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# In/exclusion of alternative voices

## 7.1 Introduction

In Chapters 4 and 5 I examined the openness of web forums in light of forum regulation as well as how they are viewed by users. In both studies, it became apparent that openness of web forums is considered important (though moderators seem to have a different idea from discussants on how to reach such openness). In the users' view, openness materialises in a diversity of opinions. But to what extent can diversity actually be found online, and how do forum participants deal with alternative voices when they are expressed online? In Chapter 6 I examined to what extent a diversity of opinions is found in the online discussion on the topic of honour killings. In this debate, no real alternative position was expressed (even though there was more diversity in terms of positions than in the newspaper debate) and several types of discursive exclusions were found.

In this chapter I will examine the way a discussion evolves when an alternative position *is* presented. What happens to the openness of a debate when a voice enters that is different from the dominant discourse? The research question that guides the analysis is: *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?* I will analyse how alternative voices are expressed and how they are received. The Internet might provide a platform for alternative voices in the form of counter publics, but if and how these voices find their way into general public debate, with the out-group, is a matter to be more thoroughly examined. The inclusion of dissenting and alternative voices is seen as a major asset of the Internet, but what happens when such a voice is included? I seek to answer this question by examining the case of Ertan.nl.

## 7.2 Ertan.nl: An alternative voice online

Ertan.nl,<sup>1</sup> a critical web logger, operates in the context of the changed and polarized public debate in the Netherlands and forms an alternative or radical voice. Ertan provides a 'satirical view on Dutch Society by a Muslim, every Sunday, when the Christians are having a rest day.'<sup>2</sup> His columns are very confrontational and distressing to some, while appreciated by others.<sup>3</sup> He insults and provokes, but also initiates and feeds debates.

According to his own writings, Ertan is a Dutch Muslim of Turkish descent. He takes on a very specific and unique role in Dutch public discourse on the issues of immigration and integration. His website 'provides an open medium for the Dutch Muslim society' and aims at 'voicing opinions that are not presented or that are distorted in the media.' In addition to his website, Ertan participates in public debate through online discussions elsewhere, such as on websites for Dutch people of Moroccan and Turkish descent, Islamic websites, a Dutch school forum, the Young Socialist website, and a website for young homosexuals.<sup>4</sup> Due to the content of his website and the posts on several forums, Ertan has become a well-known and for many, an unwelcome presence in the online discourse on immigration and integration in the Netherlands.

This chapter focuses on the reactions to a specific online message from Ertan and examines the kinds of strategies that are adopted to deal with this unconventional voice. First, I describe the specific message as well as the online forums where the post is discussed. Second, I explain the method used to examine and map the different reactions to the post. Third, through discourse analysis, I map the different reactions to Ertan's posts and columns. Fourth, I analyse the openness of debate on the issue as well as whether engagement between different discourses comes about. Finally, I examine the role of alternative types of expression such as narrative, greeting, and sharing of personal experiences.

### 7.2.1 Murat, I love you; or how contestation comes about

The post of Ertan and the focus of this chapter deals with a fatal shooting at a secondary school. On 13 January 2004 a 17-year-old student, Murat D., shot his teacher in the head. The boy, born in the Netherlands and of Turkish descent, had been suspended from school a few days before the killing. When word got out that the shooting concerned a

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<sup>1</sup>At the time of study (May 2004), the website was hosted on the Ertan.nl domain, but the website temporarily moved to Ertan.biz (visitors to Ertan.nl were redirected to this site) before moving back again to Ertan.nl. Ertan was requested by his web host to take this route as a consequence of the commotion about his columns. This was not the first time he had to move to a different domain; before Ertan.nl, the domain was Ertan.tk. He has several websites that redirect the visitor to his page, or contain the contents of his columns. These sites are: <http://ertan.reallyrules.com/>; [ertan.ontheweb.nl/](http://ertan.ontheweb.nl/); [ertan.blogspot.com](http://ertan.blogspot.com/); [www.ertan.tk](http://www.ertan.tk/); <http://home.planet.nl/~cihat/>. The website continues to shift domains and URLs.

<sup>2</sup>Ertan.nl, last accessed May 2004.

<sup>3</sup>Positive reactions are almost exclusively found on his own website. Elsewhere (regardless of the type of website) people mostly disagree with him. But even in many of these cases messages such as 'where is Ertan? I kind of miss him' pop up from time to time.

<sup>4</sup>I used the search engines [google.nl](http://google.nl) and [ilse.nl](http://ilse.nl) to search for Ertan on other Dutch language websites.

boy of Turkish descent, the issue quickly received an immigration or integration frame by the public as well as the media.

Five days after the shooting, Ertan wrote a column in which he sympathized with Murat. He posted the column on his website and on a number of web forums:

‘Murat, I love you,

You could have been my kid brother. What you did is not your fault, son, it is the fault of this rotten society in which we, unfortunately, live. The dirty tricks of the so-called tolerant Dutchmen I know better than anyone else. They get under your skin and do so in a very sly manner. But who gets blamed in the end, yes, our culture, that supposedly is no good, whereas it’s their culture that is rotten to the bone.

Even though we are born and bred here we are treated differently. My declaration of support to you was mercilessly removed from discussion forums of the public broadcaster. When a Dutchman gives his opinion this is called freedom of speech, but if a Muslim does so, he is censored or confronted with the question why he doesn’t return to his own country, if he doesn’t like it here. Holland apparently isn’t our country.

Belittled, oppressed and mentally abused, you are not the only one, Murat. You did not see any other way to vent your suppressed feelings of hate than to shoot a bullet through the head of your teacher. What choice do you have when this society leaves you no other way out? To let them belittle, oppress, and mentally abuse you? Anyone with a little bit of honour doesn’t allow that.

Believe me, there are a lot of Muslim youngsters out there like you with a lot of suppressed feelings of hate towards everything that is in any way related to Dutchmen. Therefore, I fear this won’t be the last of it. On the contrary, it will only worsen, especially when a youngster like you can only feel safe with a gun in his pocket.

Hang in there, Murat and turn to Allah. I, as a Turkish Muslim brother, love you and find you a true hero, as you stood up for yourself.’

This message was posted on Ertan.nl,<sup>5</sup> and on (at least) the following three discussion forums:<sup>6</sup>

- *Newsgroup nl.politiek*: a general political newsgroup in which Ertan (using the nickname *ErTaN*) initiated a thread, titled ‘Murat, I love you’ on 18 January 2004, at 6:48. The

<sup>5</sup>There were almost a thousand reactions on the website. The messages were very polarized, ranging from ‘I will kill you and all Muslims’ to ‘I completely agree with you Ertan’. The majority of the posts were of the first category. As a result, Ertan was requested by his provider to seek a new provider. After doing this, Ertan decided to limit the possibility of reacting to his website and all of the reactions to his column were deleted.

<sup>6</sup>I have used the search engines *google.nl* and *Ilse.nl* to find the sites where this specific post of Ertan was posted. I acknowledge that the fact that I could not find other websites containing this message does not mean that it does not exist elsewhere on the Net. Even though the Newsgroup is not a web forum (the focus of this thesis) I decided to include the newsgroup discussion here. As the results will show, the interactions were not notably different on the newsgroup. Furthermore, newsgroups can be accessed through the web as well, which makes them very alike to web forums in layout.

- last post appeared the next day, at noon, and by that time 30 participants posted 53 messages.
- *Web forum Leefbaarnederland*: a web forum on the website of a small populist political party called *Leefbaar Nederland* (Liveable Netherlands). Again, Ertan (this time using *ertan.nl* as nickname) started a thread titled ‘Murat, I love you’. He posted the message on 19 January 2004 at 12.24. The thread closed the next day at four o’clock in the afternoon. There were 33 messages in total, posted by 18 participants.
  - *Web forum Fok*: a Dutch discussion website which is also examined in the other studies in this thesis. *Salvation* started a discussion thread, containing Ertan’s column ‘Murat, I love you’, referring to *www.ertan.nl* as the source. The thread is called ‘Ertan.nl: Too sick for words’ and started on 24 January 2004 at 21:36 and ended one hour later, with 55 messages posted by 29 participants.

I have not examined Ertan’s website; although people initially could post reactions, the format of his site (a web log) is not directed at a discussion between participants.

Using a discourse analytical approach, I examined the 139 reactions on the three forums specified above (see Appendix C for the participants of the forums)<sup>7</sup> to Ertan’s column in order to identify different strategies that people adopt to deal with an unconventional voice such as Ertan’s. After having thoroughly read and reread the material, I drew up an extensive and detailed list of categories. These were later regrouped identifying broader strategies, which were used in reaction to Ertan’s posts. The strategies are very prominent and almost all of the posts use one or more of them.<sup>8</sup> I will first describe these different types of strategies before turning to the question that shapes this analysis: To what extent does Ertan’s alternative voice actually open up public discussion for difference and allow for engagement?

### 7.3 Online strategies of dealing with difference

When looking at the posts on the three forums, a first finding is that the ‘place’ in which the discussions are held does not seem to influence or affect the way in which people react. The reactions show remarkable similarities, despite the fact that there are differences in the discussions. Ertan himself started the thread on *nl.politiek* and *Leefbaarnederland*, but not on *Fok*. The forums are also different in nature: *nl.politiek* is a general political discussion group that is not affiliated with any political party or movement and seems to have quite a diverse public. *Leefbaarnederland*, on the contrary, is specifically connected to a political party and is therefore likely to attract a specific audience.<sup>9</sup> *Fok* is not a political forum per se: The website hosts discussions on all sorts of topics, from music, philosophy, and gardening to political matters.

<sup>7</sup>There were 141 messages in the three forums, two of which were the original message posted by Ertan.

<sup>8</sup>85% of the posts use one or more of the strategies. The other 15% are off-topic.

<sup>9</sup>And it does, concluding from the issues addressed and the opinions voiced on the website and the web forum as a whole.

Despite these differences in the forums, there is substantial homogeneity in the reactions.<sup>10</sup> One striking similarity is that none of the reactions on any of the forums discusses the *content* of Ertan's post. This will later be examined in detail, but for now I will concentrate on the actual reactions. Three common themes or 'strategies' can be identified: (i) attempts in finding ways of 'eliminating' Ertan; (ii) discussing his authenticity; and (iii) stereotyping. These themes can be found at all stages of the discussion, and often more than one strategy can be found within one single post. The theme 'eliminating Ertan' is most common, followed by his authenticity and the theme of stereotyping.

### 7.3.1 Eliminating Ertan from 'our' society

The most common type of reaction to Ertan's post is an attempt to find a way of silencing or, even literally, eliminating Ertan. Within this strategy three categories can be distinguished: (i) statements to the effect that Ertan does not belong to 'our' society; (ii) calls for the use of violence against Ertan; and (iii) discussion of the more technological possibilities for silencing him (eliminating his voice from the Net).

Twenty posts by 17 participants fall within the first category, stating that Ertan does not belong to 'our' society.<sup>11</sup> Thirteen posts (by 12 participants) ask or argue for the use of violence against him.<sup>12</sup> While the latter is plainly undemocratic (not to mention illegal), the first is also problematic. In the debate it is, however, seen as a legitimate argument. It seems that because Ertan is of Turkish descent, he can be 'sent back' whenever the 'real' Dutch people want him to (even though his writings suggest he was born here). The same argument is used against Murat, the boy that killed his teacher, in some letters to the editor of newspapers:<sup>13</sup> He should be sent to prison, in Turkey rather than in the Netherlands. Similar suggestions are made in the debate on honour killings (discussed in Chapter 6, Section 6.5), where the suggestion was that those who want to commit honour killings should do this elsewhere, not in the Netherlands. The same exclusion mechanism of 'othering' is applied in the debate with Ertan, but in a more extreme form, as both legal rights are denied to him and violence is proposed.

Whether this is merely rhetoric used to exclude opinions and to make the author feel that s/he has fewer rights, is not clear. It is clear, however, that it plays a major role in the discussion. Ertan is not allowed to speak his mind on the subject. If he is unhappy with the situation he should just go back to Turkey. Ertan himself identifies this in his column beforehand: '[If a Muslim gives his opinion] he is censored or confronted with the question why he doesn't return to his own country, if he doesn't like it here. Holland apparently isn't our country'. Yet, this remains the reaction of most people to Ertan's post. Freedom of speech apparently has its limits and people with Ertan's ideas and mentality operate

<sup>10</sup>Judging from the names used on the websites, most participants (apart from Ertan) seem to be 'natives'.

<sup>11</sup>Ten of these were posted on *nl.politiek*, seven on *Leefbaarnederland*, and three on *Fok*. This means that relatively there were more on *Leefbaarnederland*.

<sup>12</sup>Again, the *Leefbaarnederland* forum had relatively more posts in this category: five, against three on *nl.politiek*, and five on *Fok*.

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance: Metro brieven (letters), 15 January 2004, 'Laat de schutter zijn straf in land van herkomst uitzitten' (Make the killer serve his time in country of origin).

outside of these limits and thus do not belong here in 'our' society. Some participants suggest how to deal with such dissent:

There will be a time, dear Ertan, that we are going to eliminate people like you from our society. Passport or no passport, born and bred here or not. Your mentality doesn't belong here! (Arno, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:09)

These sort of undesirable elements should be eliminated from our society immediately. Rebelling against a society of which you are a part is not done. (indahnesia.com, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:03)

Well, with these ideas they should lock you up or withdraw your passport and have you leave the country. (Cor, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 13:57)

The third way of trying to silence Ertan is through depriving him of the possibility to speak on the Net. Participants discuss different technological and social steps that can be taken to exclude him from web forums and from the web in general. One participant of *nl.politiek* sent a message to the moderator of the newsgroup stating that Ertan's post is abusive, and indicating he should be excluded from the forum.<sup>14</sup> There is no indication whether the moderators honoured this request, by either closing down the thread or by excluding him.

The other two forums, however, did close the discussion after a short period. After one day, *Leefbaarnederland* put the post of Ertan and all the replies in the 'trash' (a separate place on the forum where the thread can still be accessed but which indicates that the discussion is seen as peripheral). Ertan himself was banned from the site, as were two extreme right-wing participants, *White Angel* and *ProudtoBeWhite*, whose messages did not differ much from other messages in terms of *what* was said, but rather *how* it was said. The forum administrator explained that Ertan's post was provocative, did not serve any purpose, and showed no respect for the friends and family of the deceased teacher.<sup>15</sup> The web forum *Fok* closed the thread after one hour, stating that: 'everything has been said',<sup>16</sup> making it impossible to further discuss Ertan's post.

Both *nl.politiek* and *Fok* discuss other ways of silencing Ertan. Some participants want to 'get his site offline',<sup>17</sup> or predict it would be hacked soon,<sup>18</sup> or cease to exist altogether,<sup>19</sup> without giving any explanation or argument for such claims. Next to the abundance of silencing suggestions, a few participants (including Ertan himself) argue that Ertan only uses his right to freedom of speech, and that he is not violating any laws. As Ertan states in the *Leefbaarnederland* forum:

<sup>14</sup>Francina, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:12.

<sup>15</sup>Victor Reijkersz, Administrator, *Leefbaarnederland*, 20 January 2004, 16:13.

<sup>16</sup>CartWOMan (Forum Admin), *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:42.

<sup>17</sup>AltamirA, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:55.

<sup>18</sup>Jan Peter, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 11:38.

<sup>19</sup>xstatic1975, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:33.

You cannot withdraw my passport, let alone lock me up, as it is my right as a Dutchman to use my freedom of speech. (ertan.nl, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 15:19)

### 7.3.2 Ertan's authenticity

A considerable number (18) of posts do not react to the content of the post but only talk about Ertan as an individual and whether he is real or a 'troll'<sup>20</sup> and should thus be ignored altogether. The fact that Ertan shows contempt for non-Muslims and non-Turks,<sup>21</sup> has a website<sup>22</sup> registered by S. Asuk,<sup>23</sup> and has expressed himself fiercely against homosexuals in the past,<sup>24</sup> suggests to the participants that Ertan is real and a Turk. The main reason people do not believe he genuinely is a Turk, is his use of the Dutch language: 'his Dutch is too good to be a Turk'.<sup>25</sup> A number of people are convinced Ertan is not who he says he is and even speculate that he is a Dutchman who wants to provoke and polarize Dutch society. Or as one participant puts it:

It seems inconceivable that the Turkish community, apart from a few nutcases, will approve of such a dirty message. It will have a huge impact, however, on Muslim haters. This causes me to suspect we are dealing here with an ancient propaganda trick, which we will often come across, especially given the possibility the Internet offers in this respect. (Henk Senster, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 17:25)

Here, one of the features of the Internet (anonymity) leads to suspicion and moreover, to (as some will argue, rightly so) ignoring some of the messages on the Internet. However, many believe that Ertan's post truly represents the ideas of a group in society, even if he is not who he says he is. Because of the discussion about his authenticity, the content of his post is not addressed as much as the 'phenomenon' that is Ertan. In this way, the possibility of having a genuine debate on the issues raised by Ertan is annulled.

### 7.3.3 Generalization

A number of participants 'expose' Ertan's stance as the 'true' Muslim attitude, and see it as evidence that politicians should monitor Islam.<sup>26</sup> This generalization or stereotyping reveals the feeling of superiority of the Dutch or Western beliefs and values, as the following quote shows:

<sup>20</sup>A troll is someone who deliberately tries to frustrate the discussion.

<sup>21</sup>Bartels, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 08:01.

<sup>22</sup>Yew Betcha, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:45. Even though it is interesting that some people apparently feel that if one has a website, this thus means one exists, it does not fit the scope of this thesis to further address this issue.

<sup>23</sup>salvation, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:00.

<sup>24</sup>R@b, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:54.

<sup>25</sup>For instance: Job, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 16:55.

<sup>26</sup>Cor, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 13:42.

There truly is a group out there that thinks in this way, a way that is completely logical for them, namely out of a culture of honour, which we discarded after the Middle Ages. (idontlikepizza, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 22:25)

Countering this strategy of generalization there is a considerable number of posts arguing that Ertan is *not* representative of all Muslims, Turks or immigrants. Some are a direct reaction to these posts, and question the lines of argumentation. Other messages that counter generalization plainly state that Ertan is bad for Muslims or Turks. A few examples:

I know many Turks and they condemn this deed [the murder]. With this expression of sympathy many Turks will be disgusted by you and will feel ashamed that you are of Turkish descent. (bbw/cno, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 17:51)

You are ruining it for many Turks who are doing well. (Agostinho dos Santos, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 23:28)

Your post is unworthy for a Turk, you are doing your brothers and sisters more harm than good with this. (Van Vliegen, *nl.politiek*, January 18 2004, 07:30)

[Ertan is] working hard to confirm prejudices. (...) They are the ones who really ruin it for their 'group' in society. (blieblie, *Fok*, 24 January 2004, 21:42)

#### 7.4 Engagement with the 'other'

It becomes clear that the quality of the discussion leaves a lot to be desired. Table 7.1 specifies the types of expression present. One third of the posts (46) contain personal attacks, like the ones quoted below:

[Ertan is] a nutcase. (Ahimsa, *nl.politiek*, 19 January 2004, 00:41)

So piss off, asshole. (PietHein, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:16)

Ertan, you are a filthy Muslim. (cor, *Leefbaarnederland*, 19 January 2004, 12:40)

The second most frequent type of expression consists of reactions to others in the discussion (18 out of 141 posts), but few of these deal with the topic at hand (the murder that Murat committed, and the possible causes for it). Of the eight statements that do deal with it, only three are supported by arguments. Alternative approaches to viewing the murder committed by Murat and its causes are only provided in two messages. Information was rarely provided (in 10 posts) and hardly ever asked for (in two posts).

The discussion does not result in engagement, as alternative positions are not heard and are thus not properly included. Further, dialogue between discourses is not present, let alone the establishment of any understanding for the other. It is instead dominated by

Table 7.1: *Types of expression on web forums*

Type of expression <sup>†</sup>	Frequency			
	<i>Leefbaarnederland</i>	<i>nl.politiek</i>	<i>Fok</i>	<i>Total</i>
Personal attack	17	23	6	46
Reaction to others <sup>‡</sup>	6	10	2	18
Meta-talk about the discussion	3	5	5	13
Providing information	2	6	2	10
Statement about the issue	3	5	0	8
Argument for statement	1	2	0	3
Asking for information	0	0	2	2
Alternative approach to issue	2	0	0	2
<i>Total number of messages</i>	33	53	55	141

<sup>†</sup> Not every message contained one of these types of expression, and some contained more than one type of expression.

<sup>‡</sup> Quotations combined with related own content, or otherwise referring to previous posts.

personal attacks; none of the participants really acknowledge Ertan's position or make an effort to address it in one of the 139 reactions to his message. The closest acknowledgment of his stance is when one of the participants asks the following (after someone reported Ertan to the forum administrator for being abusive):

Why? This is a very useful contribution. We should know how people really think about Dutch society? Very useful information, and he means it, you're not prohibiting that, are you? (...) You won't hear this if you let the professional foreigners speak, affected as they are by the Dutch welfare bureaucracy. (Yew Betcha, *nl.politiek*, 18 January 2004, 07:19)

The participants disagree with Ertan's position, but no one addresses the content and substance of his arguments. There is thus neither inclusion nor engagement with his discourse. Their only concern seems to be with finding a way to eliminate him and his point of view, either directly or through doubting his authenticity and representativeness.

It could be argued that it is Ertan's position in favour of Murat that closes the door to dialogue. But this would suggest that public debate is rather limited in terms of the content that can be discussed, as well as the way that this content needs to be presented. If public debate can only take place in ways tolerated or prescribed by the dominant public, and can only portray what the dominant public allows, the limits of public debate are rather narrow and thus, the role of such debate in democracy is not optimal, and could be restricting the space of thought and discourse.

## 7.5 The use of alternative types of communication to establish engagement

There are various considerations of democratic debate, ranging from the view that it should follow strict criteria (such as the traditional account on deliberation discussed in Chapter 1) to the view that the most radical, unmediated and proscribed forms of debate should be included (as argued, for instance, by Mouffe (2000)). The first account has been criticised for not being inclusive of difference; however, the question remains whether radical accounts do allow for such inclusion. In Chapter 1, I argued that there is more at stake than mere inclusion or tolerance of different positions. Rather, there should be *engagement* between different discourses; people should reflect upon the content of their *own* discourse through an encounter with the other's discourse. This is what openness stands for: Not only the inclusion of all participants and positions, but discussants should also be open towards others and their positions. These different discourses should not merely coexist, but also interact. In the discussion of Ertan's support for Murat, there does not even seem to be space for the different discourses to coexist (rather, the one discourse is directed at excluding the other), let alone space for engagement. Difference functions as a polarizing force.

Theorists like Young (2000) argue that deeply divided topics need types of communication that are different from rational communication. In Chapter 1, a number of linking expressions were identified, such as narratives and greetings. With contested issues like immigration in the Netherlands, these communications may help to create understanding of the 'other'. However, in the analysed debate none of these other types of communication were present. We have Ertan's testimonial, and even though he shares some of his experiences of being an immigrant struggling in today's Dutch society, no bridging replies follow that, in one way or another, show some understanding of his position.

But how can these alternative types of communication be beneficial in public discussion on this debate? With this question in mind, I turn to a discussion on another forum that seemed to potentially bridge different discourses more than the discussions examined above. It concerns a different forum, different participants, and other factors may play a role here, but I want to use this case to explore the use of the different types of communication and the possible role they may play in a discussion.

On *Maghrebonline*,<sup>27</sup> a website set up for Dutch Moroccans but also frequented by natives, a discussion started after a demonstration by a group of adolescents at Murat's school (see Appendix C for information on the participants of this debate). They were demonstrating to show their support for the killer two days after the murder, because they felt there was too much negative information about him in the media. They used a banner stating the same as Ertan's heading: 'Murat we love you'.<sup>28</sup> The day after this demonstration, *Yesmina* started a discussion on *Maghrebonline* called 'Murat' (Friday 16 January 2004). Fifteen participants (about half of the participants appear to represent

<sup>27</sup>See Chapter 3 and 4.

<sup>28</sup>The original text on the banner was English.

immigrants) post 61 messages in six days, after which the discussion died out. Three participants dominate the discussion by writing over half the contributions, among them the initiator *Yesmina*. She is very outspoken about the youngsters' actions in her initial post, and writes:

I do not feel sorry for Murat and have no mercy either! He did not have mercy when he pointed the gun at that teacher!! I feel very ashamed that something like this CAN HAPPEN in the Netherlands. To applaud someone who is disturbed!! They should throw all these disturbed people in jail! And his friends go on to applaud him as if he did not commit a crime and is not responsible for a death and he deserves his punishment. To then shout on TV We love you Murat (...) as if he has done nothing wrong. (Yesmina, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 2004, 00:18—emphasis in original)

This discussion has a similar starting point as the discussions started by Ertan and his column: There is an initial expression of support for Murat followed by strong condemnation. However, what happens in the *Maghrebonline* discussion is of a very different nature than in the discussion examined before. A dialogue develops and there seems to be engagement between different discourses. The most prominent elements in this discussion are the use of narrative, greeting and other personal addresses.

The first three messages were by *Yesmina*, the first of which is quoted above. They reveal a fierce disapproval put into strong words. The first reaction is a post in which the author tries to establish some understanding of the youngsters that were demonstrating by using narrative:

Regarding the demonstration, you should not forget they are teenagers who are trying to come to terms with what happened. Of course, it is strange to demonstrate in that way and on that place, but this you can expect from youngsters. They probably knew Murat well and considered him to be a good friend. I'm not trying to justify it, but I view it as a struggle with their own feelings. Such an experience is difficult even for adults that are involved. (HenkM, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 04, 01:01)

This participant is trying to shed light on the experiences of the friends of Murat, and attempts to come to an understanding of their situation and their subsequent actions. The discussant furthermore acknowledges that his view is not the only view (*I view it as ...*), expecting that it will also be met with disapproval (*I'm not trying to justify it, but ...*). He tries to create an atmosphere for understanding the youngsters' actions, by linking them to their own situation and to the situation of 'adults' for whom such an experience would be equally difficult.

Others in the discussion similarly try to relate the experiences of the youngsters to their own situation. In the following example, the discussant does not try so much to identify with the youngsters, but rather with their parents:

I'm sorry henk, but I do not agree with you; if it were my children that were confronted with such a situation, I would be present and available myself for the process of dealing with it. (PeterJan, *Maghrebonline*, 16-01-04, 12:13)

This participant feels that the demonstration is not the appropriate way of dealing with their grief, and that it is important that parents are there for the young people during this difficult time. In this way, the discussant acknowledges the difficulty of the situation for the youngsters, without condemning them (as was done by *Yesmina*), pointing rather at the responsibility of the parents in this matter. He comes to this position by considering what *he* would do, if *his* children were involved. The method of personalizing the incident helps to determine one's opinion on the matter and plays an important part in understanding the other situation.

Another important element that determines the tone of the discussion is also present in this quote: personal address. Although this participant undoubtedly knows that *Henk* is not the only person reading his comment (six postings by three people precede it) and probably does not have the intention of solely addressing *Henk*, he starts his posting with 'I'm sorry henk, but I do not agree with you.' This personal address suggests that *PeterJan* has weighed *Henk's* position and only then decided he does not agree. It even suggests that it is not so much his unwillingness to agree, but that their views on the issue are different. To apologize for this disagreement suggests respect and that both views can coexist. He ends his post with 'I know that I touch upon a sensitive issue [the responsibility of immigrant parents] here, but it really disturbs me.' These types of expression soften the tone of the discussion, and make differences seem less fundamental and more easily surmountable.

Another response of *PeterJan* combines a personal address with his own experiences from his personal life and that of his family members. After being asked by *Ann* whether he knows how difficult the situation of the youngsters is on VMBO (the lowest level of Dutch secondary school), *PeterJan* replies:

No, Ann; my secondary education started at a LTS [Lower Technical School] (40 yrs ago) but was/is not comparable to what constitutes VMBO at this time. (...) What I fear (and I even notice it at home) is a hardening of natives against immigrants. My wife is working at *buro jeugdzorg* [institute for youth care] and is regularly confronted with similar situations [the terrible situation a number of Turkish families are in, according to one of the other discussants]. The shocking percentage of immigrants in their caseload and the inaccessibility/language problems are enormous. (PeterJan, *Maghrebonline*, 16 January 2004, 12:59)

All these little pieces of information, personal experiences, narratives, and efforts to empathize with others are aimed at trying to get a better grip on highly complex, contested, and emotional problems. Personal address, respect, acknowledgements and other ways of letting the other know that you have listened to their position and considered it. Such strategies soften the tone of the discussion, which started off quite harshly.

I am not denying that these forms of address could be ‘mere’ rhetoric, aimed at convincing the other of one’s own position. However, if such rhetoric is what is needed to connect people and help them consider positions and experiences different from their own, then rhetoric does more good than harm to the discussion. Neither do I wish to imply that these types of address are all that is needed in public debate, or that the differences between people or disagreements will vanish because of them. Instead, I argue that these types of communication are necessary conditions for starting an open debate on contested issues. They create a sphere in which people feel respected and comfortable enough to open up to other (and ‘foreign’) positions and are not reserved for sharing their own personal experience and opinions. Sharing personal experiences or other narratives may prove to be a prerequisite for understanding.

In the second part of the discussion, it becomes clear that such a bridging of discourses can be very fragile. The discussion turns from an open discussion into a debate in which personal attacks and off-topic contributions have free play. In the 21<sup>st</sup> post, *Jena* starts to rant against one of the other participants, whom she accuses of being a Jew hater. While many of the contributions before this first personal attack deal with the actual topic (see Table 7.2), only three out of 41 posts deal with the topic after *Jena*’s posting. Even though there are still quite a number of reactions to other posts, the discussion loses its contextual direction and focus.

Table 7.2: *Types of expression on Maghrebonline*

Type of expression	Frequency		
	Before first personal attack	After first personal attack	Total
Reaction to others	13	13	26
Statement about issue	13	3	16
Alternative approach to issue	12	2	14
Argument for statement	9	3	12
Providing information	6	5	11
Personal attack	0	6	6
Asking for information	2	2	4
Meta-talk about the discussion	1	1	2
<i>Total number of messages</i>	20	41	61

Before this particular post of *Jena*, nine out of 20 posts provide arguments for their statements; after, only three out of 41 provide arguments. Also, the amount of information asked for and provided decreases rapidly. But most importantly, whereas in the first phase of the discussion participants genuinely present alternative ways of viewing the matter (12 out of 20 posts), these are no longer provided in the second phase (only in two out

of 40 posts). Thus, where the discussion started to facilitate some understanding of the different positions, after a specific flaming the course of the discussion changes. At this point, the participants who contributed to the debate in the first phase with their personal experiences do not return to the discussion.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This second case study examined what happens when the voice of a counter public enters the main public discourse. Even though Ertan constitutes an alternative or radical voice online, it does not seem that he was successful in opening up the discussion on immigration and integration. No dialogue came about on the basis of his column. Instead, the participants were unanimous in trying to find ways to exclude him. They do so, not by addressing the content of the message, but rather by trying, in one way or another, to 'eliminate' his voice. Neither Ertan as a participant nor the content of his post is acknowledged by the other participants. This means that even though the discussion platform initially allows for inclusion of Ertan's voice, the participants are not open. Thus, there is only external inclusion (Ertan has access to the debate) but no internal inclusion (he does not have an equal position in the debate); others do not grant him equal status and capacity to effectively influence the debate (see for the distinction: Young, 2000). As a result, there can be no engagement between the positions, as he only has formal, not meaningful, access to the debate. Also, no understanding for the other comes about, as the debate and its participants are lacking in openness.

Thus, the technology may allow for Ertan to have a voice in the public domain, but what happens with this voice depends on the other 'inhabitants' of this space. Ertan's emotional appeal is perhaps bound to attract strong reactions, but did the discussants try hard enough to remain open to it? If one wants to listen to an alternative voice, there is enough in Ertan's message to deal with in a serious manner. But if one cuts oneself off from the other, there is likewise material in the post to foreclose any serious discussion.

What happens when people are open towards each other and seek to bridge existing differences? To examine this, I analysed a discussion on *Maghrebonline* that features alternative positions. Here, strong contributions were present, as in the Ertan discussions. However, a few participants were open to 'connect' to the other, and tried to understand the other's position. They tried to establish understanding between different perspectives in different ways. These discussants determined the tone of the debate (and softened it) by acknowledging the other discussants, particularly those with whom they disagreed. The debate featured inclusion of difference, engagement between different positions, and through the dialogue some level of understanding was seemingly established.

This case shows the role that greeting plays in debates on contested issues. Particularly in an environment where participants cannot see one another, such greetings have an important function. They show that someone has acknowledged the other's presence, hereby showing that s/he has taken the post seriously. This acknowledgement of presence is even more important because the discussions often do not take place synchronously.

As such, greetings can provide for some sort of continuity in a space where this may otherwise feel unnatural; greetings may help to establish a feeling for the discussion. One only exists for the others in the debate when s/he contributes through posting. When someone acknowledges the other and considers his/her post, this also tells one s/he is willing to discuss it with you. Greetings from the other thus grant the other a voice in the debate. In the examined debate, apologizing for disagreeing with the other also brought this about. This shows at least a willingness to agree, and thus that the specific discussant is not unwilling to relate to the other's perspective.

Next to greeting, the sharing of personal experiences and connections to one's everyday life were also very important in connecting with the other. These testimonials and narratives allow for an understanding between different perspectives. It became clear how these function in the discussion of an emotional and contested issue. It allowed for connection between different discourses, and allowed for engagement. Thus, breaking with the dispassionate and rational discourse advocated in Chapter 1, in this case, helped the discussion. However, this case also showed that openness of the debate is very fragile. The greetings created an open atmosphere in which participants felt free to share personal stories. But even though participants can work hard to create this comfortable atmosphere, others can always come and 'crash the party'.

Greetings and other types of communication determining the tone of debate thus form an important part of the discussion. The question is to what extent these types of expression would have been helpful in the other three analysed debates. In these debates it was more a direct reaction to the one proclaiming support rather than about the youngsters whose actions were reported on in the news. It may be that this was an important aspect in the debate. The *Fok* discussion, however, was also an indirect reaction, as Ertan himself did not initiate or participate in the debate. Here, the discussion was as heated and discarding as the other debates were. Another difference was in the age of those proclaiming support for Murat; In the case of Ertan it concerns an adult, whereas the others were adolescents, and in addition were directly involved, being friends of Murat. We see that discussants trying to establish understanding take on a pedagogical tone in their messages. The fact that the youngsters are not attributed full responsibility may be an explanatory factor for the established level of understanding. However, the way in which this was done still points to the importance, or necessity of, openness in the debate and discussants, as well as to the way in which it was established through the use of narrative, greetings, and testimonials. Whether this openness and these types of expression would have been sufficient in the Ertan debate remains speculative, but their role in the *Maghrebonline* discussion is clear.