

## 74. Facebook, Diasporic-Virtual Publics, and Networked Argumentation

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In 2004, a college student founded the social networking site *Facebook*, which boasts over 150 million users worldwide, and now surpasses other popular sites such as *Myspace* (Shiels, 2009). Users typically spend 169 minutes a month on the site, on average, compared to *Google News*'s 13 minutes a month (Hempel, 2009). With so many people connecting on *Facebook*, we should ask—what kind of communication is occurring on this network? More specifically, as argumentation scholars continue to search for and advance the communication norms and practices best suited to humanity's future (e.g., Goodnight, 2007), *Facebook* poses intriguing questions concerning how users engage one another in deliberation, if at all.

The emerging literature on *Facebook* evidences some contrasts. Some researchers praise social networking sites for promoting various forms of shared capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008; Stein, 2009). One sociologist claims that *Facebook* is taking the human race "back to a more normal place, historically," since individuals are no longer losing touch with one another, "it's just like we're living in a village" (Thompson, 2008, para. 42-43).

Other scholars are less celebratory, finding that *Facebook* and similar sites encourage narcissism, exhibitionism, and shallow relationships (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Garreau, 2008; Rosen, 2007; Wintour, 2009). The popular press frequently reports on this research, and is replete with accounts of disastrous social faux pas on *Facebook* (e.g. Martin, 2008; Young, 2009). Some researchers are ambivalent about the site in finding that users hop on to *Facebook* to connect with others, but that "people who are involved in online relationships are [only] those who are willing to communicate in real life" (Sheldon, 2008, p. 67). There is some empirical evidence that the use of *Facebook* and similar sites increases isolation, a drive to quantify friendships, and sometimes leads to socially deviant behaviors (Clemmitt, 2006).

These conceptual differences indicate a critical task. Nothing with quite the structure and scope of *Facebook* has heretofore surfaced in human history. As such, understanding the site's communicative dimensions remains an important next step for scholarship. It is clear that *Facebook*'s members use the site for multiple purposes. Users "show off photographs, upload videos, chat, make friends, meet old ones, join causes, groups, [and] have fun" (Shiels, 2009, para. 2; see also Coley, 2006). Having been a *Facebook* user for the past few years, however, I have also noticed another

phenomenon—people arguing! Moreover, there appears to be a larger effort on the network to encourage this behavior. *Facebook's* CEO says that it is the company's goal to get users involved in political, debate-oriented applications (O'Connor, 2009). *Facebook's* founder further hopes that the site will connect the world—given that over 70% of users are already outside the United States (Hempel, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

At a basic level, I ask, what does *Facebook* portend for deliberative democracy? How do *Facebook* and its users invite or obstruct the development of public arguments? Rosen (2007) poses some parallel questions:

What cues are young, avid social networkers learning about social space? What unspoken rules and communal norms have the millions of participants in these online social networks internalized, and how have these new norms influenced their behavior in the offline world? (p. 23)

In essence, we know very little about *Facebook's* potential to help or hinder public deliberation.

In this analysis, I suggest that *Facebook* often creates civic spaces for *networked argumentation*, which leverages the trust of offline friendships toward social issues. Subsequently, *Facebook's* communication should be viewed within the framework of what I term *diasporic-virtual publics*.<sup>2</sup> Users create a diasporic-virtual public on *Facebook* by threading together central and peripheral friendships/acquaintances from the past and present. Despite their typically wide geographical dispersion, each friend is moored in an offline relationship that carries implications for arguments and arguing online. At the same time, various aspects of *Facebook* are potentially anti-deliberative.

In what follows, I explore these issues through a close reading of the general features of *Facebook*—in addition to five debate transcripts that developed in my own network between November 2008 and June 2009. The topics in these debates ranged from the economy to abortion policy. In the transcripts, I focus mainly on *Facebook's* deliberative structures. To go beyond my own associations and look more toward argument content on *Facebook*, however, I conclude the analysis with a larger exploration of writings created by members supporting or opposing California's 2008 Proposition 8 during the same period.

### ***Facebook's* Deliberative Form**

A first deliberative concern on *Facebook* is definitional. Attempting to describe the kind of communication fostered by new media, Castells (2008) writes that forms of “mass-self communication” are emerging in the “network society” (p. 90). B. J. Fogg (2008) argues that social networking sites evidence a hybrid type of “mass interpersonal persuasion” (see also; Weiksner, Fogg, & Liu, 2008). Others describe online forums like blogs as “‘space-less’ public spheres” (Dakrouy & Birdsall, 2008). Advancing these definitions, I submit that *Facebook* promotes a form of *networked argumentation* within and between *diasporic-virtual publics*.

Contrary to prior research, I find there is very little that is “mass” about *Facebook*. With few exceptions, *Facebook* consists of individuals and groups who have varying degrees of connection offline—from one-time acquaintances to long-time friendships. *Facebook* requires that members grant permission to add one another as

“friends” on the site. Once friends, members can communicate publically by writing on each other’s “wall,” or by sending a “message” to individuals or groups, which can show up on the general “newsfeed” that appears when one logs in to the site. The message feature also allows individuals to communicate privately with one another. There is consequently a culture of trustful one-to-one and one-to-many messages on *Facebook* that constitutes a network, but is generally not the mass communication seen in other media.

As members thread together central and peripheral friends, networks of diasporic-virtual publics develop. They are diasporic in having offline origins—some kind of common association rooted in the past or present. Beyond these ties, though, the five debate transcripts examined in this study illustrate that arguments on *Facebook* appear to largely form from “notes” or “status updates” written by members. Others see these writings on the newsfeed and form argumentational threads by commenting on them. These exchanges are reinforced by new comments being e-mailed to each thread’s discussants. *Facebook’s* very computer program thus *automatically propels public argument along*, in allowing deliberation to be both publically visible and privately evolving.

A second deliberative consideration is that these general features of the site impact public argument. Looking at *Facebook’s* very form, certain deliberative processes and procedures (see O’Keefe, 1977) are available to its users. Given the site’s structure even though arguments on *Facebook* are often between established friends, they also tend to trickle outward as invitations for others to join in. Due to the way the newsfeed shows members what their friends have written to their friends (that is, friends-of-friends who are once-removed from a particular member), arguments can develop beyond the member base. In several of the debate transcripts, arguments spiraled outward in this manner. All had a common friend or acquaintance they entered into the discussions under, but conversations appeared to cross-pollinate between friends-of-friends. This evidence suggests that argumentation on *Facebook* can rise above what Sunstein (2000) calls “deliberative enclaves” (p. 113). Networks are not completely insular, as *Facebook’s* structure brings one into contact with the arguments of friends-of-friends and beyond.

Diasporic-virtual publics form in argumentational spirals on *Facebook*—as invitations for others to come deliberatively anchor themselves within the constituted diaspora, which ultimately contributes to maintaining a communicative level of trust, risk, and accountability not often seen on the Internet. In one thread on abortion policy, for instance, the debaters appeared to know each other well—so much that the discussion wove political propositions together with personal asides (e.g., two users wove comments about grandkids between arguments). At the same time, the conversations were not always civil, particularly if members did not appear to have a connection in offline settings (that is, if they were friends-of-friends). In one debate relating to torture policies at Guantanamo Bay, the tone of the discussion quickly devolved between participants.

In fact, in a number of the threads, communication norms and practices became one of the primary issues discussed. The interlocutors quickly veered away from the main subject, raising contentions about the nature of debate, the degree of civility in their discussion, the very length of the writings (e.g. one user asked another, “spam much?”), the difference between persuasion and propaganda, and the degrees of dissent permitted by others. They also discussed the extent to which working within or outside the system can create social change, and the fallacies produced by others (like the *ad hominem*, straw

person, slippery slope, red herring, and bandwagon).

It is worth noting that *Facebook* also encourages the use of visual-auditory deliberation about oneself, others, and various public issues. Users share links to articles, but particularly *video clips*, with others. The posting of these links show up on newsfeeds in a way that is hard to avoid. *Facebook's* form subsequently promotes a degree of contact with multisensory advocacy that constitutes a good portion of its members' argumentation.

### Proposition 8 Debate

To explore argument on *Facebook* at a broader level, I conducted a close reading of support and opposition toward California's Proposition 8 on the network between November 2008 and June 2009. Proposition 8 was a ballot created to ban same-sex marriage in the 2008 election put into effect by 52% of voters. The California Supreme Court later upheld the decision (Dolan, 2009). I entered the term "Proposition 8" on *Facebook's* search function, analyzing the first 10 pages of wall postings on the first 50 groups (over 25 members) appearing on the site, to focus on the deliberation within these networks. This section focuses more on argumentation as "product" (see O'Keefe, 1977), and the communicative dynamics evoked over this public issue.

Across the pro and anti-Prop 8 groups, many advocates appeared both known and complete strangers to one another. In many of the first groups that *Facebook* listed for my search, there was often a picture of one of my friends shown in the first few member photos on the page. *Facebook* first connects users to someone they know before they go on to read the wall posts, which anchors them in their diaspora before meeting many unknown others in a wider global network. In fact, many posts on the anti-Prop 8 sites were from international members. One user on the "Protest Proposition 8" site urged, "Americans: get down to the street!!!!hello from France." On "Vote NO On Proposition 8!'s" wall, members from Australia, Britain, and Canada wrote supportive remarks to their Californian colleagues.

Activists presented a variety of claims and data. Members frequently orchestrated offline events through wall posts (e.g. members from "Repeal CA Proposition 8" connected visitors to public meetings). Many users posted links to protests, petitions, opposition phone numbers, sit-ins, and other proceedings. On the site "Yes on Proposition 8" one activist called everyone to an "online meeting," where others could learn the value of "maximizing the power of your Facebook profile." Like the debate transcripts I examined, members frequently used links to videos—on the group walls, users posted video parodies, music videos, news commentaries, and even a documentary about Prop 8. Members also used humor, like the anti-Prop 8 group "Support Princeton Proposition 8," which created a parodic campaign to ban freshmen from walking on campus sidewalks at Princeton University.

Between the pro and anti-Prop 8 sites, one clear finding emerged—the opposition engaged the walls of pro-sites far more than vice versa (e.g. compare the walls of groups like "Repeal CA Proposition 8" with "Vote YES On Proposition 8!"). Supporters of Proposition 8 seldom wrote on the walls of anti-groups. That is, the pro-Prop 8 sites evidenced more clash, while the anti-Prop 8 sites engaged more in intra-movement arguments (on "Reverse Proposition 8's" wall, one representative user wrote "let's keep trying y'all"). *Facebook* groups were spaces of innovation for anti-sites—like "Overturn

Proposition 8,” where one member commented to others, “here’s an idea. Why not instead of trying to overturn this law we attempt to create a new proposition this November that would allow same sex couples the right to wed?” Nevertheless, these activists largely had to jump on pro-sites to engage the other side in arguments.

At the same time, there was contestation within many of the groups’ sites. In one group called “Mormons Against Proposition 8,” Mormon members debated back and forth about their church’s tax-exempt status, given its involvement in funding the ballot. These discussions often revolved around church and state issues, as well the legality of majority rule. Many people on the anti-sites deliberated about how to best engage the other side. On both pro and anti-sites, users also rebutted popular arguments by the opposition—emphasizing fallacies, fact-checking, mischaracterizations, and turn-arounds. For instance, members of the site “8: The Mormon Proposition” discussed slippery slope fallacies, and used biblical arguments *against* supporters of Prop 8. One Prop 8 advocate on “Say yes to Proposition 8” said his views on the ballot had nothing to do with religion, and requested the opposition stop mischaracterizing him.

Many advocates from each side simply discussed their viewpoints, but incendiary attacks against other debaters were frequent. Many posts subsequently discussed communication norms and practices, as much as the substantive issues over Proposition 8 itself (e.g., see “Vote YES on Proposition 8!’s” wall; the top of “Reverse Proposition 8’s” site has the instructions “please be polite”). One pro-Prop 8 group creator deleted a post from a dissenter “due to its derogatory nature,” prompting the author of the deleted post to write, “i am allowed to state my views just as much as you all are!”<sup>3</sup> On the pro-sites, visitors against Prop 8 additionally took issue with supporters’ analogies, lack of evidence, and use of hearsay.

Despite frequent attacks between the different sides on *Facebook*, the sheer *length* of many of the discussions appeared to be a positive deliberative trend, with many members contributing their thoughts over months of posts. Some members even conceded arguments (e.g., on “Vote YES On Proposition 8!’s” wall, one member wrote, “I apologise [sic] for my earlier comments regarding your posts”). Many users shared personal experiences about their sexuality or religious beliefs. Although others were not always understanding of these opinions, many nevertheless continued the discussions. Overall, *Facebook’s* dynamics may not wholly meet the “ideal speech situation” envisioned for democracies (see Habermas, 1990, p. 86). On the other hand, at a minimum, there is evidence that advocates have created some novel online spaces for deliberating with local and global others, through these diasporic-virtual networks.

### **The Future of Networked Argumentation**

Given that debates on *Facebook* are typically seen between friends and friends-of-friends, my goal has been less to generalize these data outwards than to demonstrate what kinds of messages may emerge on the site, and the trajectory that this argumentation appears to take. Identities on *Facebook* are based upon offline interactions; it is not a “dreamland for deviant behaviors” (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1831; see also Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Ross, Orr, Sisic, et al., 2009). I would add that this feature of *Facebook*, in comparison to the anonymous online communication of the Internet’s past, has implications for how argumentation can and should occur online.

Despite the fact that the content of some Proposition 8 sites evidences argument

that is perhaps less than deliberative, we can no longer conclude with Mark Poster (1995) that the net is incapable of being a stable public sphere, nor that it is a space where “rational argument rarely prevails” (para. 7-8). There is reason to be critically hopeful, as *Facebook* identities are mostly rooted in stable physical and geographical relationships. Whether friends or strangers (and the many heated interchanges notwithstanding), arguers engaged in a considerable amount of metacommunication concerning argument, as well as evoked interpersonal standards of trust and risk that are the very grounds of productive exchange. This study supplements a recent survey showing that the primary motive for going online now is to socialize, share, and engage in discussions with others, above and beyond other aims, such as shopping (Smith, 2009). These findings should be further explored, to see what other deliberative norms and practices are implicated in exchanges that occur via *Facebook*.

There is already some evidence suggesting that factors like gender and age may affect how users engage *Facebook* (e.g., women are more likely to change their profiles often, and older members change their profiles less regularly than other users) (Strano, 2008). In fact, the most rapidly increasing demographic on the site involves those 30 years of age and over (Shiels, 2009). It is likely that certain members engage others in argument on *Facebook*, whereas many simply remain silent—which may have to do with variables like one’s level of argumentativeness (see Infante & Rancer, 1982). There is also room to explore the role that frequency and time on the site, member surveillance, privacy controls, and archived arguments play in advancing or limiting deliberation on *Facebook*. Given the many questions that remain, argument scholars should continue to explore this rapidly-growing online world.

## Notes

1. *Facebook* thus evidences deliberation and difference in the midst of globalization. For argumentation studies urging attention toward these issues, see Asen (1999) and Liu (1999).
2. Some authors have used the term “virtual diasporas” (e.g. Landzelius, 2006) to describe how certain immigrant and ethnic groups from around the world stay in contact through online communication—a meaning more narrow than I am constructing. In diasporic-virtual publics, people merely have some kind of historical or present tie that is used to create an online network.
3. Walther, Van der Heidi, Kim et al. (2008) claim that friends’ postings can affect the perceptions of individual profile owners on *Facebook*. This comports with my finding that argument on the site is about the interplay of complex relational webs. Further investigations might look at the potential for individuals to control the terms of debate on *Facebook* (given that there are so many people in one place at the same time), in comparison with other settings, such as face-to-face communication.

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