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"You're moving from irrelevant to irrational"—Critical Reactions in Internet Discussion Forums

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ABSTRACT: This paper scrutinizes some peculiarities of the culture of Internet argumentation: it is a qualitative pragma-dialectical study of different strategies arguers employ to question or attack argumentation of their opponents in online political discussion forums. The basic assumption of the paper is that this particular context of argumentation—or: *argumentative activity type*—creates special opportunities and constraints for critical reactions regarding propositional content and relevance of argumentation. These opportunities and constraints, it is argued, may lead online discussions to being endless, yet not necessarily fruitless from an argumentative perspective.

KEYWORDS: argumentative activity types, critical discussion, critical reactions, online argumentation, online discussion forums, pragma-dialectics, strategic manoeuvring

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet, among countless other things that permeate our everyday life, has given rise to a new unique culture of argument. This culture has been an object of much hype and speculation among those interested in various forms of online argumentation, such as political discussion forums. The camp of overtly optimistic visionaries has envisaged the growth of discussion groups on the Internet as a chance for a new public sphere, where "occupation, education and social status […] lose significance, bringing pure exchange of arguments to the fore" (reported in: Linaa Jensen 2003, p. 351). On the other hand, many have observed that what online discussions actually offer in terms of argumentation are often "endless fruitless dialogues" characterised by "irresponsibility, hate speech and decline of debate culture" (reported in: Linaa Jensen 2003, pp. 364, 358).

An interesting question to be addressed in such situation is: why, despite great perceived opportunities for critical argumentative discourse, are online political discussions so often endless and fruitless? I will seek an answer to this question in analyses of constraints and opportunities that the design and culture of online political discussion forums present to these participants to argumentative discussions who react critically to others' arguments. In this task, I will employ concepts and methods developed within the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation.

First, the concept of critical reactions—crucial to understanding argumentative exchanges in dialectical approaches—will be briefly discussed from the pragma-dialectical perspective (section 2). Second, as a prerequisite to analysing actual patterns of critical reactions, in section 3 the context of online discussion forums will be given a consistent conceptual shape as an *argumentative activity type*. In section 4, some exemplary analyses of fragments of actual online discussions accessible through Google Groups (http://groups.google.com) in which arguers react critically to others' arguments will presented. In particular, criticisms of the content of arguments and their relevance, connected, respectively, to the opportunities of 'linking' arguments to online sources of data and the constraints on topical relevance of discussions will be discussed. In the concluding section 5, these critical features will be given a tentative theoretically motivated assessment in terms of opportunities and hindrances to critical argumentative discussions, what may partly explain why online discussions can be "endless," but not necessarily "fruitless" from an argumentative perspective.

2. CRITICAL REACTIONS IN THE PRAGMA-DIALECTICAL THEORY OF ARGUMENTATION

Pragma-dialectics belongs to critically-minded, dialectical approaches to argumentation, that is, to a group of theories which understand argumentation as part of a procedure aimed at resolving disputes by critical testing of standpoints put forward (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004; cf. Walton and Krabbe 1995). In the pragma-dialectical view, such testing ideally takes place by means of a critical discussion—a rule-governed dialectical procedure that clearly specifies the rights and obligations of both parties to a discussion: the protagonist and the antagonist (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, ch. 3 and 6). The protagonist is the one who argues for, or against, a certain standpoint, while the antagonist acts as a pure critic, who does not assume any positive or negative position, but solely casts doubt on protagonist's argumentation. According to critical standards of rationality, in critical discussion the acceptability of standpoints is tested in terms of the level protagonist's argumentation supporting a given standpoint addresses all relevant criticisms by the antagonist. Therefore, if thorough testing of standpoints is the goal of an ideal dialectical procedure, then an uninhibited externalisation of disagreement and critical doubt should be secured as a means to reach this goal. Yet, any antagonist in a critical discussion should be a 'reasonable critic' and only come up with relevant critical reactions. This limitation is regulated by rule 6, which provides a very basic stipulation of the types of critical reactions available to antagonists at the argumentation stage of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 144):

> Rule 6
> *a. The protagonist may always defend the standpoint that he adopts in the initial difference of opinion or in a sub-difference of opinion by performing a complex speech act of argumentation, which then counts as a provisional defense of this standpoint.*
>
> *b. The antagonist may always attack a standpoint by calling into question the propositional content or the justificatory or refutatory force of the argumentation.*
>
> *c. The protagonist and the antagonist may not defend or attack standpoints in any other way.*

There are, then, two basic kinds of relevant critical reactions: the attack on the propositional content and on the justificatory (or refutatory) force of argumentation. The antagonist can, thus, refuse to accept the protagonist's standpoint on the basis of the argumentation backing the standpoint containing intersubjectively unacceptable (wrong, inaccurate, unverified, or otherwise flawed) information or on the basis of the argumentation inadequately supporting the standpoint by a wrong application of one of the informal argumentation schemes or formal patterns of deductive logic.

Of course, similar distinctions are common among contemporary argumentation scholars,[1] but pragma-dialectics allows seeing the dynamics of critical reactions in a broader dialectical procedure, what gives an additional theoretical insight into a reasonable progress of criticisms.

The model of a critical discussion stipulates that criticisms of the propositional content of argumentation should give rise to an *intersubjective identification procedure* in which the acceptability of the propositions used, or at least the sources of propositions, is verified on the basis of prior agreements regarding common material starting points. If agreement is not reached, then discussants should start a sub-discussion in which a disputed propositional content of an argument becomes a content of a sub-standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, pp. 145-147). Further, even if the propositional content of argumentation is successfully defended by the protagonist (i.e., the antagonist was compelled to accept the starting points on which the protagonist's argumentation is grounded), the antagonist can still attack the justificatory force of arguments by asking critical questions regarding the admissibility and correct application of argumentation schemes in a given context of discussion (through an *intersubjective testing procedure*) (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, pp. 148-150).[2]

An important consideration is that the protagonist can claim a conclusive victory in a critical discussion only if all these procedures have been successfully completed in his favour. Otherwise, the discussion is either won by the antagonist, or remains open and requires further argumentative work by the protagonist.[3] In the latter case, in accordance with critical principles, the antagonist can claim nothing more than a provisional victory, that is, can uphold his doubts in the ongoing discussion pending the protagonist's response. Unfortunately, the dialectical difference between argumentative procedures being successfully concluded in the antagonist's favour (the protagonist has to abandon his standpoint as untenable) and not being concluded at all (the protagonist still has ways to back up his standpoint) may be very easily glossed over in actual circumstances—in both cases the ordinary critic may claim to "have the last word."

This brings us close to rhetorical motivations behind critical reactions. In the extended pragma-dialectical model developed by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002a),

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[1] And can even be traced back to a classical division of criticisms into those against the minor and the major premise of a categorical syllogism. For the most recent theorising about the concept of argumentative objections see: Blair 2007, Johnson 2009, Krabbe 2007a.

[2] For an analysis of such a procedure and the soundness conditions regarding the use of argument from authority, see: van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2003b.

[3] These issues are regulated by rules 7, 8 and 9 of a critical discussion. According to these rules, the protagonists concludes the intersubjective procedures in his favour if the antagonist has to accept the propositions and argumentation schemes used on the basis of prior agreements or, in the second instance, on the basis of them being successfully defended by the protagonist in a sub-discussion. See: van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, pp. 147-151 and Krabbe 2007b.

actual everyday argumentation is seen as permeated by arguers' strategic manoeuvring, that is, by their strategic attempts to reconcile the pursuit of dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness. Indeed, critical reactions can be treated as a specimen of strategic manoeuvring. In general, the rhetorical goal of reacting critically to protagonist's argumentation may be formulated as: increasing protagonist's burden of proof regarding propositional content or the force of justification of arguments. Every critical attack—both rhetorically and dialectically speaking—requires some form of a defensive response. Hence, the more critical questions are directed at protagonist's argumentation, the more 'fixing job' he is required to do, what, of course, increases his burden of proof, in terms of a procedural, probative obligation (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002b; 2003a).[4] Eventually, the unremitting criticism may lead to a situation where the protagonist is unable to discharge his multiplied burden of proof, that is, to conclude all intersubjective procedures in his favour and thus successfully support the standpoint by employing shared material and procedural starting points, in which case he loses the discussion. And this is exactly the result the antagonist is after.

Again, it is vital to stress that neat, reasonable critical procedures are not always possible in ordinary circumstances, if only because agreements on intersubjectively acceptable information, sources of information (that is, on mutually respectable authorities), and on sound application of argumentation schemes are not routinely reached prior to the argumentation stage of a discussion.[5] Instead, the progress of actual argumentative discussions is to a large extent regulated by the constraints and opportunities—for both arguing and reacting critically—prevalent in various context for argumentation. The context of online discussion forums is therefore briefly characterised in the following section.

3. ONLINE POLITICAL DISCUSSION FORUMS AS AN ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPE

Online discussion forums can be shortly defined as particularly designed Web-pages which allow Internet users to debate various issues by posting publicly accessible messages in a form similar to e-mails. As convincingly argued, such designs for computer-mediated communication enable and constrain particular forms of talk and, more in particular, of argumentation (Aakhus 2002; Aakhus and Jackson 2005; Jackson 1998, Weger and Aakhus 2003, Wright and Street 2007). The analyses of this paper are focused on bottom-up political forums hosted and administrated by politically engaged citizens without any clear institutional affiliation and thus with no direct connection to any institutional decision-makers.

As rather informal, grassroots enterprises, such political online discussion forums are not an example of a clearly delineated institutionalised procedure that would provide explicit, precise and strictly enforced rules regarding communicative behaviour (such as

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[4] Note that this analysis pertains to non-mixed discussions in which only the protagonist has a positive (or negative) burden of proof regarding an expressed opinion.

[5] Of course, on the basis of some ordinary rules of pragmatic use of language many starting points are indeed tacitly shared between discussants and cannot be easily denied. Factors such as general and specific background knowledge (general knowledge of the world, knowledge of the specific circumstances of the speech event), as well as pragmatic presuppositions, all may be seen as belonging to a set of commonly agreed starting points.

in, e.g., parliamentary or legal proceedings). Even more importantly, such forums do not even have a proper unequivocally stated institutional goal or outcome to be reached. For this reason, some perceive the point of such forums as discussing for the sake of discussing (cf. Froomkin 2004, p. 14). Nevertheless, even though online forums indeed have to a certain extent such an *autotelic* character, and thus stand out from many decision-making procedures studied by argumentation researchers, they are still fit for a systematic analysis from an argumentative perspective.

There are two basic reasons for that. First, online discussion forums are a commonly experienced genre of communication with special characteristics which make them a unique framework for conducting discussions (see, e.g., Herring 2001, Jackson 1998). Second, they often enough do contain an argumentative aspect, i.e., a clash of diverging opinions followed by attempts to support these opinions.[6] For this reason, in the following, they will be briefly analysed in terms of an *argumentative activity type*.

Argumentative activity type is a concept introduced by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005) in order to provide a unified framework for analysing regularly practiced, more or less fixed, and often institutionalised types of communicative activity which contain a vital argumentative aspect, such as adjudication, negotiation or mediation. The unity of a framework means that each such argumentative activity type is defined along four parameters: its initial situation, starting points, argumentative means and the outcome.[7] A short characterisation of political online discussion forums along these parameters is given in table 1.

Table 1 Online political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type (adapted from van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2005, p. 79)

Critical discussion	confrontation stage	opening stage	argumentation stage	concluding stage
Activity Type	*initial situation*	*procedural and material starting points*	*argumentative means and criticism*	*outcome*
Argumentation without specific institutional constraints	difference of opinion; decision up to the parties	largely implicit intersubjective rules; explicitly and implicitly shared concessions	argumentation defending standpoints in critical exchanges	resolution of by joint decision parties or return to initial situation
Online political discussion forum	expected mixed or non-mixed disagreement; no decision to be taken (open-ended);	special design of computer-mediated discourse; explicit regulative rules of a particular forum and implicit general netiquette; material starting points available	argumentation defending incompatible standpoints in highly critical exchanges, among many anonymous participants, organised into	no outcome manifestly or necessarily established; tacit resolution of difference of opinion possible for (part of) 3rd party audience (or

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[6] Empirical, even if at times conflicting, evidence for dialogical argumentation actually taking place in online political discussions, based on large scale content analyses can be found, e.g., in: Hill and Hughes (1998, pp. 52-63), Linaa Jensen (2003, pp. 360-362), and Wilhelm (1998, pp. 327-333).
[7] Which, as table 1 makes clear, mirror the division of the ideal model of a critical discussion into four stages.

online, characterised by ideological divisions	topical threads	return to initial situation)

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005, 2007) posit that a thorough insight into the working of various argumentative activity types is indispensable in reconstructing and evaluating contextually-embedded argumentative practices, if only because, practically speaking, activity types enable and constrain particular forms of argumentation, that is, they extend or limit actual arguers' opportunities for specific forms of strategic manoeuvring. In particular, they may have a potential impact on the performance of critical reactions in argumentative exchanges. This impact in online discussion forums is briefly discussed below, with a view on their features mentioned in table 1.

First, open-endedness allows for an uninhibited performance of critical reactions, in both type and number, as there is no pressing need for achieving concrete results and thus curbing the criticisms for the sake of constructive movement towards a timely decision. Second, rules of the Net etiquette ('netiquette'), however loosely enforced, contain a certain agonistic bias (e.g. "Avoid posting 'Me Too' messages, where content is limited to agreement with previous posts"[8]). Moreover, online discussions are embedded in the World Wide Web constructed by the interconnection (or hyper-linking) of countless Web-pages, what gives great opportunities for corroborating, but also undermining, data used in argumentation by referring to online sources. Third, online discussions, especially of the less institutionalised, bottom-up variety, are largely anonymous and, as only written, communicatively 'lean,' what frees them, to a certain extent, from many social cues and status dependencies. This, in turn, may lower prominence of factors such as face concerns and preference for agreement which are hugely consequential on the ways ordinary disagreements and criticisms are externalised. Fourth, online discussions are, in fact, written conversations, that is, dynamic, actual interactions (a basic feature of spoken discourse) which are, at the same time, recorded and thus easily traceable (a typical feature of written discourse). This means that critical reactions can be performed 'on the spot' but do not have to follow the conversational dynamics of transient spoken encounters (in other words, critical reactions can be prompt, but also precisely targeted against selected parts of ongoing discussion). Fifth, by their design, in which every message has its place in a topical tree stemming from the first message, discussions are supposed to be developing along topical threads, that is, all the responses to the opening message should be topically relevant to this message. This rule, as many other in online discussions, is quite loosely enforced (and very often violated), yet it can always be called up by a discussant who finds a certain contribution irrelevant. Sixth, online discussions usually take place among many participants who get involved into open and complex poly-logues, rather than neatly regulated dialogues. In effect, anyone can join into an ongoing discussion by adding to a pool of critical reactions (just as well by adding to a pool of arguments).

In the following section, I will focus on the possibilities for hyper-linking and the constraints on topical relevance: since they influence the way some material starting points are introduced and criticised in discussions and the way relevance of parts of

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[8] *Netiquette guidelines*: http://www.dtcc.edu/cs/rfc1855.html.

argumentation is established, these two are important factors in analysing critical reactions in online discussion forums.

4. SOURCE AND RELEVANCE CRITICISM IN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

The most important feature of online discussion forums influencing manoeuvring with criticisms of the propositional content of arguments is such forums' being a part of the World Wide Web, in which every text may become a 'hypertext,' i.e., a text which contains cross-references (or 'hyperlinks') to other texts published on the Web (see, e.g., Carter 2003, Kolb 2007).

This means that arguers can easily prop up their argumentative statements by any online sources of data they find suitable: usually by posting a link (that is, a URL address) to a specific Web-page, or by copying-pasting some texts, or by doing both at the same time. In the case of general political discussions, often focused on current news events, the sources of data are usually news reports from numerous online newspapers (or any other media outlets present online). However, official documents, scientific articles, or indeed any other means of corroborating one's own words can be linked to, if only available online. It seems that thanks to its prevalence, linking has permeated online culture—information which is not substantiated by some links may be considered as somewhat defective and can certainly become a target of tenability criticism.[9]

Thus, one would expect that the basic, entry level online-specific mode of attacking the propositional content of argumentation would be to request the protagonist of a standpoint to provide a link supporting his position. Consider the following fragment of an online discussion initiated by *ImStillMags* where s/he quotes and links to an Associated Press report which claims that: "Al-Qaida supporters suggested in a Web site message this week they would welcome a pre-election terror attack on the U.S. as a way to usher in a McCain presidency." This report is further welcomed by *Fritz_da_Cat* (turn 2). In the ensuing discussion *UnityNotExtremism* (in turns 35 and 37) challenges *Zebnick* for posting arguments without a link:

> (1) *Al-Qaida backs McCain* [10]
> http://groups.google.com/group/abc_politics_forum/browse_frm/thread/530778eaf3cf69ec/7c186b
> bd8ef0dbf7?hl=en
>
> 2. *Fritz_da_Cat*   Oct 22 2008, 9:23 pm
> Ofcourse Al Qaeda backs McCain. They know he'll keep our troops in
> Iraq and not persue them where they really are in Afghanistan, and

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[9] Dahlberg (2001, online) explains this common feature of an online culture of argument in terms of a sceptical need to verify information provided by anonymous disputants: "Aware of the possibilities of fraud, participants often challenge any claims and supporting information that are not convincingly substantiated. Although it is sometimes a difficult task, claimants are expected to provide convincing support (from either offline or online sources) for their assertions before their positions become accepted by other participants."

[10] All the excerpts of online discussions are presented in the following way: topic, Web-address, number of message (or 'post') as appears on the forum (at the time of consulting the forum), nickname of the author ('poster'), date and time, and the text of the message. Note that, due to the topical rather than purely chronological structuring of the conversations, even posts far removed in the numbered sequence can be direct responses to some previous posts, as is the case in example 1. All the messages are quoted verbatim, without any editorial corrections, apart from some necessary deletions indicated by: […].

Pakistan.

> 34. *Zebnick*   Oct 23 2008, 4:48 am
> LOL [Laughing Out Loud - ML]! Nice try jack offs. Everyone knows
> Al   Queda   backs   one   of   their   own,   Hussein   Obama.
>
> 35. *UnityNotExtremism*   Oct 23 2008, 5:47 am
> You   gotta   link   that   supports   that   general   statment   you   claim???
> Ooops,   I   guess   not...   But   ImStillMags   has   one   that   says   just   the
> opposite.   And   there   are   a   dozen   more   on   all   the   news   stations   that
> says   you're   full   of   shit.
>
> 36. *Zebnick*   Oct 23 2008, 5:57 am
> A   link?   Al   Queda   doesn't   advertise   their   celebrations   of   getting   one
> of   their   own   elected   as   President   of   the   US   on   the   internet
>
> 37. *UnityNotExtremism*   Oct 23 2008, 6:46 am
> Oh,   […]   So   you   don't   have   a   link   to   support   you're   claim?   So   where's
> your source? ... Or did you just make it up???
> […]

In this rather typical example of an online critical reaction regarding the propositional content of argumentation, arguments which are not backed by a quoted/linked material are classified as "made up" and thus not worthy of serious consideration, even when a certain absurdity of the request to provide a link is pointed out by the attacked protagonist—*Zebnick* (in turn 36).

Further, it may be important to note that such provision of links backing one's arguments seems to be a convention internalised and expected by the Internet arguers. It is not unusual to see fragments of 'meta-discussions' of a following type:

> (2) *McCain Was Not Tortured, POW Guard Claims*
> http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/c3c3b5b8a589c9e5#
>
> 39. *frankg*   Oct 17 2008, 9:34 pm
> […]
> I try to maintain an open mind, but if I have come to a conclusion
> I try to support that conclusion by explaining my rational as well as
> posting links to data, editorials, etc., that helped get me there.
> […]
>
> (3) *Powell Endorses Obama*
> http://groups.google.com/group/misc.news.internet.discuss/browse_frm/thread/b5948e65bf1b1101
> #
>
> 25. *Wally nft*   Oct 19 2008, 11:01 pm [to be removed]
> I   have   been   trying   my   best,   but   I   can't   find   the   Wiki   link
> so I can be as smug as you.

Apart from the first level of criticism—that is, requesting any link whatsoever— there is a deeper level of requesting an *acceptable* linked source. This is the case in the following passage:

(4) *More bad polling news for Obama*
http://groups.google.co.uk/group/p0liticalf0rum/browse_frm/thread/d179a16cb1110d53?hl=en

3. *mike352*   Aug 23 2008, 12:03 pm
Obama   325   McCain   199   Ties   14
Senate   Dem   56   GOP   44
House Dem 239   GOP 196

4. *The Weasel*   Aug 24 2008, 12:57 pm
ROLFMOA [a misspelled acronym: Rolling on The Floor Laughing My Ass Off—ML].
What   a   MORON.   Posting   data   that   is   month   old   doesn't   show
that   Obama   is   winning,   it   show   old   just   proves   that   you   are
dishonest.
http://www.electoral-vote.com/evp2008/Pres/Maps/Jul18.html
Once again, you have shown that you are willing to distort the truth.

Such critical reactions make it clear that providing a link is quite different from providing an *acceptable* link. The search for common ground among online arguers may be worse than in many other contexts: on the Internet, right-wingers will always have their own news reports, opinion pages, blogs, and even opinion polls to support certain viewpoints. And leftists will have their own too (cf. Hill and Hughes 1998). Linking, thus, is by no means a remedy that would solve epistemological problems of disputants. It is, rather, a resource that can be used, as well as a requirement, to supply some online evidence for arguments put forward in an open, world-wide battle of ideas that takes place in many online forums. Still, despite usual open online contestation, there are some generally revered sources of data: for instance, the 'free' online encyclopaedia—Wikipedia—often seems to be considered a reliable reference.

Many examples of stubborn endless criticisms regarding protagonists' propositions may seriously diminish any overall positive evaluation of the quality of online discussions. The situation is not as hopeless as it may seem, though. In some cases online arguers do agree on some facts. Still, it does not mean that they cease their criticism—it may just as well mean that they move to another kind of criticism, that is, basically, to the justificatory potential criticism:

(5) *"McCain didn't seem to mind unified control of government when it was him, Phil Gramm, Tom DeLay, and George Bush."*
http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/9408f40eb41850a3?hl=en#

1. *mike[move on]532*   Oct 29 2008, 9:39 am
"McCain   didn't   seem   to   mind   unified   control   of   government   when   it
was   him,   Phil   Gramm,   Tom   DeLay,   and   George   Bush."
[…]

2. *Gaar*   Oct 29 2008, 11:15 am
They   didn't   have   a   Fillibuster   proof   Senate   at   any   time   during   their
tenure...

3. *mike[move on]532*   Oct 29 2008, 11:37 am
really   please   post   the   numbers   of   each   party   in   the   senate   during   that
time   .

4. *Gaar*   Oct 29 2008, 11:42 am

The best they did was 55 Seats...
http://uspolitics.about.com/od/usgovernment/l/bl_party_division_2.htm

6. *mike[move on]532*   Oct 29 2008, 11:48 am
interesting   but   it   doesn't   address   the   issue   of   ["McCain   didn't   mind
unified   control   of   government   when   it   was   him,   Phil   Gramm,   Tom   DeLay,
and   George   Bush."   ]

13. *Gaar*   Oct 29 2008, 2:25 pm
Not if you don't understand what a Fillibuster is...
So I guess you can remain ignorant.

In this fragment of a discussion, in turn 3 *mike[move on]532*, just as in the examples
quoted above, casts doubt on the acceptability of information provided by *Gaar*
("really[?]"), and immediately requests further data substantiating *Gaar's* claim ("please
post the numbers"). *Gaar*, in turn 4, fulfils the request and posts a link to a page which
indeed in a nice table presents the numbers of the Democratic and Republican share in
both houses of American parliament from 1945 up till 2007. *mike[move on]532* is
compelled to accept ("interesting but") the rather unshakeable statistics confirming
Gaar's claim but immediately moves on to question the relevance of *Gaar's* argument
instead: "it doesn't address the issue of" the topic of the discussion initiated by him.

Such a dynamic progress of critical reactions may be seen as another strategic
manoeuvre: the "first acceptability, then justification" route of critical questioning is
impeccably reasonable from a dialectical perspective, and supposedly also rhetorically
useful. Still, of course, online debaters are probably hardly aware that they are taking a
certain dialectical route. Rather, they are making use of some resources of online forums.
Just like in example 5, after some requested, and rather incontestable, data are presented
to the questioning antagonist, s/he can pursue critical questioning by bringing up another
convention of online discussion, namely, topical relevance.

It has been observed by the Internet researchers that in fact "violations of
sequential coherence," which encompasses topical relevance, "are the rule rather than the
exception in CMC [Computer-Mediated Communication]" (Herring 1999, online). Still,
some basic rules of netiquette require that arguers "be brief and to the point" and "don't
wander off-topic."[11] These guidelines, even if indeed often not observed, can always
serve as a basis for criticising others' argumentation. Such relevance criticisms are, in
general, based on ordinary speakers' 'naïve,' rather than 'normative,' reconstruction of
discursive exchanges (cf. van Eemeren et al. 1993, ch. 4) or, more specifically, on
'interpretative,' rather than 'evaluative,' approach to relevance (van Eemeren and
Grootendorst 1992). This means that arguers are not necessarily employing the concept of
relevance in an argumentative sense, that is, as an impossibility of finding a proper
argumentation scheme that would connect the data adduced with the standpoint they
make in a given context of discussion (Blair 2007), but rather that they draw upon some
simple requirements of topical coherence.

For instance, in the example 5, one can quite easily reconstruct the argumentative
relevance of *Gaar's* argument "They didn't have a Fillibuster proof Senate at any time
during   their   tenure..."   by   seeing   it   as   an   element   of   a   subordinative   (chained)

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[11] *Netiquette guidelines*: http://www.dtcc.edu/cs/rfc1855.html.

argumentation structure of the like: "One should vote for McCain, because he is right in warning against Democrats having a unified control over government and there is nothing wrong in him not minding the unified control by Republicans in the past, because they 'didn't have a Fillibuster proof Senate...'" Yet, *mike[move on]532* decides to accuse *Gaar* of irrelevance, especially that he is the originator of this discussion thread, and thus has a privileged position as, say, a guardian of topical relevance.

Similar is the situation in the following fragment of online discussion initiated by *Euwe*, who chooses to put forward his standpoint ("Republicans like Georgian democracy better than Palestinian democracy") in the very title of the thread and, subsequently, supports it by an argument in the form of a rhetorical question (turn 2). In response to that, *Kamakazee* quotes a report from www.foxnews.com entitled "U.S. Refuses Israel Weapons to Attack Iran" which, among other things, quotes Israel's defense minister as saying that The United States "does not see an action against Iran as the right thing to do at the moment." This counterargument is vigorously criticised by *Euwe* in turn 6:

(6) *Republicans like Georgian democracy better than Palestinian democracy*
http://groups.google.com/group/abc_politics_forum/browse_frm/thread/5ba9041db07e9966?hl=en

1. *Euwe*   Aug 13 2008, 8:35 am
...I wonder what's up with that?

2. *Euwe*   Aug 13 2008, 9:29 am
Maybe shelling villiages is ok as long as you're not Muslim?

3. *Kamakazee*   Aug 13 2008, 1:23 pm
Sure. Brilliant, again.
Report: U.S. Refuses Israel Weapons to Attack Iran
[…]
The United States "does not see an action against Iran as the right thing to do at the moment," the defense minister said, but shared Israel's view that "no option should be removed from the table."
http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,402708,00.html
I think you're jumping ahead of yourself. I think you meant the Obama-ites.

6. *Euwe*   Aug 13 2008, 8:40 pm
[…]
My post was about the Georgians shelling Tskhinvali being judged not terrorism because they're not Muslim - how in the fuck do you get to your reply about Israel attacking Iran from Palestinian democracy? You're moving from irrelevant to irrational.

Euwe's accusation of irrelevance directed against *Kamakazee's* counterargument is, on most obvious interpretation, based on topical grounds. Still, "how […] do you get to your reply about Israel attacking Iran from Palestinian democracy?," can be seen both as a lack of topical as well as argumentative link between the *Kamakazee's* counterargument and *Euwe's* original standpoint.

In this case, again, making use of some basic conventions of online discussions intermingle with argumentatively pertinent problems. A tentative critical assessment of this relation will be given in the last section.

5. CONCLUSION

Online political discussion forums have been seen by many researchers as discouragingly inconclusive. Some have attributed this inconclusiveness, apart from ideological divisions, to the imbalance between the protagonists and the antagonists: the latter seem to hold sway of online disputes.[12] As I tried to show in the foregoing analyses, the argumentative activity type of online political discussions creates many opportunities for reacting critically to protagonists' argumentation. Two basic ways of such criticism are the attacks on the propositional content and the relevance of arguments. The great question is: do these opportunities make such discussions more critical in the sense of open dialectical testing of standpoints advanced?

Criticisms are indeed at the core of dialectical approaches to argumentation. In particular, in critical discussion, there are special rules that are meant to secure openness, maximal externalisation of disagreements and optimal use of the right to attack.[13] Such rules stem from the basic dialectical principle—the more critical questioning is allowed, the more thorough critical testing will be. At the same time, a critical discussion is a procedure which is aimed at resolving differences of opinion—this means that arguers should be given a chance to finally come to some kind of a tentative conclusion, given the circumstances of a given discussion.[14] A reasonable conclusion of argumentative discussions can only be reached if critical reactions are properly dealt with in the intersubjective procedures regarding the acceptability of material and procedural starting points. It is by going through the procedures at the argumentation stage of a discussion, that is, by arguers' agreeing if the arguments used can indeed be accepted in terms of their propositional content or justificatory force, that the result of a discussion can be decided.

The problem with online discussions, in this respect, is that these procedures may be exceedingly difficult to conclude. This is basically due to the difficulties in arguers' recognising common grounds for discussions, that is, in their agreeing on a certain standard of proof. If such agreements are lacking the antagonists may easily play persistent sceptics. This is further exacerbated by other qualities of online discussions mentioned in section 3: above all, by the overall open-endedness of discussion forums and their anonymity. In offline contexts, concluding some lines of argumentation is much more likely. First, if discussions are informal, and thus lack clear rules for argumentative procedures, they tend to be more consensual, as discussants are guided by factors such as preference for agreement and the general cooperative principle (Jackson and Jacobs 1980). Online political discussions, even though very informal and free-wheeling, may be seen as quite uncooperative, and seem to be characterised by a preference for

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[12] See examples analysed by Chaput and Campos (2007, p. 237): "Following some exchanges between one protagonist and many antagonists, the later messages published in that thread are all by antagonists, and the discussion is put to an end when no further contributions are presented."

[13] Rule 1, 2 and 10 for critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, ch. 6).

[14] Even if, in principle, a critical discussion, as an ideal model, is not bound by real-life limitations, such as time limits, and can thus extend openly if this is conducive to critical testing. Cf. Krabbe 2007b.

disagreement.[15] Disagreement, of course, is also constitutive of many types of offline argumentative discussions, such as legal disputes or academic debates. Such activity types are, however, usually quite formal, and thus contain clear rules for moving along the procedures which are eventually concluded. By contrast, online discussions analysed here are loosely structured, open-ended and yet may get fiercely adversarial.

This may be one of the reasons why, despite high critical value, online discussions do not bring about rational results: their qualities may hinder the dialectical procedures of critical discussion by giving the antagonists a chance to keep the intersubjective procedures constantly open. Moreover, critical reactions, as described in section 2, are also subject to strategic manoeuvring: such lack of conclusion can easily be seen as a victory of the critical respondent. Indeed, it seems that playing the pure antagonist, under the conditions of rather feeble obligations for cooperation,[16] may be an effective strategy. It is simply easier to (seem to) be winning by raising the others' burden of proof by asking critical questions, than by discharging one's own burden of proof by arguing conclusively for one's own standpoint.

In any case, what we are left with as readers of online political discussions is a repository of sometimes thoroughly criticised standpoints and arguments. Hence, even if endless, such discussions are not completely fruitless. If we believe in "a free marketplace of ideas"—a vision underpinning critical approaches to argumentation—then the Internet culture of arguments does have its merits. Therefore, online discussion forums or Wikipedia, which are constantly "under construction" and evolve in chains of critical reactions and arguments, or rather—reactions and re: reactions—deserve at least careful attention from argumentation students.

Link to commentary

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[15] Cf. Dahlberg (2001, online): "In comparison with offline groups, participants can leave a discourse with relative ease if disagreements become too challenging to their values or demanding of their attention. On many occasions, critical dialogues do not get much further than a few exchanges before drying up."
[16] Notwithstanding the issue of online reputation.

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