FROM "THIRD PLACE" TO "THIRD SPACE": EVERYDAY POLITICAL TALK IN NON-POLITICAL ONLINE SPACES

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Abstract

This article takes forward a "new" agenda for online deliberation (Wright 2012), by setting out in detail the concept of third space: non-political online spaces where political talk emerges. The concept of third space is heavily influenced by, but ultimately grounded in a critique of, Oldenburg's (1999) concept of the third place. Rather than thinking about what virtual equivalents of a third place might look like, this article reconsiders the concept in the context of the Internet and thus differs in several of its conclusions. First, the article sets out the case for studying informal political talk in third spaces. It is argued that this necessitates broad definitions of the political and inclusive definitions of deliberation. Second, each of Oldenburg's core characteristics of third place are presented, critiqued, and, where necessary, reformulated for the online context. In so doing, the article provides a theoretically informed framework that can be used to study third spaces while also contributing to the broader debates about the nature of political debate online.

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Analysing Political Debate Online: An Overview

The consequences of new media for political deliberation have been theorised and analysed for many years (Arterton 1987), though it would be fair to say that the field is far from reaching maturity. There have been four distinct research phases to date. First, there was a period dominated by hype – sometimes referred to as the revolutionary phase: it was thought that new technology would (often deterministically) revolutionise political communication and reinvigorate the public sphere. Writers such as Negroponte (1995) and Hauben and Hauben (1997) made some rather speculative claims that tended to detach the theoretical potential from the every day reality that shapes technological diffusion. This is not to say that technologies do not have the potential to "revolutionise" political communication, but that we need to think carefully about what we mean by revolution and ground such accounts in the lived reality (Wright 2012).

In the second phase, there were related theoretical and empirical responses. There was a rebuttal to the revolutionary "school" through the cyber-realist or normalisation "school," associated with the work of Margolis and Resnick (2000) that sought to bring an element of "realism" to debates (Shane 2004, xii). This was accompanied by a raft of empirical studies of online deliberation that almost universally focused on the explicitly political areas of Usenet[1] discussion forums (e.g. Alt.politics.clinton), finding that they largely failed to meet the hype and often were not deliberative and did not constitute a Habermasian public sphere (Wilhelm 2000; Davis 2005). In response to the largely negative findings, the third phase was marked by a shift to analysing government-sponsored e-democracy experiments[2] that were designed to encourage political/policy deliberation (Coleman 2004; Wright 2007), occasionally comparing Usenet with government-led forums (Jensen 2003). Most of this work was grounded in elite models of deliberation.

The current phase has followed what some see as the maturation of Internet-technologies through the development of social, web 2.0 media. These studies have, again, largely looked at the formally political spaces of such websites: the comment threads of the Facebook pages of US Presidential candidates (Robertson, Vatrapu and Medina 2010); party candidate blogs (Williams et al. 2005); and the reasons why people visit candidate web pages (Ancu and Cozma 2009).[3]

If we consider the preceding review of the literature, several discrete criticisms can be made. First, the vast majority of studies have focused on formally political spaces such as government-run forums. Where research has extended to the broader Internet (e.g. Usenet, Facebook), scholars have largely chosen to focus on the explicitly political areas such as party web pages or independent political forums. While analysing how politicians' blog or Tweet is interesting, and there can be deliberative debates in government-run discussion fora, scholars have largely ignored the spaces where the vast majority of (everyday) political talk between "ordinary" citizens online is most likely to occur. This lack of research is all the more surprising given that scholars have recognised the importance and prevalence of such talk in the offline world (Walsh 2004).

Second, where scholars have studied the nature of deliberation outside of formal, government or party owned websites, they have tended to use existing (often grand) theories. For example, studies of political debate on Usenet were largely

grounded in Habermas' theory of rational critical communication (see below). They have also tended to use formal, traditional definitions of "the political," that may not effectively capture the everyday, life politics that we might expect to see (Bennett 1998; Giddens 1991). An interesting piece of research by Scullion *et al.* (2010) analysed political talk in formally non-political forums such as Hotukdeals and Digitalspy. They defined a political message as one where the topic or issue is linked to the political process in some way – in part because it decreases the degree of subjective judgement being made by the researcher as to what should be coded as political.[4] While this definition is deliberately narrower than Graham's (2008 – see below), they still found 7 percent of all seed messages were political according to their definition. This suggests that there is a significant amount of "everyday" political talk on Internet discussion forums – in contradiction to research that has found people avoiding political talk in (face-to-face) public settings (Eliasoph 1998) – contextual factors appear to be crucial.

Finally, many of the earlier studies are now outmoded because the context for online political talk appears to have changed so much over recent years. There have, for example, been improvements in design and moderation (Wright and Street 2007) and the online public has grown significantly. Circumstances have changed since Papacharissi (2002, 21) wrote of a: "vision of the true virtual sphere [that] consists of several spheres of counterpublics that have been excluded from mainstream political discourse …" Furthermore, there is now greater experience and understanding of the norms and patterns of acceptable behaviour, while the development of social networking and Web 2.0 has encouraged people to take their offline identity into the virtual world.[5]

This critique of the literature suggests that renewed focus must be placed on the informal, everyday political talk that occurs online. Such talk is crucial to civic life and democratic health more generally. For Kim and Kim (2008, 51), it is a: "fundamental underpinning of deliberative democracy. Through everyday political talk, citizens construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy." Put simply, it may be the case that more democratically important political and social changes occur amongst the interactions of ordinary citizens (Bennett 1998, Graham and Harju 2011) and may not be political acts as understood by more traditional definitions (Coleman 2005; Van Zoonen 2005, 123-142). As Hay notes:

> The clear danger is that the conclusions of our analyses may increasingly come to depend upon externally generated assumptions whose empirical content we do not regard ourselves worthy to judge. [...] That implies a political analysis which refuses to restrict its analytical attentions to obviously political variables and processes ... (Hay 2002, 4-5).

This evolution in thought is reflected in Habermas' late theory of the public sphere, and particularly the emphasis on informal associations and interpersonal communication in the lifeworld – precisely those areas that are most likely to be transformed by the use of communications technologies (Friedland et al. 2006, 17).[6]

There have recently been several welcome and important empirical studies that have addressed some of these issues. Graham (2008, 2012), for example, has analysed political talk in a number of non-political online forums, finding that people

often discuss political issues and that where this occurs it is largely deliberative in nature. Van Zoonen has studied political talk on film discussion forums (2007) and in the comment fields of Youtube videos (Van Zoonen et al. 2010). Similarly, Klein and Wardle (2008, 516) analysed how the inclusion of two welsh housemates in a series of Big Brother provoked political deliberation in the shows online discussion forum, concluding that it provided a "rare deliberative space, particularly for young people …" Oates (2009) has analysed how the families of children with genetic differences in Russia use new media, finding strong evidence of parental politics developing in informal, non-political spaces – leading her to argue that we need to look beyond individual cases and outside of formal, party-political issues and websites – and to the development of a broader collective conscious that speaks to both the general public sphere and the third space. Finally, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) have analysed political talk through a representative sample, finding that non-political forums were less polarised than explicitly political ones. Each study has found significant amounts of political talk in non-political spaces and that this was largely of a high discursive quality. To help encourage and guide future research, this article outlines the concept of the third space: online discussion spaces with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations. It is argued that analysis of the extent and nature of political talk in third spaces is necessary if we are to understand fully the nature of political talk online. The third space concept is heavily influenced by, but ultimately grounded in a critique of, Oldenburg's (1999) concept of the third place.[7] It also moves us beyond analysing the existence and nature of such talk but guides us towards the social and structural characteristics that facilitate it.

From Third Place to Third Space

A third place, for Oldenburg, is a public space beyond the home or workplace where people can meet and interact informally. As the name suggests, they are place-based spaces; the common denominator is the location of the participants and that community can thrive: "The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public spaces that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals' and is a core setting of informal public life" (1999, 16). Moreover, Oldenburg argues that third places perform a crucial role in the development of societies and communities, helping to strengthen citizenship and thus are "central to the political processes of a democracy" (1999, 67). Oldenburg cites numerous examples of third places from the traditional English pub to a Parisian café. It should be noted that, for Oldenburg, it is not that certain types of venue constitute a third place; rather they exist when venues exhibit certain characteristics.[8] In other words, not all pubs are third places: they are constructed through specific social and environmental characteristics. The problem, for Oldenburg, is that the third place, to the extent that they ever existed in the United States, is in decline – and is often wholly absent.[9]

Following in a long line of scholars such as Robert Putnam (2000), Oldenburg (1999, 70) links the decline of the third place, and of political communication and democracy more generally, to the media:

> *What the tavern offered long before television or newspapers was a source of news along with the opportunity to question, protest, sound out, supplement,*

and form opinion locally and collectively. […] An efficient home-delivery media system, in contrast, tends to make shut-ins of otherwise healthy individuals. […] The best counter to the harmful and alien influence that the media too often represents are face-to-face groups in which people participate in discussions of what is important to them and how to preserve it (Oldenburg 1999, 77).

His concerns extend to the new media: (1999, 204) "the new, corporately-controlled technological order has so atomised the citizenry that the term 'society' may no longer be appropriate." For Oldenburg, the network society:

is not defined in terms of location but in terms of the accumulated associations of a single individual. One's friends, acquaintances, and contacts, however scattered, constitute his or her network. Each of us has his or her own "personal community," and its apologists make the network sound like an advanced form of society rather than an artifact of atomization. […] it permits us to retain the myth of a viable community form amid the atomization of life attending our chaotic urban sprawl (Oldenburg 1999, 264-5).

Oldenburg's account of the network society was written as thinking on the topic began to evolve rapidly and is, I would argue, now rather dated.[10] It is beyond the scope of this article to review the literature on cyber-communities and the network society in detail, but, suffice to say, his views are disputed. A number of scholars have questioned whether, rather than being part of the problem, new media might be part of the solution (Schuler 1996; Wellman 1998). Directly addressing Oldenburg's third place, Rheingold (2003, 10) mused:

It might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in mind, but so many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the WELL [online community]. Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall.

Similarly, the New Media Consortium (2007, 3) argued that: "Increasingly, it [the Internet] is the 'third place'…" though they provide no empirical research to support the claim.

In fact, there are only a limited number of empirical studies that have analysed whether online forums constitute third places, and these have focused on the sociological aspect rather than their role in political talk. Steinkuehler and Williams (2006), for example, studied online gaming platforms, finding that: "MMOs are new (albeit virtual) 'third places' for informal sociability that are particularly well suited to the formation of bridging social capital." However, they argue that as users become more embedded, their function as a third place begins to wain as the community shifts more to bonding rather than bridging social capital. It is not made clear how this fits with Oldenburg's positive analysis of "regulars." More generally, studies of online community often discuss Oldenburg's work on third places, but are not explicitly designed to test it (see, for example, Rheingold 1993; Shuler 1996). There remains, thus, an important empirical and theoretical question: how to conceptualise the third place in the context of the virtual world, and whether or not new media actually facilitate or debilitate political talk.

The most sophisticated analysis of the theoretical concept of third places in the context of new media has been provided by Soukup, who argues that while there are similarities between third places and many virtual communities, there are also significant differences that need to be acknowledged: "Frankly, describing CMC as a third place is, to an extent, an inaccurate (and potentially dangerous) use of Oldenburg's term" (Soukup 2006, 432). According to Soukup (2006, 426), there are three areas where online communities differ dramatically from third places:

(1) third places emphasise localised community;

(2) third places are social levellers; and

(3) third places are accessible.

Soukup (2006, 432) suggests that the term virtual third place is more accurate because it acknowledges that interaction: "transcends space and time and alters identity and symbolic referents via simulation." From the characteristics identified by Oldenburg, Soukup identifies three preliminary factors as being key: localisation, accessibility and presence. Soukup argues that virtual localisation occurs not just through it being linked explicitly to a particular physical place such as through a council discussion forum, but can be constructed through discourse and other signifiers – symbolic spaces. This is, thus, still a place-based definition, but would allow, for example, certain types of online expat communities to be considered a virtual third place or an online forum that focuses on a particular town. In the virtual world, access relates to the digital divide, in all its complexity. But it is also, for Soukup, about how the virtual environment is designed and constructed and, crucially, that the community can itself shape the environment. This links to his account of presence: virtual third spaces must immerse their participants and reflect socio-cultural cues from their local: "For a virtual space to be warm and comfortable to someone from a small town in Iowa, the space must 'feel' like a familiar rural, midwestern location" (2006, 435). It is unclear from Soukup's account whether there is a playoff between the two: can physically-identified virtual forums be virtual third places with limited other characteristics, and do non-geographic virtual third places require more symbolic cues?

Soukup's starting point that they "differ dramatically" is questionable. Clearly, some online forums are very different from what Oldenburg proposes, but some approximate the core characteristics (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006). As noted above, Oldenburg accepts that not all pubs are third places – this is determined by analysing whether they exhibit the core characteristics. Thus, arguably, Soukup's approach contradicts one of Oldenburg's foundational points. Nevertheless, its strength is that clear pointers are provided to aid the development of virtual third places, and there are indications that the virtual third place is on the rise. As indicated, the approach taken here is different; rather than thinking about what virtual equivalents to the third place might look like, this article reconsiders them in the context of the Internet. It is, thus, informed and inspired by the work of Oldenburg, but ultimately differs in several of its conclusions.

The concept of third space does build on Oldenburg's argument that they come into being when a venue features specific social and environmental characteristics. Thus, we cannot say that all online discussion forums or blogs are third spaces. Similarly, we cannot claim that Twitter or Facebook is a third space – significant parts of these websites almost certainly are – but the ultimate determination must

be made through analysis of the discourse and patterns of participation. The point here is, thus, not to focus people on specific websites, but to encourage people to look for political talk, particularly amongst ordinary citizens, on the Internet wherever it emerges (Hay 2002, 2007). While people may choose to focus on specific websites for methodological reasons, the concept itself is deliberately expansive. This, of course, places great emphasis on the core characteristics that, combined, lead to the development of a third space. It is necessary, thus, to (re)consider each of Oldenburg's characteristics in the context of the Internet. To help organise this analysis, it is divided into what might be called structural and participatory characteristics.

Structural Characteristics

Place. What Oldenburg describes as "the problem of place" is arguably the driving focus of his work, and is where the concept of third space differs most dramatically. In third spaces, the key link between participants is not *normally* their location but shared links that draw people together. Both Oldenburg and Soukup normatively privilege place-based forums over space or issue based ones such as tend to exist online. While there is clearly a value to such real-world and virtual communal spaces that are linked by a physical tie, following the voluminous literature on virtual communities (Wellman 1998), it is argued here that to privilege place over issue-based (and related) forums and communities is short-sighted: they *both* have value (Mitra and Schwartz 2001). While some fear that this can lead to a decentred, hyperreal experience that would inhibit the development of third space (Poster 1997, 1990), evidence suggests this is based on a misconception of the nature of online interaction (Dalhberg 2001).

Much of the thinking here has been informed by Anderson's (1991) argument that geographic proximity is not a necessary condition for community to form. Wilson and Peterson (2003, 456), for example, argue that the appropriateness of the distinction between place and space, real and virtual, is unhelpful. Habermas (1992, 451) himself acknowledges that the public sphere: "must be uncoupled from the concrete understanding of its embodiment in physically present, participating, and jointly deciding members of a collectivity." Third spaces have their own rules and norms and this is central to community building (Harrison and Dourish 1996) and the differences between virtual and physical space can be exaggerated (Butler 1999) – particularly if a third place is conceptualised as including open regions where strangers can interact in the offline world (Shaviro 2003). As new media continue to evolve, they (continue to) blur further the distinction between place and space (Hope 1996 – cited in Dahlberg 2001b), muddying the analytical distinction that Oldenburg and others have made. Third spaces can, thus, include both geographic and non-geographic communities.

Commerce. Third places, according to Oldenburg, can be commercial venues. This acceptance of commercial spaces is important. Apparently following Habermas, prominent theorists of the virtual public sphere have argued that online spaces must be free from both government *and* commercial control (Dahlberg 2001a) and thus most third spaces would not be considered as viable loci. However, there are significant differences of opinion. Papacharissi (2002, 19) is more flexible in her interpretation. She notes that: "advertising is not necessarily a bad addition

to the Internet." Blumler and Coleman (2001, 19) have a similarly open-minded approach: "We are far from proposing that such activities [including finance and business] should be prevented or censored in any way (even if they could be), but we do favour making clear distinctions between opportunities to enhance civic democracy and distractions from that purpose." These differences of opinion can be seen as embedded in Habermas' theory, which is not as explicit as some have assumed. It must be remembered, for example, that the coffee houses and salons that Habermas lauded were themselves commercial spaces (see Bennett 2006). It is also worth noting that the exact commercial nature of third spaces are often not clear-cut. Many, such as Anglersnet.co.uk, have advertising, but this is to cover costs rather than because it is a formally commercial venture. Others, such as Jamie Oliver's online forum, is not itself intended to be a profit-making initiative, but a by-product of it is to strengthen his broader business ventures. The nature and impact of the commercial function of a third space is, thus, an important point for empirical analysis – but, importantly, they can have a commercial function.[11]

Neutrality. Oldenburg argues that third places must be on neutral ground. The discussion of neutrality will focus on two particular aspects: the extent to which third spaces link to political decision-making and the extent to which political discourse becomes polarised. One of the key issues in this context is the nature of the political function. Following Habermas and Dahlberg, third spaces cannot be controlled by governments or political parties. Oldenburg takes this further, arguing that the primary function cannot be political – so a council debating chamber could not be a third place. In the online world, there are numerous explicitly political, but independent discussion forums (e.g. Open Democracy, Comment is Free) alongside government and political party-controlled ones. Although these may well fall under Habermas' general public sphere, this is an important difference between the two theories. Informed by Oldenburg, third spaces are non-political spaces where political talk emerges. Third spaces can also feature formal politics – personal pages of elected representatives on social networking websites, for example. However, such content cannot dominate the space, and should not be the main interest for a researcher of third space. The extent to which third spaces link to power, and the nature and impact of these links, is another question for empirical analysis: the danger is that political spin encroaches upon everyday political discourse (Griffiths 2004).[12]

The danger that online communication becomes politically polarised is widely recognised (Sunstein 2001), and would challenge the neutrality of a third space. However, both the theoretical and empirical cyber-polarisation literature focuses on explicitly political discussion spaces: the argument is that conservatives migrate to conservative forums to discuss (or reinforce) conservative views. This assumes, of course, that people hold (and are aware of) ideologically informed positions that they can and want to gravitate towards. While this may be true of America, where much of this literature originates, the trend in the UK has been toward a weakening of ideological ties and arguably a shift to the centre ground of politics. This suggests that the underlying basis for ideological polarisation may be weaker. But this argument can be taken further.

Third spaces may well be different because many, and perhaps most, do not have an obvious political slant; people do not visit them to discuss politics and in

this sense it can be hypothesised that they will be politically inclusive spaces. As Graham and Hajru (2011, 29) put it: "fragmentation theory makes little sense once we move beyond the politically oriented communicative landscape ..." If this is true, rather than polarising the public sphere, third spaces may actually facilitate a broader range of information sharing and debate. There is a danger that the cyber-polarisation literature a) adopts an idealised, golden-age view of what existed before the advent of the Internet and b) applies an outdated understanding of how people consume news and talk politics online. While we might assume that some issues and hobbies are more popular with people from specific political viewpoints, and thus there would be a polarisation in certain cases, this is still an assumption and may be based on a false stereotype (for example that people who like hunting lean to the right).[13] Wojcieszak and Mutz's (2009) detailed study of online polarisation found significant evidence to back up these claims: non-political spaces were more diverse, and this was due to the social context and not because people with strongly partisan views gravitate to political forums.

Inclusivity and Access. Oldenburg argues that third places must be inclusive: they are open to the general public and have no set formal criteria of membership and exclusion. There is an "emphasis on qualities not confined to status distinctions current in the society ... [what matters is the] charm and flavour of one's personal personality irrespective of status" (1999, 24). To this end, third places must be open "at almost any time of the day or evening" and "access must be easy" (1999, 32). However, third places do not attract a high volume of strangers or transient customers" (1999, 36). But is this actually right? The reality is that pubs have become increasingly expensive and some people may not be able to afford to visit regularly (if at all) while there are age restrictions (Greenaway 2003).[14] Second, it is questionable whether pubs act as social levellers, and just how accepting the regulars are of new people. Finally, in practice there may be barriers in third places such as pubs: the landlord can refuse to serve someone; require a dress code such as no jeans or baseball caps; or close off parts of the pub for customers who purchase food.

The reality is that third spaces and pubs can adopt similar barriers: many online spaces require a participant to login before they can post (though most are open literally all of the time, unlike third places); moderators can bar users; and a small number ask users to pay a fee. Oldenburg would argue that if a pub's barriers were too high, it would not be considered a third place. However, as noted, the real world is different from the virtual world and shifting guidelines and rules from the latter to the former without taking account of this is problematic. Requiring people to login, while a barrier, is in place for a reason: it adds some control to the social interaction that already exists in the real world through other norms and regulations. The login is akin to asking someone to remove a balaclava when entering the pub; it adds detail to the virtual world that already exists in the real. There must, thus, be some minimal restrictions otherwise debates are likely to become the unregulated free-for-alls that online communication is often perceived as.[15] I would argue that this is different, rather than incompatible, with Oldenburg's approach.

The biggest accessibility issue online is the digital divide: there are still significant - though shrinking – disparities in physical access to, and ability and desire to use, the Internet (Wright 2012). As indicated, there may be similar barriers in third places: people may not be able to afford to enter a third place, or may feel uncomfortable so-

cialising face-to-face – no matter how welcoming people are. The relative anonymity of many online forums may actually help to overcome the latter issue for some. It is also worth noting that non-political online forums sometimes have a more inclusive range of participants than political forums (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009).

A Low Profile. Third places, for Oldenburg, are typically plain, unimpressive and are not normally advertised (1999, 36-37). This, he argues, helps to protect them from too much transient customers and discourages pretention while facilitating equality. Image – both of the venue and for the users – is not important. Most online forums are plain in their aesthetic design and follow a standard structure. This may be because most use one of a select few pieces of software (Wright and Street 2007). Image – or the performance of identity – can matter in online forums – though much of the research is from the pre-web 2.0 era (Nakamura 2002). How people present themselves discursively and through identity markers is, thus, another important empirical question (Fagersten 2004). With regard to advertising, Oldenburg does not disallow advertising completely. Third spaces can also be advertised – they operate in a very different competitive environment than most third places and promotional work may be necessary so that interested people can find them – but it is unlikely that many pay for formal advertising.

Participatory Characteristics

The Regulars. Oldenburgh argues that third spaces must have a group of regulars and, more importantly, that they perform a positive socialising function and set the tone of the debate: "The third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars. It is the regulars who give the place its character […] and whose acceptance of new faces is crucial" (1999, 33-34). For the regulars, visiting the third place is "an ordinary part of a daily routine" (1999, 37). From a Habermasian perspective (2005, 2006), a dominant minority within debates is more worrying because it can inhibit the ideal speech situation and rational-critical communication – leading to a "Daily Me" form of communication (Sunstein 2001). Many studies of online political discussion have identified a small number of users that make a significant proportion of all the posts (Davis 2005; Wright 2006; Anstead and O'Loughin 2011). As with pubs, there is a danger that if the regulars come to dominate, they can limit diversity and weaken inclusiveness. Indeed, there is a tendency to assume that their impact in online forums is negative (see Graham and Wright 2011). However, we cannot assume this – as the language of dominant minorities implies. Graham and Wright (2011) have sought to address these issues; they develop a typology of what they call super-participation (SP) and empirically analyse their behaviour in a third space (www.moneysavingexpert.com). They found that there were SPs: 0.4 percent of users created 48 percent of over 25m posts. However, detailed qualitative analysis found that in the vast majority of cases they performed a positive role within the forum (such as facilitating talk and summarising debates) – similar to Oldenburg's regulars – with only limited evidence of negative activity such as attacking or attempting to curb other users. Based on the existing literature, we expect that the vast majority of online discussion forums will have SPs, and their behaviour is crucial to the construction of a third space. This makes analysing patterns of participation and the nature of political talk crucial to identifying a third space.

Communication and Mood. According to Oldenburg, "*Conversation is the main activity* … Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good*" (original emphasis). Within a "Third place conversation is typically engrossing. Consciousness of conditions and time often slips away amid its lively flow" (1999, 30). He also argues that humour is crucial, and is often characterised by an impoliteness "which really communicates affection. […] Ordinary rudeness offends its victims. In the third place, much of the talk sounds like rudeness and gains its effect from doing so, but is calculated to delight and communicate the strength of fraternal bonds" (1999, 53-4). In essence, the mood is playful (1999, 37-38).

Online political debates are often found to be crude and subject to flame wars, and this is variously "blamed" on poorly designed forums, transient users and a lack of social/physical cues (Davis 2005). As noted, social media may be changing this, but Oldenburg leads us to a more specific point: could it be that at least some of what is characterised negatively as flaming is actually performing a positive role? In the context of lifestyle politics, Bennett (1998, 749) argues that: "The new patterns of political engagement may not be particularly polite […] It is not surprising that people get personal about issues that are increasingly close to home." Moreover, there is some evidence that humour can facilitate political talk in third spaces (Graham 2010) – though more research is needed. The danger is that methods such as quantitative content analysis fail to pick up the nuances of the interaction.[16] This raises broader issues about how to theorise and analyse the nature of political communication online.

Empirical studies of both Usenet and government-run political discussion forums have largely operationalised Habermas-informed models of elite deliberation. Habermas, of course, came to draw an explicit distinction between everyday political talk and that which occurs in formal decision-making spheres (2005). Nevertheless, empirical research has tended to focus upon his rules for rational critical communication, and particularly his ideal speech situation, rather than his concept of communicative action, which sets a lower threshold. Coleman and Blumler (2009) are critical of studies that are grounded in a "deep, sombre, rationally-bounded cerebral rumination" picture of online deliberation that is "more suited to the Senior Common Room than the workplace, community hall or public square." While this undoubtedly has a place, clearly many online spaces are very different from this. Coleman and Blumler "are happy to settle for a *more deliberative democracy*" (2009, 38 original emphasis) that "would take seriously a range of forms of public talk, from the informal and conversational to the consultative and evidential." This reflects a broader series of interventions that have argued for the acceptance of other forms of communication than the rational and broader definitions of the political (Giddens 1991; Bennett 1998; Mansbridge 1999; Dryzek 2000; Graham and Harju 2011). Analysis of everyday political talk in third spaces must take account of the nature of communication and adopt a sufficiently broad, "porous" definition of the political to capture the often messy nature of life politics (Graham 2008, 18). Such work has provided important pointers to help guide future research.

Rationale for Participation. Oldenburgh argues that the mutual aid/pecuniary benefits are of secondary importance. In other words, people visit third places and maintain their contacts not because of the personal benefits that they can accrue, but because they enjoy each other's company. The reality is that making such a

distinction empirically is difficult because this is still, arguably, a benefit in kind (i.e. wanting company, alcohol). It is also likely to be the case that this applies far more to regular rather than infrequent visitors because a full appreciation of the quality of talk/company can only develop with time and thus, at least for the initial visits, the rationale is much more likely to instrumental. There is evidence to suggest that community can flourish online in the context of more ephemeral contact and, thus, participating for personal gain is not necessarily considered detrimental to a third space. Moreover, if, as a by-product of this instrumental behaviour, political (and other) talk emerges – that talk can still be of civic value – as found by Graham and Wright (2011).

Conclusion

Grounded in a critique of both Ray Oldenburg's concept of third place, and studies of political deliberation online to date, this article has set out the concept of the third space. It has been argued that there is a worrying linearity to existing research, with a lack of attention placed on political talk in non-political spaces. It is hoped that the concept of third space will encourage and guide further research in this area. As Soukup (2006) has noted, Oldenburg is widely cited, but often misunderstood or used partially. Rather than developing ways to operationalise Oldenburg in the online context, this article has sought to engage more critically with Oldenburg's work and has, thus, differed in several of its conclusions. This begs the question: why use Oldenburg? As has been outlined, while this critique is necessary, Oldenburg's work remains interesting and important. In particular, the concept of third place differs in several important respects from the widely used public sphere/deliberation approaches associated most closely with the work of Habermas. It has, for example, been argued that third spaces can have a commercial function and that the existence and behaviour of Super-participants is crucial. The biggest difference from Oldenburg's approach is that third space does not privilege place-based communities.

Studying political talk in third spaces does, however, raise important theoretical and empirical questions. First, there is the issue of what topics and events are considered to be political. It has been argued here than an inclusive definition must be adopted that captures the everyday, life(style) politics that often occurs. Second, it has been argued that normative conceptualisations of deliberation (and deliberative democracy) must be grounded in the everyday life practices of the third space (Mansbridge 1999). Following Graham (2008, 19-21), this implies a shift in emphasis away from the rational and an acceptance (and valuing!) of broader forms of communication including emotions, humour, rhetoric and private (not just public) issues when conceptualising political talk.

Notes:

1. Usenet is a largely ungoverned bulletin board-based system.

2. There were other important factors: before the late 1990's most governments did not host online discussions and thus there was nothing to analyse before this. That government's chose to conduct e-democracy experiments was clearly an important development in need of analysis.

3. It is fair to say that empirical research has largely concluded that the hype hasn't played out in practice: but is this surprising? While most empiricists are critical of the "revolutionaries," they largely

frame their results within the revolutionary discourse (Hindman 2008; Davis 2009). This, in turn, can influence how scholars make sense of their data by creating undue expectations. Third, and most important here, it influences what research questions get asked and which aspects of the Internet are analysed.

4. This definition also links with the Habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere, and his focus on the political public sphere and talk that in some way (even indirectly) influences the political system (Rasmusen, 2009, 19).

5. There has also been a tendency to focus on isolated cases, which, while interesting, are often drawn from the latest, fashionable websites in the earliest days of their use when it is hard to draw meaningful conclusions. The danger is that research becomes innovation-centric as scholars compete in a gold-rush to study the latest website or technology – and this makes it difficult to make informed judgements about the implications.

6. Friedland *et al.* (2009, 15) draw a useful distinction between the primary (offline) and secondary (online) lifeworlds and discuss how the relations and impacts are becoming stronger.

7. Oldenburg's work is cited regularly in studies of the Internet, but often they do not take into consideration all aspects of his approach which can lead to dangerous misunderstandings (see Soukup's (2006) critique). This article also hopes to help overcome this issue.

8. These characteristics include: place, commerce, access, neutrality, a home away from home and a group of regulars (discussed further below).

9. Oldenburg is critical of the commercialised, bland strip-malls, which he describes as nonplaces.

10. Social networking sites, for example, allow both disparately located real world friends, and broader acquaintances, to stay in touch and share information. But they also allow disconnected geographically close communities to reconnect. For example, in the absence of a viable Third Place (or a lack of desire/resources to visit it) and a broader lack of neighbourly interaction, one person on a street put a note through the doors of the people on their street: "Hello friends and neighbours, I have set up a group on Facebook. I thought this could be a central place where we can share useful information, look out for each other and mind each other's homes when we are away ... anything, really! It's a closed group, so only members will be able to see what is displayed on page. Shelagh (No 3)." While the initial aim was partially instrumental, it has evolved into a discussion space with a range of offline social events. The street covers a range of individuals from a retired 92 year-old to TV stars.

11. One potential issue is that commercial forums must protect their broader business interests. They may, for example, censor messages that criticise these interests; more generally adopt highly restrictive moderation practices because of legal threats such as libel; or define what is relevant to the forum narrowly. For example, Klein and Wardle (2008, 527) cite an example where a moderator in the Big Brother forum closed a thread that debated holiday homes in Wales.

12. Of course, for those interested in how new media impact party campaigning and the like, they remain important and worthy of study. The same is true of Third Places such as pubs: my former local Member of Parliament (Derbyshire Dales) noted that every weekend he would visit a series of pubs and drink half a pint in each and talk with the locals. This was considered an important part of staying in touch with the community and presenting himself as "normal." The impact spread far beyond the pub because people would talk about his presence, though he joked that there was a danger that people thought he was an alcoholic.

13. It also presupposes that 1) people do not have conflicted views on issues – that they do not lean to the right on certain issues and to the left on others and 2) that the political talk in these spaces is just about the issue – be it hunting or gardening – when the history of discussion forum analysis suggests a strong tendency of topic drift.

14. As part of the UK coalition government's Big Society agenda, laws are being proposed to facilitate communities buying their local pub and running it as a not-for-profit venture.

15. Jones and Rafaeli (2000) draw a distinction between more open virtual publics and virtual communities.

16. Similarly, Oldenburg argues that people can lose track of time in third places – it is a sign that they are comfortable. Online, this is widely presented as a danger – even by Oldenburg himself.

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