

Everyday opinions in news discussion forums: Public vernacular discourse

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I study news discussion forums as vernacular public discourse and as a communicative genre in the digital context. News discussion forums constitute the most popular form of participatory journalism, although not all news stories receive comments (Reich, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Weber, 2014). Despite the popularity of news discussion forums, the commenting is diverse, polarized, and likely to attract disruptive and other types of non-collaborative comments. To counter this tendency, some online newspapers and magazines have developed different practices, such as the *New York Times* organizing comments under different categories—*NYT picks*, *Reader's picks*, and *All*. The first one usually contains fewer than ten comments, the second includes those that have been liked, and the third category presents comments in reverse chronological order. Several publications have eliminated or shut down their comment sections, at least temporarily, because of negative posts. For example, *Helsingin Sanomat*, the Finnish national newspaper, shut down its comment section for two weeks in the fall of 2015 after heated commenting on migration (Pullinen, 2015).¹ Several media researchers have noted that these online discussions lack a deliberative character and the democratic qualities of citizens' debates (van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Ruiz et al., 2011; Weber, 2014). Studied from a pragmatic perspective, disagreement seems to be the basic positioning of many posts on

sociopolitical topics (Johansson, 2015; Kleinke, 2010; Weizman, 2015). In this paper, I will consider news discussions from a theoretical perspective.

In computer-mediated communication research, one of the main objects of study has been the sequentiality of posts. This type of research aims to observe a linear or a chronological sequentiality, and it results in descriptions in which incoherence, disrupted turn adjacency, overlapping messages, and topic decay have been found to be the main features (e.g., Herring, 1999). As this kind of approach is usually based on comparing digital interaction with face-to-face conversation, in which spoken interaction is considered as the primary type of interaction, it has been duly criticized (cf. Giles et al., 2015, p. 48). If conversation analysis or any other interactional approach is used, it must be adapted to allow the investigation of digital social interaction *on its own terms*. Instead of studying posts from a platform's technologically based timeline, this study adopts the perspective of social agents; that is, the *users' perspective* on commenting about news.

News discussion is an opinion-based genre that is related to news events (Johansson, 2015, p. 85). In the social context, genres are rarely isolated, but discourses organize genres into dialogical relationships or into genre systems (Bazerman, 1994). According to Gruber (2013, p. 38), genres can form a system in which genres are functionally related to situational and/or socio-institutional contexts. A news discussion can be an independent one that is not related to a specific news article. However, if a comment section follows a news article directly, these two form a genre pair (Johansson, 2015, p. 84). This has consequences for how this latter type of digital discussions should be approached. In this paper, I will aim at conceptualizing news discussions based on notions of discourse and the communicative genre, which will be defined in Section 2.

My first objective is to study the news discussion forum as a form of public discourse in a social context. In order to define these forums at this macro level, changes to the public sphere have to be considered. The public and private spaces have merged and become hybrid in many online contexts. This is due to the transformations that have taken place in and among mass media communications, social media, and society. In media studies, this phenomenon has been studied

as *mediatization*. I suggest that news discussions are situated in an in-between space formed both by journalists' and experts' views on news events and by readers' private everyday opinions on news. This has been noted in studies that compare letters to the editor and news discussion forums (Landert and Jucker, 2011). Online news discussions represent a type of everyday public discourse that emanates from news readers' private spheres (cf. Papacharissi, 2014, p. 103) and will be discussed in Section 3.

The second objective strives to examine this written social interaction in the situational context. The starting point is the sociocultural ecology of digital media that attempts to determine how news discussion forums situated in institutional news media spaces could be compared with social media discussions. I will consider this in Section 4 through the comparison of different types of interactions on social media. The third objective aims at studying how news content and everyday opinions are expressed in the linguistic context. This will be analyzed in Section 5 in terms of how users refer to their source of knowledge when they recontextualize and assign new meanings to their discourse topics through their postings.

The theoretical framework builds on the premise of language use as dialogical action in context. First, the approach is based on interactional sociolinguistics, sociopragmatics, and discourse analysis, broadly understood. It can be characterized as digital discourse and interaction analysis, in which the focus is on language users' activities and practices (Helasvuo et al., 2014; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011). Second, I will focus on studies of contemporary society, media, and digital culture (Couldry, 2012; Couldry and Hepp, 2013, 2017). I will use *digital (interaction, discussion, and context)*, *user*, and *post* as general terms instead of referring to technology- or computer-mediated communication. The terms *comment section* and *news discussion forum* on the one hand and *writer(s)* on the other refer to instances and actors, respectively, in a specific social space and time. Although my emphasis in this paper is on theoretical considerations, I will use one news discussion as an example that has been part of a larger analysis in my previous work (Johansson, 2015). This data come from a discussion on the online news discussion forum for the French national newspaper *Le Monde* (2008) in reaction to an editorial that reported on the 2008 American presidential election one day before it was held.²

2. Discourse and communicative genre

The news discussion forum consists of a particular type of discourse and is a digital communicative genre—or “digital genre” for short. In this paper, *discourse* refers to understanding how construction of meaning takes place in a situated action. In any kind of human sense-making, semiotic, or language-related interaction, the action, thinking, and/or communication is a situated, dialogic action (Linell, 2009, pp. 5–6). Discourse consists of “all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity” that are connected with social interaction (Blommaert, 2005, p. 3). A “social world becomes constructed” through different types of communication events that are interwoven: face-to-face, written, and mediated interactions (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). In these kinds of definitions, the social aspect is understood to be one dimension of discourse. Social agents engage in different types of sense-making processes in the social world that are grounded in everyday action and practices (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). I will rely on the distinction between different levels of contextual description: the linguistic, situational, and social contexts (cf. Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Fetzer 2004; Gruber, 2013).

The interrelation between discourse and communicative genre has been considered as the *order of discourse*, in which discourses and genres comprise parts of some social practices (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Foucault, 1971). This notion is based on Foucault’s (1971, pp. 10–11) view on discourse that is controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed in society according to several processes. From the perspective of social practices, discourse comprises a particular subject matter that reflects constructions of different “areas of knowledge” (Fairclough 1995, p. 76). The representations of knowledge and belief are constructed in discourses that reproduce and maintain or transform them simultaneously with social identities and relations between social agents (Fairclough 1995, p. 55; cf. Foucault 1971). According to Fairclough (1995, pp. 54–55) discourse is in a dialectical relationship with the social: “it is socially shaped, but [it] is also socially shaping—or socially *constitutive*.” Therefore, it is necessary to consider wider contexts that shape “discourse practices in important ways” (Fairclough, 1995, 50).

The notions of communicative genre and of the communicative activity type are basic constructs for considering communicative situations (Bergmann and Luckmann, 1995; Bhatia, 1993;

Levinson, 1992, pp. 69, 71; Linell, 2009, pp. 198–203). Communicative genres provide information about the situation and the frames of a social interaction as well as of its goals and the types of contributions that participants can make by using verbal and other semiotic means. This means that all dialogue or interaction is based on mediation by cultural tools, such as language, semiotic means, and artifacts (Johansson, 2012, p. 48; Wertsch 1998). These can be divided into primary mediation by embodied language use and secondary mediation by mediational tools (Androutsopoulos, 2016, pp. 287–288). In this sense, discourse in the digital context can be defined as mediated digital discourse (see Section 3). Digital genres, such as blogs, Wikipedia articles, and others, have been discussed in the literature as emerging genres (Giltrow and Stein, 2009) or, if they have evolved from offline genres, in terms of how they have been reconfigured or whether they are emerging types of genres (Herring, 2013). Here, *digital* refers to the context in which the genre is situated.

3. Public vernacular discourse

News discussions take place in a public and institutional context of news media, which have been traditionally considered as a part of the public sphere. According to the Habermasian theory, the *public sphere* is the space of civil society with a normative basis (Habermas, 1965; see also Koller and Wodak, 2010). It has been specifically perceived as a national space for civic deliberation and public opinion formation (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 12). The public sphere constitutes a state and its organizations where citizens participate through concrete or immaterial public spaces (Papacharissi 2010, p. 3). In this sense, mass media has been the representative of public discourse *par excellence* (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Several perspectives are central here in order to characterize the nature of contemporary public discourse, including the public sphere and the mass and social media.

The changes in modern societies have been approached as a change from the past society of industrialization to the contemporary one of “reflexive modernization.” This modern society is not based on consensus but on conflict (Beck, 1994, 5). Uncertainty about societal risks leads to

a self-critical and self-confrontational society in which one of the main social conditions is individualization (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1994, pp. 6–11; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 4). The constant change brings uncertainty and fear into everybody's life, leading to liquid life that is in constant flux and full of uncertainties (Bauman, 2001; 2005). This has led to the current trend of public cynicism and disillusionment with contemporary democracy (Papacharissi, 2010, pp. 11–12; Weizman, 2015). These phenomena are observable especially in politics and the mass media, although disconnection and cynical attitudes are not new phenomena (Papacharissi, 2010, pp. 11–13).

In the media, recent changes and transformations have been considered first as *mediation*. According to Livingstone (2009, p. 7), everything is mediated: media changes societies and individuals in profound ways. The technological changes have transformed the duality of mass communication and interpersonal communication and have led to diversifying and hybridizing processes of communication (Livingstone, 2009, pp. 3–5). Second, the major contemporary transformation is that of *mediatization*, which designates a perspective of the interconnection of “changes in media and communication on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other” (Androutsopoulos, 2016; Couldry and Hepp, 2013, p. 199; Lundby 2009). Mediatization refers to the “process of communicative construction” of society and how various media take part in it and change the construction of reality (Hepp, 2014, pp. 51–52, 57). Mediatization opens up a historical perspective for societal macroprocesses and their transformations (Couldry and Hepp, 2013; Lunt and Livingstone, 2016). This is a phenomenon that intersects with globalization, commercialization, and individualization, among other things (Lunt and Livingstone, 2016).

Mediation and mediatization affect the publics. According to Chadwick (2013, p. 24), the increasingly networked media makes the public *hybrid*: “Newer media technologies accrete newer media publics, but those publics are best seen as the hybrid, partly amalgamated combinations of groups, organizations, and social norms and practices that were previously associated with older media.” Various Internet platforms, including news discussion forums and social media, can be considered public spaces for *networked publics* that constitute an “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice” (boyd,

2010, p. 39). Compared to the traditional public sphere, contemporary online public spaces are plural, complex, and fractioned, as their users do not necessarily share a common ground. In addition, they lack the kind of societal authorities they had in the past, or whose meaning has become obsolete (cf. Couldry, 2012).

News discussion forums have often been regarded as possessing the qualities of spaces for citizens' debate or have been studied as such. This strong claim is based on the imaginary representation of social media—how it is used and what its outcomes are (cf. van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014). It emerges from mythologies of technology, democracy, and what the Internet can allow individuals to do, but in addition to these utopian views, there are also “dystopian polarities” (Papacharissi, 2014, pp. 110–111; 2010, p. 3). The belief that social media enhances and/or empowers citizens in democratic societies belongs to what Thurlow (2013) calls the rhetoric of Web 2.0. However, a free space for free words does not automatically produce a citizen debate.

As social media has become popular, its meaning as public social action has broadened as well (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 11). However, there are different uses and outcomes of social media in the public sphere, where the logic of social media is entangled with that of mass media (van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Papacharissi, 2014, p. 111). Some of these are negative, highly destructive, or even life threatening; for example, the organization of riots (the so-called Facebook riots) or terrorist actions (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Others are tightly connected to commercial and consumer or celebrity practices (Marwick, 2013; Page, 2012; Thurlow, 2013). In the digital context, several of the social practices that resemble past civic practices originate in private spaces and are within reach of multiple audiences (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 19). This does not result in deliberative practice:

The emerging political conscience is not collective, but privatized—both by virtue of its connection to consumer culture and in terms of the private spaces it occupies. The contemporary citizen adopts a personally devised definition of the political, and becomes politically emancipated in private, rather than public, spaces, thus developing a new civic vernacular. (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 9)

When considering public space in the digital context, it is not possible to determine beforehand whether it is a space for legitimation of people's views, deliberation on civic issues, or something else. Digital public spaces have to be studied in terms of contemporary views on plural public spaces (cf. Lunt and Livingstone, 2013). In sum, in these changing and hybrid digital spaces, the public and private spheres converge.

Everyday private thinking is now expressed in public communicative spaces. This is a “new civic vernacular” or a “new public vernacular,” (Papacharissi, 2010), but it is not a novel media phenomenon. Everyday life has been the object of study of various practices of social interaction, including face-to-face conversation, self-presentation, and ordinary practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; de Certeau, 1990; Goffman, 1974; Sacks et al., 1974). In the media studies, this has been called as the demotic turn (Turner, 2010). Everyday speech and private voices have always been (re)presented in the mass media in various ways. They have been studied in discourse analysis as conversationalization and informality, indicating changes in public media discourse (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 204–205). Recently, they have been addressed in sociolinguistics in opposition to standard language as *vernacular language* and *vernacularity* in the study of ordinary language practices and sociolinguistic change (Coupland, 2014; 2016, p. 410). All these approaches consider the talk and writing of ordinary persons from different perspectives. Therefore, the term I propose here is *(new) public vernacular discourse*. It has a broad pragmatic and discursive meaning: it designates everyday and ordinary discourse practices in public spaces produced by ordinary social actors, especially in digital contexts.

As a first definition, I propose to consider news discussion forums consisting of everyday opinions in public spaces as one form of public vernacular discourse. They are characterized by an asymmetrical interaction in which users lack institutional power and their views do not usually receive legitimation from journalists. This means that one of their users' distinctive features is that their communicative acts and representations of knowledge (or subject matters) reflect positioning in private spaces. Their language use may manifest standard language, but it is especially likely to contain multiple varieties of vernacular sociolinguistic features, in addition to containing characteristics of everyday speech without a moral filter. As users lack the means to truly influence social life, such as politics, news discussions reflect cynicism (Weizman, 2015;

see above). Commenting does not produce a common and shared understanding for all the users within a discussion, because reactions in online discussions are derived from the private spaces of individuals with different backgrounds, views, and values (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 123). Rather, the diversity of contradicting and polarizing views is the result of heterogeneous participation in discussion forums and other instances of social interaction. According to Marwick and boyd (2011, p. 123), neither traditional nor social media makes it possible for audiences to engage in complex negotiations; instead, both produce what the authors call “context collapse,” the flattening of various social contexts. Participants are isolated individuals in their daily environments, reacting instantaneously to news events and issues around themselves. However, news discussions are written social interactions that take place on institutional media sites, and the question how they can be compared with social media discussions is intriguing.

4. Social media and news discussions

The Internet as such is not a public sphere but is based on business actors that provide services through different platforms (Papacharissi, 2010). It is important to study how an institutional media actor, such as a news site, compares with or distinguishes itself from social media actors and/or platforms. The term “social media” covers a wide range of meanings, from networked services and platforms to a general reference to user participation and user-generated content. In one of the basic definitions, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) consider social media “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” However, since participation and the means of digital communication are very different on various platforms, I will concentrate in this section on how online discussions in the social media are organized. I will first address this issue by considering the classification of social media.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 62) categorize social media based on four criteria: social presence and media richness on the one side and self-presentation and self-disclosure on the other.

Although their classification reduces a complex reality into six categories (see Table 1), it provides a heuristic starting point for understanding the underlying social interaction.

		Social presence/Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
Self-disclosure	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

Table 1. Classification of social media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 62)

The first criterion of social presence is based on a theory derived from the early days of social psychology, in which interpersonal relationships are important in the framework of mediated communication (Short et al., 1976, p. 65).³ *Social presence* is considered to be “the quality of the communications medium,” because it has an impact on how individuals interact (Short et al., 1976, p. 65). By *social presence*, the authors distinguish the kinds of presence that media allows in the different modes (acoustic, visual, and physical) with which participants can communicate (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61; Short et al., 1976). The second criterion, *media richness*, emphasizes the goal of communication to resolve ambiguities and reduce uncertainties among participants through “the amount of information they allow to be transmitted in a given time interval” (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).⁴ These two criteria range from low to high.

The two other criteria also exist in a continuum from low to high. *Self-presentation* is based on Goffman’s principle of *mise en scène*, referring to how participants represent themselves in everyday face-to-face situations with others (Goffman, 1974; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 62).

Self-disclosure pertains to how users reveal personal information (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 62). Based on these criteria, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) distinguish six types of social media platforms (see Table 1): blogs, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), content communities (e.g., YouTube), and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft). Although this classification offers an initial insight into social media, it clearly forces each complex mediated social action into one category, although mediated action might involve several categories. Such is the case on Facebook, which to a large extent is a platform in which ordinary users share their daily life, but in which institutional agents, such as news sites, also distribute content. Another problem is that this categorization does not consider *social interactions* which take place on these platforms, so that it needs to be broadened to capture these interpersonal aspects.

From the perspective of meaning-making practices in social media instances, and, by extension, in other institutional and professional digital spaces, the following two questions remain: “How does social interaction take place?” and “How do users establish relationships among themselves?” To answer these questions, research needs to focus on what users do in relation to social media platforms and what kind of agency they have in these contexts and situations (cf. Couldry, 2012, p. 37). Here, the basic distinction is anchored in how communicative activity takes place in the communicative genres that are used in social media platforms. Therefore, Table 2 expands the classification shown in Table 1:

		Social presence/Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self- presentation	High	Blogs <i>Blog discussions based on the blog contents</i>	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) <i>A variety of different types of discussions based on the type of networking</i>	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life) <i>A variety of space-internal discussions based on virtual world activities</i>
	Low	Collaborative projects(e.g. Wikipedia) <i>Knowledge-building</i>	Content communities (e.g. YouTube) <i>Content-based</i>	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft) <i>Game discussions</i>

disclosure		<i>discussions</i>	<i>discussions</i>	
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Table 2. Discussions on social media platforms (modified from Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 62)

Table 2 seeks to distinguish among some basic communicative events and enrich them by their respective types of social interactions. In this categorization, virtual social and game worlds both enact discussions that are space-internal interactions among participants who have chosen these social media platforms. In them, users concentrate on the goals set by games or engage in social interactions constrained by the frames of the virtual worlds. Second, blog discussions are anchored in the blog contents on which blog readers comment, and possibly interact with bloggers. Content communities, such as YouTube, resemble blog discussions, as their comments are based on video contents, but differ from the latter in that video creators rarely reply. Third, collaborative projects are centered on knowledge-building discussions, for example on writing a Wikipedia article. Finally, social networking sites may include a variety of different types of social interactions, ranging from information sharing and commenting to knowledge building. This expanded categorization is by no means exhaustive, but it ought to shed some light on the sense-making practices within these platforms.

How, then, should news discussion forums be categorized? Online discussions, originated in list serves, forums, and message boards during Web 1.0, spread in various platforms of social media, and were adopted to online news sites (cf. Johansson, 2015). They are obviously not similar to gaming or virtual world discussions, and neither do they resemble blog or networking discussions. In blog discussions, bloggers build their post according their choice of themes, and may engage in discussions with the users who comment their posts. In news discussions, journalists do not participate in discussions and the themes are based on daily news events. In networking discussions, based on friendships or hobbies, for instance, users strive to tell or share with others events of their everyday life, which is not a central issue in news discussions. Furthermore, it is possible that news discussions resemble knowledge-building or content-based discussions (indicated by the dotted line in Table 2), but this mandates further consideration, as existing research presents somewhat contradictory findings. The belief, that news discussion forums are deliberative and thus knowledge building in a traditional sense, has not been verified

in previous studies (Section 3). They are not deliberative, as they do not strive toward common goals and leave private matters aside. It also seems that participants rarely post comments that contain verified facts or knowledge whose accuracy is shown (Section 5). But as the public and private spaces converge, these discussions can be knowledge building for participating users in the sense of public vernacular discourse: users contribute at least their everyday knowledge and experience to these social interactions. However, news forum discussions are not knowledge building in the same sense as the discussions in collaborative projects, such as writing Wikipedia articles. Another clear point of comparison is with content-based discussions, such as on YouTube (see Table 2) in that they relate to content that has been previously posted. Thus, I propose to consider news discussion forums primarily as content-based discussions, in which users' opinions mainly respond to news reports and articles (Johansson, 2015). *Content* is a social media term that must also be expanded. It is clear that these content-based discussions are further determined by the topics of a discussion. I will turn to this point in the next section.

5. News content and everyday opinions on “Dangerous America”

Social agents have ordinary knowledge about the social world. In this case, objects of media discourse from media and social life, such as freedom of speech, racism, and migration, are negotiated and transformed in discourse (cf. Fairclough 1992; Foucault, 1969; Johansson, 2006, p. 219; 2015; Moirand, 2007). When displaying their everyday opinions about news content, users have to introduce and name the topics, describe them, give meanings to them, tell what they know about them, and evaluate them (cf. Moirand, 2007). They may express their stance—epistemic, affective or other—in various ways (Biber and Finegan, 1989; Chafe and Nichols, 1986; DuBois, 2007; Kärkkäinen, 2003; Ochs, 1996, p. 410). Here I am particularly interested in users' sources of knowledge (Stivers et. al, 2011, pp. 9–10). Sources of knowledge show how, largely, users have gained their knowledge about the world. In the example thread, the topic to be examined is a sociopolitical one. I will demonstrate this with some extracts from the news discussion that followed an editorial called “Dangerous America.” The editorial addresses the political situation under the outgoing president, George Bush, and the merits of both candidates,

Barack Obama and John McCain, evoking different problematic outcomes if either candidate wins.

In the discussion that followed this editorial, users recontextualized three main topics in their posts: media, politics, and other users' opinions. These were further divided into subtopics. The first of these, media, was approached from the perspective of the type of editorial, newspaper, journalist, information, and media discourse that was analyzed in a previous study (Johansson, 2015). The second, politics, concerned political actors, such as the presidential candidates and the political event, elections. Furthermore, it addressed other institutional actors, such as states (the U.S. and France) as well as institutions (the European Union) and users also evoked political ideologies (racism, militarism) and values (morality, freedom of speech). The third subtopic referred to other users' opinions and their stereotypes. In the following, I focus on how users represent their knowledge of the social world, media, and especially on politics.

The first step in the analysis was to study how users referred to the preceding editorial (cf. Johansson, 2015):

(1) (...)Dommage que cet *edito* ne nous donne meme pas une toute petite chance de mieux apprehender les US.

(...) It's a pity that this *editorial* does not give us a smallest chance to better understand better the U.S. (...)

In this example (1), the user makes a reference to the editorial by a metapragmatic act that indexes the communicative situation and the preceding genre (Agha, 2007; Lucy, 1993; Silverstein, 1976). The user complains about the lack of information that is associated with the affective stance, naming an emotion (*pity*). In sum, he or she judges the information given in the editorial as insufficient and thus undermines its authority. In fact, users disagreed with editorials by thanking, congratulating, refusing, or denying with affective, epistemic, and/or ironic stances (Johansson, 2015). Some did agree by pointing out common ground with the editorial or by thanking and pointing out the good qualities of the editorial (Johansson, 2015, pp. 101–102).

When evaluating the editorial, the source of the knowledge can be based on self-presentation and locality, as in the following example (2):

- (2) *Vivant aux Etats-Unis, je rigole quand je lis les editos des journaux francais "pompes" sur les editos anglo-saxons.*

Living in the United States, I laugh when I read the editorials in the big French journals about the Anglo-American editorials.

In example (2), this user positions him- or herself as a reader by a subjective positioning (*je lis/I read*), but one whose knowledge is based on the fact of his or her place of residence. Thus a reference to this reader's private sphere, the locality of his or her residence, gives the reason for this user to criticize the quality of the editorial.

A second step in the analysis was to study how writers used the *media* as their source of knowledge. When users display their knowledge of *politics, the elections, or candidates* in the U.S., what is striking is how the source of knowledge is referred to. First, media references are given in a very general manner, as in the following examples (3 and 4):

- (3) *Pour l'instant, Obama l'emporte largement, selon les sondages.*

At the moment, Obama wins by far, according to the polls.

- (4) *Les medias US font une propagande effrénée pour BO [Barack Obama], et se dispensent d'insister sur ses mensonges (...)*

The U.S. media offers a tremendous amount of propaganda for BO [Barack Obama] and spreads his lies (...)

In these posts, the user makes reference to polls (3) and the media in the U.S. in general (4). Example (3) is a rare case in the discussion: it is the only one that asserts additional information that has not been given in the editorial, providing evidence that the user is following the news elsewhere. Example (4), in turn, is an offensive accusation about the quality of the news in the U.S. by using a negative stance (*propagande/propaganda, mensonges/lies*) and presenting an opinion on how Obama is being portrayed in the American media.

In other cases, the source of knowledge can be from the media, but not from the news media, but drawing on popular culture as in the following example (5):

- (5) *On est assez effrayé de la capacité de haine d'une partie de l'Amérique, qui rappelle les scènes de lynchage dont les anciens—et au demeurant remarquables—westerns raffolaient. (...)*

One is very afraid of the hatred of one part of America that *brings to mind* the scenes of lynching that the old—and still remarkable—*Westerns* were enthusiastic about. (...)

In the preceding comment (Example 5), this user first expresses a stance that evokes a private space affect—fear (*on est assez effrayé/one is very afraid*). Here, the pronoun with the non-specific reference (*on/one*) implicitly targets the speaker (Helasvuoto and Johansson, 2008). This user's reason for fear is entextualized by a cognitive verb (*rappeler/bring to mind*): the source of knowledge is not a sociopolitical one, but it refers instead to the individual, private sphere knowledge of popular culture and film scenes (*Westerns*).

Finally, when users comment on the main topic, the election, they do not give their source of knowledge but rather assert information as if the journalist and/or other users share the same knowledge and thus a common ground about the political situation, such as in the following example:

- (6) Vous oubliez le militarisme américain et l'influence regrettable et difficile à comprendre des néoconservateurs, complexés et avides de guerre et qui entourent McCain. Cette idée de McCain en tant que 'réformateur' date d'avant hier, et son choix de Sarah Palin pour amadouer les fanatiques religieux aux EU a inquiété plus d'un. Espérons qu'Obama peut amener un peu d'honneur aux EU.

You forget American militarism and the neoconservatives who are grouped around McCain. They are hung up on and keen on war, and their regrettable influence is hard to understand. This idea of McCain as a "reformer" goes back some time, and his choice of Sarah Palin to placate religious fanatics in the US bothers more than one person. Let's hope that Obama can bring back some honor to the US.

In the beginning of the preceding post (Example 6), the writer replies to the editorial by using a cognitive verb (*vous oubliez/you forget*), wanting to add information and align with the editorial's title about why the U.S. is dangerous (*militarism américain/American militarism*). This user segues to the presidential candidate McCain and enumeration of the political qualities

of his supporters (*des néoconservateurs, complexés et avides de guerre et qui entourent McCain/ the neoconservatives (...) hung up and keen on war who are grouped around McCain*). However, confirmation of the source of this knowledge is not given. The post ends with an individual point of view from a private space, wherein this user expresses a wish (*Espérons/Let's hope*). In another example, the user blames the U.S. in an allusive list of reasons why he or she finds the U.S. dangerous:

(7) L'Amérique ! Un pays qui se prosterne devant Dieu, qui prend ses ordres auprès de lui, qui n'a que le mot morale à la bouche, qui refuse l'avortement, Darwin et le reste... Mais qui tue, torture, ment, pollue, cultive le racisme, produit un cinéma cynique, violent et propagandiste (...) (S3)

America! A country that grovels in front of God, that takes its orders from Him, that does not have but moral words [to say], that refuses abortion, Darwin and the rest...But that kills, tortures, lies, pollutes, cultivates racism, and makes cynical, violent and propagandist films (...)

This excerpt (7) does not contain mention of a source of this knowledge. In fact, this user generalizes and condenses different kinds of meanings in rejecting the U.S, thus blurring historical and other facts. In sum, users develop the main topics in their posts, but they do so in a descriptive and affective way, without addressing specific sources of knowledge. They produce generalizations and simplifications, providing somewhat ahistorical, stereotypical, and mixed information. Their positioning is confrontational or oppositional toward the editorial, as they mostly blame, complain, and reject.

6. Conclusion

News discussion forums do not represent a digital agora in a sense that they could be called a space of true citizens' debates. These forums offer public spaces for everyday social interactions to respond to news, with a remote possibility of influencing society and political agendas. Rather, they depict everyday opinions based on individual and subjective expressions that

emerge from users' private spaces. Therefore, such forums do not necessarily follow the patterns of public institutional communication, but constitute a new type of public vernacular discourse. This public vernacular (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 19) fluctuates between affective and unconfirmed information-based discourse produced by users. In sum, a news discussion forum is also heavily ritualized as a genre.

News discussion forums are content-based social interactions. Their participants are networked and hybrid and do not (usually) share a common ground on sociopolitical issues. Therefore, news discussion forums do not create spaces of empowerment, as has been suggested regarding imaginary uses of digital space for free speech and networking (See Section 3). Especially discussions on sociopolitical topics rather result in disconnection, pessimistic debates and struggles. In other words, they belong mostly to the negative outcomes of the privatized public spheres (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 19), since the users are unable to reach deliberative negotiations or receive legitimization of their views.

News discussions are asymmetrical interactions in which ordinary users recontextualize their ordinary knowledge and views on mediated news. When users refer to their sources of knowledge in the public space, these usually remain rather general. If they do not, they assert information in a simplified and condensed manner. Users react rapidly to news events by negative communicative acts such as blame and accusation, performed in a pointed and offensive way in order to attack not only other users, but the professional and journalistic view (and authority) on news issues. Also in this sense, news discussions as a type of public vernacular discourse cross the line of what is or has been considered publicly appropriate communication.

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¹ Ellis (2015) describes the views of different newspapers and magazines that shut down commenting.

² The news discussion that follows the editorial includes 38 posts from 37 writers, totaling approximately 2,200 words. The writers are anonymized in the analysis, and their posts are used without any revision.

³ They call it telecommunications (Short et al., 1976).

⁴ Daft and Lengel (1986) discuss information processes within organizations, whose objectives are to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity.