 2011; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). But much of the knowledge gained here is through survey methodologies. Through content analysis, we are examining the relationship between talk and political action as it unfolds in real social settings. It is from here that we are able to make some observations from which we might develop further understanding of the dynamics of technology, politics and everyday life.

495 This discussion is framed by two fundamental questions: what is it about third spaces that seemed to foster political action, and why was DS the exception? For MSE and

Netmums, we argue there were four essential factors at work that made action possible (a) the connection to everyday life and the personal nature of talk; (b) a culture (and structure) of help and support; (c) the interactive and reciprocal nature of the platforms and communities; and (d) absence of a political sub-forum. In addition to explaining the differences between the cases, these four factors provide a point of reflection on the nature and design of online communities in light of political participation and civic engagement.

Part of the value of examining third spaces lies in their everyday nature as a crucible of negotiation between the public and private, the political and personal. Here, we found MSE and Netmums to be productive spaces for turning personal problems into political action. When political talk arose in these spaces, it very often was deeply connected to participants' personal lives. They felt connected because their subject matter was the self, not politics, therefore removing or side-stepping one of the barriers to engagement for many contemporary citizens. Harris and Wyn (2009, p. 339) similarly found that when issues were localized and personal, political action seemed more possible and meaningful as real actions people could take in everyday life. In contrast, for DS the entry point for conversations was what is in the news or on TV; hence there was immediately a greater distance between participants and the subject matter. This mattered when politics emerged because in DS it was framed as something to talk about but too distant to influence, whereas in MSE and Netmums it was framed as something that was close to home, affecting forum members, and something they could mobilize around.

This was complemented by a culture and structure of help and support – the second key factor and point of comparison between the cases. Whilst it would be too simplistic to solely characterize MSE and Netmums as self-help groups, there is a clear agenda in the communities towards self-help. The main MSE website is dominated by money-saving deals and advice, and this culture is applied to the forums too, where the emphasis is on goal-oriented discussions to help members with their particular dilemmas. Likewise, Netmums has extensive sub-forums devoted to self-help in every aspect of parenting, childcare and lifestyle issues. Indeed, many participants come to these spaces with help and support-based dispositions; they are there to listen to and help or to tell their stories and receive support from others. Such a disposition not only fostered a sense of belonging and community, but also it seemed to encourage political action. This action-orientated mind-set, along with the everyday and personal nature of the forums, we argue, helped facilitate political action.

This mind-set comes from the top. Both Netmums and MSE make clear that they have a civic/political/activist element that is underpinned by the helping function. For example, Netmums (2014) self-defines its mission as such:

- To help families have fun with and enjoy their children.
- To bring people together to make our local communities more lively and friendly.
- To make it unnecessary for any mum to feel lonely or isolated.
- To make sure every parent has access to all of the local support and advice available – from other mothers and from professionals.
- To give mothers a voice, locally and nationally, on issues of importance to them.

The purpose of DS is far less goal-oriented. It is about 'news and conversation about entertainment, technology and the media': in essence, a talking shop. Such mission statements on occasions translated into the discussion forum culture through active forum

545 moderation. On DS, there is very little active moderation, and so the topics of discussion and direction of conversation is user-led. The same applied to the other cases – where users can post on whatever topic they choose – but these threads were sometimes supplemented by those started by forum staff. Moderator-led threads (such as those posted by the Netmums News Team) were on a variety of topics, but often focused on politics.

550 In the sociological literature, the political mobilization that emerges from self-help groups has typically been positioned within the broader shift towards lifestyle and identity politics. Hence, they can be framed as contributing towards a retreat from civic life as people focus increasingly on their own narrow concerns (e.g. Bauman, 1999); or alternatively as an empowering democratic force, through providing spaces for reflection on the reality of current politics, with an emphasis on questions of identity, experience and storytelling rather than the broad redistributive questions that had concerned previous generations (Giddens, 1991). An interesting empirical observation from our study is how the forums performed both roles, with many discussions leading to personal actions that were not for societal benefit, alongside the finding that the forums facilitated all sorts of manifest and latent forms of political participation in aid of the common good, with many of these actions emerging as a result of the personal actions. Thus we would argue that an increase in personal empowerment that comes through self-help can have civic repercussions, such as heightening awareness of the broader social forces that impinge on people as individuals (McLean, 1995), increasing social capital and encouraging forms of political participation (see Hatzidimitriadou, 2002).

560 The third factor was the interactive and reciprocal nature of both the platform and communities. Much has been said about the interactive and networking affordances of (new) social media such as Twitter and Facebook (see e.g. Semaan, Robertson, Douglas, & Maruyama, 2014). However, unlike many new social media, discussion forums seem to be conducive to reciprocity: discursive reciprocal exchange. They allow people the time to read and reply to each other's posts. The threading of discussions (and public access) also makes it easy for participants to follow discussions and interact with one another. These affordances along with the personal connection and culture of support seemed to foster meaningful reciprocal and reflexive exchanges, allowing relationships, and a sense of community, to develop and prosper. Indeed, in Netmums and MSE, participants often shared very personal details, experiences and stories with one another. These intimate- and personal-based communicative practices seemed to be conducive to affective subject-position taking (Pols, 2006). That is, these online communities opened up spaces of personal and emotional relationships through which participants forged affective bonds that allowed for deeper levels of understanding, thus fostering a sense of belonging. Such connections, we argue, made participants more receptive to taking political actions or mobilizing around them.

570 The final factor that distinguished DS from the other two cases was that it had an explicit politics sub-forum; politics in DS is symbolically positioned in its own enclave, which means there is less political discussion in the rest of the forum, thus potentially limiting the connection to everyday life/the personal (as discussed above). This matters because when politics emerged in a non-political thread, participants would self-moderate by pointing them in the direction of the politics sub-forum. Having a busy politics sub-forum where most political discussions occur might seem like a good structure, but the politics forum displays many of the less edifying discursive characteristics of other explicitly

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political forums. This includes elements of polarization (Sunstein, 2001), incivility (see e.g. Rowe, 2015) and a competitive ‘swordfight’ mentality which revolves around providing the best arguments and challenging competing ones, aimed at winning the debate as opposed to achieving deeper levels of understanding (Graham, 2011). Not to be mistaken, many of the political discussions on DS are highly informed and more deliberative than those of the other cases analysed. No doubt accelerated by the immediacy of information access on the web, there is a culture on DS of demanding evidence for claims made in political discussions. But still, the culture on this forum is more about political points scoring than understanding and bonding with forum participants.

Overall, it was a combination of these factors, which seemed to create a space whereby people could act out their citizenship by forging relations through meaningful interaction with others. More specifically, the nature of such spaces helped fuel three essential processes to achieving political action: (a) recognition and activation; (b) complementary agency; and (c) organization and mobilization. First, they facilitated recognition of common social and political problems and issues facing participants. Often in the threads, we came across ‘aha moments’. These were moments, after reading similar stories, when participants realized that they were not alone; they were facing similar personal dilemmas and began to think and talk about such issues in the context of the public good as opposed to simply a personal concern. The recognition of common problems activated participants for political action. Once activated, third spaces seemed to be conducive to what McAfee (2000, pp. 134–135) calls complementary agency: ‘By this I mean people coming together in order to create new, broader understandings of what is in their interests. [...] They help each other flesh out a more comprehensive picture of the whole’. Indeed, in two of the cases, intersubjective processes, whereby participants would link their personal issues and actions with one another, seemed to cultivate political agency. Finally, participants used third spaces to mobilize and organize political action. In addition to mobilizing, participants used the forums as communal spaces to organize collective action from drafting e-petitions to writing letters to MPs and the news media.

However, our findings are limited to three cases; thus, it is unclear whether MSE and Netmums are exceptional. Moving forward, future research should not only begin exploring the vast array of online third spaces, but also start comparing them by moving beyond support- and news/discussion-based forums to include other popular online communities such as practice-, transaction-, social-, knowledge-, goal/action-, peer-review-, and fan-based communities. Another limitation of our study was that it focused primarily on the discussions and interactions that occurred in the threads; again, we could not verify whether actions were actually taken. Future research should move beyond an analysis of the text by complementing it with methods that tap into participants’ perceptions and experiences (e.g. interviews and/or questionnaires). Such mixed methodology would allow for a better understanding of the factors and processes that foster political action in third spaces. Finally, the analysis has hinted at the role of the mainstream media in driving the topical agenda of political talk in third spaces. This phenomenon has previously been examined in the context of major media events (e.g. the 2010 UK election debates) (Scullion, Jackson, & Molesworth, 2013), but we know far less about the everyday agenda-setting that may take place, and how it shapes the dynamics of political talk for better or worse; and thus we would encourage future research to pursue this.

Notes

1. Note that for all three cases the number of sub-forums can change over time.
2. In the previous study, the 3000 threads were coded for the initial topic (e.g. parenting, personal finance, sports and politics) and the political topic that emerged (e.g. business/economy, education, health and social services/benefits). This allowed us to identify threads dealing with austerity and threads that start off as political.
3. The coding manual is available upon request.
4. Note that all quotes from the forum are included verbatim, including the often numerous typos and malapropisms. Example 1 comes from a thread where a single mother, and full-time student, was seeking advice on applying for Income Support.
5. For Ekman and Amna, talking politics is a form of latent political participation under civic engagement.

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