

Online Political Discussions in the Balance: On the Costs and Benefits to Participating Individuals

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1 Introduction

Many of us who have used the internet, have participated in online political discussions. But why did we do this? In economic terms, contributing to such forums is irrational. Online discussions are unlikely to significantly affect the behaviour of other voters, let alone that of politicians. But even if they would, such effects are even less likely to flow back to the original contributor, and to benefit him or her significantly. In this essay we will therefore try to clarify why people would want to contribute to online political discussion forums.

We will begin by defining what we mean here by forums, and by setting out some limits of this essay. Then we will formulate and accounting strategy that is suitable for the motivational landscape. Once this groundwork has been done, we will analyse first the costs, and then the benefits, derived from online political discussions. Finally we will discuss some ways of making sense of our findings, and conclude that, if we take a view broader

than the merely economic one, then participation in on-line political forums can be worth the costs, at least for some individuals. It all hinges on whether one accepts the real value of psychological benefits in ones calculations.

1.1 Forums

The archetype of the on-line discussion forum as considered here, is a Web-based bulletin-board that provides for written, thread-based (topics-posts, with a tree of comments underneath, chronologically ordered) conversations. It hosts discussions on a particular topic, such as electronic voting or the war in Iraq. Such forums being topic-oriented, generally means that they mostly comprise of people that have never met, are open to newcomers, anonymous / pseudonymous contributions, and are international to some extent. Systems that are very similar in terms of structure and being topic-oriented, are: usenet groups, unmoderated mailing-lists, group-blogs, and certain news-sites, such as Slashdot and Hacker News.

Other systems that are quite popular nowadays, but different, are Twitter and Facebook (especially the wall and the Quora application). What makes these different is that they are ego-oriented, and (for most users) overlap with a very large portion of their offline social network (including co-workers, ones supervisor/boss, and siblings), thus leading to very different cost-benefit dynamics. Arguing that every software platform brings its own dynamics, as in ‘the platform is the politics’, to paraphrase McLuhan, goes too far. While at the same time assuming no differences would harm clarity. Therefore we make the distinction between topic- and ego-oriented platforms, and will, to maintain focus, not further discuss the latter here.

1.2 Limits

We take a purely analytical approach in this essay, and no new data has been gathered for it. In addition we will not merely be taking an economic perspective, but will also consider psychological and social effects. For reasons of space, we will only make up the balance for the individual contributing to the forum. Though highly important, benefits to others, nations, or humanity, will not be taken into account where separate from those to the individual.

2 Accounting

In accounting for costs and benefits we can make a couple of distinctions. First of all, we can separate direct and indirect effects. Direct effects affect the individual immediately. Examples are time spent, costs incurred, and transitions between psychological states. Indirect effects are for example, influence on policy through affecting the opinions of others, or deriving monetary benefits that are dependent on ones reputation. Indirect effects are hard to account for, because the chains of interactions that are involved, make them hard to predict.

A similar, but different distinction is that between costs and benefits in the short and long term. An example of long-term benefits associated with political discussions, is, for example, that people who engage in political discussions become better informed voters.^{7,19,14,29} While short term effects are often direct, and long-term effects often indirect, they differ along different axis. What is shared by indirect and long-term effects, however, is that they are both less certain. In economic terms this is translated by multiplying their value by their probability (smaller than 1), making them less valuable. Therefore, and for the sake of brevity, in our accounting, we will collapse the axis of directness and timeli-

ness into that of certainty: almost certain, and remotely possible effects.

Secondly, in order to form a complete picture, we should not only look at economic costs and benefits, but also consider psychological ones. Psychological aspects are normally brought into the equation when people try to build successful online communities (even in commercial settings), so there is no reason why they should not be taken into account when the question is approached from the other end: what the costs and benefits are for users.^{4,10,32}

Table 1 summarises the main distinctions we will make, in a balance-sheet: with in (benefits) and out (costs) in the columns, and certain and possible effects in the rows. Aspects with direct market-value will be added in bold, while those without will be entered in italics.

Table 1: *Balance-sheet for costs and benefits of contributing to online forums*

Probability	In (benefits)	Out (costs)
Certain	with market-value <i>without direct market-value</i>	
Possible		

3 Costs

When we think of costs, the first thing that comes to mind is money, and the resources it can buy. And this indeed comes into the equation, as in order to be able to partake in forum-discussions, one will need a computer (or other internet enabled device) and an internet-connection. In addition, the computer needs to be powered by electricity as well. But assuming that very few people buy a computer specifically to engage in on-line discussions (rather for work or school), and that electricity is quite cheap, then the monetary costs of forum-discussions are very minor, at least in the West.

Another cost is visibility, or ones reputation. Online discussions are more visible (searchable) and permanent (often archived) than offline ones. Even if one writes anonymously or under a pseudonym (but most participants use their real names), IP-addresses are generally logged, and therefore a trace to a specific machine, and thus home-address, always remains (even if only known to the ISP).¹⁶ In unfree societies such as China and Iran, and in the low probability case of the obliteration of civil liberties, or somebody becoming a figure of great interest to the media, the potential damage could be enormous. More modest costs, such as lost career oppor-

tunities (if candidates are googled), could be imagined as well.

A third set of costs are in the psychological domain. Things such as overcoming a recurrent writers-block, or ones fear of public speaking (even if in the virtual realm) would be examples of minor costs. Ones peace of mind, say if one ended up in a flame-war (contention with negative emotions and ad-hominems dominating the exchange), or became the target of a troll (an on-line bully, or other negative type) could be more serious. In a study done by Preece, on why people lurk (regularly read a forum without posting), this was found to be an important deterrent to posting.²⁵ In addition, when trying to save face in case of a flame-war, but probably more in general as well, people sometimes can be drawn into forum-discussions against their will. Which could be seen as a cost as well.

Finally, the greatest, and most predictable cost of participating in forums, is the time that people spend doing it, whether at home or at work. An important thing to note here, is that not everybody values their time equally. Some people are simply busier than others, or have access to more profitable alternative endeavours. In economics this is conceptualized as opportunity costs: the relative loss incurred by not taking the best (alternative) opportunity. In a study by Prasarnphanich, on moti-

vations for people to contribute to Wikipedia, for example, not only a wide range of motivations was found, but also a wide range of available resources, especially in terms of time.²⁴ In addition, P. Muhlberger found that home-owners, and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds (controlling for their greater access to the internet) were less likely to contribute to on-line forums in 2003; suggesting that they would consider their time to be more valuable.²¹ Though different valuations of benefits might also come into it.

Adding all the costs, most of which do have market value, to our balance-sheet, results in table 2.

Table 2: *Balance-sheet for costs and benefits of contributing to online forums: costs*

Probability	In (benefits)	Out (costs)
Certain		equipment electricity time <i>involvement</i>
Possible		reputation safety <i>peace of m.</i>

4 Benefits

In terms of benefits, we first of all have the rewards often associated with political activity, such as changing peoples opinions, and ulti-

mately exerting influence on policy. While such an effect could be present (over time), it most likely is also very small. D. Green, and others have argued that even voting is irrational, because of the tiny or nonexistent leverage of each vote (especially in uneven states of district systems).^{6,13} Thus effects that depend on convincing a small group of strangers on a forum to change their votes, will likely be even smaller.^{3,19} This even though there have been some high-profile exceptions.^{5,8} In addition, social benefits, in terms of strengthening ones community by seeking agreement with each others political views, is also likely to be small or nonexistent. This because topic-oriented web-forums generally don't serve offline communities. So not engaging in debate and/or choosing a community that already matches ones political views, should be easier than arguing with them.^{26,30}

A theory that is often brought in, in order to explain motivations, is Maslovs pyramid of human needs. In which people are motivated on five levels, from physical needs such as food and sex, all the way up to self-actualisation. Maslovs theory has received much criticism, especially in terms of counter-examples ranging from starving artists to internet-addicts going without sleep and food for days.^{9,20} Even though these are valid counter-examples, they still are rare ex-

ceptions. The idea of people turning to on-line communities in search of self-expression and self-actualisation, seems not that far fetched. Especially given that most people are in jobs that don't offer much room for this. An argument similar to Maslovs was made by A. Kim, of how talented individuals are motivated to take on the roles of elders in on-line communities, sharing their knowledge, and guarding community-culture.¹⁵

In other domains than political discussions, such as Free / Open Source Software (FOSS) or contributions to Wikipedia, we find mysteries of motivation as well.^{34,23} A. Hars looked at self-reported motivations to contribute to FOSS projects, and found that in terms of intrinsic motivations, self-determination (80%), sense of community (28%), and altruism (16%) were considered the most important motivators.¹² While the most important extrinsic motivations were human-capital (learning, 88%), peer-recognition (43%) and self-marketing (37%). Finally many wanted to use what they had made themselves (39%).³¹ For Wikipedia, similar findings were made, with some differences in emphasis (intrinsic factors were more important, with a relatively larger emphasis on community).^{1,33}

While not all of these motivations are applicable to on-line communities, it is not hard to find substantial overlaps with on-line dis-

cussions about political issues. For example, self-determination is an important notion in politics, and politically active people have a sense of it.¹⁸ So it would be odd if this played no role in on-line political discussions. In addition it was found that, as in Wikipedia, people participating in on-line forums often experience a sense-of community. Altruism, in terms of defending reason, rights, or civil liberties is also a common political motivation. Peer-recognition, and recognition for ones standpoints could also be an important motivator, especially to those without many other outlets for these. Finally, many people derive a sense of satisfaction from seeing their thoughts in recorded writing, even if their works are hardly read, so forum-posts could be satisfying in this way as well.

Another type of psychological state that is often reported by FOSS contributors (and authors, as well as people surfing the web), is a state of flow.²² It consists of being so absorbed in an activity, that one loses track of time, and has a reduced sense of self (loss of self-consciousness). Activities that require skill, speed, focussed attention, are somewhat challenging, and can lead to arousal, are generally associated with this. Though forum-discussions are quite mellow most of the time, they could fit this profile for those involved, in the heat of a debate.

Thus pending further research, it seems likely that psychological rewards play a major role on forums. The costs and benefits can be seen in summarised in table 3.

Table 3: *Balance-sheet for costs and benefits of contributing to online forums: costs and benefits*

Probability	In (benefits)	Out (costs)
Certain	<i>publication</i>	equipment
	<i>actualisation</i>	electricity
	<i>self-det.</i>	time
	<i>flow</i>	<i>involvement</i>
Possible	policy infl.	reputation
	<i>community</i>	safety
	<i>recognition</i>	<i>peace of m.</i>

5 Discussion

As can be seen in table 3, while offering one indirect, but uncertain reward with market-value, most of the direct benefits of forum-discussions are tied to psychological rewards. On the other hand, most of the certain costs seem to have a market-value. This leads us to a situation in which, if we only look at the bold items in the balance, then, from this economic perspective, contribution to forums seems irrational. While from the psychological perspective (italics), participation seems more sensible.

Instead of one $B * P - C * P$ calculation

(benefits times their probability, minus the costs times their probability), we have two; an economic one ($B * P - C * P$), and a mirrored, psychological one ($B * P - C * P$). The issue of how to make their values commensurate, and combine them, remains complicated. A not very satisfactory solution is to note that: on a daily basis we all balance a lot of different values against each other, and come to supposedly sensible choices between them. For at least some, these work out in favour of forums. However this observation does not clarify much.

A more fruitful approach might be to compare contributing to forums to peoples behaviour simpler cases in which irrational behaviour is observed. A good example of such a simple case, are lotteries. As any economist can tell you, tickets for commercial lotteries are, on average, always a net loss to the buyer (or the lottery would not be able to make a profit). So then why do people buy tickets? One way to look at this, could be to argue with K. Hardoon, that people are simply bad at correctly valuing positive outcomes with very low probabilities. Which leads to a psychological over-valuation of the lottery ticket.¹¹ It is easy to draw parallels from this, to voting and on-line discussions, which also involve tiny probabilities (and negligible leverage).¹³

Yet what if we tried to value the psycholog-

ical benefits of owning a lottery ticket?: Intangible benefits such as the excitement felt just before the draw, or the cozy daydreams about what one could do if one would win the money?¹⁷ If we are willing to assume that the average actor is rational, then we can calculate the value of these benefits (minimum value to the average ticket-buyer). Namely as follows: the value of the psychological benefits should be equal to the monetary loss made on each ticket (trusting the market to be efficient, so people running commercial lotteries would maximize their ticket-prices). Performing this calculation for the value of the psychological benefits of forum-participation is an exercise we leave for future research.

Building on this, by accepting the reality of at least some psychological benefits, we can bridge the gap by considering participation in forums as something people derive (real) psychological value from. To speak with R. Stebbins, contributing to forums is thus 'serious leisure'.²⁸ Stebbins has namely found that psychological rewards play an important role in volunteering in other contexts as well. So while the activity in question may be aimed at greater social goods, much of its motivation stems from psychological rewards of the type normally associated with pleasurable, consumptive activities. For forum-discussions the social goods seem to be small, and indirect,

compared to the psychological benefits (including hopes), yet they exist. Thus it seems proper to classify such forum-discussions as a serious leisure activity.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, we discussed the costs and benefits of contributing to online forums. Where forums, as topic-oriented platforms, were set apart from ego-oriented ones, as having a different motivational landscape. Then we looked at costs in terms of resources, putting ones reputation and peace of mind on the line, and as lost time. Differences between people, in terms of their opportunity costs, were also noted. Next we looked at rewards in terms of how on-line forums might offer self-actualisation, and intrinsic, and extrinsic rewards, with a focus on self-determination and community. Psychological rewards appeared to be most important, while costs were mostly economic.

Yet the psychological benefits were argued to be real benefits, which people ultimately value, besides money. So while contributing to on-line forum discussions does not make sense from a narrow economic perspective, if we factor in psychological benefits, it becomes more rational. In further research (and assuming rationality) it would be interesting

to make an informed attempt at calculating the monetary value of these benefits. In addition, it would be interesting to see if the type of platform has an impact on the extent to which people are willing to discuss politics, and especially the extent to which people are more risk-averse on ego-oriented platforms (such as their price on each platform for defending something unpopular).

In closing, the dualistic divide between rational physical productive behaviour, and the psychological world of consumption, seems to be no longer obvious in the context of the internet. Where the costs of involvement have been lowered, such as in FOSS and Wikipedia, this border has already been erased. There is no fundamental reason to expect things to be different for political forums. Especially as we have seen aspects of serious leisure in political movements for centuries. In Ancient Greece, and later in France, during the Ancien Regime, the wealthy argued over ideas and politics in salons. And as Egypt has just been liberated, and the oppressive regime of Iran trembles under popular protests, we can witness the internet lowering the costs of political involvement as we speak, even while great human costs remain as well.

Yet whether economists and dictators alike like it or not, we are, to paraphrase Aristotle, wired to be political animals.

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