

The extreme right and the online public sphere

A study on the discussions on the Web 2.0 platforms used by the extreme right and whether they contribute to the formation of an online public sphere

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Abstract

Political talk has taken a central position in contemporary models of democracy and with the emergence of the Internet, scholars have also focused on the role of online political talk. The study presented here contributes to this field of research and investigates whether the discussions on Web 2.0 platforms used by the extreme right contribute to the formation of an online public sphere. It elaborates upon the necessity of political talk and explores two schools of thought on the civic potential of the Internet. It shows how measuring the quality of deliberation can provide insight in the formation of an online public sphere and performs a case study on the discussions on the Facebook page of an extreme right party, the British National Party (BNP). To place this case study into context, this dissertation also explores the rich history of the far right and its current relations with new media. This study shows that the quality of deliberation on the BNP Facebook page is appallingly low and confirms the theory of polarisation (Sunstein, 2001) and prior research on the discourse of the BNP (Atton, 2004; Copsey, 2003). The findings do also point towards some developments linked to the use of Web 2.0: there is less hierarchical control and more multi-voiced discourse within the BNP community than observed in previous research. However, the results provide more evidence for the construction of a 'community with closure' (Couldry, 2002a) and an 'anti-public sphere' (Cammaerts, 2007). It is clear that the participants on the BNP Facebook page have sealed themselves in an echo-chamber of opinion reinforcement.

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1 Introduction

On the 22nd of July, 2011, 77 people were murdered in two sequential terror attacks in Norway. One man, Anders Breivik, has been arrested for both the Oslo bombing and the Utøya shooting. From the 1500 page manifesto that he published online, it is clear that he has extreme right views and is driven by anti-Islamic beliefs (e.g. Madslien, 2011; Ahlander and Klesty, 2011). However, his close friends and family did not know about his extreme beliefs. Who he did share his beliefs with were the over 600 far right friends he had on Facebook and other online platforms. On these national and international online discussion spaces Breivik (anonymously) shared anti-Islamic and right-extremist ideas with other participants. Breivik is not the only one who uses the Internet as an outlet for extremist views. The role the Internet plays for extremist movements has been pointed out in context with these recent events. In an episode of Newsnight 3 days after the attacks (Newsnight, 2011), Tore Bjørgo, professor at the Norwegian Police University College said:

“During the last few years we have seen the emergence of an anti-Islam movement which has a very different character. They are not street-oriented. They are not organisations who gather in meetings and demonstrations...they mainly sit behind their computers and write statements on blogs...”

Later in the same episode it was pointed out that it is alarming how much extremist individuals feed one another through online networking sites.

The appearance of the Internet in extreme-right communities is not new. Since the 1980s a wave of extreme right political parties has amassed (e.g. Norris, 2005) and “the 1990s saw a dramatic movement of the European far right towards the centre of national politics” (Atton, 2004 p.61). Parallel to this normalisation of right-wing discourse, the extremist movements started to make use of information and communication technologies. Analyses of the early use of the Internet by the extreme-right show that these organisations create ‘communities with closure’ (Coudry, 2002a) and ‘anti-public spheres’ (Cammaerts, 2007, 2009) where information is controlled and unidirectional (Atton, 2004, 2006; Copsey, 2003).

The appearance of politicians on the Internet, and lately also on platforms associated with the second phase of the Internet, ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly, 2005), has received a lot of attention from the academic community (e.g. Castells, 2001; Coleman, 2007; Dahlgren, 2006; Gibson, Nixon and Ward, 2003; and for politics and Web 2.0, see e.g. Jackson and Lilleker, 2009, 2011; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011). There are different views on the civic potential of the web: one school of thought argues that the Internet causes polarisation and fragmentation and that it increases the possibilities for access to individualised information environments (e.g. Sunstein, 2001); the other school of thought is more positive about the potential of the web and especially about the new Web 2.0 platforms, which are often described as having an open, democratic and bottom-up structure (O’Reilly, 2005). “It has

been argued that the Internet has the capacity to revolutionize public communication.” (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009 p.232) and create an networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006)

The findings of the studies on the ‘1.0’ websites of extreme right parties confirm the theories on polarisation and fragmentation, but these analyses were before the emergence of Web 2.0 tools and platforms. Therefore it will be interesting to make an assessment of the use of Web 2.0 platforms by far right politics in order to see whether the parties now still create communities with closure or if an online public sphere is being formed. The question central in this dissertation is:

Do the discussions on the Web 2.0 platforms used by the extreme right contribute to the formation of an online public sphere? If so, how? If not, why not?

In order to address this question, I will perform a case study on the use of a Web 2.0 application by the British National Party (BNP), a UK-based extreme right party. I will assess the discussions on the official BNP Facebook page, a forum-like Web 2.0 platform. For this case study my research question has to be narrowed down. I will focus on the discussions on this online platform and how the political talk does or does not contribute to the formation of an open community and an online public sphere.

Answering this question and looking at this specific case is relevant from both an academic and a social point of view. To my knowledge the openness of the discourse of the extreme right on a Web 2.0 platform has not been researched in this way before and this dissertation will therefore provide interesting insights. Next to this it is also relevant because since the 1980s a new wave of extreme right political parties has emerged and their discourse has become more normalised over the years. Recent events like the attacks in Norway but also smaller incidents such as the fights and riots around the gatherings of the English Defence League show the danger of this rhetoric.

Before I can start the case study and provide answers to my questions, I will first have to elaborate upon the necessity of political talk. Subsequently I will look at political discussion online and explain two different schools of thought on political discussion online. The first school of thought believes in the Internets’ civic potential and argues that online public spheres can be created. The second one is sceptical about the potential and mainly sees online polarisation. In this first section, chapter 2, I also explain that to get insight into political discussion, one can measure the quality of online deliberation. In chapter 3 I introduce my case study, the BNP, and look at the rich history of the far right and its current relationship with new media. Prior to the actual analysis of the discussions on the BNP Facebook page, in chapter 4 I will present the research design and the coding scheme created for the analysis. The analysis is presented in chapter 5 and I will place the results into context of my study in chapter 6. The last section, chapter 7, consists of my conclusions and my reflection on this study.

2 Political discussion online

As mentioned in the introduction, the relation between politics and the Internet has often been discussed and Stromer-Galley and Wichowski (2011) have pointed out that next to general political communication, online political conversation is frequently the topic of research. Political talk is often thought to be good for society and as Stromer-Galley and Wichowski explain, in the early 20th century John Dewey (1939, 1946) argued that to interact with and talk to others is essential to a healthy democracy. In this way a public sphere could be created, an idea that is central in theories developed by Habermas (e.g. 1989). According to him, a strong democracy can be achieved via a public sphere of informal citizen deliberation. As explained by Dahlberg (2001), this informal citizen deliberation should be focused on rational-critical interaction oriented to resolving political problems. Where Habermas limits participation to the educated elites, Barber (1984) argues to include all the citizens in deliberation. Even though they disagree on certain points, the theories by Barber and Habermas made that “public talk has been accorded a central position within recent models of participatory and deliberative democracy” (Coleman and Blumler, 2009 p. 15).

“It is through political conversations that members of society come to clarify their own views, learn about the opinions of others and discover what major problems face the collective. Through such conversations, political participation is made possible, enabling citizens to affect the practices and policies of their elected leaders and ultimately ensuring a democratic process of governance.” (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011 p. 169)

2.1 A democratised Internet

The emergence of television was seen as a setback for political participation, because it led to for instance the ‘colonisation’ of politics by the media (Meyer, 2002) and also to the public being treated as consumers instead of citizens (Stanyer, 2007). In contrast, the initial appearance of the Internet brought hope. “It has been argued that the Internet has the capacity to revolutionize public communication.” (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009 p.232) As a new form of mass communication, the Internet led to the developments of what has been described as the ‘information age’ and the ‘network society’ (Castells, 1996). The characteristics of the Internet, interactivity, the possibility to overcome distances, or: ‘connectivity’, affordability and the chance to speak freely, have often been noted to make way for increased political participation and conversation. Because of these aspects, the web has been described as a public space that can expand the public sphere and create what Benkler explained as a ‘networked public sphere’ (2006, p.212-272).

Especially the changes of the Internet over the last decade resulted in even more positive, sometimes utopian, views. During the last ten years the web has become a more normal feature of our daily lives and the primary observed transformation is the emergence of what

is often referred to as 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 is seen as an open, democratic and bottom-up structure than earlier versions of the Internet: it indicates the second phase of the web. From a technical perspective in this phase the Internet can be seen as a platform on which a new generation of interactive, easily used advanced web applications are available. These web applications are related to networking and self-publishing, for example weblogs, wiki's and file sharing tools. A distinctive feature of Web 2.0 is that information is not only available in one static place, but, with the use of for example tags and syndication techniques, moves towards the interested Internet user (O'Reilly, 2005). However, as Dahlgren explained: "While Web 2.0 signals some technological innovations, it also rhetorically underscores the potential for broad participation." (2009, p.152) Web 2.0 is more about the way users and software developers utilise the Internet than about technological specifications.

Amongst others, Time Magazine received these changes with enthusiasm. In 2006, the magazine chose 'YOU' as person of the year. According to editor Grossman, you had worked harder than ever before, sharing and creating information on the web:

"It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people's network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes. [...] it's really a revolution." (Grossman, 2006)

This quote captures the prospective of the Internet at that time. As scholars have noted, the web potentially creates an 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly, 2005) where non-hierarchical production of information, social networking and interaction is facilitated (e.g. Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2001, 2005; Dahlberg, 2001, 2007; Gillmor, 2006; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Leadbeater, 2008; Shirky, 2008). "It's like building a bird's nest where everyone leaves their piece." (Leadbeater, 2008) Choosing 'you' as person of the year, Time Magazine observed what has been described as the more human aspects of Web 2.0 (Barksy, 2006; Barksy and Purdon, 2006). Even more than previously, this people-focused architecture of participation has been noted to facilitate the potential creation of online public spheres.

2.2 A polarised Internet

Next to this positive view of the civic potential of the web, a more negative school of thought also erupted. Sunstein (2001, 2009) for instance is part of this school and he argues that because the structure of the Internet, it can be argued that it increases the possibilities for Internet users to hear "echoes of their own voices and to wall themselves off from others" (Sunstein, 2001 p.44). The access the Internet provides to individuated information environments, 'information cocoons' (Sunstein, 2008 p.94), can result in group polarisation

because their beliefs and prejudices are being reinforced (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Sunstein, 2001; Ward and Vedel, 2006). We can shape our online experience and create a 'Daily Me' (Sunstein, 2001 p.3-22) or a 'me-channel' (Noveck, 2000 p.29) and this fragmentation will subsequently promote one-dimensional mentalities, which can have a bad influence on the public sphere and democracy (Dahlberg, 2007).

According to Sunstein (2009), fragmentation and polarisation have their worst effects on people who already have extremist views. It is easy to find online support for judgements that are held by only a bizarre, confused or hateful few. Views that would normally dissolve in society because there is no social support for them are found online in large numbers. In general, people go to extremes when they are separated from the rest of society, physically or psychologically. They tend to become even more extreme when they talk to like-minded people because "polarization is all the greater and all the more likely when people are attached by bonds of affection, commonality or solidarity." (Sunstein, 2009 p.81) Also, opinion reinforcement takes place: "Group members come to rely exclusively on one another to validate new information, and everything that they believe is a product of interactions within their enclaves." (ibid, p. 52)

The scholars of this school also often refer to the 'digital divide' (Norris, 2001), and argue that the Internet will be moulded to fit or reinforce the status quo (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). Because of the limits of public competence and the absence of credible information (Barabas, 2004) the quality of debate would be limited.

2.3 The quality of online deliberation

Above I described the two main views on the Internet. The first group believes in an architecture of participation, the second one points towards the limitations of online talk. Measuring the quality of deliberation can offer insight in this discussion: if the online discussions are highly deliberative, an online public sphere can be formed; if discussions only take place between like-minds, the quality of deliberation will be low. Several studies have tried to measure the deliberativeness of online discussions and investigated whether they meet the Habermasian ideals (e.g. Davies, 2005; Graham and Witsche, 2003; Graham, 2009; Hagemann, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Wilhelm, 1998). Looking at the studies in comparison, Stromer-Galley and Wichoski concluded that the results are mixed. Some studies somewhat confirm the optimistic ideas about the formation of an online public sphere (Coleman, 2004; Jensen, 2003), others show that the studied debates are not deliberative in the Habermasian sense (Wilhelm 1998).

A problem with the studies that investigate the quality of online debates is that they offer different definitions of deliberativeness, and that makes it difficult to compare their results (Stromer-Galley and Wichowksi, 2011). One way of measuring the quality of these online debates is by operationalising Habermas' idea of the public sphere. As Dahlberg (2001) points out, Habermas' analysis shows that a citizen taking part in the rational-critical

interaction 'makes reference to a number of pragmatic presuppositions and thus to a set of normative conditions of the public sphere' (Dahlberg, 2001 p.3). Based on Habermas' theory of communicative rationality, Dahlberg detailed a set of normative conditions of public sphere discourse adequate for critical analysis. One of the scholars that uses this set of normative conditions in measuring the quality of deliberation is Graham (2008, 2009, 2011) and as he describes, there are two categories. One category of normative conditions defines 'the process of achieving mutual understanding' and the conditions in the other category define 'structural and dispositional fairness' (Graham, 2009 p. 17-18).

The following conditions fall in the first category and are thus necessary for achieving understanding during the course of political talk. The condition *rational-critical debate* (similar to the element 'reasoned opinion expression' defined by Stromer-Galley (2007)) is the guiding communicative form. Participants have to provide reasoned claims and critically reflect upon these claims. Until agreement or understanding is achieved, participants have to stick to the topic of the debate and the conditions *coherence* and *continuity* are defined to secure this. Three other conditions, *reciprocity*, *reflexivity* and *empathy*, are needed in order to achieve mutual understanding. Reciprocity requires that participants listen and respond to each other, reflexivity demands that participants go through a process of reflecting another's argument or position against their own and finally the condition empathy makes sure that people are able and willing to imagine another person's position and perspective.

The second set of conditions is aimed at creating a fair communicative environment. The condition *discursive equality* is intended to maintain equality amongst participants. It does not only require that participants respect each other as equals, but also that the rules in the debate do not privilege certain individuals or groups. Next to that, no groups or individuals should dominate the conversation. Participants should be able to freely share information, opinions, and arguments and the condition *discursive freedom* is defined to ensure that. The last condition, *sincerity*, implies that all the participants should be sincere and truthful, and so should the information provided in the debate.

I will follow Graham (2009) and will utilise this set of normative conditions of the public sphere in this dissertation to measure the deliberativeness of the chosen debates in the case study.

3 The extreme right and the Internet

3.1 The rise of the extreme right

Above I set out the normative conditions of deliberation and showed that insight on the different views on online discussion can be given by measuring deliberation. In the next section of this dissertation I will introduce my case study, the Facebook page of the British National Party. To put the case study in perspective, a short history of the far right and the

BNP will be given and I will assess the previous research that has been done on the online activities of the BNP.

The BNP was formed in 1982 by John Tyndall, two years after he left the extreme right party National Front (NF). Tyndall used to be the leader of the NF, but left the party in 1980 because of an internal division (Copsey, 2008). The BNP can be seen as a part of the third wave of post-war right-wing extremism (von Beyme, 1988), a wave that started in the 1980s and "is without a doubt the most successful period in both the electoral and ideological sense for such parties in almost every West European country" (Mudde, 2000 p.6). Over almost three decades in and outside Western Europe many new parties emerged and also existing extreme right parties transformed themselves (Ignazi, 2003). These new or transformed parties have been gaining popularity in many nations (e.g. Betz, 1994; von Beyme, 1988; Buijs and van Donselaar, 1994; Cammaerts, 2009; Eatwell, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004a,b; Fraser, 2000; Hainsworth, 2000; Harris, 1990; Husband, 1998; Merkl and Weinberg, 1993; Mudde, 1995, 2000, 2004; Roxburgh, 2002; Rydgren, 2005a,b) and for some the support even almost tripled between 1985-2005 (Norris, 2005). Looking at the statistics, it is visible that not all parties have (had) electoral success and especially the BNP is an example of this lack of votes. However, the achievements of extreme right parties cannot just be measured in electoral terms. As Hainsworth (2000) noted, in a variety of situations the extreme right parties have influenced the agendas, policies and discourses of major political parties and governments.

Even though the BNP did not have much electoral success, it can still be seen as an example of the extreme right. Within the scholarly community there is little consensus on the definition of terms, but despite that, most of the authors trying to define the extreme right and the ideology do that in the same way. They refer to a collection of features and Mudde (1995, 2000) identified five features mentioned by most of the studies. They are nationalist, racist, xenophobic, anti-democratic and they believe in the strong state (2000 p.11). As a result of some of these features, the ideology of the extreme right also actively constitutes the 'Other'. The constitutive Other indicates a person other than one's self and although this duality is fundamental for all thinking and acting, structures of the differentiation between 'Them' and 'Us' are actively constructed in the racist discourse. The Other is identified as different from the self: in the case of the extreme right it depends on the context who this other is, it "might not only be the 'immigrant'; it might easily be the other 'British' people, most obviously 'liberals' and 'the left'" (Atton, 2004 p. 74). Othering often takes place in the discourse of the BNP and also the other features that define the far right can be found in the BNP discourse. However, they often publicly dissociate themselves from such discourse (Copsey, 2008).

The political style of the BNP also fits in the style of other extreme right parties, especially when Nick Griffin became leader of the party in 1999. As Hainsworth (2000) noted, in the third wave leadership and image have become more important for extreme right parties.

The most successful extreme right parties (re)packaged their message, built up their organisation and have been led by individuals with excellent oratorical and media skills (Mazzoleni et al, 2003; Peri, 2004; Stanyer, 2007). Griffin used to be associated with the very extreme and racist activities of the Front National, but despite that, in 1999 “Griffin’s objective was to transform the internal culture of the British National Party - to ‘modernise’ it and ‘normalise’ it as a legitimate political party” (Copsey, 2008, p. 100). This ‘modernisation’ has often been described as neo-populism, right-wing populism, radical right-wing populism, national populism and new-populism (Betz and Immerfall, 1998; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni et al, 2003; Mudde, 2000; Peri, 2004, 2008; Taggart, 1995, 2000). In this dissertation I will refer to the BNP as an extreme right or far right, neo-populist party and will put the results of this case study in context of the more general views of the far right.

3.2 Right winged neo-populist movements and the Internet

The media is of great importance to neo-populists: Peri (2004) even refers to them as ‘tele-populists’. The connections between old media and these parties have been studied by for example Mazzoleni and colleagues (2003) and Peri (2004) and they concluded that the media are an important tool for these parties. However, in these studies the focus is on ‘old’ mass media, not on the Internet. One of the first extensive studies of online racism is done by Back (2002). In his article he argues that new types of racist culture are made possible in cyberspace and warns that the extreme right always has been ahead of their time using the newest technologies. Back shows that white racist groups already started to use computer networks in the mid 1980s and by the mid 1990s they had seized upon the Internet as a political tool. This is also visible when looking at the BNP: it was the first party in Great Britain to make use of the Internet and already in 1995 recognised the Internet as “the most significant development for politics since the invention of television” (Copsey, 2003 p. 219).

Assessing the activities of the extreme right, Back shows that the web is mainly used as a broadcast propaganda, for example by the Klu Klux Klan, the White Aryan Resistance and also the BNP. It also offered the ability to tailor messages for a variety of authors and because of that it has also been used as a recruitment tool (Eatwell 1996). Copsey (2003) and Back (2002) also mention the possibility for an online merchandising outlet, for example for White Power rock music and Nazi paraphernalia. They also point out that the ability to bypass national laws and boundaries and that the medium can be privately controlled also made it interesting for the extreme right to go online (Back, 2002; Copsey, 2003; Eatwell, 1996). Next to all these aspects, Eatwell (1996) also refers to the ability the web offers to create an effective sense of community.

Studying communities, Couldry (2002a) claimed that right extreme parties create closed communities:

"[...] one of the central values of, say, neo-Nazi media is to *close off* certain others' abilities to speak of their experience, as part of constructing or sustaining a community *with* closure" (Couldry, 2002a p.7, italics in original).

Cammaerts (2007) described these closed communities as 'anti-public spheres' and writes:

"[...] in many Western democracies anti-democratic forces, such as for example neo-fascist parties, manoeuvre themselves centre stage of the dominant public sphere through the strategic use of the formal rules of representative democracy and perverting freedom of speech rights to incite hatred, racism and intolerance." (Cammaerts, 2007 p. 74)

Analysing the discourse of three extreme right weblogs, Cammaerts (2009) concludes that also the Internet gives rise to anti-public spaces voicing hatred and essentialist discourses. Atton (2004, 2006) did a case study that focused on the online discourse of the BNP and he confirmed Couldry's assertion: the discourse of the BNP suggests that their online populism is one of control and determinism. "The 'community' established by the BNP in cyberspace is replete with closure: organisationally, dialogically, discursively." (Atton, 2004 p.90) The ideological framework of the BNP not only prevents counter discourses from arising, but multi-voiced discourse amongst sympathisers and supporters is curtailed. On the website of the BNP there is hierarchical control of symbolic resources and it maintains an authoritarian hegemony of ideas. Atton argues that there is little evidence of 'democratised creativity', barely any space for sharing or exploration of ideas and arguments, and no online public sphere is being formed (Atton, 2004, 2006).

Copsey (2003) also analysed the website of the BNP and found that the BNP website in 2002 did not have any discussion forums, all the information was unidirectional and controlled from the centre. Visitors did not have the opportunity to discuss, share information or organise themselves. Again, from this content analysis it can be concluded that no deliberative discussion or online public sphere is visible and following Cammaerts (2007, 2009) it could even be concluded that anti-public spheres had been formed.

Studying these results in the light of the discussion about political talk online, it can be said that these studies confirm the theories about polarisation and fragmentation. However, these studies have been conducted before the emergence of Web 2.0. As shown above, with the appearance of Web 2.0, new platforms have emerged that are seen as having a more open, democratic and bottom-up structure than earlier versions of the Internet. The far right is using Web 2.0 platforms, for instance the BNP makes use of Facebook, Twitter and Bebo and its websites has adopted the structure of a blog (Lilleker and Jackson, 2009). The non-hierarchical and open structure of the Web 2.0 platforms and the presence of user generated content on them seem to conflict with the hierarchical, unidirectional and controlled sphere of extreme right parties. It is therefore necessary to make new observations to see whether the far right parties still create closed communities and anti-

public spheres or that the use of Web 2.0 has resulted in a more open sphere on the far right pages.

4 Methodology

In the previous sections I showed that according to scholars online political talk can result in a democratised Internet, but also in a polarised Internet. Measuring the deliberativeness of the political discussion can give insight in the kind of sphere that is created by these talks: a public sphere or an anti-public sphere. Looking at early research on the online activities of the BNP it is clear that many scholars agree that the far right creates closed communities and anti-public spheres. However, this research is dated and the recent changes making the structure of the Internet more open and non-hierarchical might have influence on the online activities of the far right; they might make it more open and non-hierarchical as well.

In the next section of this dissertation I am going to analyse the discussions on the BNP Facebook page to assess the quality of the deliberation. If the quality is high, these results conflict with the earlier analysis of the online activities of the BNP and point towards a more open, public sphere. If the results of the analysis point towards low quality of deliberation, it confirms the earlier research and points towards the formation of closed communities and anti-public spheres. Before I proceed I want to repeat the main question of this study as stated in the introduction:

Do the discussions on the Web 2.0 platforms used by the extreme right contribute to the formation of an online public sphere? If so, how? If not, why not?

As said, this case study focuses on the online discussion place on the official BNP Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/OfficialBritishNationalParty>. For this case study I had to narrow my question down and I will focus on the use of the official BNP Facebook page, and how the discussions on this page do or do not contribute to the formation of an open community and online public sphere. I do not attempt to provide a general picture of the online activities of the BNP and neither will expect that the results I get will be representative for all extreme right neo-populist parties. As Mazzoleni (2000) argues, all neo-populist parties and their actions are country-specific and studying one does not provide an overview of all the parties. In the context of his research, Atton (2004) argued that merely studying the BNP does not give a full oversight, but “to begin somewhere is enough” (p.71).

4.1 The research design

The official BNP Facebook page will be analysed mainly by looking at the debates on the platforms. Assessing the degree of deliberativeness of the debates will demonstrate whether the discussions contribute to an online public sphere (see chapter 2.3). Next to the assessment of the normative conditions of the process of deliberation I will also assess the

accessibility and the moderation of the forum and the valence of the participants towards the discourse of the BNP.

To perform the main analysis of the debates, I utilise the research design and method as described by Graham (2009). In his study he analyses three online forums and amongst other things he assesses the quality of the debate. This is similar to the aims of this present research and I will use an adapted version of his method. In this version I also insert aspects of other studies, for example Wilhelm (1999) and Stromer-Galley (2007). The analysis will have a normative character and to assess the quality of the debate the normative conditions of the process of deliberation are operationalised into criteria and with these criteria the degree of deliberativeness can be assessed (Graham, 2009).

Graham argues in his study for the use of content analysis with both quantitative and qualitative features and adopts the method as defined by Mayring (2000). According to Mayring (2002), all research involves quantitative and qualitative steps. Mayring's content analysis is a systematic and transparent research method, and brings qualitative content analysis nearer to the methodological standards of quantitative methodology (Scheufele 2008). Mayring points out that he wants to "preserve the advantages of quantitative content analysis for a more qualitative text interpretation" (Mayring, 2000 p.3). He argues that quantitative components such as having specific rules of analysis and having detailed criteria of reliability and validity are the fundament for a qualitative oriented procedure of text interpretation. The qualitative side of Mayring's content analysis concerns inductive category development and deductive category application. Mayring has developed step models for both approaches and when designing his coding scheme, Graham followed Mayring's instructions. Graham offers several reasons for this method to be the most appropriate for his study (2009 p.48) and these reasons also apply to this present research. First, the method offers the ability to study 'naturally occurring discussion in an online setting' in a non-obtrusive way. Next to that, as Wilhelm (1999) stated, you can paint a compelling portrait of the deliberativeness of discussions without having in-depth knowledge of the participants. Third, text analysis offers the ability to analyse (recurrent) communicative and social patterns of participants. Finally, and I think this is one of the most important points, this type of content analysis offers various levels of operationalisation, interpretation and manoeuvring which is suitable given the diverse nature of the normative conditions of deliberation.

4.2 Data collection and sampling

Analysing the discussions, the whole Facebook page is too large to serve as a sample. Therefore, after an initial review of the posting rate and distribution over time, I selected two months: February and March. Not only the posting rate and distribution of these two months was similar to other months, but compared to data closer to date, the chance that people are still active in these discussions is small. The archiving was performed on July 13, 2011

and all the posts on the threads started in the selected months that were available at the moment of archiving were included. The discussions were archived using the ability on Google Chrome to download the webpage to a local hard drive, including the HTML, CSS and images. I also used the tool BetterFacebook (www.betterfacebook.net) to expand the page back to February without difficulty.

This initial sample contained 1012 threads, and a total of 7218 replies on these threads. Later in this dissertation I present a basic analysis of this initial sample, but it is still too large for a detailed analysis. I followed Graham and divided the posts according to topics. I found this method useful because there are certain topics connected to the far right and the distinction between these topics could provide interesting insights. For my final sample I selected two weeks within these two months. Assessing the posting rate and distribution of posts and the salient topics, the first two weeks of February appeared to be representative. During these 14 days (24% of the total time), a fair 22% of the threads was started. As I will elaborate on later, the topics salient during these two weeks are similar to the topics salient in general in February and March. To provide a further normative analysis, 50 random threads were chosen that were representative of the overall range. The sample contained both long and short threads, started by the BNP and by participants and it addressed all the salient topics. In total these 50 threads contain 515 posts, 50 initial posts and 465 comments. A full overview of the selected threads is presented in the appendix (section 9.3).

Before collecting the data, ethical guidelines were considered and in particular whether it was necessary to get permission for the collection and analysis of the data. In this study I followed the guidelines for computer-mediated communication as developed by Herring (2001). According to her, consent is required when researching private computer-mediated-communication, but only if the researcher is interfering with the subject or uses the real identity of the subjects. In this study, the data collected came from a public discussion forum and is available to everyone. The data on the BNP Facebook page is available to anyone with a Facebook account, and anybody can sign up for a Facebook account. Also, Mayring's content analysis offers the possibility to conduct non-obtrusive research, so no interaction with the subjects took place and no personal information of the subjects was required. Names used in this study are not the participants' real identities but pseudonyms created by me.

4.3 The coding scheme

In order to conduct the normative analysis and assess the quality of the debate, the debates have to be described first and specific categories need to be identified in the text. In order to categorise the text a coding scheme was designed. The scheme I use is mainly based on Graham's coding scheme (2009 p. 51-53), but some elements from the scheme developed by Stromer-Galley (2007) have been

Phase 1

Message type

- a) Initial
 - i. Initial argument
 - ii. Initial assertion
 - iii. Link
 - iv. Question
 - v. Announcement

- b) Response

Response type

- a) Reasoned claim

- b) Non-reasoned claim

- c) Non-claim response

- a) Counter
- b) Rebuttal
- c) Refute
- d) Affirmation

- a) Counter
- b) Rebuttal
- c) Refute
- d) Affirmation

- a) Commissive
- b) Expressive
- c) Question
- d) Answer to question
- e) Extension of earlier message

Phase 2

Evidence type

- a) Fact/source
- b) Comparison
- c) Experience
- d) Example
- e) None

Reflexive argument? Does it provide:

- a reasoned claim in the form of an initial or counter argument
- evidence to support that argument
- reasoned responsiveness to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes
- evidence in support of a challenge or defence against one

Phase 3

1. Sender

- a) BNP
- b) participant

2. Intended recipient(s)

- a) BNP
- b) Whole thread
- c) Specific participant(s)

3. Valence (attraction/aversion to BNP discourse)

- a) Attraction
- b) Attraction, but
- c) Aversion
- d) Aversion, but
- e) Unsure/none/equally

4. Topic code

- a) On topic
- b) Off topic, relevant
- c) Off topic, irrelevant

5. Communicative empathy

- Is there an *empathetic exchange*?

6. Discursive equality

- Is this a degrading post?
- Is this post neglected?

7. Discursive freedom

- Does it contain *curbing*?

8. Sincerity

- Does it question someone's *sincerity*?

Figure 1: Schematic overview of the coding categories

adapted. Figure 1 is a schematic overview of the coding categories and as visible in this figure, there are three phases. In the following part I will describe these phases but a more detailed coding book can be found in the appendix.

4.3.1 Phase one

As visible in Figure 1 the first phase is to define what type of message has been posted. Each message has to be coded whether it is an initial or a response. If it is an initial it can be coded as an initial argument, assertion, link, question or announcement. If the initial contains a reasoned claim it is an initial argument. If not, it is one of the four other codes.

When the message is a response, it will be one of following coding categories: reasoned response, non-reasoned response or non-claim response. In the first category set, reasoned claims, four types of different claims can be identified: counter, rebuttal, refute and affirmation. A counter claim can be described as a reasoned claim in which an alternative claim is proposed that does not directly contradict or challenge a competing claim or argument. A rebuttal is a reasoned claim that does directly contradict or challenge a competing claim. A refute is a defensive response to a rebuttal: a reasoned claim that directly defends an initial argument, initial assertion, counter, counter assertion, non-reasoned affirmation or affirmation against a corresponding rebuttal or non-reasoned rebuttal. Finally, a reasoned response that provides direct or indirect support in favour of another participant's claim is coded as an affirmation.

The second category set, non-reasoned claims, is also divided into the same categories as the reasoned claims, counter, rebuttal, refute and affirmation, and follow the same rules as described above. However, as the name indicates, these claims in these posts do not have a foundation of reason.

The third category set, non-claim replies, consists of five coding options: commissive, expressive, question, answer and extension of earlier message. Commissive non-claim replies are messages that either assent, concede or agree-to-disagree. Expressive non-claim replies are messages that show a participant's feeling or attitude. Posts are coded as an extension if it does not provide any new response.

4.3.2 Phase two

Only messages that contain reasoned claims are advanced to the second phase. In this second phase, the argument style is being defined. To do that, first the kind of evidence used is coded. This can either be a fact or a source, a comparison, an example or an experience. Next to these four codes developed by Graham (2009) I also added 'none', to clearly point out when participant make a reasoned claim but do not provide any evidence for their reasons. The second step analysing the reasoned claims is looking at whether the argument is reflexive or not. It is reflexive when it provides a reasoned claim in the form of an initial or counter argument, evidence to support that argument, reasoned

responsiveness to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes and evidence in support of a challenge or defence against one (Graham, 2009).

4.3.3 Phase three

In the last phase a lot of small things about the participants and the messages are coded. First it is categorised who the sender is, BNP or a participant, and who the intended recipients are, the BNP, a specific participant or the whole thread. Subsequently it is decided what the expressed valence of the message is. Valence is the degree of attraction towards or aversion from the BNP discourse. A message can express attraction or partial attraction when the participant writes a post in agreement with the BNP message or shows support for the party. When a participant agrees with the BNP but questions or criticises one aspect, it is coded as 'attraction, but'. A message can express aversion or partial aversion when the post contains opposing ideas. A post is only partially opposing when a participant mostly criticises the BNP but also shows some form of agreement. Next the messages are coded as on or off the topic of the initial seed and whether the topic change is relevant or irrelevant.

In the last part of phase three all messages of the selected threads are coded for communicative empathy, discursive equality, discursive freedom and sincerity. Messages are coded as containing an empathetic exchange when it suggests that the author had cognitively or emotionally imagined him- or herself in another participant's position. The coding for discursive equality is divided into degrading and neglected. When a message degraded another participant or his or her argument, statement or opinion, it is coded as degrading. A message is coded as neglected when it lacked reciprocal exchange. Third, the category discursive freedom consists of curbing, defined by Graham as "[...] messages that attempted to suppress, restrict, or prevent another participant's argument or opinion'. In my sample there is a lot of intimidating language and since that can also influence the discursive freedom of participants I also code that as an act of curbing. Messages that questioned the sincerity of another participant are coded as 'questionable sincerity'.

4.3.4 Validity and reliability of the coding scheme

Since this coding scheme was mainly based on Graham (2009) and Stromer-Galley (2007), and they both have closely processed the validity and reliability of their schemes, I have confidence in the validity of this scheme as well. However, before starting the full analysis, the coding scheme has been checked for inter-coder reliability, following Neuendorf (2002). Only one of the codes had a percentage of agreement lower than 80%, the rest of the variables had a higher percentage. All of the results of the inter-coder reliability test have been taken into consideration and the coding scheme has been improved using the results. The test was especially useful for feedback on the explanation of the coding scheme and adjustments to clarify the scheme and the codebook have been made after the test.

4.4 Indicators of deliberation

The coding scheme developed above presents several different elements of a debate. As Graham wrote: "The question now is how does one determine whether a discussion forum satisfies the normative conditions of deliberation?" (2009 p.53). Graham does this by offering an operationalisation of the normative conditions and in the next session I will follow this example. In chapter 2.3 I specified the normative conditions of deliberation. In this current chapter these conditions will be operationalised into empirical indicators needed for assessing the debates. Operationalising the conditions I will use work by Graham (2009) and Stromer-Galley (2007).

As described earlier, the indicators of deliberation can be divided into two different categories: the process of achieving mutual understanding and structural and dispositional fairness (Graham 2009).

4.4.1 The process of achieving mutual understanding

The first condition, *rational-critical debate*, is operationalised as following. First it is assessed whether the participant makes reasoned claims and then the level of rationality is assessed by calculating the number of reasoned claims in relation to the total number of claims. Second, critical reflection is measured through determining the level of disagreement. As Graham (2009) argues, disagreement is not always accompanied by reflection. Therefore, in this case only the reasoned disagreements (refutes and rebuttals) are calculated. The level of *coherence* addresses whether the participants stick to the topic of discussion. The level of coherence is determined by assessing the number of topic changes and the relevance of these changes: many irrelevant changes may point towards a lower level of coherence. The third condition, *continuity*, is operationalised through the measurements of the level of extended debate and convergence. The number of strong-string claims, a minimum of three argument interactions, ideally critical, in relation to the total number of claims will show the level of extended debate. To see whether these debates end in convergence the number of commissive speech acts is calculated. *Reciprocity* is measured through the reply-percentage indicator: the percentage of postings coded as a reply. It has to be noted that Graham (2009) sees this method as incomplete and also measures the degree of centralisation. However, this method is too extended for the present study. As the coding scheme shows, arguments are coded as *reflexive* if they provided: "(a) a reasoned claim in the form of an initial or counter argument; (b) evidence to support that argument; (c) reasoned responsiveness to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and evidence in support of a challenge or defense against one" (Graham, 2009 p.53). The degree of reflexivity is measured by calculating the amount of reflexive arguments in relation to the amount of arguments in total. The level of *empathy* is assessed by calculating the number of empathetic exchanges in relation to the total postings.

4.4.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

Measuring the conditions for the creation of a fair communicative environment, first *discursive equality* is measured. Where Stromer-Galley (2007) counts the frequency of participation and the volume of the message, Graham (2009) measures this condition by assessing the number of participants along with their share of postings, and he also looks at substantial equality. Substantial equality measures whether participants have respect for each other and the codes 'degrading' and 'neglected' are calculated to give insight in this condition. To measure *discursive freedom*, Graham suggests calculating those instances that a participant prevents another participant from speaking his or her opinion or argument. These instances are called acts of curbing. The level of *sincerity* is measured by identifying the cases someone's sincerity is questioned by another participant.

4.5 Additional measurements

As mentioned before, in addition to the assessment of the deliberativeness of the debates, further measurements are taken to find more information about the openness of the BNP Facebook page. A descriptive analysis of the accessibility and the moderation will be conducted and the valence of the participants towards the discourse of the BNP will be determined.

5 Political talk on the BNP Facebook page

In this section I will provide insight into the quality of the debates on the BNP Facebook page. First, the deliberativeness of the page will be assessed through the evaluation of the normative conditions of the deliberation process. Second, I will research three extra measurements that will give more insight into the openness of the page: accessibility, moderation and valence.

The discussions on the BNP Facebook page took place on the 'wall': the most forum-like part of Facebook. Next to the wall the BNP Facebook page has some other general features; a screen shot of the page is visible in Figure 2. If you are familiar with Facebook, you can see that this page is similar to most pages for companies, organisations and political parties: at the top there is the organisation's name, on the left the profile picture. Next to the organisations' name there is the 'like button': people who like the organisation can click that button and will automatically be kept up-to-date with the messages the organisation posts. Also, in order to comment on any of the messages, people have to click the like-button and when the like-button is clicked, a notification is placed on the clickers' Facebook page and is visible for the clickers' connections. I will go into these aspects later. For an initial analysis the postings in February and March 2011 (1012 threads and 7218 comments) were divided into topics. It was visible that the topics differed from week to week, but there were some general topics that were salient the whole period.

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Edward Grant The perpetrator was a Christian fundamentalist, the same thing as an Islamic fundamentalist, we are a proud Christian country and ancient culture thousands of years older than Islamic culture, which is a cult not a religion, take us out of the EU now close our borders and take our ancient culture and Christian

Figure 2: Screenshot of the BNP Facebook page on 23 July, 2011

These topics can be divided into two categories: 'BNP related issues' and 'society related issues'. In the first category the most salient topics were the BNP image, BNP policies and BNP promotion. In the second category, prominent topics were immigration, Islam, crime and terrorism, war and (dissatisfaction towards) the government and other British political parties. It sometimes appeared that threads fit in multiple categories and in those instances I followed the most prominent topic.

For a more detailed analysis I had to limit down the sample to two representative weeks: the first two weeks of February. In Figure 3 an overview of the initial posts with the salient topics is offered. These salient topics cover 61% of the total posts those two weeks. Of these initial posts with prominent topics, 38% were posted by the BNP and 62% by participants. Most of the threads following the initial posts did not contain many posts: only on 16% of the threads there were over 16 comments. Out of these threads, I selected 50 threads for the final analysis (see chapter 4.2).

Topic	Frequency	Percent
BNP image	15	11.0
BNP Policy	11	8.1
BNP Promotion	38	27.9
(dissatisfaction towards) government and other UK Political Parties	26	19.1
Immigration	12	8.8
Islam	12	8.8
Crime and Terrorism	11	8.1
War	11	8.1
Total	136	100.0

Figure 3: Salient topics of the discussions on the BNP Facebook wall 1-14 February

5.1 The normative analysis

In this section I analyse to what extent the normative conditions of the process of deliberation of the public sphere are satisfied by the communicative practices of the discussions on the BNP Facebook page.

5.1.1 Achieving mutual understanding

Rationality and critical reflection

Rationality and critical reflection are essential in the process of achieving mutual understanding. Assessing rationality, in the discussions on the Facebook page non-reasoned claims are preferred over reasoned claims. As Figure 4 shows, out of 515

postings written over 50 threads, there were in total 296 claims. 125 of these claims were reasoned, which is 27% of all postings and 47% of the claims. Another 157 claims were non-reasoned, which is 30% of all postings and 53% of the claims. These results suggest that the guiding communicative form was the exchange of claims, approximately 57% of all the postings. An example of an exchange of claims was on a discussion about the policies of the BNP. The participant (in this example called John) wants the BNP to take a more secretive approach.

BNP: *We need to be more in your face if anything.* (2/2/2011 at 12:01)

John: *but surely they [the BNP policies] will scare off supporters. The bnp is thought of as a racist party, which I disagree with and that's why we don't get votes from the society, unlike UKIP who aren't so blatant. Maybe "hiding" a few policies may lead to parliament ?* (2/2/2011 at 12:16)

John claims that 'hiding' a few BNP policies might lead to more votes. The reason he gives for this claim is that the BNP policies scare off supporters and gives people the impression the BNP is a racist party. As evidence he makes a comparison between UKIP and the BNP. Discussions that included claims with reasoning were mostly common between people who showed attraction towards the BNP discourse. I will discuss these kinds of discussions later.

	Claim type													Total
	Reasoned claims						Non-reasoned claims							
	Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total	Initial	Counter	Rebuttal	Refute	Affirmation	Total		
Frequency														
in #	14	41	15	20	49	139	12	62	8	12	63	157	296	
% of claims^a	5	14	5	7	17	47	4	21	3	4	21	53	101	
% of posts^b	3	8	3	4	10	27	2	12	2	2	12	30	57	

Figure 4: Claim types of the postings in the selected threads

Note. The total percentages do not all add up to 100 because of rounding.

^an=270 claims

^bn=515 postings

However, providing reasoned arguments for these claims was not the norm: only 47% of the claims provided a reasoned argument. A claim without an argument looked more like the following argument in which a participant comments on a thread about 'home-grown terrorists':

Peter: *Deport them and their immediate families* (4/2/2011 at 17:29)

Peter claims that 'they', the 'home-grown terrorists', and their families should be deported. He does not provide a reason for this claim, just like 53% of the other postings.

Looking at the critical aspect of the debates, I will assess the level of rebuttal and refute arguments. Out of all the claims only 19% provided some sort of disagreement (rebuttal and refute) and 38% provided affirmative arguments. However, it is more important to assess the rebuttal and refute arguments in relation to the total number of reasoned claims. On the following thread an exchange of reasoned rebuttals and refutes took place. Ben started the thread and the BNP replied with a rebuttal. Ben defended his argument and subsequently another participant replied with a non reasoned defence for the argument of the BNP:

Ben: i will say 1 thing, nick griffin realy needs tp te[down wiv immediate effect to be replaced, preferably a woman leader, wic no baggage. this will attract voted for a NEW reformed BNP! no disrespect to nick but he has history bk to start of the national front..its why we get bad name for ourselves...i hope this msg wil get across to nick, coz by the time he does step down its gna be to late. (9/2/2011 at 16:46)

BNP: There was a leadership challenge recently with Nick overwhelming being backed to remain as Charman.(9/2/2011 at 16:49)

Ben: to my believe and instinct also comment frm friends and family that nick to step down, its the only way BNP will get power, especialy a women leader. nick has to much history (9/2/2011 at 20:08)

Ryan: I think nick is an extremly good leader for our party (9/2/2011 at 23:50)

The rebuttal and refutes represent only 25% of the reasoned claims and affirmative claims make 35% of the reasoned claims. In the following comment Chris replies to another participant and provides an affirmative claim for what she said:

Chris: true caroline, the "petro-dollar recycle" is the reason we appeal to islam and muslims so much. collapse that and bingo we have our country back. (8/2/2011 at 16:00)

Overall the exchange of claims was the guiding communicative form, but providing reasoned claims was not the norm. Participants provided more affirmative claims and agreed more with each other and the level of critical reflection appeared to be low.

Coherence

Coherence is an essential part of achieving mutual understanding: participants should stick to the topic of discussion. Assessing the number of topic changes and the relevance of these changes, the level of coherence can be determined. Out of the 50 threads there are 12 threads which contain two or less posts, including the initial post, and can therefore not be measured for coherence. The 38 remaining threads contained nine threads in which participants remained faithful to the topic of discussion. In the other 29 threads there were one or several topic changes, and in 17 of these threads comments irrelevant to the

discussion were posted. Often, these posts were neglected but in five threads the irrelevant off-topic discussion contained nine or more posts. An example of this off topic discussion can be found in a thread started on the 6th of February 2011 about 'Chameleon Cameron's Pronouncements on Islam'. Instead of discussing David Cameron and/or Islam, participants discussed their desire for withdrawal from the European Union and later Jews and Palestine.

In sum it can be said that the participants were coherent but there was a tendency to move away from the original topic. In 45% of the threads (excluding the very short threads), participants moved away from the discussion and made irrelevant off-topic comments, 55% of the threads were coherent, sometimes with relevant off-topic comments.

Continuity

The third condition, continuity, required that some form of agreement is achieved before participants abandon debates. The level of continuity is assessed through measuring the level of extended debate and convergence. In total there were eight instances of three or more argument interactions, called 'strong-strings'. Of these strong-strings, five were fully reasoned, two were half reasoned and one did not contain any reasoned claims. The average number of postings in a strong-string was four. One of the reasoned strong-strings was part of an irrelevant topic change. There possibly were two other strong-strings, but posts out of these discussions were deleted. I will talk about the issue of moderation and deleting posts later. Another indicator of continuity is convergence: the amount of commissive speech acts. From the 515 posts, there were 23 commissive speech acts, 4.5% of the total postings. Only one of these commissive speech acts was an outcome of strong-string exchanges.

In short, there was barely any extended debate and the level of convergence after these extended debates was also very low: only one extended debate ended in some form of convergence. All in all the level of continuity on the BNP Facebook wall is almost nil.

Reciprocity

Another normative condition of the process achieving mutual understanding is reciprocity. In total, 206 posts, 40% of the total, can be counted as a reply. I excluded 'reply to self' here, because that indicates an extension of an earlier message and does not have anything to do with reciprocity. Looking at the threads individually, 13 out of 50, 26%, had a reply percentage indicator of $\geq 75\%$. Another 10, 20%, had a reply percentage indicator of $\geq 50\%$ but $< 75\%$. The remaining 54% of the posts contained a percentage of replies $< 50\%$.

Assessing the source of the replies, relative to the total amount of posts by the two different groups (BNP and participants), 47% of the BNP posts are replies and 39% of the posts by participants are replies. Some of the replies from the BNP were in the form of an

answer. Out of the 515 posts there were 23 questions, of which 11 towards the BNP. These questions were often about BNP policies or membership. The BNP has answered most of these questions and in some cases the questions were answered by other participants.

Dave: *Where does the British National Party stand Av / Alternative Vote* (3/2/2011 at 12:53)

BNP: *Here you go Dave: <http://bnp.org.uk/why-bnp-will-urge-“no”-vote-av-referendum>* (3/2/3011 at 12:55)

Of the 39% of replies by participants, 25% are replies to the BNP and 48% replies to specific participants. There are also replies to missing posts, post that have been deleted by the moderator or the sender, and by the context of the post it can either be a missing post from the BNP or from a participant. 26% of the posts by participants are a reply to a missing post.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the level of interaction between participants and from participants towards the BNP is moderately low. More than half of the posts are meant for the whole thread and not for one or more participants in particular. This also counts for posts written by the BNP, but the BNP does reply relatively more to specific participants than participants themselves.

		intended recipient					Total
		BNP	whole thread	specific participant(s)	reply to missing post	reply to self	
sender BNP	#	0	50	31	13	0	94
	%	0	53	33	14	0	100
participant	#	41	253	79	42	6	421
	%	10	60	19	10	1	100
Total	#	41	303	110	55	6	515
	%	8	59	21	11	1	100

Figure 5: The intended recipients in the selected threads

Reflexivity

In a discussion participants should reflect other participants' arguments against their own. As the coding scheme (figure 1) shows, an important part of reflexivity is providing evidence. Four types of evidence were identified in the 125 reasoned claim responses: facts (10%), comparisons (31%), experiences (13%) and examples (34%). On 16 of the reasoned claims no evidence was provided (13%). Both comparisons and examples were the most frequent and facts were least preferred. Even though participants of the discussions on the BNP Facebook wall made more assertions than reasoned claims (see Figure 4), the reasoned claims they did make were often provided with evidence. However,

frequently the reasoned affirmative and counter claims were provided with evidence and not the reasoned rebuttal and refute arguments.

The second step in assessing the level of reflexivity is analysing whether arguments provide: "(a) a reasoned claim in the form of an initial or counter argument; (b) evidence to support that argument; (c) reasoned responsiveness to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and evidence in support of a challenge or defense against one" (Graham, 2009 p.53).

Of all the 125 reasoned claims, only one was coded as a reflexive argument, and only one participant was responsible for this reflexivity. This participant also disagreed with the discourse of the BNP. So even though the level of providing evidence was high, the level of reflexivity remained extremely low, and among BNP supporters on the Facebook page there was no reflexivity at all.

Empathy

The last condition of the process of achieving mutual understanding is empathy. This condition requires that participants imagine themselves in another participant's position, cognitively or emotionally. On the BNP Facebook wall there were 11 empathetic exchanges which is only 2% of the total postings and 55% of these empathetic exchanges were posted in combination with an affirmative argument. Not many of the participants had imagined him/herself in another participant's position, cognitively or emotionally but if it happened, most of the time it was because they already agreed with each other and were in a similar position.

Overall it can be said that the conditions for achieving mutual understanding through debate were not satisfied. The debates were mostly coherent, but the level of rational-critical debate was low, there was no continuity and the debate lacked empathetic exchanges and the exchanges that were there were in combination with affirmative arguments. Even though participants did provide evidence, the condition of reflexivity remained unsatisfied. The participants do not send many replies, but the level of reciprocity is relatively higher for posts coming from the BNP.

5.1.2 Structural and dispositional fairness

Discursive equality

The first condition of structural and dispositional fairness is discursive equality. Analysing this condition first the equal distribution of voice is measured. The 515 posts came from 210 writers, one of which was the BNP with 94 posts. The remaining 421 posts were distributed over 209 participants. Most of them, 73% just posted once and 18% posted twice. The remaining 9%, 18 participants, posted more than three times and five of them posted even

more than ten times. In total, the five most frequent posters were responsible for 80 posts, 16% of the total posts. In total, the 18 participants who posted the most were responsible for more than 45% of the posts. Overall there were a substantial number of one-timers, and often discussions seemed dominated by the same group of frequent posters.

However, discursive equality is not only defined by the equal distribution of voice; it is also important that participants have respect for each other. There were 11 posts that contained degrading comments and 69 posts were neglected. Together these 80 posts make up 16% of the total postings.

In sum, the discussions on the BNP Facebook page seemed substantially equal, but almost half of the posts come from the most frequent posters. Therefore, the level of discursive equality seems moderately low.

Discursive freedom

Discursive freedom, whether participants are able to speak their opinion or argument, is calculated by measuring acts of curbing: those instances that a participant prevents (an)other participant(s) from voicing their opinion. In the discussions analysed there were 25 acts of curbing, 5% of the total posts. These acts of curbing were often not directed to a specific participant, but often towards the constitutive 'Other' – in this case mostly Muslims, ethnic minorities and the politically opposed. Many of the acts of curbing were in the form of using intimidating language. Altogether the act of curbing was rare, but when it did occur it was not against the present participants, but often as an act of Othering. This Othering did not always take place in the shape of curbing, but also more general comments did not seem welcoming towards their constitutive Other(s). Comments such as the following show this unwelcoming atmosphere. On a thread about 'Muslim Supremacy Schools', a participant commented by saying the following about the Muslims in Britain:

Shane: *Solution. Get them all out. PROBLEM SOLVED EASY.* (13/2/2011 at 15:49)

Another example of the limitation of discursive freedom is on a thread about the 'Bring Our Boys Home Petition':

Adam: *i spent 8 yrs in the british army, severd in Kosovo, n.i, and Iraq. and a wish a didn't bother now the state this country (not our country) is in. a feel its to late for the british now. we are betting outbred and outnumbered. i am really proud of this country and its history. its second to none. but the free ride illegal immigrants get makes me sick! how many other countries would give immigrants 3 bedroom houses, pay all there bills, and give them money for nothing? none!* (6/2/2011 at 01:53)

Sincerity

The last condition, sincerity, is measured by identifying the cases when participant(s) question(s) another participant's sincerity. In the threads I analysed sincerity was not questioned and the level of perceived sincerity was therefore high.

In sum it can be said that there is at least some structural and dispositional fairness. The condition of perceived sincerity was satisfied and mostly the debates are discursively free. However, even though the participants show respect for most of the other participants already on the forum, they do not seem welcoming towards their constitutive Other(s) and the distribution of voice is not equal: a group of frequent posters is responsible for almost half of the posts.

5.2 Additional measures

As aforementioned, in addition to the assessment of the deliberativeness of the debates, I also researched the accessibility possibilities of the Facebook wall and moderation of the discussions. Next to that I analysed the degree of valence, especially in perspective with the degree of counters and rebuttals. The reason for these additional measures is, as argued earlier, to get more information of the general openness of the Facebook page.

5.2.1 Accessibility

The BNP Facebook page is visible to anybody with a Facebook account; in the UK there are almost 30 million Facebook users at the end of July 2011, which is a penetration rate of 47.7% (Gonzalez, 2011; Internetworldstats.com, 2011). For people with an Internet connection it is free and fairly easy to get an account and in the UK there are 51 million users, which is 82% of the total population (Internetworldstats.com, 2011).

However, even though the BNP Facebook page is very accessible, the wall, the actual forum-like platform of the page, is not. The BNP has divided its Facebook wall into two sections: posts from the BNP and posts from participants. The posts from the BNP and the comments on these posts are always visible, but the other section of the wall is only visible when there is a BNP moderator online. The BNP is not very clear about these limitations and has only announced this in comments on several questions. The following message is an example of such an announcement: "The wall is closed when there's no one around to monitor it" as a reply on a question on the thread 'National Weekends of Action' (25/2/2011 at 20:36). There are no standard 'opening times' stated on the site and although Facebook provides the option to close the wall on pages, but this feature is not often used. It seems to confuse the participants on the BNP page, they ask several questions about it.

Another limitation is that in order to comment on the site, people have to click the 'like-button'. This button is a common feature of Facebook and by clicking the button the page

will be added on to the list of things you like. This list is published on your profile, visible to all your Facebook connections. People might restrain from clicking this button, and thus restrain from taking part in the debate, because they do not like the BNP or do not want to share their political preference with their Facebook connections. After clicking this button you can comment on posts from the BNP, but you cannot write any messages on the Facebook wall yourself, see or comment on messages from other participants unless the wall is opened by a moderator.

5.2.2 Moderation

As described above, there is a moderator active on the BNP Facebook page. From the context it is often clear that there are posts missing because other participants are responding to the posts or because the discussion is obviously incomplete. In the 50 threads, 515 posts, 55 posts were coded as written towards a missing post. Messages can be deleted by the sender himself, but from the context it can often be concluded that it is the BNP moderator who has deleted the posts.

The moderator does not only monitor and delete the posts, but is also the representative of the BNP and in that role he responds to posts, answers questions and warns people about their posts. The moderator does not control the topic of discussion and does not warn people if they are off-topic, but he does warn people if he thinks posts are unacceptable, for example on 6 February 2011 on the on thread 'Bring our Boys Home Petition':

*BNP: Kim, your posts are being removed because your language is revolting.
(6/2/2011 at 01:53)*

and later:

BNP: Last warning Kim, one more post with swearing in it and you will be banned from the page. You are on an official British National Party page, please act accordingly. (6/2/2011 at 02:09)

Sometimes the moderator does not discuss it with the participant but just announces: "Shezad has been banned and his posts deleted" (6/2/2011 at 01:51). However, as aforementioned, often it is not announced that posts have been or are being deleted. Even though the BNP moderator sometimes deletes posts by participants that show some kind of support for the BNP, from the context it can be concluded that most of the missing posts were posts conflicting with the BNP ideology. Although this biased moderation is obvious, it is difficult to prove since it is not announced that these posts are deleted by the BNP moderator.

5.2.3 Valence

The sample of threads was also measured for valence: the degree of attraction towards/aversion from the BNP community and its discourse. Based on the content of the posts, 92% of the posts expressed attraction. Of all the posts 84% seemed to fully agree

with the discourse and 8% seemed to agree but with some minor objections. There were only eight posts, 2% who clearly showed aversion from the BNP community and its discourse and the remaining 6% did not express any attraction or aversion. This image might be slightly distorted because of the moderation.

Assessing figure 6 it is visible that next to the affirmative arguments, also in the counter, rebuttal and refute arguments attraction towards the BNP is expressed. This shows that in most of the debates people agree with each other and that the rebuttals and refutes that are expressed, merely come from within the community.

			Valence (attraction towards/aversion from the BNP discourse)					Total
			Attraction	Attraction, but	Aversion	Aversion, but	Unsure/none/equally	
Response type (both reasoned and non-reasoned)	Counter	#	86	11	3	0	3	103
		%	84	11	3	0	3	101*
	Rebuttal	#	15	5	0	1	2	23
		%	65	22	0	4	9	100
	Refute	#	23	7	0	0	2	32
		%	72	22	0	0	6	100
	Affirmation	#	108	3	0	0	1	112
		%	96	3	0	0	1	100
	Total	#	232	26	3	1	8	270
		%	86	10	1	0	3	100

Figure 6: The degree of valence in combinations with response type in the selected threads

* This total percentage does not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Concluding this final descriptive analysis it can be even though the medium is open, the accessibility of the debate remains limited. The wall is highly moderated and looking at valence it is clear that most of the participants agree with the messages of the BNP and that discussion mostly is within the community.

6 Discussion

This study was designed to examine the discussions on a Web 2.0 platform and analyse whether it contributed to the formation of an online public sphere. The analysis of the BNP Facebook page indicates that the quality of the deliberation was very low. This rather

gloomy picture was even further established by the observation of the poor accessibility, the biased moderation and the unbalanced audience.

Evaluating these findings, first a comparison will be made with other research on online deliberation. The discussions I analysed were not a result of invited participation in an online deliberation experiment, but occurred naturally online. It is as Davies (2009, p. 11) describes: "online dialogue in the wild." It can therefore be compared with other studies of online dialogue in the wild, for instance the one done by Graham (2009). Since this studies' coding scheme was mainly based on Grahams' coding scheme, a good evaluation can be made. Graham analysed three different online discussion spaces: discussion forums of the newspaper the Guardian and of the television programs Big Brother and Wife Swap. On the Big Brother fan forum, the levels of coherence, reciprocity, discursive freedom, substantial equality and perceived sincerity were moderately high to high, but the level of rationality, critical reflection and extended debate were moderate. The level of convergence was low. Graham found similar results on the Guardian forum, but the levels of critical reflection and rationality were higher. Also the level of extended debate was high but similar to the Big Brother forum, convergence was low. Compared to these two forums, the Wife Swap forum offered a higher quality of debate. Especially the level of convergence was moderately high, which was a remarkable finding in contrast to the other forums: "almost all lines of discussion ended in some form of agreement" (Graham, 2009 p. 149). Compared to all of these forums, the discussions on the BNP Facebook page seemed incredibly poor. Even though the discussions on the Big Brother forum were of much higher quality, looking at the amounts of reasoned and non-reasoned arguments, the BNP Facebook page seems to get closest to that forum. However, Graham described the environment as "civil, friendly and welcoming" (p. 148) and this is completely different from the BNP Facebook page. As shown, despite mutual respect between participants, the general environment was not welcoming to their constitutive Other. Although the study by Graham (2009) shows a higher degree of deliberativeness than this study found, the general observation of deliberation in the wild is that citizens "tend not to produce high-quality discussions" (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011 p. 180) and the findings of this study are somewhat in line with that observation: the deliberation on the BNP Facebook page produced low-quality discussions.

The discussions on the BNP Facebook page did not occur completely naturally. The talks are encouraged by the BNP and the party does engage with (biased) moderation. Compared to the organised discussions Stromer-Galley (2007) studied, the discussions analysed by her were a lot more deliberative. In contrast to my findings, Stromer-Galley noted a fairly high volume of reasoned opinion and a moderate amount of expressions of disagreement. In general discussions that are moderated seem to produce a higher quality of deliberation (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011). Compared to the discussion studies by Stromer-Galley (2007) the discussions on the BNP Facebook page show a low volume of reasoned opinion and expressions of disagreement. Stromer-Galley did not research the

degree of disagreement, but did observe that participants were hearing 'divergent perspectives' (2007 p.18). As figure 6 shows, this was definitely not the case on the BNP Facebook page. Also, as mentioned before, the moderation in organised deliberation is most likely not to be biased, and although the BNP sometimes censures its supporters as well, biased moderation was common.

Explanations for the low quality of the discussions on the BNP Facebook page can be found in the theory of a polarised Internet (Sunstein, 2001). This theory argues that Internet users are unlikely to be exposed to opinions and information opposing their own views, because the Internet promotes discussions and information seeking mainly within like-minded communities. The results of this study confirm this theory: on the BNP Facebook page there was a homogeneous message, the participants were mainly attracted to the BNP discourse and there was a high level of opinion reinforcement in the form of affirmative claims. Also a counter discourse was prevented from developing: almost 40% of the posts opposing the views of the BNP were neglected, in contrast to a neglected 12% that showed attraction to the BNP discourse. Sunstein argues that polarisation tends to be significantly greater when group identity is emphasised (2009 p. 43) and group identity is definitely visible on the BNP Facebook page: it is a community around a political party and many participants show support for the party. Sunstein states that fragmentation and polarisation have their worst effects on people who already have extremist views. It is easy to find online support for judgements that are held by only a bizarre, confused or hateful few (Ibid p.81). This might also explain the polarisation on the BNP Facebook page, as the BNP is categorised as an extreme right political party.

The low quality of the deliberation on the BNP Facebook page is also in line with the findings of the studies on the early online activities of the BNP done by Atton (2004) and Copsey (2003). The BNP community is closed and there is little counter discourse present. Almost all participants express attraction towards the BNP discourse (see figure 6) and as pointed out above, they close off others' abilities to speak. The findings confirm the theories of Couldry (2002a) and Cammaerts (2007). Couldry theorises that the extreme right create 'closed communities' and Cammaerts argues that 'neo-fascist' parties create 'anti-public spheres'. These theories do not point towards the Internet as a cause for the closed communities and anti-public spaces, but mainly towards the ideology of the far right. Especially the racist, anti-democratic and xenophobic features of the far right ideology contribute to the limited deliberation. What also had influence on the discussions was the constitution of the 'Other' in the discourse and the limited amount topics the far right is concerned with (see figure 3). As shown, it is visible that these features, the Othering present on the BNP Facebook page and the ideology of the BNP prevent a counter-discourse from occurring.

One last explanation of the low quality of the deliberation can also be sought in more technical aspects. As Wright and Street (2007) write, well-designed software that promotes

reciprocity and contemplation has produced better results than natural devices. They studied a special designed forum, Futurum, in comparison to a normal forum, Usenet, and found that the way that discussion spaces are designed matters greatly to the content. Facebook is in the first place a social network and even though it is designed to communicate, there are signs that it might not be great for deliberation. One of these signs is the accessibility: you have to 'like' the page before you can comment and it is not probable that people are going to click the like button if do they not actually like the page. In this way counter discourses are already prevented from appearing, which makes the degree of deliberation lower. This aspect can also be seen in another light: when you press the like-button, a notification of this is placed on your own Facebook page and is visible to your connections. This might stop some people from pressing that like-button even if they do like the BNP, because they do not want to share their political preferences with their Facebook connections. In order to understand the association between low quality and Facebook, more (comparative) research on Facebook and other platforms needs to be undertaken.

As shown, the findings of the present studies are in line with earlier research on the online activities of the BNP and can mostly be explained by the abovementioned theories. However, it must be pointed out that there are some developments at odds with these findings and theories. Both Atton (2004) and Copsey (2003) pointed in their early observations at the absence of a space for sharing or exploring ideas and arguments. Already the mere presence of an online discussion space in the form of the BNP Facebook page is a change in contrast with these previous findings. Next to this, it is visible that there are also other developments that conflict with the previous findings. Although it is clear that the results of this study do not support the theories positive about the potential of the web, assessing specific aspects of Web 2.0 does offer some interesting insights. As explained in section 2.1, O'Reilly (2005) described that Web 2.0 promotes a non-hierarchical bottom-up structure that is more open and democratic than earlier versions of the Internet. The findings of my analysis echo these Web 2.0 features to some extent. Compared to previous research on the BNP online, the BNP Facebook page is more open, less hierarchical and to a minimal degree even more democratic.

The 'openness' is demonstrated by the presence of a multi-voiced discourse *within* the BNP community. Analysis of the previous activities of the BNP online showed that the BNP prevented a multi-voiced discourse from occurring, even within the BNP community (Atton, 2004; Copsey, 2003). Examining the BNP Facebook page, it is visible that there is a *more* multi-voiced discourse, even if this is only *between* participants showing attraction towards the BNP discourse. As figure 6 shows, disagreements in the form of rebuttals and refutes were not uncommon within the BNP community. The non-hierarchical and possibly even more democratic structure is demonstrated by the availability and importance of user-generated content (the posts of the participants) and that the BNP representative engages

with the participants. There were questions and discussions about BNP policy and the moderator replied to these threads.

However, these findings should not be exaggerated. Even though it shows that the activities of the BNP community have developed somewhat in line with the general changes of the web, the total of affirmative claims and with that the number of opinion reinforcements is still much larger than the amounts of disagreements on the BNP Facebook page. And although user-generated content is central, the participants mostly express attraction towards the BNP discourse and the discussions were controlled by the (biased) BNP moderator.

7 Conclusion

This dissertation has investigated whether the discussions on the Web 2.0 platforms used by the extreme right contribute to the formation of an online public sphere. Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that, in the case of the BNP Facebook Page, the discussions do not contribute to the formation of a public sphere. The quality of deliberation on this page was appallingly low: the conditions of the process of achieving mutual understanding were unfulfilled and there was only little structural and dispositional fairness. In order to fully answer my question and understand why the quality was so poor, I examined possible explanations.

One of these explanations can be found in theories of the civic potential of the web. It is clear that the findings contradict with the theories positive about the civic potential of the web; this study confirms the theory of polarisation. The deliberation on the BNP page is of low quality, partly because there are mainly like-minded people and as Sunstein (2001, 2009) argues that this is because the Internet promotes polarisation. This is especially great for extreme groups and when the group identity is emphasised (Sunstein, 2009). Another explanation can be found in theories about the ideology of the far right. Mainly the racist, anti-democratic and xenophobic features of their ideology, combined with Othering contribute the formation of closed communities (Couldry, 2002a) and anti-public spheres (Cammaerts, 2007). These features were visible on the BNP Facebook page and can be seen as a reason for the limited quality of the deliberation. A final explanation of the low quality can be found in the technical aspects. Facebook is not especially designed for deliberation and as Wright and Street (2007) found, well designed software that promoted reciprocity and contemplation has produced better results than natural devices.

The findings of this study are remarkable, because they are far more depressing than prior studies on deliberation. Studies on naturally occurring discussions on normal platforms generally show a lower quality than organised projects of deliberation, but in comparison the debates on the BNP Facebook page are exceptionally low. The participants on the BNP Facebook page mostly discuss without a foundation of reason and reinforce each others' opinion. The results of this study are also significant because they can be compared to the

previous research on the BNP online. Even though the platform of the activities is different, for the greatest part the results are still in line with previous research on the BNP online. On the platform 'closed communities' (Couldry, 2002b) and 'anti-public spheres' (Cammaerts, 2007) are still created. However, assessing the characteristics of Web 2.0, it is clear that there have been some developments. Compared to the previous observations, the BNP Facebook page is more open, less hierarchical and to a minimal extent even more democratic. There is a more multi-voiced discourse *within* the BNP community, more interactivity between the BNP and the participants and user-generated content plays a bigger role than before. Nevertheless, these findings should not be exaggerated: opinion reinforcement is still more common than disagreements and the user-generated content is moderated.

To further investigate this study's findings, it would be interesting to research whether the poor quality of the BNP Facebook page is representative for all the online activities of the BNP. The BNP is also active on other Web 2.0 platforms such as Twitter, and its website has a blog-like lay-out with a comments section. It would be interesting to analyse the debates that take place on these platforms in a similar way these Facebook posts have been analysed. Also, to confirm the findings of this study, more research has to be done on Facebook as a platform for deliberation and the influence of the characteristics of Web 2.0 on the online activities of the extreme right. In addition to measuring the quality of deliberation, a critical reading of the Facebook postings can expand the findings of this study. It can give insight in for instance the rationale of the participants and might provide more reasons for not only the behaviour of the far right, but also for the development of online discussions. Furthermore it would be interesting to research discussions on platforms of other extreme right parties, in the United Kingdom as well as in other countries. There are many country-specific aspects to the extreme right (Mazzoleni et al, 2003) and therefore a focus on different countries is recommended. Next to this it would be interesting to also compare this research with a study focused on an online discussion space of a mainstream political party. Such a comparison can provide more insight on whether the research is only representative for extreme parties or whether the discussions on discussion spaces of mainstream parties are not deliberative either. Besides these recommendations for further research, I follow Stromer-Galley and Wichowski (2011) and stress that more research is needed in online deliberation in general and "to systematically and carefully identify what elements seem to provide the greatest benefits for quality online discussion" (p.180).

Altogether it can be said that the discussions the participants have on the BNP Facebook page is of poor quality. Even though there are some developments visible that are somewhat in line with the general transformations of the web, there is no counter discourse available and most of the participants do no more than provide and receive affirmation for their polemic arguments. This gloomy image becomes even more pressing when one realises that polarisation and homogeneity is especially dangerous amongst extremists and

that through opinion reinforcements like-minded people tend to become even more extreme (Sunstein, 2009). There are numerous examples of the disastrous consequences that going to extremes can have and the recent incident in Norway is just one of them.

With this dissertation I have shown the depressing state of online debates within the BNP and hope to have presented the opportunity for further research into the discussions of extreme groups. It is necessary to open up the echo chambers of opinion reinforcement and in this way diminish polarisation, preventing people from going to extremes.

8 Bibliography

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9 Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1: Code book

Coding category phases and definitions

1) Phase one

The whole sample is included in the coding for phase one.

a) Message type

i) Initial

This code identifies the seed of the discussion. Within this group distinction has been made between:

- (1) *Initial argument*: an initial post that makes a claim that is accompanied by reasoning.
- (2) *Initial assertion*: an initial post that makes a claim that is not accompanied by reasoning
- (3) *Link*: an initial post that does not make a claim but only contains a link.
- (4) *Question*: an initial post that does not make a claim but asks a question. Not all initial posts formulated as a question fall in this category, as some questions are rhetorical or sarcastic.
- (5) *Announcement*: an initial post that does not make a claim but makes an announcement.

ii) Response

(1) Reasoned claim

- (a) *Counter*: a reasoned claim in which proposes an alternative claim that does not directly contradict or challenge a competing claim or argument
- (b) *Rebuttal*: a reasoned claim which directly contradicts or challenges a competing claim.
- (c) *Refute*: a defensive reasoned response to a rebuttal and directly defends an initial, a counter or an affirmation, reasoned or non-reasoned.
- (d) *Affirmation*: a reasoned response that provides direct or indirect support in favour of another participant's claim.

(2) Non-reasoned claim

- (a) *Counter*: a non-reasoned claim in which proposes an alternative claim that does not directly contradict or challenge a competing claim or argument
- (b) *Rebuttal*: a non-reasoned claim which directly contradicts or challenges a competing claim.
- (c) *Refute*: a defensive non-reasoned response to a rebuttal and directly defends an initial, a counter or an affirmation, reasoned or non-reasoned.
- (d) *Affirmation*: a non-reasoned response that provides direct or indirect support in favour of another participant's claim.

(3) Non-claim response

- (a) *Commissive*: a non-claim response that either assents, concedes or agreed-to-disagree.
- (b) *Expressive*: a non-claim response that shows a participant's feeling or attitude.
- (c) *Question*: a non-claim post in which only a question is asked.
- (d) *Answer to question*: a non-claim post in which only an answer to a question is provided.
- (e) *Extension of earlier message*: a post that is an extension of the earlier message and does not provide any new claims, commissives or expressives.

2) Phase two

Only messages that contain reasoned claims are advanced to this phase.

b) Evidence type

- i) *Fact/source*: the participant provides a fact or source to legitimise the argument
 - ii) *Comparison*: the participant provides a comparison to legitimise the argument.
 - iii) *Example*: the participant provides an example, either fictional, hypothetical or a real life case to legitimise the
 - iv) *Experience*: the participant shares an experience to legitimise the argument.
 - v) *None*: the participant does not provide any evidence to support his/her reasoned claim.
- c) *Reflexive argument*: a message or series of messages that provide "(a) a reasoned claim in the form of an initial or counter argument; (b) evidence to support that argument; (c) reasoned responsiveness to challenges by providing rebuttals and refutes; (d) and evidence in support of a challenge or defence against one" (Graham, 2009 p.53).

3) Phase three

The whole sample is included in the coding for phase three.

d) Sender

- i) *BNP*
- ii) *Participant*. Note: all participants are given pseudonyms when used in the study.

e) Intended recipient(s)

- i) *BNP*: a message is clearly directed towards the BNP.
- ii) *Whole thread*: a message that is not a reply towards any of the posts in particular.
- iii) *Specific participant(s)*: a message that is clearly directed towards one or multiple participants.

f) Valence

Valence is the degree of attraction aversion towards the BNP/the BNP discourse.

- i) *Attraction*: a participant expresses attraction and/or support towards the BNP, agrees with the BNP discourse and/or provides a claim that affirms the BNP message.
 - ii) *Attraction, but*: a participant expresses partial attraction and/or support towards the BNP, partially agrees with the BNP discourse and/or provides a claim that somewhat affirms the BNP message. A message that agrees with most, but criticises or questions part of the BNP messages falls under this category.
 - iii) *Aversion*: a participant that expresses aversion from the BNP, completely disagrees with the BNP discourse and/or provides a claim that opposes the BNP message.
 - iv) *Aversion, but*: a participant expresses partial aversion from the BNP, mostly disagrees with the BNP discourse and/or provides a claim that mainly opposes the BNP message. A message that mostly criticises the BNP message falls under this category.
 - v) *Unsure/none/equally*: a message that neither expresses attraction nor aversion, a post that provides confliction messages.
- g) Topic code
- i) *On topic*
 - ii) *Off topic, relevant*: a message that is off topic but does not distort the discussion.
 - iii) *Off topic, irrelevant*: a message that is off topic and distracts from the original discussion.
- h) Communicative empathy
- i) *Empathetic exchange*: a message that suggests that the author had cognitively or emotionally imagined him- or herself in another participant's position
- i) Discursive equality
- i) *Degrading*: a message that degrades another participant or his or her argument, statement or opinion
 - ii) *Neglected*: a message that lacks reciprocal exchange
- j) Discursive freedom
- i) *Curbing*: a message that attempts to suppress, restrict or prevent another participant from giving voice to his/her opinion. Also messages that included intimidating language were coded as curbing.
- k) Sincerity
- i) *Questionable sincerity*: a message that questions other participants' sincerity.

9.2 Appendix 2: The operationalisation of the indicators of deliberation

This operationalisation is mainly based on the operationalisation done by Graham (2009).

1) The process of achieving mutual understanding

a) Rational critical debate

First it is assessed whether participants are reasoned by determining the total number of postings coded as reasoned and non-reasoned claims in relation to the posting total. Next, the level of rationality is assessed by calculating the number of reasoned claims in relation to the total number of claims made. Finally, critical reflection is determined through the calculation of the total rebuttals and refutes in relation to the total number of reasoned claims made.

b) Coherence

To assess the level of coherence, it is measured how many posts are on topic, off topic but relevant and off topic and irrelevant. More irrelevant topic changes may point towards a lower level of coherence.

c) Continuity

First the level of extended debate is to be measured by calculating the number of strong string claims, a minimum of three argument-interactions, ideally in the form of critical reflection. Second, the level of convergence is assessed by calculating the number of commissive speech acts in relation to the lines of discussion.

d) Reciprocity

The level of reciprocity is measured with the reply-percentage indicator: the percentage of postings coded as a reply.

e) Reflexivity

The degree of reflexivity is measured by calculating the amount of reflexive arguments in relation to the amount of arguments in total.

f) Empathy

The number of empathetic postings in relation to the total postings defines the level of empathy.

2) Structural and dispositional fairness

g) Discursive equality

First, the concentration of participation is measured through calculating the number of participants along with their share of postings. Next to that substantial equality was measured through calculating the number of posts coded as degrading and neglected.

h) Discursive freedom

To measure those instances that a participant prevents another participant from giving voice to his or her opinion, curbing, discursive freedom is measured.

i) Sincerity

Sincerity is assessed through the calculation of the cases when a participant's sincerity is measured.

9.3 Appendix 3: Selected threads for the final analysis

	Date and time	Started by	Total posts
1	01/2/2011 at 09:57	BNP	60
2	01/2/2011 at 12:43	Participant	12
3	01/2/2011 at 14:36	Participant	1
4	01/2/2011 at 16:06	Participant	2
5	02/2/2011 at 11:21	BNP	13
6	02/2/2011 at 11:47	Participant	3
7	02/2/2011 at 11: 56	Participant	7
8	03/2/2011 at 11:28	Participant	5
9	03/2/2011 at 12:47	BNP	4
10	03/2/2011 at 12:53	Participant	4
11	04/2/2011 at 09:57	Participant	1
12	04/2/2011 at 13:59	Participant	8
13	04/2/2011 at 17:18	BNP	25
14	04/2/2011 at 18:06	Participant	3
15	05/2/2011 at 09:19	BNP	13
16	05/2/2011 at 09:27	Participant	2
17	05/2/2011 at 23:40	BNP	24
18	06/2/2011 at 01:19	BNP	39
19	06/2/2011 at 11:50	Participant	3
20	06/2/2011 at 13:11	BNP	43
21	06/2/2011 at 16:20	Participant	1
22	06/2/2011 at 17:13	BNP	57
23	07/2/2011 at 15:48	BNP	12
24	07/2/2011 at 18:41	BNP	12
25	08/2/2011 at 09:59	Participant	1

	Date and time	Started by	Total posts
26	08/2/2011 at 10:02	Participant	1
27	08/2/2011 at 10:44	Participant	1
28	08/2/2011 at 13:00	Participant	14
29	08/2/2011 at 14:33	BNP	48
30	09/2/2011 at 11:43	BNP	6
31	09/2/2011 at 12:26	BNP	9
32	09/2/2011 at 12:28	Participant	1
33	09/2/2011 at 15:04	Participant	3
34	09/2/2011 at 16:46	Participant	4
35	10/2/2011 at 10:48	BNP	15
36	10/2/2011 at 17:12	BNP	51
37	10/2/2011 at 17:47	Participant	3
38	11/2/2011 at 10:50	BNP	3
39	11/2/2011 at 15:00	Participant	9
40	11/2/2011 at 17:12	Participant	2
41	11/2/2011 at 18:01	Participant	2
42	12/2/2011 at 10:35	BNP	5
43	12/2/2011 at 10:26	BNP	8
44	12/2/2011 at 11:32	Participant	4
45	13/2/2011 at 11:53	BNP	3
46	13/2/2011 at 14:04	BNP	35
47	13/2/2011 at 14:37	Participant	5
48	13/2/2011 at 18:55	BNP	27
49	14/2/2011 at 12:19	BNP	4
50	14/2/2011 at 13:19	Participant	4