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Argument Ecologies in Social Media: Populist Reason in Facebook Immigration Pages

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In the last several years, online and offline communication have merged to a remarkable degree. Social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook have created an unprecedented environment for public discussion, both impacting and being impacted by offline arguments. Scholars face a critical task in teasing out the deliberative forms and practices advanced or impeded by these new technologies. This paper seeks to elucidate some features in the argument ecologies of Facebook political pages. Using examples from two of the largest pro and anti-immigration pages (for and against Arizona’s SB 1070 law) on Facebook, I explore some contours of argument chains on the SNS.

Social networking sites are now a permanent feature of politics, organizing, and argument. Approximately 80 percent of American Internet users are involved in groups (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011, para. 1). Marichal (2010) describes Facebook groups in terms of “microactivism” or “small scale, many to many forms of politically oriented communication” that “reflect micro-level intentions and are not necessarily geared towards mobilization like more traditional forms of digital activism” (p. 1). Along these lines, scholars are finding that online discussions blend traditional and new forms of reasoning—and will need to be conceived in terms of broader, inductive theories that help us move beyond top-down deliberative models (Black, 2009; Freelon, 2010).

Online environments may exhibit new argumentative norms, fusing with or moving beyond conceptions of rationality grounded in expressive identity performance (Svensson, 2008), or intersubjective searches for truth (Goodwin, 2000; Habermas, 1991). In particular, it is the porous nature of “context collisions” between friends from so many different parts of one’s life on Facebook (boyd, 2006), which would appear to have created conditions amenable to public deliberation. Studies of net activism can help us understand what validity claims, norms, and interpretations are present in such environments (Palczewski, 2001, p. 181). For instance, as Schwarz (2011) finds, social media tend to objectify conversations, creating a “network intimacy” where “proof and evidence are introduced into interpersonal spheres where they weren’t common before” (p. 71).

Tensions exist in the deliberation literature on discussion within and among activist groups. Based on empirical findings, Mutz (2006) calls into question the assumption that deliberation should necessarily occur between groups, demonstrating that deliberative publics engaged in “cross-cutting” networks often do not rise to very high levels of political participation. Other empirical studies of online environments demonstrate both positive and negative
findings for deliberation (Dahlberg, 2011; Warner, 2010). Yet there is some evidence emerging that shared and enclave nodes can allow for deliberation within and across multiple publics, working in complementary ways through various network configurations (Simone, 2010).

Given these findings, various research questions should be considered by argumentation scholars. What kind of argumentative practices and interactions are opened to participants of political groups on Facebook? What role do offline connections or “anchored relationships” (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) on Facebook appear to play in the shared and enclave rationalities created in these forums? As has been asked of online communication more generally, do SNS spaces “present a separate alternative to, extend, minimize, or ignore the public sphere?” (Papachrissi, 2002, p. 10)

In this study, I created a Facebook profile (to bypass how the site leverages one’s network toward certain search features), and then conducted a close reading of exactly one week of argument threads (May 1 to May 7, 2010) posted to the walls of two of the SNS’s largest pro and anti-SB 1070 pages—each possessing between approximately 10,000 and 100,000 members. SB 1070 is a controversial, strict immigration law passed in Arizona, which requires aliens to possess registration documents at all times (Christie, 2010). Enacted at the end of April 2010, the May time period was selected as a window into the immediate populist formations that emerged on Facebook supporting or opposing the issue.

Various pages have been set up on Facebook to argue both for and against the cause. This study focused on Facebook “pages” rather than “groups.” While many Facebook groups require potential participants to be approved by a group’s administrator(s), Facebook pages have a much lower threshold for joining—members simply have to press the “like” button at the top of a page to comment on the discussion threads of these sites. Given the public accessibility of pages over groups, these parts of the SNS presented a greater opportunity for examining how participants of cross-cutting networks or differing views deliberated online.

Building from a framework of networked argumentation in diasporic/virtual publics (Waisanen, 2009), and employing Laclau’s (2005, 2006, 2007) theory of how populist reason is formed through logics of equivalence and difference, I argue that Facebook page threads are created and mobilized through a form of populist argument in which the intrusion of alternative perspectives mostly fuels in-group cohesion and ideological homophily. Much like a public meeting in which one side is dominant but another side is present, these pages are not pure enclaves, due to the chains of offline relationships by which members typically join the social network. But relational ties are often so distant on these parts of the SNS that deliberative possibilities are largely neutered.

In other words, while some studies assume that the introduction of others necessarily creates diversity and democratic communication in online environments (e.g. Simone, 2010, p. 128), I find instead that enclaves can be built in an open SNS environment through the occasional introduction of different
logics. In the following sections, I first situate Laclau’s theory of populist reason in relation to the SNS, and then demonstrate how this argument form is enacted through logics of equivalence and difference on the pro- and anti-SB 1070 pages. I conclude this study with several implications and a policy proposal that Facebook’s designers could employ for making the SNS a more deliberative environment.

**Populist Reason**

Laclau (2007) provides a fitting vocabulary for studying argumentative form on Facebook political pages, aiming to put “populism” (and the forms of public reasoning the concept invokes) at the very center of political inquiry. His theory of populism is grounded in the idea that collective identity formation is a rhetorical process involving a group’s coalescence around key signifiers (pp. 67, 110, 227), in direct contrast to non-performative views that tie the concept to core teleologies, publics with hardened interests, or typologies of ideological movements (pp. 117, 162, 226, 250). The theory moves populism beyond typical, descriptive connotations—involving, for instance, elites oppressing the masses—instead situating the concept in terms of communicatively generated group formation. The two Facebook SB 1070 pages in this study are amenable to this performative view of collective identity development, since these publics are literally argued into existence through the threads on each site. Importantly, populism targets a form of public articulation, rather than specific contents, and is thus a topic for inquiry on the political left or the right (Laclau, 2005, 2007). Laclau (2007) argues that populist identity is constructed through a form in which demands are first articulated by communicators in relation to an established order that they are “both a part of yet distinct from” (p. ix). A demand for better working conditions against an employer or the state, for example, can invoke a key signifier such as “workers,” around which a populist formation can be structured. Through these demands and key significations, an internal, symbolic frontier is constructed separating the collective from an external enemy. In turn, these synecdochal key signifiers can create continuity for many different demands. For instance, the signifier “workers” can represent the particular demands of some communicators, but then go on to represent a collective or people as a whole (p. 87). Condensed demands for “bread, peace and land” (p. 97) have marked similar populist revolts; even leaders such as Nelson Mandela have become key signifiers, as national populist symbols embodying many different demands (p. 100).

In turn, what Laclau (2007) calls “equivalential chains” of relations eventually link members together, who may find that unfulfilled demands for better healthcare invoke similar demands for better schooling, etc. (pp. 73-74). In the Facebook pages in this study, digital communicators establish equivalential chains through primary demands about immigration and Arizona’s SB 1070 law.
However, the pages also evidence how collective identity is created by chains of demands in which healthcare, education, taxes, crime, unemployment, free school meals, benefits, and many other needs are brought to bear upon the symbolism of SB 1070.

Critical to this case study, tensions between logics of difference and equivalence become necessary to populist identity formation. When some consistency is found in the equivalential bonds emerging from various demands and significations, a condensation of populist identity can be structured (pp. 93-94). Yet differences expressed between communicators can also threaten to dissolve a populist formation. Laclau’s theory thus allows room for the rhetorical fractures, slippages, and processual movement features that more reified language about such matters would tend to obscure.

While various aspects of Laclau’s (2007) explanation of populist form can be demonstrated on Facebook pages, my concern is less with the way that different demands and equivalential bonds are formed within SNS pages than with how logics of difference are introduced from outside others. Advancing Laclau’s call for more examples of populism (pp. 29, 63, 221), the Facebook pages in this study exhibit a form in which logics of difference—articulating demands from outside each forum’s internal frontier—come to both impede public deliberation and fuel equivalential bonds of populist rhetoric within each page.

Critically, the SNS demonstrates how logics of equivalence and difference are not simply enacted within the boundaries of an online populist formation—as advocates articulate logics of equivalence and difference in spaces simultaneously incorporating discourses from both insiders and outsiders. Far from creating argumentative diversity, however, these public enclaves mostly respond to the introduction of different logics by closing space for deliberation, a finding that appears to proceed from the relational distance between interlocutors on this part of the site. In the next section, this essay will demonstrate these logics on the Facebook SB 1070 pages.

Pro- and Anti-SB 1070 Facebook Pages

The wall threads of Facebook pro and anti-SB 1070 pages could be approached from a variety of perspectives, but this section will focus on moments when different logics are introduced into discussions, illustrating a form with deliberative consequences. Examples from the week of comments on each page are too numerous to list, so representative data will be provided.

After many posts on a thread between members of the pro-SB 1070 page, one young woman shared a personal testimony about the difficulties she and her family had experienced in waiting to become American citizens, commenting that “it is hard enough to live like [an immigrant] . . . enforcing that [SB 1070] law would complicate everything so much, it would make so much harm, it would destroy so many dreams, scar so many people for life.” This comment fueled a
...chained by chains of employment, free school on the symbolism of difference and... When some various demands structured (pp. 93- also threaten to... for the rhetorical more reified... of populist form can the way that... SNS pages than with Advancing Laclau’s... book pages in this... ing demands from public deliberation... page. difference and difference populist formation—as spaces simultaneously for creating... n response to the... tion, a finding that... on these... these logics on... pages could be... will focus on moments creating a form with... on each page... the pro-SB 1070 page, difficulties she and her... ofSB 1070] law with harm, it would... comment fueled a... chain of responses on the page, such as “whaaa whaaa whaaa... legally or don’t come at all,” and “sorry honey... illegal means against [sic] the law... If we didn’t have all the illegals causing the problems maybe it wouldn’t take 15 years for someone to come to this country in the appropriate manner. The law is a good law.” Other objectors on the pro-page discussed how difficult it was working long hours for low wages, only to receive similar responses.

While an internal frontier was formed between pro-SB 1070 advocates and others such as immigrants, politicians, and institutions against the policy, the occasional introduction of protesters from beyond the page’s borders served to merely reinforce the group’s ideologies. In turn, these different logics strengthened the equivalential chains creating common bonds between members. Both sites also had many comments from outside others that were deleted by the each page’s respective administrators. Across the pages, outsiders were called “intruders” or “trolls,” and were digitally ambushed by the pages’ members or excised altogether. In response to one deleted person’s post on the anti-SB 1070 page, a member wrote that “the point is racial profiling, not if I’m legal or not. Arizona is becoming the Nazi Germany we remember.” To the same person another member asserted, “obviously nobody like your comments and nobody cares either. so how bout [sic] you do us a favor and go join pro-sb 1070. with all your other white friends.”

The presence of pages committed to an opposite cause on the same SNS also demonstrated how arguments were fueled by the sheer proximity of different logics. On both pro- and anti-SB 1070 sites, there were clear frustrations with the numbers of people on other Facebook pages arguing for the opposing position. Many posts on both pages urged fellow advocates to get more people to join their pages, share existing site features (to extend the equivalential chains), and “keep posting.” Proselytizing calls were displayed frequently, and likely a key reason why comments from outsiders were sometimes found on these pages’ walls. But many members confessed visiting the other pages too; as one pro-SB 1070 page member stated: “I spent a lot of time on the opposite page yesterday... It is all propaganda with inciteful videos from MSNBC and constant agitation from the lib left using these people as pawns in their sick game.”

On the anti-SB 1070 page, a member similarly shared, “I went to their stupid little group here on facebook and stated my opinion and they all got mad at me and said that i am a traitor [sic], and that i should be sent somewhere else too. They had alot [sic] of nasty comments about me.” Sometimes this practice itself became a topic of discussion, since members had to “like” a page in order to provide comments on that page’s wall. Hence, participants were sometimes called out for having inadvertently supported the other side by helping that page’s numbers and venturing beyond the boundaries of their respective cause.

Additionally, these Facebook pages had the effect of blurring lines between deliberation and advocacy/activism. The introduction of different logics into each page simply advanced an equivalential chain of advocacy/activism by
each site’s members. At the same time, both pages also demonstrated the thin bonds by which digital discussion was held among page members. On the pro-SB 1070 page, fissures developed on topics such as whether President Obama was an American citizen and the appropriateness of “Obama-bashing” to the immigration cause. On both pages members also debated the merits or pitfalls of using moderate or extreme language to reach outside others who needed conversion to each cause. These pages thus evidenced the porous, performative nature of Facebook argumentation, and the leveraging of equivalence and difference to either close or open deliberative space within a populist ecology.

Conclusion

Examining the form of digital argumentation is critical to understanding the limits and potentials of online deliberation. Lewinski (2010) finds that structures of horizontal or vertical criticism online can tell us a great deal about argumentative ecologies. Similarly, this study of Facebook political pages confirms that, above and beyond content, the very form of an SNS’s porous boundaries between logics of equivalence and difference can fuel populist identity formation online.

As Das (2010) urges, we need “to investigate divergence and difference, and perhaps also consensus in making sense of digital everyday lives” (p. 156). Similarly, Dahlberg (2007) writes that current research should ask to what degree the Internet “is facilitating the development and expansion of counter-discourses and the contestation between discourses?” (p. 838). Studying the form of SNS argument threads moves us toward a theory of digital deliberation and activism demonstrating how the structures of these sites can impact how people argue. In particular, Laclau’s useful vocabulary for dealing with collective identity formations can be reconfigured for digital populist practices.

This study shows that the divides Mutz (2006) draws between deliberation and participation/advocacy are blurred in social networking. Deliberation from others outside these types of sites appears to drive participation/advocacy within. The barriers to access on these pages are few; at a minimum, the click of a mouse is a much easier means of entering opposition enclaves and accessing discussion than having to be physically proximate with so many others. While these sites may evolve and function differently in the future, they currently illustrate somewhat confused hybrid spaces between private and public, where members want to support their cause, but also both influence and police others who have different views on particular subjects.

Moving forward, greater theoretical understanding of the deliberative diversity that already exists within populist formations on Facebook may provide grounds for promoting more tolerance between members of these collectives. More so, these findings point toward a policy recommendation for Facebook itself. In a previous study, I found that the presence of diasporic-virtual publics on
Facebook—where online arguments are anchored in the bonds of offline identities and relationships—portended well for deliberative democratic practices (Waissman, 2009). Oppositely, the pages in this study are on parts of the site so far removed from these tempering relationships that members easily veer toward more closed, enclave mentalities than might otherwise be the case. Moreover, Facebook has been increasingly narrowcasting its services—automatically showing members only wall posts of friends with whom they have been in recent contact, for instance.

Facebook’s designers could tweak features of the site to make connections with distant others (even through a few degrees of separation from known “friends”) more prominent, thus humanizing argumentation further through reference to offline relationships and accountabilities. Dahlgren (2005) has worried about the possibility for “chaotic populism” (p. 152) in online environments. But if the structures by which argumentation occurs in sites like Facebook are addressed and narrowcasting trends reversed, populism online is nothing to be afraid of—potentially pointing toward more reasoned digital democratic futures.

References


