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Chapter 3

Examining online discussions

3.1 Introduction

This thesis examines the way difference is dealt with in online debates, focusing on online public discussion on immigration and integration in the Netherlands. In this chapter, I discuss the methodological choices and considerations regarding the empirical research conducted. In examining interactions on web forums, I focus on discussions on immigration and integration, as it is currently an important issue in the Netherlands and dialogue is viewed as alleviating tensions in society. For the purpose of this thesis, immigration can be seen as an exemplary case as it is a contested issue, dealing with the (presumed) differences between the ‘native’ Dutch and those of immigrant descent.

Web forums are chosen to examine how different discourses come together and whether engagement is present. On these sites, interaction is not only *possible* but also generates the main reason for existence of the web space. This is not to say that engagement between discourses is impossible or less likely to occur on non-interactive spaces. I, however, chose to focus on web forums because they are specifically intended for discussion. People can raise issues, publish ideas, and present arguments. Web forums are designed to foster response to posts, even if authors of posts do not always (intend to) get one. After describing these web forums and their main features (section 3.2), a description follows of the choice of forums studied in this thesis (section 3.3). Subsequently, I will discuss the ethical considerations involved in studying communication on web forums (3.4). Section 3.5 provides a description of the main approach to research that is employed to examine in/exclusion of difference in public discussion: critical discourse analysis. The last part of the chapter introduces the research design and briefly discusses the methods used to answer each of the four research sub-questions identified in the Introduction. In the chapters that report on the empirical analyses (Chapters 4–7), I provide a more detailed description of the methods used and the specific types of analyses conducted.

3.2 Web forums

The analysis in this research focuses on discussions on immigration that take place on websites that use a specific format to enable discussion and to which debate is central: web forums.¹ Web forums are a specific form of Internet communication, even though they can use differing software formats. It can be defined as ‘an online public discussion area where users exchange ideas and information’ (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 219). There are a number of shared characteristics for this type of discussion: they are public; participants may remain anonymous; the discussions are organized through themes and topics; the discussions are facilitated or moderated; and participants do not have to be online at the same time.

Communication is open to all

Even though there are specific owners of web forums—collectives, individuals, political parties, foundations or media companies—anyone who wants to participate can access the discussion. Depending on the specific forum, a number of discussion features are accessible without registering and logging in. On the forums examined in this thesis, reading the discussion is open to all. Searching within the discussions or accessing the list of participants or their profiles, however, requires registration on most forums. With all forums in the sample, registration is required to initiate a post or reply to one. This registration involves acknowledging the basic rules of the forum and filling out a profile that includes providing a user name (which can be, and in most cases is, a nickname) and a functional e-mail address (to which the password needed for further participation is sent). If one prefers, the address can be made available to other participants of the forum, and is always available to the forum administrators. Other information that may be included in one’s profile is gender, date of birth, country or city of origin, and other personal information, depending on the forum. Some forums also give the opportunity to accompany one’s profile with a picture or signature. Whether or not participants have to register and log in to use other features of the discussion, like searching for key words on the site, viewing someone’s profile and user statistics, is dependent on the web forum.

Communication is (quasi) anonymous

Participants need not give their real name when registering for a forum, so they can participate anonymously if they prefer. However, certain information is available to the forum administrators. First, one has to have a functioning e-mail address, which, of course, does not have to display more specific contact information. Second, the administrators have access to the IP-address, which can then possibly be used to identify an individual.

¹Other names, like web discussion, bulletin board, and conference are also used to describe this specific type of site.

Communication is moderated

On all the forums there is at least one moderator (but on most forums there are several), who has the role of enforcing the rules of the forum (often called 'netiquette'). When a participant's behaviour is perceived to be unacceptable, moderators can deny him/her access to the forum. Such a ban is the ultimate punishment on a forum, but normally only happens after a number of warnings. These participants can, of course, choose to sign in again under a different name. Moderators also edit posts of participants or ask this of the participants when deemed necessary. The process of moderation varies per forum and per moderator. In Chapter 4, the process of moderation and the various differences between the forums will be discussed.

Communication is guided by threads

Discussions online are divided into categories, sub-categories, and 'threads' or topics. For instance, on one of the analysed forums there is a category 'Departments', which is then further divided into sub-categories 'Economy', 'Internal affairs', 'Foreign affairs', and 'Immigration and Integration' (*Weerwoord*). Within these sub-categories, people can start 'threads' or 'topics' such as 'immigration and integration in the media'. A thread is a 'chain of postings on a single subject' (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 219). Participants cannot themselves create new categories, but when registered one can start a new thread. A thread starts with an initial posting, and can be followed up by replies. The number of postings and the order in which the threads are shown varies per forum and can, on most forums, be modified by the readers up to a certain extent; usually a thread has the latest reply on top. The order is thus often dependent on the date of reply instead of the date the thread was started. Icons are often used to either show the status of the thread (for instance, to indicate something is a 'hot topic' or a 'new topic') or to show its nature, according to the initiator of the thread.

Communication is a-synchronous

The web forums are all available 24 hours a day. Threads are only occasionally closed. In theory, discussions have no real ending. This not only means that people can participate in their own time, but also that they can take their time when phrasing their posts.

3.3 Selection of web forums

I examined the discussions on immigration on a number of web forums, selected after a thorough investigation.² The search for relevant web spaces started with a search engine query. To map the issue of immigration as it is represented on websites, I performed a search in August 2003 using a Dutch search engine searching for the words 'immigration', 'immigrant', 'immigrants', 'non-native', 'non-natives', 'asylum seeker' and 'asylum seekers',

²I would like to thank Nicolette Ouwerling for her assistance with the data collection.

using the or-function, which provides Dutch websites containing one or more of these words.

Using search engines for data collection is problematic (see, for instance, Wouters, Hellsten, & Leydesdorff, 2004), as they influence the result; to what extent and in exactly which way is often unknown. After comparing a number of the major search engines, such as *Google*, *Yahoo* and *MSN*, as well as a number of Dutch ones, I decided to use the most frequently used search engine in the Netherlands at that time: *Ilse.nl* (Benjamin, 2002). This decision was based on a comparison of the results, the little information there was on the algorithm or search method, the number and presentation of the results, and the availability of an 'or'-function. Only Dutch-language websites were included on the domains '.nl' and '.net' and '.org' (excluding the Belgian domain).

The search resulted in some 80,000 websites; the first 22 contained six of the seven keywords, 52 contained five, 139 had four, 399, three, and then from 613 to at least 2,000 websites contained two keywords. The search result was saved and the first 2,000 were examined within a month of their collection. The first 100 results were used to refine an earlier draft of a coding scheme, resulting into 15 categories. The first 500 results were then coded, the distribution of which can be found in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: *Distribution of categories of websites referring to immigration*

Web forum	Percent	Valid percent
Educational & research material	17	22
Media, articles, columns	15	19
Non-profit organization	13	17
Political party website, program or statement	13	17
Governmental organization	6	8
Personal homepage	4	5
Discussion forum	3	4
Religious groups	3	4
Local/regional group	2	3
Other political movement	1	1
Starting page immigrants & ethnic minorities [†]	1	1
Asylum seekers as minor part of other theme	6	—
Not relevant	8	—
Can't open/doesn't exist anymore	8	—

[†] A 'start pagina (starting page)' is a Dutch term for websites that are centred around a specific theme and which provides links to websites dealing with that theme. This can be for instance 'Islam', or 'politics in general' or 'Pim Fortuyn'. They are not necessarily centred on political themes; they also deal with holidays or health, for instance.

For a large part, the websites represented 'mainstream' voices also represented offline: the media, non-profit organizations, political parties and governmental organizations (61% of the coded web pages; excluding the non-relevant pages and those only indirectly referring

to asylum seeking and immigration). The largest category constituted information related to education or research (22%). Only a few of these 500 websites represented individual citizens, such as personal web pages and discussion forums. I acknowledge, though, that no general conclusions can be drawn from these data, and this was not the aim of the search; this initial coding and examination of 2,000 websites only aimed to identify relevant discussion sites. Following the links of these websites as well as those provided on so-called starting pages, more websites were examined.

To locate discussions on the issue of immigration, I specifically looked for websites where people discuss the *political* side of the issue. This is not to say that organizations that provide information for asylum seekers regarding legal procedures are not part of the political realm, but these do not fall within the focus of my research. Seven large Dutch web forums were selected for further analysis: *Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, *Politiekdebat*, *Terdiscussie* and *Weerwoord* (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: *Types of forums*

Forum	# users	# posts	Type of discussion forum
Fok	–	33954,358 [†]	Diverse topics, sub forum ‘politics’
Maghrebonline	3,947	91,324	Specifically aimed at Dutch Moroccans, diverse topics
Maroc	49,346	2184,589	Specifically aimed at Dutch Moroccans, diverse topics
Nieuwrechts [‡]	–	–	Linked to political party (political orientation extreme right-wing)
Politiekdebat	1,004	25,524	Aimed at discussing politics
Terdiscussie	688	210,159	Mainly aimed at discussing politics
Weerwoord	1,939	228,053	Mainly aimed at discussing politics

[†] The sub forum on politics has 995,764 posts.

[‡] The web host of the website of *Nieuwrechts* has closed off the site (supposedly because of financial reasons). On the new site there is no discussion forum.

This sample of forums is the result of the initial examination of online discussions, and includes some of the most popular web forums (in terms of the number of readers and postings) in the Netherlands. They represent more right-wing orientated (*Nieuwrechts* and *Fok*) and left-of-centre orientated websites (*Weerwoord*), as well as specific ethnic minority websites (*Maghrebonline* and *Maroc*), forums that are designed specifically for the discussion of politics (*Terdiscussie* and *Politiekdebat*) and general discussion forums (*Fok*, for instance) in which political discussion is just one issue among many.

3.4 Ethical considerations in studying web forums

There are a number of considerations that should be taken into account when using data from these forums. The main question is whether it is ethical to use data available (pub-

licly) online without informing the participants about such use of their communications. Should one attempt to obtain consent of all participants included in the research? Should the researcher, when quoting the online posts, refer to the original author, thereby crediting him/her?³

Hewson et al. (2003: 53) take on the position that researchers can use the 'data that have been deliberately and voluntarily made available in the public Internet domain (including on the www and in newsgroups) (...), providing anonymity is ensured.' The question is: When is something 'deliberately and voluntarily made available' online? This depends on the expectations of the participants of online communication. Here, two positions can be distinguished: the view that Internet research involves studying human subjects in space that should be protected, and the view that online interactions concern 'texts' and 'authors' (Basset & O'Riordan, 2002). First, the human subject being studied needs to be protected from harm and should not be involved in research without his/her knowledge and consent. The latter perspective considers online texts to be authored and made available deliberately and voluntarily. They are *published* as, for instance, a letter to the editor is published.

The expectations are paramount in determining the status of online communication and the ethics of using the data (Ess, 2002). Elgesem (2002) suggests that also the nature of the information (specifically its sensitivity) should be taken into account as this affects the expectations users will have. The expectations of participants of online discussions should thus inform the researcher as to whether an online space could be considered public or private. This study takes the web forums analysed in this thesis to be public spaces. More than that, they are examined in this thesis precisely because they are considered to be part of the *public* sphere. They are open to all, both with regard to reading and to writing. Moreover, I assume the participants of the web forums hold the same expectations. The forums they choose to participate in distinguish themselves by the fact that they have a large, heterogeneous, public, are aimed at discussion, and the participants actively seek to be read and responded to by others. I believe Mann & Stewart (2000: 46) are right when they argue that the online contributions are public acts that are deliberately intended for public consumption.

This is not to say that interactions on these forums are never private. Between different forums and even *within* forums the interactions can differ in nature. People use the same spaces to have more 'private conversations' and to publicly discuss public matters; the status it is given can vary per interaction. In this thesis, I only include those interactions that are public, precisely because they are public (see also: Lee, 2000). I examine *public* discussion, rather than private conversations online.

There is another issue to take into account. According to the position of Hewson et al. (2003), public online data can be used, but if and only if the anonymity of participants is ensured. So, we can analyse and use the data, but we have to make sure that the authors of

³For an overview of the ethical considerations when conducting online research see, for instance: Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel (2003); Lee (2000) and the special issue of *Ethics and Information Technology* 2002, 4(3).

the texts cannot be identified. This can be considered to be in conflict with the previous argument. If the interactions are public and *published*, they concern authored information. Apart from issues such as copyright, one could argue that using pseudonyms or ‘anonymising’ the authors is not doing justice to the status of their communication (Basset & O’Riordan, 2002). Authorship should be acknowledged, and the communications should be treated in the same way, as we would, for instance, treat letters to the editor, by quoting and referring to the author of the text.

In sum, the discussions on web forums examined here are considered to be public texts that are *actively* and *deliberately* presented in public space. People contribute because they want to voice their opinion and want to be heard. Because of this, I will quote the text and refer to the authors.

3.5 Discourse analysis

In this thesis, public discussion is seen as constituting an important part of democracy and citizenship. It is viewed as ‘public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interest and values that are engaged. It includes not only information and argumentation but images, metaphors, and other condensing symbols’ (Ferree et al., 2002: 9). Public discourse comes about in various spaces, including public online spaces such as web forums.

The perspective on discourse taken here is that of *critical discourse analysis*.⁴ The term discourse refers to:

- language use as a social practice;
- the kind of language used within a specific field;
- a way of speaking which gives meaning to experience from a particular perspective (Philips & Jørgensen, 2002: 66-67).

In this thesis, discourse is analysed mainly at the level of specific discussions online.

By analysing the openness of public discussion on immigration, this study does not involve a full discourse analysis; it does not give equal attention to all aspects of the discourse. I will focus on the nature of the discourse with regard to ‘difference’: Which participants are represented and which are not, and which discourses are included and which are excluded? In this analysis special attention will be given to the different levels of power of actors in the debate: Who has the power to exclude voices from debate and what are the power relations within the debate? In addition, I raise the question whether or not there is engagement—interaction and dialogue—between discourses. This method of analysis fits well with the theoretical framework of this thesis, as it involves examining relations of power, particularly with regard to inclusion of marginalized discourses. It fur-

⁴For overviews and different approaches within the field of discourse analysis see: Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Dijk, 1997a, 1997b; Fairclough, 1995; Gill, 2000; Howarth, 2000; Philips & Jørgensen, 2002; Potter, 2003; Torfing, 1999; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001.

thermore takes into consideration the idea of engagement between discourses, which in critical discourse analysis is seen as constituting social change.

A critical discourse analysis also calls for social relevance and explanatory critique. This implies that a social problem lies at the basis of the research, one that the research aims to help solve. The social problem that is addressed here is how alternative voices are met in public discussion and whether this allows for inclusion, engagement and understanding.

3.6 Research design

The approach of discourse analysis informs the empirical analysis of this thesis. The ways in which this approach takes form is discussed in detail in the chapters reporting on the analyses (Chapter 4–7). These analyses together examine the four sub-questions which will allow me to answer the main research question: *To what extent is the public debate on Dutch web forums on the issue of immigration open to different voices and how do these different voices interact in this online debate?* Here, I will briefly address the research design by introducing the methods used to examine the four sub-questions.

i) How are web forums organized and in what way does this facilitate or hinder the openness of the debate?

To answer this question, both the explicit and implicit norms for debate held by forum management are examined as well as participants' reactions to the management of the forum (Chapter 4). This analysis involves the mapping of power relations between moderators and users of the forums. What forms of power (to deny/grant access to participants and/or control the content of the debate) do moderators have and employ in their governing of online discussions? Three elements regarding forum regulation are included in the analysis of the web forum norms: the rules of web forums (netiquette); behaviour of and decisions made by forum moderators as well as participants' reactions to them; and moderators' presence in debates, their appointment, and participants' reactions to them.

The netiquette is analysed by means of a discourse analysis, in which I identify common themes in the argumentation of what is included on the forums and what is not. Besides the formal netiquette and the way in which forum administrators and moderators uphold it, I also examine the reactions of participants to the netiquette as well as to forum maintenance.

ii) To what extent do participants of online discussions view and use web forums as an open and inclusive platform specifically with regard to the discussion of the issues of immigration and integration?

Participants' evaluations of the nature of web forums are examined, and their attitude towards inclusion of difference online (Chapter 5). To answer this question an online survey is conducted that asks participants for a broad range of information to gain insight into who is discussing online, why they discuss online, and how they evaluate the online discussions.

iii) To what extent are different actors and viewpoints included in discussions on immigration and integration and how does this compare to the representation in newspapers?

Inclusion ideally results in the actual representation of difference in terms of a variety of actors, positions, and arguments. Only in this way can the goals of inclusion—both the voicing of all relevant issues, arguments and representations of all actors involved, and the opportunity to access all of these different positions and arguments—be reached. This involves analysis of the representation of actors (visible diversity, either through name or reference in text); representation of positions; and exclusions in the discourse.

The question of representation is examined in a case study in Chapter 6 on a particular issue within the broader debate on immigration and integration in the Netherlands: ‘*eerwraak*’ (honour killings). Representation and exclusion in online discussions are compared to those in offline debate. The discourse on honour killings in seven newspapers is compared to the discourse in three web forum discussions.

iv) How do different voices interact online when alternative voices are present(ed) in the debate and to what extent is this interaction open and inclusive?

The last case examines the online discussions in which an alternative voice expresses his opinion on a murder by a youngster of Turkish descent and aims to map the reactions to this alternative voice. I analyse whether or not engagement takes place by establishing whether participants are including one another in these debates, acknowledge and grant the other space to speak and address issues and arguments (Chapter 7). In addition, I examine whether alternative types of expression to the rational communication (such as greeting, rhetoric and narrative) are being employed and whether they foster understanding and engagement between discourses.