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# Participants' views on discussing online

## 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided insight into the boundaries of web forums' in- and exclusiveness by examining the implicit and explicit rules that guide online communications. I discussed users' reaction to these rules about forum moderation and their maintenance as expressed in forum discussions. I concluded from these discussions that a number of users do not agree with the moderation, feel that discussions are not as open as they should or could be and that some participants and contributions are wrongfully excluded. In this chapter, I examine user evaluations of the openness of web forums through a survey to provide a broader picture of the evaluation of forums' openness by users. The aim here is to gain insight into the way the forums are perceived by the users and to establish whether they view web forums to allow for an inclusive debate. Do the users consider web forums to be the open and inclusive space the public sphere is supposed to be?

I have observed a tension between the views of the users as expressed on the forums and those of the moderators. The users considered the space to be 'theirs' that should be ruled by, or at least *for* them, whereas the moderators viewed it more as a private space merely made available to the users. The question is how open users are towards diversity and difference. Even though the structural openness, forum management, set some of the boundaries of the forums, the attitude of the participants determines how the openness of online communication is filled in. Not only their view on openness—how open should web forums be—but also their evaluation—how open do they think the web forums are—is important. Together these views give insight into the web forums' potential for providing an open and inclusive public sphere. The question that I seek to answer in this chapter is: *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 issue of immigration and integration?*

The data on the users' views regarding openness were collected through an online questionnaire, which was announced on five web forums. I first introduce the procedure of selecting the web forums, problems of sampling, representativeness, and other method-

ological issues.

## 5.2 Methodology

The research was conducted using an online survey tool of the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR), and published on a university domain (for a more extensive account on the issues of sampling, representativeness, and content of the questionnaire see *Appendix A*). Respondents were recruited through an online request to participate in the survey. The Internet population does not allow for generalization to the population at large; Dutch Internet users are not representative of the whole of the Dutch population (for issues of sampling in online studies see, for instance: Hewson et al., 2003). Thus, no inferences to the Dutch population at large can be drawn, not even to Dutch Internet users. The method does allow, however, for considerable understanding of participants of large Dutch web forums. It was also here that the request for survey participation was posted. An invitation was posted on the following forums: *Fok*, *Maghrebonline*, *Maroc*, *Nieuwrechts*, and *Weerwoord* (*Politiekdebat* and *Terdiscussie* did not give their consent for the post).<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of issues relating to the representativeness of the sample. Somewhat problematic is the fact that the sample consisted of only volunteers who actively followed the link to the survey. As Hewson et al. (2003: 38) have pointed out, volunteers have been found to differ, for instance, on personality variables. They are likely to be more interested in the topic of political discussion online than those *not* participating in the survey. In addition, the sample is very dependent on who visited the web forum at the time the announcement was posted. Threads normally move ‘downwards’ in the topic. This depends not only on the date and time of the initial message but also on the number of replies (the more replies, the more prominent the thread). Thus, if many people reacted, the message remained in a prominent place for a longer time than on those forums where no one reacted. This resulted in more responses from the participants of web forums where the survey already attracted a lot of attention. This caused problems with regard to generalizability of the findings. The chance that people participate is dependent on when and how often they visit the forum, check the specific section the request was posted on, and how many reactions the request received.

There is a dominance of *Fok* participants in the group of respondents. *Appendix B* (Table B.6) shows the forums that respondents visit to discuss politics.<sup>2</sup> 121 out of 207 (58%) respondents state that they use *Fok* for discussing politics online. This might very well be a dominance that exists in the population (it does not necessarily mean an overrepresentation of *Fok* users), but the small number of users of other forums makes it difficult to draw any conclusions on the influence of, or difference between the various forums. I therefore discuss the findings without distinguishing between the forums (and thus without trying

<sup>1</sup>As is explained in *Appendix A*, the questionnaire seems to have been announced on at least one other website, outside of the initiative of the researcher.

<sup>2</sup>It was possible to give more than one site. On average respondents provide the address of two web forums.

to establish whether there are significant differences between the different users), and treat all respondents as participants of 'online political discussions' rather than users of specific forums.

When looking at the actual composition of the group of respondents, it becomes clear that those who filled out the questionnaire are indeed not a representative sample of Dutch society (see *Appendix B* for the demographics). Over 80% of the respondents are male.<sup>3</sup> The respondents are relatively young: the mean (*M*) age is 32 years (standard deviation [*SD*] = 12.7). Fifty percent are younger than 30 years; only 12% are older than 50, and there are no respondents older than 70.<sup>4</sup> The respondents are highly educated, with more than three quarter of them having followed either higher education or university,<sup>5</sup> compared to 25% in Dutch society.<sup>6</sup> The vast majority (almost 70%) is not religious: Not even 10% consider themselves Catholic (compared to 30% in society); the Dutch reformed (both 'Gereformeerd' and 'Hervormd') are also less well-represented with 8% in this study versus 18% in society. Other religions are well-represented in this study: 6% consider themselves Muslim (compared to 6% in society), and 1.6% adhere to Hinduism (0.6 in society).<sup>7</sup> Finally, most of the respondents are natives, rather than (first or second generation) immigrants.<sup>8</sup> In comparison to the official statistics on Dutch society, this is an acceptable representation: In this sample there are 10% Western immigrants (both first and second generation), compared to 9% in society in 2005. The non-Western immigrants are slightly underrepresented with 7% in the sample, compared to 10% in Dutch society.

As the questionnaire was announced on political discussion forums online, unsurprisingly, the respondents of the questionnaire are highly interested in politics (*M* = 1.39; *SD* = 0.66). Sixty-six percent (154) claim to be highly and 31% (72) rather interested. Only four (2%) respondents state they are moderately interested, and three (1%) are not interested in politics at all. It is difficult to say whether this interest in politics is equally distributed over all participants of online political discussions, but it does hint at a more than average interest in politics. In 2002, the percentages for a representative sample<sup>9</sup> were: 15% highly interested, 42% rather interested, 21% moderately interested, 14% hardly interested, and 7% not interested at all in politics.

In terms of party membership, the respondents also show more political engagement than average: 23% of the respondents state they were a member of a political party at the time of filling out the questionnaire, 16% state they have been member of a political

<sup>3</sup>See *Appendix B*, Table B.1: Gender of the respondents.

<sup>4</sup>See *Appendix B*, Table B.2: Age of the respondents.

<sup>5</sup>See *Appendix B*, Table B.3: Level of education of the respondents.

<sup>6</sup>All of the statistics used to compare my data to the Dutch population come from the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS, Statline, *cbs.nl*), unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>7</sup>See *Appendix B*, Table B.4: Religion of the respondents.

<sup>8</sup>See *Appendix B*, Table B.5: Descent of the respondents.

<sup>9</sup>All of the statistics used to compare the data on political interest and activities come from a study amongst a random sample of the Dutch population conducted in 2002 (*Culturele Veranderingen (Cultural Changes)*, 2002), unless otherwise indicated. The phrasing of the questions that are compared here were equal or similar to the phrasing of questions in this study.

party are but not anymore, and 61% state they never have been a member. In 2002, the numbers for a representative sample were: 9% are a member, 6% have been a member but not anymore and 85% have never been a member.

Of those entitled to vote, 91% say they would exercise the right if parliamentary elections would be held today. Another 6% would go and vote if they would be entitled to vote (that is, 14 out of the 15 respondents that are not entitled). Voting intention is relatively high in the Netherlands, but the respondents of this questionnaire (with 97% that would vote) score even higher than general Dutch society (where 85% said they would vote, and 7% would maybe vote).

In addition, people show great interest in news and politics in their daily media use (Table 5.1). The vast majority of respondents watch the news (almost) daily. They watch current affair programmes and read newspapers slightly less. The majority listens to the news on the radio and discusses politics with friends at least once a week. Their Internet use shows the same high level of involvement; almost 70% read online discussions (almost) every day and 80% contribute to online discussions at least once a week. One third reads the online news pages (almost) daily. All in all, the respondents form an interested and involved public, as could be expected from respondents of political discussion forums.

Table 5.1: *General interest in news and politics*

How often do you undertake the following activities:	(Almost) daily	3 to 4 times per week	1 to 2 times per week	Less than once per week	Never
Watch the news on TV	72.1	13.5	7.4	5.6	1.4
Watch current affair programmes	46.5	22.3	20.5	7.0	3.7
Read the newspaper	58.6	14.0	13.0	9.3	5.1
Follow the news on the radio	29.8	17.7	14.4	18.1	20.0
Discuss politics with friends	21.9	20.9	29.8	23.7	3.7
Read online discussions	66.5	17.7	12.6	1.9	1.4
Post in online discussions	43.7	19.1	17.2	14.0	6.0
Read Internet news pages	66.5	10.7	11.2	7.4	4.2

$n = 215$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .703$

The majority of respondents (71%) do not feel politics is too difficult for them to understand and they consider themselves better informed than others (69% agree or strongly agree). At the same time, only a fourth of the respondents disagrees with the statement *People like me have no influence on the government's actions* (see Table 5.2). This is in conflict with the 'normal' scale of political efficacy; there is no correlation between the different

Table 5.2: *Political efficacy*

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Politics is sometimes so difficult that people like me cannot understand what is going on	3.87	1.10	232
People like me have no influence on the government's actions	2.57	1.21	233
I think I am better informed on politics than others	2.20	1.06	233

1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree, *M* = mean, *SD* = Standard deviation, *n* = number of participants answering the particular question

indicators.<sup>10</sup> Apparently the three items do not tap into one underlying variable.

An explanation could lie in the specific audience the forums attract, which might experience a distance between themselves and the ruling politicians. They are politically engaged, but do not feel represented by the government. In Chapter 4, I observed that a number of web forums (including *Fok*) want to provide a space in which users are free to say what they want, and which differs from traditional media. They position themselves against these 'mainstream' discussion platforms that are 'controlled' by the political elite, and thus are limited in terms of access and width of the debate. It could well be that a number of these spaces fulfil exactly this role for participants: Forums are a space to voice opinions that (they feel) are not expressed (and not heard enough) by their representatives.

This impression is supported by the respondents' voting behaviour (see Table 5.3). Over a quarter of the respondents claim to have voted for one of the newly formed anti-establishment parties (*Geert Wilders* and *Nieuwrechts*); the governing parties only receive 20%. This was a trend that was observable in Dutch society as a whole at the time of the questionnaire, but not in such a strong direction. Polls<sup>11</sup> for that particular period (18 March – 28 May 2005) point to a loss for the then governing parties (CDA – 21%, VVD – 16% and D66 – 3%). But in the polls, these parties still had 40% of the votes, whereas not even a quarter of the respondents in this study indicate they would vote for one of the governing parties.<sup>12</sup>

The high percentage of *Nieuw Rechts* voters can be explained by the fact that the request to participate in the survey was posted on the *Nieuwrechts* forum. However, even if we exclude the *Nieuwrechts* participants (16 in total), and respondents for whom information on the forum they came from is missing (75 respondents), the anti-establishment parties still receive many votes. *Geert Wilders* (17%) and *Nieuw Rechts* (3%) receive almost

<sup>10</sup> Cronbach's *alpha* of the two positive political efficacy indicators and one reversed negative approximates zero with a score of .072

<sup>11</sup> www.politiekebarometer.nl

<sup>12</sup> Note that the main difference is in the percentage that would vote for the CDA, only 2% indicate they would vote for this party at the next elections.

Table 5.3: *Voting behaviour*

Political party	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent <sup>†</sup>
(Groep) Geert Wilders	42	18.7	21.9
PvdA (Labour Party)	32	14.2	16.7
VVD (Liberal Conservative Party)	28	12.4	14.6
SP (Socialist Party)	23	10.2	12.0
GroenLinks (GreenLeft)	19	8.4	9.9
Nieuw Rechts (New Right)	19	8.4	9.9
D66 (Liberal Progressive Party)	13	5.8	6.8
CDA (Christian Democrats)	4	1.8	2.1
Christenunie (Christian Party)	3	1.3	1.6
Other	9	4.0	4.7
Do not know yet	27	12.0	
Blank	6	2.7	
<i>Total</i>	225	100.0	100.0

<sup>†</sup> Excluding 'Don't know,' and 'Blank.'

20% (21 out of 108) of the votes, and the government parties receive as little as 29%.

Having introduced the demographics of the respondents and their political interest, in what follows I first discuss respondents' online discussion attitudes and behaviour towards immigration. I will then address the ways in which people discuss politics and immigration specifically on online forums. Last, I turn to the notion that is central to this thesis: openness. How important do participants of forum discussions find openness, and how do they evaluate the openness of the web forums?

### 5.3 Participants' (online) discussion attitudes and behaviour

As Table 5.1 showed, the respondents discuss politics very frequently online. Two thirds of the respondents read online political discussions (almost) daily and half post messages to online political discussions (almost) daily. To specify these results, the respondents were asked where they access the Internet to discuss politics, and which platforms they use. 208 people (89%) state they access discussions from home, 70 (30%) from work, 44 (19%) use a connection at their school, and three respondents (1%) discuss politics from an Internet café connection (more than one answer could be given here).<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the types of discussion platforms that are accessed, most of the respon-

<sup>13</sup>Another 3% (7 people) state they have other means of accessing the discussions.

Table 5.4: Forum used to discuss immigration and integration

Web forum	Frequency	Percent
fokforum.nl <sup>†</sup>	92	50.3
nieuwrechts.nl <sup>†</sup>	18	9.8
weerwoord.nl <sup>†</sup>	18	9.8
dutchdiseasereport.nl	14	7.6
maghreb.nl	5	2.7
maghrebonline.nl <sup>†</sup>	4	2.2
opinari.nl	4	2.2
maroc.nl <sup>†</sup>	3	1.6
politiekdebat.nl <sup>†</sup>	3	1.6
cyberty.nl	2	1.1
other (websites mentioned once each)	16	9.9
no answer	4	2.2
<i>Total</i>	183	100.0

<sup>†</sup> Web forums examined in Chapter 4.

dents (86%) mention web forums.<sup>14</sup> Other manners of discussion are through chatting (21%), e-mail groups (13%), and newsgroups (9%)<sup>15</sup> (here too, more than one answer could be given). For most, web forums are the only way of discussing politics online. This does not automatically mean that they actively choose this method over others or that they evaluate this type of communication higher than other types. The reasons for discussing immigration on web forums are discussed in the next section, but they do not indicate why they choose web forums over other types of online communication.

When asked specifically about their discussion behaviour regarding immigration and integration, almost all of the respondents (203, or 94%) answered they had read or written posts on immigration and integration in the past half year on one or more online discussion forums. This, of course, was to be expected as the respondents were recruited from web forums on which immigration is an important issue. However, most participants came from general forums and the invitation to participate in the survey was posted

<sup>14</sup>That not 100% state they use web forums (whereas the announcement was made on web forums), might be because the announcement was also posted on different websites, which were not necessarily web forums (see *Appendix A*). Even though the announcement explained that the questionnaire was about online discussion of politics, there were three people that stated they do not discuss politics online. The last explanation might lie in a different definition of web forums. Two people stated that they discuss politics in different ways than the ones mentioned above, namely through forums. So, apparently they take forums to be different from web forums.

<sup>15</sup>Another 4% (8 people) state that they discuss politics on a different platform.

in general threads, asking for people who discuss *politics* on the Internet, not specifically immigration. As such, the number can be considered remarkably high. When asked to give the address of the web forum they most frequently used for this purpose, 26 different forums were given (see Table 5.4). The *Fok* forum was the dominant web forum.

Just as web forums are the prevailing way of discussing politics (as compared to other online methods), Internet discussions represent the most frequent manner of discussion immigration and integration (Table 5.5). Almost 60% discuss the issues often (29%) or very often (31%) online, which is more than with friends and family. Other ways of discussing the issues are practiced much less: 36% discuss it (very) often with colleagues; only 7% (very) often attends public debates; not even 5% writes an opinion piece or letter to the newspaper often.

Table 5.5: *Discussion of immigration and integration*

How often do you participate in the debate on immigration in the following ways:	Very often	Often	Some-times	Almost never	Never
Write posts in Internet discussions	30.7	28.8	28.4	7.9	4.2
Discussion with family and/or friends	17.7	38.6	32.1	9.3	2.3
Discussion with colleagues	7.0	28.8	31.6	21.9	10.7
Attend public debate	2.3	5.1	15.8	21.4	55.3
Write opinion/letters to newspapers	2.3	2.3	14.4	19.1	61.9

$n = 215$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .712$

The frequency with which people discuss immigration and integration is not related to the attitudes of respondents on these issues. The attitudes towards immigration are quite evenly distributed, with the exception of the question on 'adjustment to Dutch culture of immigrants,' which is supported by most (Table 5.6). It could be that both people that feel strongly *positive* about immigration as well as those that feel strongly *negative* about it discuss the issue more often. However, this is not the case. The frequency with which people discuss the issue seems to be independent from the strength and direction of their attitude towards immigration and integration. One explanation might be that the issue of immigration is of general interest, making people discuss the topic even though they do not feel specifically strong about it. This corresponds with the general interest respondents have in news and politics. The variable 'general interest' (the indicators of Table 5.1 taken together,  $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) does correlate with how often people discuss immigration (the indicators of Table 5.5 taken together,  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). If people are more interested in news and politics, they discuss the issue of immigration more frequently ( $r = .46$ ).

In addition, when asked to describe why they discuss immigration and integration online, quite a number of people refer to their general interest in politics, news, and the

Table 5.6: *Attitude towards immigrants*

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Immigrants should adjust to Dutch culture	1.99	1.15
The Netherlands should send back as many asylum seekers as possible	3.11	1.46
Immigrants take advantage of social services	2.99	1.24
Immigrants are an enrichment for Dutch society	3.12	1.20

1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree,  $n = 187$ , *Cronbach's alpha* = .802

issue of immigration (see Table 5.7). Nine percent explain they are generally interested in politics, news and society, and state that immigration is part of this, 'nothing less and nothing more.' Others explain they discuss immigration specifically because it is a pressing issue at the moment in the Netherlands (12%). Fourteen percent discuss the topic because of their unease and dissatisfaction with Dutch society. Some of them are quite explicit in that they want to change things by discussing the issue online, as one of the respondents explains:

I am annoyed with the daily routine with respect to immigration and integration. I want to help by discussing.

Table 5.7: *Reasons for discussing immigration online referring to interest in politics and the issue of immigration (open question)*

Reason	Frequency	Percent <sup>†</sup>
General interest (in societal issues)	15	8.5
Immigration as pressing issue	22	12.4
Unease/dissatisfaction Dutch society	25	14.1
To voice criticism against Islam	4	2.2

<sup>†</sup> This percentage indicates the percentage of respondents that gave this reason taken over the total amount of the people (177), not the percentages taken over the 247 reasons given.

Others say they enter the discussion because they want to fight right-wing extremism, explain that the multicultural society is nonsense, or because they are worried. Four respondents (2%) explicitly state they discuss the issue to somehow change society. They want to 'mobilise an anti-Islam electorate', 'refute the multicultural lie', or 'rectify the

brainwashing of 6 years of secondary school and 10 years of biased reporting by NOS [Dutch Broadcasting Foundation] news’.

## 5.4 Openness of web forums

The respondents participate in discussions on immigration in several ways, though mainly online. One of the aims of the questionnaire is to examine *why* people discuss online, in order to establish what the benefits of online discussion may be over other platforms for public debate, and how the respondents regard openness and inclusiveness of the online debate. This has been examined through both open-ended and closed questions. In the discussion on deliberative democracy in Chapter 1, several criteria for debate were introduced, and openness towards difference was identified as the most important requirement of public discussion in plural societies.

The openness of the forums is constituted by the forum participants’ interactions (and to a certain extent bounded by forum management, as discussed in the previous chapter). To a large extent, the users determine the openness of forum discussions on immigration and integration. The medium can facilitate a certain type of interaction, but the actual use of it determines the openness and inclusiveness of the discussion. The questionnaire provides information on two elements of the participants’ views on openness: How they value openness online and how they rate the actual openness of the forums on which they discuss immigration and integration.

### 5.4.1 Openness online

With a total of 247 reasons provided by 177 people, the average amount of reasons per person is 1.4. As Table 5.8 shows, a quarter of the respondents indicate ‘exchanging information and opinions’ to be the reason for participating in the discussion online. This exchange of information and opinions entails more for the participants than merely expressing one’s own opinion. It is a multifaceted process and participants state they want to ‘form their opinion’, ‘gather and share information’, are ‘curious as to how others feel about the issue’, want to ‘compare viewpoints’, and ‘test their own view’. A respondent states:

I want to view problems from as many different perspectives as possible and then form an ‘objective’ judgement about it. On forums everyone can make himself heard, so here I get to see the most perspectives.

This respondent specifically refers to seeking a diversity of opinions online in addition to exchanging information. This reference to the diversity can be found in almost 20% of the responses. It is also mentioned that one can encounter voices different from those expressed in the mainstream media. Some seek these other opinions to inform themselves, others seek them for the challenge of discussing them. Searching for difference turns out to be a dominant theme:

[I discuss online] to read that other people have different experiences and [because] those do not appear in the newspaper.

Simply because there are a lot of people that are rightwing [on the forum] and this means I get more opposition.

In addition, 12% of the respondents refer to the importance of the size of the forum, often relating this to the size of the audience they (think they) reach and to the variety of opinions they may encounter. Respondents seem to equate size of the forum to the diversity of opinions that exists on it.

Table 5.8: *Reasons for discussing immigration online referring to openness or diversity of the forum (open question)*<sup>†</sup>

Reason	Frequency	Percent <sup>‡</sup>
To exchange information and opinions	48	27
Diversity on the forum	35	20
To voice or encounter alternative views	26	15
The size of the forum and its audience	22	12
To find like-minded/similar people	11	6
Open forum (high level of tolerance)	7	4
Broadness of the forum	4	2

<sup>†</sup> The remaining reasons that were mentioned on the open-ended question (next to those introduced in Table 5.7), and that were mentioned more than once, were: quality of the forum (13%) and to pass the time/ fun activity (5%).

<sup>‡</sup> This percentage indicates the percentage of respondents that gave this reason taken over the total amount of the people (177), not the percentage taken over the total number of reasons given (which is 247).

Some participants explicitly state that they are seeking *alternative* views in the online discussion. Almost 15% of the respondents express the wish to hear or represent an alternative view against the mainstream views on immigration and integration:

I mostly participate to add a leftist sound to the predominantly rightist discussions.

[I] post to express an opposing view when I get too annoyed by what people write.

[I choose this forum] to read opinions that are not expressed in daily politics.

A few respondents (4%) explicitly link the perceived openness of the forum to tolerance. Compared to other types of discussions or forums, they feel that here, they can say anything. The specific forum they participate in provides a space where they can express their

criticism and where they expect not to be censored. One participant explains that ‘there are not so many forums where freedom of expression is taken seriously.’ In conclusion, the findings of the open-ended question show that openness of forums seems to be highly regarded with much importance attributed to it.

The results presented in Table 5.9 (answers to the closed questions) support the finding that expression of opinions is an important factor (76% find this (very) important). The views on diversity online point to the high status that the users attribute to the openness of web forums. In concurrence with its prominence in the answers to the open question, 86% find diversity of opinions (very) important in their choice to participate in the political discussion online.

Table 5.9: *Importance of openness in the choice to participate in online political debate (closed question)*

How important are the following aspects in your choice to participate in the political debate online:	M	SD
Diversity of opinions	1.67	0.85
Express one's opinion	2.06	1.05
Find like minded	2.83	1.19

1 = Very important, 5 = Not at all important,  $n = 187$

Far fewer respondents (6% in the open ended question) state they are looking for like-minded people, seeking support for their ideas or people with the same background. One respondent visits the website [Indianfeelings.nl](http://Indianfeelings.nl) in order to get recognition from his own community. As another says:

[I discuss on this forum] to seek like-minded, [for] the feeling that you're not alone in your views.

Finding like-minded voices plays an important role in participants' motivation to discuss online, the responses to these closed questions show that it is still an important feature of the online debate (40% find this (very) important). Even though one may expect that those who seek diversity of opinions online would not seek like-minded people, there is no correlation between the importance of seeking diversity and seeking like-mindedness. Thirty-two percent of the respondents find seeking diversity of opinions as well as seeking like-minded opinions (very) important. Thus, for one third of the respondents, having like-minded perspectives represented on the forum is important, while at the same time, they value diversity.

The reactions to the statements pertaining to the regulation of the Internet seem to confirm the general notion that the Internet has to be open. Table 5.10 shows that most of the online discussants are not in favour of more Internet regulation to prevent either

Table 5.10: Views on Internet regulation

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:	M	SD
The Internet should be regulated better to prevent racism	3.49	1.381
The Internet should be regulated better to prevent religious fundamentalism	3.58	1.343

1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree,  $n = 187$

racism or religious fundamentalism (only 27% and 21% are in favour of the respective regulations).

The question is, to what extent is regulation needed to secure openness of the forum, and does objecting to regulation mean being more in favour of a forum's openness? This dilemma can also explain the finding that the importance of diversity of opinions online is not correlated with whether the Internet should be better regulated. There are apparently more ways to ensure diversity of opinions. Disagreeing that the Internet should be better regulated can also mean that one is happy with the existing level of regulation. In general, the findings seem to indicate that openness online is regarded highly by forum participants. But how do they evaluate the forums' openness in practice?

#### 5.4.2 Experienced openness online

A number of items in the questionnaire were included to examine how openness is experienced in online discussions. How free do people feel to express their opinions on immigration and integration on their forum of choice? How does this compare to how open they consider other media to be? Table 5.11 shows that the participants do find diversity in the forum they visit most. Almost 80% agree with the statement: *On this forum I encounter a lot of different opinions with regard to immigration and integration*. In addition, respondents agree that: *On this forum I encounter opinions that I do not find in my family, or in my circle of friends and acquaintances* (64%) and with the statement *On this forum I encounter opinions that I do not find in other media* (55%).

Almost 50% of the respondents feel their views are not represented in the mainstream media. They also agree with the statement that *The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere* (84% (strongly) agrees). Similarly, most respondents (strongly) disagree with the statement that *On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere*. One of the respondents illustrates this point in his/her comments at the end of the questionnaire, whilst at the same time expressing feelings of anxiety in what this may result in:

The fact that the Internet is an uncontrolled mess has broken the monopoly of mainstream media. I don't need them anymore; I don't have to listen to their interpreta-

tion of the facts anymore. That is on the one hand liberating, as the NOS [Dutch Broadcasting Foundation] or De Volkskrant [a national newspaper] are prejudiced institutes that try to proclaim their political viewpoint. On the other hand, they give way to radical opinions that blossom on the Internet. [If you want to, you] can directly see the things NOS interprets for us on the Internet through C-span, but eventually [you] can also discover that the Jews are behind 9-11 on elqalem.nl [a critical Muslim website]. Because we have Dutch media that are leftwing (the media should be both right and leftwing), the chances are that viewers and readers only find a satisfactory answer in conspiracy theories on the Internet. Very dangerous.

Feelings about the openness of the debate also relate to the perceived equality on a forum. Table 5.11 shows that the vast majority (88%) agrees with the statement *I feel free to express my opinion on the subject of immigration and integration*, while three-quarters feel everyone has an equal chance to express their opinion. Half of the respondents, however, do feel that a small number of participants dominate the discussion; though in theory all

Table 5.11: *Openness of online forums*

To what extent do you (dis)agree with the following statements:			
<i>Openness of the forum:</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
I feel free to express my opinion on the subject of immigration and integration	1.60	0.89	183
I encounter a lot of different opinions	1.76	0.99	183
Everyone has equal chance to express their opinion	1.94	1.13	183
A small number of participants dominate the discussion	2.59	1.16	183
<i>Openness compared to other media:</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
I encounter opinions that I do not find in other media	2.5	1.22	183
The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere	1.76	0.90	187
On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere	3.53	1.16	187

1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree

participants are equal in the online discussions, in practice discussions are dominated by a few. The latter idea that discussions are dominated by a small number of participants is in accordance with the findings from studies looking at the equality of online discussion, as was discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, even though diversity and exchange of opinions are said to be important, and people do encounter a lot of different viewpoints that they do not elsewhere, more than half of the respondents agree with the statement *I do not change my opinion as a result of the discussion* (58% (strongly) agree). Openness does then not necessarily mean preparedness to change one's opinion.

The participants' evaluations of the forums' openness can be seen in two forms: one is the openness of the forum itself and the other is the openness of the online discussions compared to the openness and inclusiveness of other media.<sup>16</sup> The statements pertaining to the general openness of the forum constitute the first form of openness:<sup>17</sup>

- I feel free to express my opinion on the subject of immigration and integration;
- I encounter a lot of different opinions;
- Everyone has equal chance to express their opinion;
- A small number of participants dominate the discussion.

Almost 80% consider online forums to be open in this sense. In contrast, not even 5% feel online forums are closed. The mean score is 2.2 ( $SD = 0.71$ ), once more indicating the perceived openness of the forums.

The second type of openness of online discussion is the openness compared to other media, and comprises the statements:<sup>18</sup>

- I encounter opinions that I do not find in other media;
- The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere;
- On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere.

Concerning this type of openness, we see that the majority considers online forums to be more open than traditional media (64%). A mere 8% consider online forums to be more closed than their offline counterpart ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ). This second type of openness correlates positively with the statement *In traditional media (newspaper, television and radio) my opinion is not represented* ( $r = .52$ ). This suggests that people who feel they are not represented by the traditional media agree more strongly that the Internet

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<sup>16</sup>A Principal Component Analysis (Rotated, *varimax* method) seems to confirm the existence of these two types underlying the openness of online discussions (see next footnotes for *eigenvalue* and factor loadings).

<sup>17</sup>The *eigenvalue* of the factor is 1.9. The factor loadings are respectively: .81; .66; .79; .44. *Cronbach's alpha* for this dimension is .6 (with the last variable reversed). Scores for both types of openness (means taken over the four statements): < 2.5 = open; 2.5 - 3.5 = neither open nor closed; > 3.5 = closed.

<sup>18</sup>The *eigenvalue* of the factor is 1.7. The factor loadings are respectively: .77; .77; .73. *Cronbach's alpha* is .62 for this dimension (with the second variable reversed).

allows for a wider representation and inclusiveness than people that do feel represented by traditional media.<sup>19</sup> In addition, people that more often write letters to newspapers regard the openness of the Internet less strongly as compared to traditional media ( $r = -.27$ ). So the Internet—although considered open by most—seems to hold more potential for those that feel they do not have access to or are not represented in traditional media.

On the whole, for the respondents the importance of openness in online discussions is apparent. The participants value openness as one of the main reasons for discussing online and they actually perceive online discussions to be open, in fact more so than other media. One of the aspects of online discussions emphasised in the literature is its (perceived) anonymity, which could make people feel free to express their views in public. For the respondents in this sample, anonymity is reasonably important: 45% of the respondents state that it is a (very) important aspect in their choice to participate in the online political debate. However, in comparison to the other reasons, it is less important. In the open question, only one participant referred to anonymity as one of the reasons for discussing online. Moreover, this feature does not relate to the openness that people experience online: It does not affect the perceived freedom to express their opinion—not for either of the two types of openness identified above. It could be that this particular sample does not benefit from this feature as much as others do, since they are already active politically and discuss politics in other ways as well. In this sample there is, however, no relationship between the relative importance attached to anonymity and the frequency with which other discussion platforms are used. People who participate less in discussion with family, friends or colleagues, attend fewer public debates or contribute less to public debates, do not value anonymity more.

Another relevant finding is that diversity is a more common motivation for online discussion than finding like-minded individuals. This seems to suggest that participants value the online space more as a place to find difference than as a space to form a counter public, where people aim at discussing matters with like-minded (the in-group), rather than with a wider public (see Chapter 1 for a more extensive account of counter publics). It may be that this finding can be fully explained by the fact that the sample represents more participants of general discussion forums. It is important to examine whether there is a difference between discussants of general discussion forums (such as *Fok*) and those forums that aim at a specific audience (such as *Maroc* and *Maghrebonline*, focusing on Dutch Moroccans), or are affiliated to a specific political party (for instance *Nieuwrechts*) or political movement (such as *Stormfront*, a neo-Nazi website). These latter types of websites can be considered more as counter publics because of their narrow focus, but this is only one aspect of counter publics (the forums mentioned here, do not, according to other aspects of the definition, fall into the category of counter publics). What is relevant here is to see whether or not participants of these spaces aim at a specific homogenous

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<sup>19</sup>The separate correlations (*Pearson's r*) of the statement 'In traditional media (newspaper, television and radio) my opinion is not represented' with the three statements constituting relative openness are as follows: 'I encounter opinions that I do not encounter in other media':  $r = .366$ ; 'The Internet offers a possibility to bring opinions to the fore that are not heard elsewhere':  $r = .459$ ; and 'On the Internet the same opinions are expressed as elsewhere':  $r = -.341$ .

audience and actually prefer like-minded participants in the forum rather than diversity.

First, participants of forums that have a specific focus and that resemble, in this sense, a counter public, do value finding like-minded more than participants of general forums ( $n = 36, 137$ ;  $M = 2.22, 2.93$ ;  $SD = 1.12, 1.16$  respectively). However, there is no difference between the two groups in the extent to which they deem diversity important; the counter forum participants even regard it slightly higher ( $n = 36, 137$ ;  $M = 1.69, 1.64$ ;  $SD = 0.82, 0.83$  respectively). Likewise, the counter public forum participants hardly differ in their evaluation of the general openness of online discussion ( $n = 39, 140$ ;  $M = 2.12, 2.20$ ;  $SD = 0.81, 0.68$  respectively). They do differ, however, in terms of their evaluation of the openness of web spaces compared to the openness of other media: Counter public forum participants consider this comparative openness to be bigger than general forum participants ( $n = 36, 137$ ;  $M = 1.93, 2.30$ ;  $SD = 0.77, 0.80$  respectively).

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the question of the users' perspective on openness through an online survey. The respondents were mainly young, high-educated males who were very politically active. In Chapter 4, I concluded that a number of participants questioned the openness of the forums, as they did not agree with the way rules were upheld, and how participants and contributions were excluded from the forum. Those evaluations of the forum's openness concerned the unsolicited expressions of discontent by users of the forums. Through the results of the survey reported in this chapter, I established that in terms of the opinions expressed on the forums, the users generally view and establish web forums as open platforms for discussion.

The participants are politically active and discuss the issue of immigration in several ways, both offline (i.e., with friends and family) and online, but it becomes clear that online discussion is conducted more often than offline. In addition, discussion on web forums is for many respondents the only way of discussing issues online. The most prominent reason provided for discussing immigration on web forums was the exchange of ideas and the discovery of different opinions. The respondents attach much value to diversity of opinions as well as to the possibility to express their own opinion online.

Next to valuing diversity of opinions online, the respondents experience this diversity when discussing immigration. Participants consider the web forums as spaces where difference is found and opinions are freely expressed; they consider the online spaces to be open for discussion. Openness of online debate is one of the most important aspects of discussing online. In Chapter 2, I mentioned two features of online communication that are said to foster this openness online: the anonymity of online communication and the virtually unlimited space for interaction (which includes the low access restraints to this space). From this sample it became clear that, though anonymity is of reasonable importance, it is not one of the most essential features. Less than half of the respondents consider it to be an important feature for discussing online. Also, anonymity does not affect the perceived openness of online discussion; those that value anonymity more do

not think the Internet provides a more open space than those that value anonymity less. Furthermore, people that do not discuss immigration on other platforms (such as attending offline public meetings, sending letters to the newspapers, discussing with friends, family or colleagues) do not value anonymity more than those that do utilise these other discussion platforms.

The other feature that is argued to produce openness of debate—the unbounded space for interaction—proves to be of more importance. The participants seem to view the Internet as a space where everyone is able to express her or his own opinion and encounter those of others, allowing for a discussion. It does not only refer to people expressing their own thoughts but also to people being able to hear from others, whether people are seeking for like-minded or alternative voices, or both. Thus, online spaces are considered to be open spaces. The results of the survey showed, moreover, that there are two elements to the openness of web forums: Respondents do not only consider the forum they discuss on to be open, but in addition they regard it to be more open to difference than traditional media.

Participants focus on the Internet's potential to encounter difference rather than to find like-minded people and to form counter publics. Confrontation with other discourses is more important than seeking confirmation of one's own viewpoint. We have to keep in mind, though, that most of the respondents in this sample participate in web forums that do not have a specific topical or audience focus. The majority of the visited web forums are general discussion forums with a diverse public. It could well be that the participants who do value finding like-minded individuals attend web forums with a specific focus and audience. The survey showed that the participants of web forums that have a specific political affiliation, (ethnic) target group, or topic, indeed value finding like-minded people more than the participants of general discussion forums. However, this difference was only slight. The participants deemed encountering a diversity of opinions just as important as the participants on general discussion forums. Also, no difference was found regarding the openness of web forums; the specific forums that could be regarded as counter publics were deemed as open as the general forums. However, compared to traditional media, the openness was deemed slightly higher by the participants of specific forums than by those of general forums. Apparently, the participants of forums that resemble counter publics regard the online spaces as more inclusive than the participants of general forums. But this is a difference in degree and not in nature.

The question that arises is whether the participants are open enough towards alternative positions to engage with them and not just have different positions merely coexist. It is difficult to derive this type of information from the attitudes of the participants, but answers to one particular survey question suggest that this engagement does not really occur, and the participants only rarely change their opinion as a result of the discussion.