Agreement and Disagreement in American Social Media Discussions (Evidence from Facebook Discussions on the Second Impeachment of D. Trump)

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to analyze whether agreement and disagreement expressed by participants in political discussions on social media influence the general process of political talk online and its outcome. This study also shows what nature of disagreement expressions prevails in political discussions on the second impeachment of D. Trump on Facebook platforms of politically polarized American mass media. The investigation is mainly based on concepts of deliberative democracy and public sphere formulated by J. Habermas, systemic approach to deliberative democracy proposed by J. Mansbridge. To achieve the goal of study, the authors use content analysis with such categories as opinion expression, interactivity, agreement and disagreement. The article concludes that agreement and disagreement expressed by participants in online conversation have no strong impact on the whole process and outcome of discussing on social media as their extents are minor, but they may influence inner processes of political talk online in different ways. As research revealed, there can be two ways: 1) a certain group of like-minded people is formed that allows to increase a level of interactivity and number of new participants in a discussion thread as people develop thoughts of each other by agreeing and adding new justifications; 2) two and more people with polarized opinions disagree with each other and attract more attention to their discussion thread that raises a level of interactivity. Disagreement in American online discussions on suggested theme can be characterized as more likely civil and justified rather than uncivil and unjustified. It means that such kind of disagreement does not have a destructive impact on political conversation and gives an opportunity for true and genuine deliberation.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing**; • **Collaborative and social computing**; • **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**;

KEYWORDS

Political Conversation, Social Media, Agreement, Disagreement

1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, more and more political communications are observed in the online space as the Internet has flexibility and huge potential to quickly implement a multilateral information exchange on almost the whole planet, which, in turn, facilitates interacting between people. As a result, political science demonstrates a growing number of communication practices of justification between citizens, civil institutions, media and authorities [1–4] in relation to socio-political problems in the public sphere that occur online [5–8]. It is supposed that online political discussions are at the heart of civic culture as citizens learn about opinions of others, discover and discuss current political and social issues, test new ideas, develop and clarify their preferences through participation in them [9]. By everyday political (online) conversations, we understand the processes of public (often unstructured) (online) communication where citizens exchange information, their opinions on current events, social issues, public policy, political campaigns, and government. Political talks habitually do not lead to immediate or direct political actions. However, there is growing evidence that talking about politics online and offline may increase the level of political knowledge, civic engagement, openness and tolerance to different points of view, as well as contribute to changing preferences [10–17].

Today, one of the key institutions of the public sphere is media because, acting as a gatekeeper, they decide which events, actors, agenda issues and disputes will enter the public sphere forming it [18], especially in the Internet space where their capabilities have increased enormously thanks to variety of e-spaces. There are a lot of different digital environments for deliberative practices such as e-deliberation or e-participation platforms, political forums, discussion boards, news websites and social networks [19–23]. However, scientists have a doubt on whether the Internet may foster political talk as an extensive body of deliberative research illustrates that the quality, tone and criteria of political discussions do not correspond to deliberative standards [24–27] formulated by leading theorists of deliberative democracy and democratic deliberation [1, 2, 28–31].

Social media, such as Facebook, gives unintentional access to heterogeneous information which can also lead to political disagreements [32, 33]. The use of social media platforms can allow citizens to learn about the views of other people through their access to diverse information, which is the main value of informal political discussion from the point of deliberative democracy's view [29, 34–36]. Although many people may refrain from unpleasant face-to-face conversations, some works indicate that digital platforms can potentially become a platform for participation in such debates [37–39].

According to works of Esterling, Fung and Lee [40, 41], disagreement is both a condition and a challenge for deliberation, since some citizens may welcome heterogeneous discussions and be open to new knowledge while others may refrain from these debates and become more attached to their own positions. Indeed, this scientific discussion is controversial because some studies show that familiarity with contradictory views can increase people's political knowledge and their willingness to participate in public discussions [15] whereas other studies that take into account the individual level of network size have not revealed a significant relationship between exposure to political disagreements and avoidance of disputes [42–44].

In this study, we examine agreement and disagreement in political conversations on the second impeachment of D. Trump triggered by exposure to political news on Facebook pages of American media outlets and use content analysis where such categories as opinion expression, interactivity, agreement and disagreement are analyzed. Additionally, we investigate the discursive characteristics associated with expressions of disagreement, since its character may have an impact on process of political online talk and its outcome.

Primary RQ: How do agreement and disagreement expressed by participants in American Facebook discussions on the second impeachment of D. Trump influence the process of political talk online and its outcome?

H1: Agreement and disagreement expressed by participants in American Facebook discussions on the second impeachment of D. Trump do not influence the whole political conversation and its outcome.

Secondary RQ: How can disagreement in American Facebook discussions on the second impeachment of D. Trump be characterized in the terms of civility/incivility and justification?

H2: Disagreement in American political talk on Facebook about the second impeachment of D. Trump can be characterized as more likely civil and justified rather than uncivil and unjustified.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Our research is based on a few theoretical approaches: concept of public sphere and theory of deliberative democracy proposed by J. Habermas, systemic approach to deliberative democracy formulated by J. Mansbridge.

The deliberative theory of Jurgen Habermas plays a huge role in deliberative studies as his deliberative model of democracy is based on various forms of communication, continuous and maximally broad political discourse in society where the results are determined by the power of arguments [30]. The concept implies that true problems of society, directions of their solution and optimal ways

to achieve goals are identified in the course of collective reflection. Although at present the basic Habermasian concept of deliberation is criticized for being particularly impracticable even in the most developed democracies and divorced from policy development in the real world, where negotiations, not disputes, seem to be the most predominant method of dispute resolution [45].

Turning to the concept of (online) deliberation, which is the center of deliberative democracy concepts, researchers note that there is no unified definition [46], but most of them are sure that citizens participating in the discussion process should make political decisions based on arguments in support or refutation of certain proposals. In our study, we define deliberation as a process of public, mutual, purposeful, reasoned, rational, respectful and equal discussion between citizens with the predominance of a dialogical form of communication aimed at solving common problems and reaching consensus [47].

The area of online deliberative practices has become one of the central research agenda that covers a variety of directions. For instance, comparisons between face-to-face and online deliberation [53]; the use of online consultations [48–53]; moderation and the design of forums [54–57]; the extent to which forums facilitate contact between opposing perspectives [37, 58, 59]; and the effects of online deliberation on civic engagement [60]. One of the most popular research lines belongs to studying informal political (online) talk through the lens of deliberative ideals.

There is a logical question about the distinction between formal deliberation and everyday political talk. Firstly, we indicate on differences of these concepts and, secondly, look at their hierarchy according to systemic approach to deliberative democracy. For many scholars, deliberation is a normative concept which is guided by the principle of rationality based on a set of norms and rules oriented towards the common good aimed at achieving a rationally motivated consensus [9]. However, this kind of deliberation seems inappropriate for the everyday commutative spaces of the public sphere as they are not organized for formal objectives. As a result, political talk that emerges in these spaces is informal, often spontaneous and unstructured. Unlike deliberation within public decision-making bodies, everyday political talk is not necessarily aimed at decision-making or other forms of political action, but rather is frequently expressive in nature [61].

Speaking about hierarchy, at the core of the deliberative system, according to Mansbridge [61], are the structured deliberations that occur within institutions (national courts, parliaments, civil service departments). Around the core and linked with it are conversations between constituents and government officials, and conversations in political parties, interest groups, and the media. The model's third ring consists of the still less deliberative everyday discussions among political activists, attentive publics and general publics, a form of political talk that is essential to the system's democratic character.

The Internet and social networks have generated new «hybrid media systems»that have expanded the number and types of actors who are potentially able to shape the political discourse and agenda [62, 63]. Therefore, the rise of digital platforms makes the scholars research who sets the political agenda in networked environments. Despite a great quantity of media studies dedicated to the questions

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Table 1: Online discussions on the second impeachment of D. Trump on media outlets' Facebook pages

Sources	Liberal		Conservative	
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News
Article name, material	As House votes to impeach him, Trump's focus shifts to brand rehabilitation	Impeached, Again	Impeachment trial won't begin until after Trump leaves office	House meets to debate article of impeachment against President Donald Trump
Post time	14.01.2021 (3:12)	14.01.2021 (16:50)	13.01.2021 (22:15)	13.01.2021
Number of likes	1100	4800	427	7100
Number of reposts	3	81	33	0
Number of comments	504	654	281	904

of perception of social media messages [64, 65], effects of exposure to news media on social media discussions [66], interaction between politicians and the public on social media [67], there is still no full and detailed understanding of the social media role in agenda setting. In our research, we do not focus on the role of social networks in agenda setting, but it can be investigated using the same empirical material in the future.

3 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The empirical material for analysis consists of Facebook discussions on the second impeachment of Donald Trump in connection with attempted capture of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The topic is relevant for this study as it causes strong polarization which probably may be observed in opinion expression, disagreement and its uncivil character. Facebook pages of the leading print and television American media were taken as data sources because there are active discussions in terms of users' interaction, their expression of positions, number of comments, argumentation.

Traditionally, American media are differentiated according to their supporting one of two leading parties – the Democrats or the Republicans. This criterion was put into our sampling. As a result, we chose four media outlets according to their political affiliation with two leading parties. The first group is represented by conservative Washington Times and Fox News, the second one is by liberal New York Times and MSNBC. The news about the second impeachment of D. Trump were posted on 13-14 of January 2021, so we accounted only comments made during this short period of time. A total of 2,343 comments were analyzed (see Table 1). The discussion materials were collected between 1 and 3 of February 2021 with usage of parsing and uploaded to Excel spreadsheets. When encoding discussions, the following data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet: author ID, link to the author, author's first and last name, author's gender, link to the author's image, link to the comment, date and time of the comment, comment text and the number of likes to the comment.

To achieve the goals of our investigation, we used systematic content analysis [68] with a coding scheme broadly inspired by prior research [69, 70]. The comments were coded according to such categories as opinion expression, argumentation, target of interaction (interactivity), agreement, disagreement, civility and incivility.

Opinion is as an expression of the individual's belief about what/how the world is.

Target of interaction (interactivity) identifies whether the message is a direct reply to a previous comment (using a reply feature or mentioning someone else's name). To determine interactivity, it is needed to divide a number of participants' requests to each other's posts, mentions of each other (with name or without it) by total number of posts.

Agreement is a supportive signal with something a prior speaker said. The presence of agreement encourages an affinity between different users and enhances rational evaluation of a user's argumentation [71]. Agreement includes a comment that contains an explicitly or implicitly expressed agreement with the statements of other users [38].

Disagreement is a statement that signals opposition with something a prior speaker said. It includes a comment contains an explicitly or implicitly expressed disagreement with the statements of other users [38]. The presence of disagreement is a crucial condition for deliberation which needs clashes of various points of view and diverse perspectives to be fruitful and avoid cognitive errors and biases [72, 73]. Moreover, reaction to disagreement manifests users' attitudes towards other opinions and willingness to achieve common understanding. The messages are coded as disagreement when they (1) diverge with the general tone of the discussion (considering the previous message in a thread as the baseline), which indicates heterogeneity in the thread or (2) explicitly diverge from another commenter in the form of either name tagging or reply. If two comments criticized one thing and another commenter subsequently defended it, this message was coded as disagreement. Besides such phrases as "I disagree," "I'm not sure about that" "That's not right", a statement of opposition may repeat part of the prior speaker's thoughts while changing small elements to signal disagreement.

There can be different types of disagreement that are needed to be fixed. First, disagreement can be a) justified, coded as any remark that revealed a commenter's take on a topic without any elaboration and (b) unjustified, coded when there is any explanation or elaboration to substantiate an opinion. Second, disagreement can be classified as civil or uncivil. An uncivil expression is never polite. Incivility was classified using such subcategories as mockery, disdain, dismissive or pejorative language, profanity, and personal

Table 2: Attitude to D. Trump and his second impeachment (in percentage)

Sources	Liberal		Conservative	
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News
For	2	24	71	66
Against	98	76	29	34

Data summarizing attitudes expressed on the platforms of liberal and conservative media outlets separately				
For	13		68,5	
Against	87		31,5	

Overall results
For D. Trump and against his second impeachment (40,75)
Against D. Trump and for his second impeachment (59,25)

Table 3: Interactivity, quantities of participants and comments (in percentage).

Sources	Liberal	Conservative		
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News
	14	34	41	16
Number of participants	442	466	198	752
Number of comments				
	504	654	281	904

Overall interactivity on the platforms of liberal and conservative media outlets separately	
24	28,5

attacks (e.g., referring to personality, ideas, or arguments). An expression of civil disagreement may be bold or polite that makes analysis more complicated as two concepts are related, although they are not the same. We were guided by prior research on expressions of disagreement from Kuo (1994) [74], Pomerantz (1984) [75], Rendle-Short (2007) [76], Stromer-Galley (2015). We considered polite expressions of disagreement to be those that softened the disagreement through phrases such as well, but, and I agree, but. These phrases are forms of predisagreement that occur prior to the actual expression of disagreement. They demonstrate the preference for agreement in that they delay disagreement [77]. Bold expressions of disagreement were those that lacked such hedges: I disagree, no, you're wrong. As they may have the effect of showing disrespect, we limited our analysis by not placing value claims on the expressive work participants are doing.

4 FINDINGS

The main category to be analyzed first was opinion expression. Our analysis showed that, generally, the majority of online discussions' participants (59,25%) supports D. Trump's second impeachment and negatively react on actions and personality of 45th American president whereas only 40,75% of people are in favor of D. Trump and against his second impeachment (see Table 2). As for media identity, it was expected that more people (87%) taking part in the discussions on Facebook pages of liberal media are against Trump and for his second impeachment while near 2/3 people (68,5%)

participating in the discussions on Facebook pages of conservative media express support for D. Trump and disagree with his second impeachment. Overall, the more negative attitude to Trump was demonstrated on liberal media outlets' platforms.

After identifying public opinion expression, we analyzed interactivity in the Facebook discussions as this indicator may help partly predict the approximate proportions of agreeing and disagreeing in online conversations (see Table 3).

As a result, we observed not highly interactive online discussions (less than 50%) that can be explained by the fact that people come to talk on social media for talk's sake. It means they prefer reading news, leaving a comment rather than interacting with others and coming to general conclusion/deliberative outcome. It is also significant to take into account the quantities of comments and participants as not all communicators scroll the comments under posts and read till the end, in particular when there is a plethora of comments. Moreover, intensiveness of posting news, their time, quality, topicality and other characteristics like quantities of likes, reposts have an impact on the level of interactivity. Analysis of interactivity on platforms of different media outlets showed that discussions on conservative media Facebook pages demonstrated a higher degree of interactivity rather than discussions on liberal media Facebook pages.

Analyzing a connection of interactivity with extents of agreement and disagreement, we concluded that the more interactivity in the discussion, the more extents of agreement and disagreement

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Table 4: Presence of agreement and disagreement (in percentage)

Sources	Liberal		Conservative	
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News
Agreement	2,2	2,3	5,7	2,7
Disagreement	0,6	2,8	2,8	0,5
Both agreement and disagreement	2,8	5,1	8,5	3,2
No agreement and disagreement	97,2	94,9	91,5	96,8

Table 5: Character of disagreement in terms of civility/incivility (in percentage)

Sources	Liberal	Conservative			
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	Overall data
Civil disagreement	66,7	83,3	100	80	82,5
Polite disagreement	100	83,3	25	0	52,1
Bold disagreement	0	16,7	75	100	47,9
Uncivil disagreement	33,3	16,7	0	20	17,5

can be there. In fact, The New York Times had 34% of interactivity, 5,1% of agreement and disagreement presence and The Washington Times had 41% of interactivity, 8,5% of agreement and disagreement presence whereas MSNBC had 14%, 2,8% and Fox – 16%, 3,2% respectively (see Table 4). However, the percentage of agreement and disagreement was not relevant, in particular disagreement.

As extents of agreement and disagreement were determined, we continued our analysis and focused on character of disagreement in terms of such categories as civil (bold/polite)/uncivil, justified/unjustified. As a result, there were more civil disagreements rather than uncivil ones (see Table 5) that characterizes American discussions more from positive side. As a prospect, such a feature may open a road for authentic deliberation where disagreement does not influence reaching consensus, but it is a considerable part of deliberative process. We illustrate a few examples of civil/uncivil disagreements.

There were more justified than unjustified disagreements (see Table 6). Unjustified disagreement, as a rule, stopped a conversation between participants as a deliberative process supposes an exchange of arguments that may move a discussion forward and expand intellectual horizons of communicators. Thus, we may confirm our second hypothesis. Indeed, disagreement in American political talk on Facebook about the second impeachment of D. Trump can be characterized as more likely civil and justified rather than uncivil and unjustified. Some examples are revealed below.

There are a few examples of agreement and disagreement (civil/uncivil; justified/unjustified) from The Washington Post's discussion (agreement, bold/justified and polite/justified disagreement) and MSNBC's discussion (uncivil/unjustified disagreement).
– *Lori Beall Schuler*: Brett Binford **I totally agree** with you. Just saying they probably will try. Hoping enough people stand up to her though, because she'll go full throttle as last updates say that she has not backed down. **(Agreement)**– *David Rauscher*: Lori

Table 6: Character of disagreement in terms of justification (in percentage)

Sources	Liberal	Conservative			
	MSNBC	The New York Times	The Washington Times	Fox News	Overall data
Justified disagreement	33,3	66,7	37,5	80	54,4
Unjustified disagreement	66,7	33,3	62,5	20	45,6

Beall Schuler **no but they can waste the citizens money over n over and over again**. **(Bold, justified disagreement)**– *Lori Beall Schuler*: David Rauscher **yeah for real, but** they won't have to now **because** the house just voted to impeach. **(Polite, justified disagreement)**– *Ryan Hanseen*: Jeff Moore he's an actor and hung out with the global elite his entire life.
– *Jeff Moore*: Ryan Hanseen Oh, **of course you are right,** they all loved him. He was the globalist favorite. Deep state wanted him in asap. Good bloody grief. **(Agreement, a group of like-minded people)**– *Ryan Hanseen*: Jeff Moore **ya because** a group as powerful as the deep state would totally not have the power to rig elections. **(Agreement, a group of like-minded people)**– *Greg Brown*: Jeff Moore, **that's it exactly**. That's what it's been about for four years now. **(Agreement, a group of like-minded people)** – *Scotty Shapiro*: The Senate will not convict. President Trump will run for office again in 2022 for Senator or governor and definitely run for president again in 2024

– *Jossue Castellanos*: **you're delusional** lol **(Uncivil and unjustified indirect disagreement)**Summarizing the results of this section, we managed to see how different in a linguistic and communicative way can be expressions of agreement and disagreement, what value they may present both for deliberators and scholars. In general, agreement and disagreement expressed by participants in American Facebook discussions on the second impeachment of D. Trump do not have an influence on the whole political conversation as their extents are insignificant. There can be some impacts that we may notice inside of political talk, but there is no relevant impact on the outcome of discussion. Thus, both hypotheses (H1, H2) were confirmed.

5 DISCUSSION

The investigation requires further verification and interpretation of results and more detailed attention to research problematic as this is our first research on agreement and disagreement in online discussions. The first limitation is methodology which should be improved in order to understand how such different categories as opinion expression, interactivity, participatory equality, argumentation, civility, incivility, agreement and disagreement may correlate with each other, especially how opinion polarization and communicative culture of participants may influence deliberative agreement and disagreement, and vice versa.

In this study, we identified opinion expression, target of interactivity, extents of agreement and disagreement, nature of disagreement. It is relevant to figure out how external indicators such as opinion expression and interactivity may predict the prevalence of agreement or disagreement in a political conversation, how participants may stimulate agreeing and disagreeing and how these processes influence an entire deliberative process. We managed to gain some results; however, more investigations must be conducted to define the objectiveness and validity of outcomes. Our research may continue development of ideas and methodological approaches touched in the following works of J. Stromer-Galley and P. Muhlberger (2009), J. Stromer-Galley, L. Bryant, and B. Bimber (2015), R. C.M. Maia, G. Hauber, T. Choucair, and N. J. Crepalde (2020).

The second limitation is empirical material. It would be a good idea to analyze material that has a practical sense and impact on processes of decision-making in countries with different political regimes as reaching consensus, agreement and disagreement among people there seem to be more significant. Political online talk about the second impeachment of D. Trump on Facebook is extremely curious, although it has no key deliberative component – achieving consensus or decision-making. This is an example of problem which cannot be solved by ordinary citizens. The only thing they can do is to talk about it. There were political conversations that contained small groups of participants interacting and arguing with each other, but they did it without basic deliberative purpose. On the one hand, we could observe and study their communicative behaviors and strategies of (dis)agreement. On the other hand, the results are not exceedingly relevant, but represent basis for further solid research. The four articles chosen are not representative, but there was no aim to select representative news for this research. Nevertheless, it

can be considered as one of limitations in the study and taken into account in the future investigation.

The third limitation that can be eliminated in the future is a character of analyzing method. In this study, we had to use a manual method for accounting the opinion expression as machine method is at a stage of testing and improving. Nevertheless, we can mention our own experiment conducted in 2019 as an example of using ML possibilities for research on Internet discourse [78]. The experiment was related to deep learning in the text classification field. As a result, our network model learned to predict the position of participants ("for", "against" or "neutral") in discussions in relation to such an acute socio-political topic as the Russian pension reform. An automated tool was developed for the study of Internet discourses based on recurrent neural networks with an LSTM block (RNN+LSTM). For binary classification ("for" and "against») the accuracy rate was 89%. For triple classification ("for", "against", "neutral") the accuracy rate was 78%. For a more detailed description of the experiment, these works can be seen [79, 80]. The experiment showed that ML is a reliable and easy-to-use tool for analyzing the content of discussions on the Internet and understanding their intended meaning in semantic terms. Research in this area needs to be continued in order to offer solutions for the use of AI. Thus, the results of any public discussions will be understood better.

6 CONCLUSION

Overall, our research allowed us to answer primary and secondary research questions. We may suppose that agreement and disagreement have no strong impact on the whole process and outcome of political conversation as there is not much presence of these deliberative conditions. Although they may influence some inner processes of political talk online in different ways. As our investigation revealed, there can be two ways. The first one is that a certain group of like-minded people is formed. Such a formation allows to increase a level of interactivity and number of new participants in a discussion thread as people develop thoughts of each other by agreeing and adding new justifications. The second one is that two and more people with polarized opinions disagree with each other and attract more attention to their discussion thread that, eventually, leads to raise of interactivity level (primary RQ). Therefore, thanks to analysis of interactivity level, it is possible to anticipate approximate extents of agreement and disagreement. The main category is opinion expression that may indicate on level of interactivity. The more polarized opinions in a political conversation, the more interactivity of participants can be observed as their claims and positions may clash or facilitate to creation of like-minded people's groups. These moments should be analyzed more profoundly in the future.

Disagreement in American online discussions on example of the second impeachment of D. Trump can be characterized as more likely civil and justified rather than uncivil and unjustified (secondary RQ). In further research, it would be a step forward to define how disagreement is associated with incivility and intolerance in different digital environments where citizens can debate politics. Disagreement is an important component of deliberation. However, justification of disagreement is more valuable for deliberation as it may have beneficial outcomes for participants – new knowledge,

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experience and change of mind. Thus, various types of reasoning can be investigated in the upcoming study. For a future research, it would be interesting to analyze whether there is a change in positioning based on the discussions held in the social networks or whether the discussions only serve to reinforce their positions. It would also be good to analyze how socio-demographic issues impact the discussion and expand the analysis to other social networks in order to see if the hypotheses are confirmed.

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