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A discourse analysis of audience deliberation in online forums on race-relevant news

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In a post-cyber-utopian world, scholars are aware that online discussions emanating from newspaper articles do not automatically exhibit democratic discourse. Against this background, we aim to delineate some of the main attributes of deliberative discourse in an online news site for the South African Mail & Guardian. We are particularly interested in determining how interlocutors justify conclusions through warrants. Warrants are discourse moves that link conclusions with evidence, and we examine their role in contesting the ideological productiveness of opposing arguments. Focusing on race-sensitive discussions, we combine a content- and discourse-analytic framework to identify the deliberative dynamics of warrants in online debates hosted by the Mail & Guardian. We argue that warrants, as a conceptual tool, offer a fruitful purchase on the enactment of deliberation in naturally-occurring settings. Moreover, they seem cardinal for the contestation of ideology, notably when deliberation is suffused with the analysis of power relations in highly-charged topics.

Keywords: online deliberation, discourse analysis, content analysis, news discourse, user comments, racism, race

1. Introduction

Computer-mediated discourse analysts hold that the relationship between online communication and political exchange develops amid complex constraints and possibilities, including commercial colonisation, new technologies and other socio-cultural evolutions (Lyons 2017). The levels of criticality that participants in online news deliberation accomplish and sustain are actuated in this uncertain climate. Our analysis is impelled by the potential of this situation for catalysing democratically-orientated interaction. We aim to contribute to academic ventures in online deliberation concerned with delineating "theoretically promising standards that can be achieved in the real world" (Bächtiger, Niemeyer, Neblo, Steenbergen and Steiner 2010: 45).

We hone our project on the discourse practices emerging from user-generated comments (hereafter user comments) to news stories. Our data has been sampled from the online arm of the Mail & Guardian, a national South African broadsheet news provider. This selection was prompted when other news agencies suspended reader-response facilities during our data collection phase.

Creating comment sections for registered readers, and making these visible to the broader public, emanates from both a digital-journalistic drive to make content more interactive, and a commercial imperative to attract audiences. Regardless of motivation, the trajectory of discussions remains volatile. To probe this landscape, we conjoin two analytic frameworks. The first supplies a content analytic scheme for gauging levels of reciprocity; that is, the model charts the degree to which interlocutors interact through questions, answers, agreements and disagreements as opposed to monologues (Brooks and Lutton 2015). We deductively expanded this model, focusing on whether participants aimed agreements and disagreements at journalists, or at each other, and whether agreements/disagreements are fortified by reason-giving (Brokensha and Conradie, 2017). This first-level analysis suggested that arguments commonly centred on a specific component: the care invested in connecting evidence to conclusions.

Mindful of this, we consulted existing research, and applied Adams's (2014) model to deepen our scrutiny of the patterns discerned in our first-level investigation. Adams (2014) positions reason-giving as one of the key components of deliberation, and frames it as interlocutors' commitment to making individual arguments intelligible to each other. Analytically, Adams (2014) delineates three components that are conducive to this cause: a triad of evidence, conclusions and warrants. However, while Adams (2014) illustrates the role these components play in individual contributions, we take an interest in how they manifest within dialogues.

2. User-generated content to online news

For news professionals, user comments offer metrics of readers' reactions to different news topics and reporting styles. Moreover, comment platforms allow readers from unpredictably diverse social positions to collate and contest information from multiple sources since participation is comparatively cheap, fast and unhindered by geographic distance. The unpredictability occasioned by diversifying audiences is a key touchstone for our study, notably in the light of a growing awareness that "the discrete national state belonging to a homogenous population [is] a myth of modernity" (Steyn 2015: 379).

The myth has been ruptured not only by human mobility across borders, but by "changing relationships between people who are differently positioned within the nation state" (Steyn 2015: 379). This scenario necessitates skills for navigating complexity and ambiguity. For example, by making arguments comprehensible to others, collating and evaluating the extensive batteries of information presented by peers, participants can decisively alter the direction of interactions (Adams 2014). A cognate of these skills includes an awareness of the incompleteness of individual arguments and a consequent willingness to seek clarification and collaboration.

Such skills are exigent for readers dialoguing on news platforms, since the background similarities and divergences between peers are uncertain. Advancing deliberation requires the negotiation of complex relationships. Much of the early cyber-optimism hinged on the hope that digital communication would ease access to information and equalise critical participation. The former would enhance the preconditions for deliberation, while the latter would provoke the effective pursuit of social justice. However, as Steyn (2015), Hughey and Daniels (2013) advocate, pursuing these hopes necessitates attention to practices that emerge from real-world settings. Against this kaleidoscope, our interest in user comments is propelled by the evolution of reader-exchange forums into a commonplace yet fraught component of digital news (we conceptualise forums as the comment sections provided by online news sites). The rest of this section sketches our discourse-based approach to these permutations.

We root our approach in theoretical propositions and discourse analyses by Adams (2014), Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer (2014). This entails probing user comments forums to untangle the discursive practices that condition interaction, such as using metaphors to link opinions with supporting evidence (Adams 2014). Given the reach of online media, discourse practices that ossify into regular patterns can disseminate among the broader public, including readers who are exposed to, but not actively involved in, the interchange. In fact, Han and Brazeal's (2015) experiments suggest that exposure to civil disagreement, prompts readers

to emulate associated behaviours, such as asking for clarification and avoiding uncivil responses. Similarly, Lyons (2017) reminds researchers that any single online forum should be broached as a part of a much broader network within which some discourses gain traction, while others do not.

These networks can also disseminate practices that are considered disruptive to deliberation, including incivility or ideological enclaves where like-minded discussants exchange preference-reinforcing opinions (Han and Brazeal 2015). Over the past few decades, journalists and readers from various backgrounds have expressed concern with these dangers. During our data collection stage, South African news sites including *The Citizen*, Eyewitness News, and News24, suspended their online comment facilities, in response to a surge of racist and sexist polemic, much of which targeted journalists. These developments prompted our choice to combine a content analytic framework (Brooks and Lutton 2015) with a more contoured discourse analytic rubric for investigating reason-giving, as one type of deliberative practice in user comments (Adams, 2014).

In what follows, we explicate the theoretical grounds of our analysis, through recourse to Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer (2014). Prior to presenting our findings, we adumbrate our data collection procedures, and analytic frameworks.

Before continuing, we acknowledge Hartz-Karp and Sullivan's (2014: 2) caution against assuming that online interaction can replace carefully facilitated face-to-face deliberation completely. Similarly, we signal our awareness of Freelon's (2015) caveat that deliberation is not the only communicative norm against which online interaction should be measured. Our discourse analysis is aimed at responding to this warning, however owing to page constraints we cannot explicate our response in this article.

3. Conceptualising deliberation, reason-giving and reciprocity

The fulcrum of deliberation rests on interrogating the logics espoused from one perspective from countervailing alternatives, predicated on the conviction that doing so can refine existing knowledge, fortify human relationships, and ultimately shape political behaviours (Lyons 2017). Robust deliberation requires active engagement with discordant opinions by asking probing questions, substantiating both agreement and disagreement with reasons, and maintaining civility. Some theorists instate reasoned consensus as the ultimate objective of deliberation. Recently, consensus has been de-emphasised, since many key benefits are not predicated on achieving consensus (Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer 2014).

Two prongs of deliberation include reason-giving and reciprocity. The former entails using justifications that buttress argumentative claims. The latter demands moving beyond isolated preference-statements, into conversations where participants seek clarification and articulate agreements and/or disagreements that are, again, anchored by reason-giving (Adams 2014). The affordances of user comments seem conducive to deliberative reciprocity, because participants are not required to respond only to the latest comment in a news discussion. Instead, replies can be posted to every previous comment, making multiple conversational tangents possible.

Below, we review Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer's (2014) theoretical touchstones for the particular value of both disagreement and reason-giving in deliberation, before elucidating the analytic rubric we applied to the corpus under study.

3.1 The dangers of agreement

Early cyber-optimism has cooled upon the realisation that digital media are not innocent of offline inequalities. Critical scholars of race and gender, for example, have cited power relations that compel some discussants to enter online deliberation from marginalised positions (Hughey and Daniels, 2013). Cognisance of the constitutive role that power relations play is increasingly recognised as a principal skill for navigating interactions in contemporary publics, including news portals (Steyn 2015; Hampton, Shin and Lu 2017).

One reaction to a growing recognition of unequal power is an appreciation of the willingness to expose ideas to confrontations that prompt reasoned defence or even reconsideration. The appreciation imputed to this kind of engagement reifies the value of both reason-giving and reciprocity.

Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer (2014) contribute to this corpus by adducing three cognitive and social-psychological mechanisms that centralise the primacy of both difference and reason-giving: stagnation, forgetfulness and conformism.

First, if juxtaposing countervailing ideas is indispensable for producing superior perspectives, lower levels of contestation will risk enervating the vital preconditions for deliberation. Simultaneously, the generative potential of contestation is expanded when disagreements are made mutually comprehensible through effective reason-giving. The salience of overcoming stagnation is sharpened by Steyn's (2015) reflections on the imbrication of difference and inequalities, referenced earlier.

Second, the dynamic of forgetfulness signifies how the validity of existing arguments escape interrogation when adherents are not compelled to recall and

possibly refine the details underpinning them. This caveat speaks specifically to the methodical appraisal of dominant understandings. To elaborate, Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer (2014) invoke Mill (1991: 59):

> even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be [...] earnestly contested, it will, by those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice.

Meeting contestation can therefore inculcate criticality by compelling discussants to reflect on, and (re)articulate the justifications underpinning their opinions and potentially to accommodate the counter-arguments promulgated by peers, if possible. Conversely, avoiding contestation can induce forgetfulness because defending existing arguments becomes redundant.

Third, in deference to conformity, when a set of political views are perceived as the dominant outlook, detractors may become disinclined from objecting, while exponents are emboldened. Anxiety over digressing from what is perceived as dominant ideas discourages disagreement (Hampton et al. 2017; Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer 2014).

We adopt these claims as justifications for mapping two discursive facets of the setting under study. First, we compare the incidence of agreements and disagreements between interlocutors. Next, we scrutinise the extent to which agreements/disagreements reflect Adams's (2014) set of reason-giving procedures, premised on the view that omitting evidence and warrants could inhibit the benefits of public deliberation. We unpack these concepts in the next section.

3.2 Components of reason-giving

This subsection operationalises Adams's (2014) conceptual triad for reason-giving and its theoretical cornerstones. Discourse-based research on the internal structures of reason-giving offers input to two alternative streams of empirical work on digital deliberation. One catalogues potential outcomes, such as increased awareness of issue-relevant information, and increased tolerance or polarisation. A second appraises the influence of pre-deliberative determinants, such as the political sensitivity of various topics (Hampton et al. 2017).

Discourse analyses of reason-giving are linked to, but methodologically divergent from, these works, by mounting a closer inspecting of conversational dynamics. Generally, projects are instigated by theoretical and empirically-informed archives that differentiate reason-giving from other modes of discourse (Adams 2014). Reason-giving and its components are then broached

as discursive accomplishments. Stretches of text are read as doing discursive work by, for example, articulating conclusions, or evidencing the verisimilitude of those conclusions through contextually functional moves such as citing factual information. Discourse practices are, therefore, strategically instrumental, but also situationally circumscribed (Adams 2014).

Adams (2014) delimits reason-giving into evidence, warrants, and conclusions. In Adams' (2014) model, evidence can be adopted from factual statements, personal experiences and storytelling. The last two classifications might require some explanation.

Much of the latest research into typologies of evidence eschews attempts to "articulate a hierarchy of reasoning [...] distinguishing between "good" and "bad" reasons" (Adams 2014, 2). Advocates of more elastic models argue against idealising empirically falsifiable facts (*cf*. Bächtiger et al. 2010). For example, accommodating storytelling and personal experiences may cultivate empathetic understandings of the lived experiences of others, especially those who are excluded from mainstream education and other forms of institutionalised knowledge (Steyn 2015). Equally pressing is the view that participants can jointly renegotiate the criteria for legitimate evidence, and thus for suitable reasoning. In this light, instituting one evidence type over others becomes expendable. Consequently, discourse analysts are not charged with parsing legitimate from illegitimate evidence types. Instead, studies focus on teasing reason-giving from other discourse types, and explicate its operation in naturally-occurring settings. Adams's (2014, 3) route into this project proposes that:

> [the] point of reason-giving is to explain to others why you hold a particular position, which requires reasoning to be explicit [in an attempt to be] mutually understandable to others who do not share the speakers' opinions and worldviews.

Warrants are cardinal to mutual intelligibility. As discourse moves, they bridge evidence and conclusions by expounding the "causal infrastructure" that links them (Adams 2014: 2). Omitting warrants can weaken or obfuscate arguments by failing to specify connections between evidence and conclusions. Explicit warrants can also invite reciprocity by clarifying and thus opening its infrastructure to critique.

Warrants are often conveyed by implication, but this communicative economy becomes problematic in proportion to the unpredictable composition of news audiences, as well as the mechanisms described by Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer (2014). Making warrants explicit rather than implicit orients to the deliberative demand to render underlying modes of reasoning comprehensible to peers.

Deliberation is, of course, possible without warrants, but their explicating function helps to trigger incisive exchange. By bridging evidence and conclusions, warrants can become the most focal points of dispute. Even when batteries of factual evidence, such as independent statistics, are accepted or when personal experiences are respected, the modes of reasoning that extrapolate conclusions from these sets of evidence can ignite variance (Adams 2014).

A summary of Adams's (2014) framework is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Categories from Adams's (2014) model

Category	Description
Evidence:	
Factual statement	Empirical declaration about the world, but not from a first-person perspective. *'The South African Reserve Bank is the RSA's central bank'.*
Personal experience	An event that personally involves the individual participant and/or significant others, as indicated by first-person statements about an issue. *'I witness government interference daily'.*
Story	A narrative (with a beginning, a middle and an end) that reflects a problem. *'A loyal worker gets hauled over the coals by vindictive employers…'*
Conclusion:	
Proposal	Proscriptive statement that recommends solutions to an issue. *'Only the South African Reserve Bank should maintain price stability in the RSA.'*
Problem definition	Descriptive statement that diagnoses what is wrong with an issue. *'The Public Protector cannot tell the South African Reserve Bank what to do.'*
Warrant:	
Conditional	Creates causal links between a proposal/problem and evidence. A conditional can be expressed prospectively (if-evidence-then-conclusion) or retrospectively (conclusion-if-evidence). *'If X respected the independence of Y, then the Rand would not plummet'.*
Value statement	Moral beliefs such as equality are explicitly proposed as general guidelines for a wide range of issues. They are forwarded as an infrastructure for rendering specific evidence conducive to particular conclusions. *'Respecting one another should guide a non-racial society'.*
Analogy	One perspective on an issue is illustrated by enacting another, presumably well-understood/less complicated situation. *'X's financial policies are akin to a household spending excessively on luxuries'.*
Meta-proposal	Statement that reflects a general proposition about economic, political and social dynamics. *'Schools may be better at improving literacy than government policies'.*

4. Sampling

We purposely selected all user comments to 17 news stories on race-relevant issues in South Africa, for the period from January 2015 to March 2017. Topics include racism in social media (including expressions by Penny Sparrow, Chris Hart, Vanessa Hartley and Velaphi Khumalo), issues related to colonialism, whiteness, land reform and student protests at universities. The coding process ultimately yielded 2352 functional moves. All texts are listed in an appendix to this article. During the analysis, key points of contextual information on the sample, as well as the racially-charged events with which the texts engage, will be provided to elucidate our investigation.

Deliberately selecting user comments on race-related topics stems from the following observations: (1) *Mail & Guardian Online* provides a public forum for deliberative democracy, and (2) was, during our data collection stage, one of the few news sites in South Africa that allowed user-comments. (3) Racism remains one of the most vexed social problems in South Africa, around which competing interpretations of history and its impact on the present are negotiated, making race-based articles likely to elicit animated reader-reactions that generate high levels of interactivity.

Our analysis addresses one limitation in Adams (2014). Adams (2014) does not explicitly investigate cooperation and reciprocity across participants' contributions, in favour of examining individual messages. Moreover, his data is also contextually different from our own, set within face-to-face, synchronous interactions that facilitate extemporaneous reasoning. Instead of focusing exclusively on whether individual posts reflect conclusions, evidence and warrants, we also map whether participants cooperatively proffer evidence and/or warrants for each other's conclusions. Doing so is particularly relevant to asynchronous forums, because this mode allows participants more time to contemplate and plan the composition of each post. However, asynchronous interactions are not without disadvantages. Disagreements, for example, may be expressed less frequently and less boldly, because asynchronous communication is liable to fragmentation: interlocutors could become prone to posting comments in a vacuum, without actively interacting (Hartz-Karp and Sullivan 2014).

5. Qualitative content analysis

Prior to selecting Adams's (2014) discourse framework, we conducted a content analysis, the results of which gestured to the utility of Adams's (2014) three-part subdivision of reason-giving. Our content analysis originated from Brooks

and Lutton (2015), but to reflect our interest in reason-giving and reciprocity, we extended their codifications in several directions.

Following Brooks and Lutton (2015), we adopt content analysis for its replicability, context-sensitivity and its non-intrusive methods. One danger of content analysis is the reduced generalisability occasioned by a tendency to develop new coding rubrics for new projects, rather than replicating and refining existing schemes. Reflecting this critique, we conducted an initial reading of our data, before adopting Brooks and Lutton's (2015) instrument, and refining its components.

As indicated in Table 2 below, Brooks and Lutton (2015) can trace reciprocity by coding whether user comments are posted as agreements, disagreements or questions. Originally however, their codes did not signal the direction of agreement/disagreement, whether it targets peers, a source quoted in the news story or journalists. Neither did it disclose the inclusion or omission of reason-giving. We extended this instrument by adding categories for direction and reasoned support (A1-4 and D1-4).

Table 2: Coding scheme adapted from Brooks and Lutton (2015)

Code	Category	Description
SO	Shares opinion	Presents opinions /thoughts about the topic without supporting evidence.
SN	Shares non-cited information	Presents facts/opinions without clear reference to sources.
SC	Shares cited information	Presents facts/opinions and clearly references sources by methods such as links and citations.
RQ1	Questions a fellow discussant	Asks a question of a fellow discussant related to the topic and that invites further discussion.
RQ2	Raises an other-directed question	Asks a general question related to the topic and that invites further discussion.
RC1	Challenges a discussant	Explicitly challenges a discussant to present an opinion on a hitherto neglected/ unanswered tangent.
RC2	Raises an other-directed challenge	Challenges the author of the given article/ news outlet/ a prominent source cited in the news article to present an opinion on a hitherto neglected/unanswered tangent.
A1	Agree 1	Discussant expresses agreement with an interlocutor.

Code	Category	Description
A2	Agree 2	Discussant expresses agreement with the author of the given news article or a prominent source cited in the article.
A3	Agree 3	Discussant does not provide reasons for the agreement.
A4	Agree 4	Discussant provides reasons for the agreement.
D1	Disagree 1	Discussant expresses disagreement with an interlocutor.
D2	Disagree 2	Discussant expresses disagreement with the author of the given news article or a prominent source cited in the article.
D3	Disagree 3	Discussant does not provide reasons for the disagreement.
D4	Disagree 4	Discussant provides reasons for the disagreement.
CO	Changes opinion	Amends an opinion stated in an earlier post, either explicitly or implicitly by expressing support from a view that contradicts an earlier statement.
IR	Indirect response	Employs humour, irony or sarcasm to express an opinion or raise a relevant issue that has not been factored in the discussion.
BO1	Bashing of others 1	Discussant bashes a fellow interlocutor through, for example, disrespectful name-calling or invective.
BO2	Bashing of others 2	Discussant bashes others outside the forum through, for example, disrespectful name-calling or invective.
AC1	Acknowledgement 1	In the context of an agreement, the discussant acknowledges some merit in a commenter's post.
AC2	Acknowledgement 2	In the context of a disagreement, the discussant acknowledges some merit in a commenter's post.
UC	Uncategorisable	Comment does not suit any of the above categories.

After applying this model, the resultant patterns were subjected to a closer discourse analysis, by scrutinising how respondents orient their comments to the three reason-giving practices in Adams (2014). Since our data involved incidents of racism and reactions to them, opinions aggregated around explicating the nature of the issue (problem definitions) and evaluating existing solutions, or proffering alternatives (proposals). Additionally, Brooks and Lutton (2015) code whether

opinions are accompanied by factual references (SN and SO). The deployment of other evidence types is not admitted, and to examine alternatives we turn to Adams (2014). Similarly, knowing how often cited or non-cited information is offered does not speak to the labour delineators undergo to make evidence-conclusion structures intelligible to peers. For this reason, and those propounded by Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer (2014), we attend closely to warrants.

6. Unit of analysis

We decided to treat each commenters' posts as a discrete unit, and then to code the presence of functional moves, each of which constitutes "one move in an ongoing conversation that serves a particular function in the discourse" (Paulus and Phipps 2008: 465). For this reason, single messages can perform multiple functions. A comment such as "i dont subscribe to the notion of white privilege, never will and I really couldn't give a [damn about] those who think i should" (Forum 7), which represents a response to a journalist's critique of whiteness in South Africa, reflects an SO, BO (vulgarity), and a D2 in terms of the categories shown in Table 2.

7. Findings

7.1 Application of Brooks and Lutton (2015)

SOs dominated the forums, reflecting their principal purpose as an opinion-sharing space (Table 3). SOs were rarely accompanied by interactive moves such as agreement (19.3%) and disagreement (26.3%).

Table 3: Results of the content analysis

Forum	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Totals
Posts	28	45	66	70	86	207	58	6	10	22	22	28	32	41	11	11	31	30	814
Mono-logues	35	25	32	42	65	84	34	4	7	8	19	8	18	32	6	10	30	30	489
SO	39	41	66	63	76	180	63	11	10	24	31	26	26	36	12	12	27	33	776
SN	4	2	8	9	10	52	12	5	3	5	5	6	10	10	14	6	13	14	178
SC	5	3	2	3	4	10	2	1	2	3	3	1	2	2	1	0	2	1	47
RQ1	1	0	0	1	2	8	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	0	1	01	0	1	20
RQ2	18	4	11	7	18	19	7	2	4	2	1	3	5	8	2	2	10	12	135
RC1	1	4	14	5	3	27	7	0	0	0	4	1	0	2	0	1	1	0	70

Forum	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Totals
RC2	1	10	3	4	0	6	2	0	5	9	6	1	1	4	2	0	1	2	47
A1	2	3	15	18	8	35	4	0	0	0	7	3	4	3	2	0	0	0	104
A2	13	0	1	22	2	1	5	2	0	0	34	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	53
A3	0	0	3	3	0	3	3	1	0	0	6	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	25
A4	15	3	13	37	10	33	6	1	0	0	4	2	3	2	2	1	0	0	132
D1	1	12	19	6	7	62	15	0	0	0	1	9	4	3	1	0	0	0	140
D2	2	1	0	4	0	6	8	1	4	12	8	3	7	12	3	2	1	0	74
D3	1	0	0	1	0	5	0	1	0	4	1	2	2	7	0	1	1	0	22
D4	2	13	19	9	7	63	23	0	4	12	8	10	9	8	4	1	0	0	192
CO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
IR	5	10	5	5	9	13	3	2	9	12	8	22	18	23	13	2	0	1	160
BO1	0	0	2	0	0	9	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
BO2	1	8	2	5	12	57	4	0	0	3	2	1	1	13	2	2	10	10	133
AC1	0	1	0	4	1	7	7	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	24
AC2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4

To investigate how reciprocity was instantiated when it occurred, we conducted a three-level analysis: 1) whether agreements/disagreements were directed at peers or at other targets (A1s *vs.* A2s, and D1s *vs.* D2s), whether reason-giving was included or omitted (A3s *vs.* A4s and D3s *vs.* D4s), and 3) how the previous two patterns combined. That is, did reason-giving (A4s and D4s) occur most commonly when participants targeted peers or others?

Reason-supported agreements with peers (A1A4) exceed agreements without reasons by 55.4% (87 of 157 instances). Similarly, evidenced disagreements with peers (D1D4) occurred more frequently than disagreements without reasons, whether aimed at fellow deliberators or at targets outside the debate by 61.2% (131 of 214 instances). These findings suggest that when participants moved beyond simply stating opinions into the process of actively interacting with peers, reason-giving regularly emerged, regardless of whether opinions converged or disjoined. In fact, disagreements materialised more frequently, both during interactions between peers, as well as disagreements with figures beyond the forum (87 A1A4s *vs.* 131 D1D4s; 45 A2A4s *vs.* 61 D2D4s).

Interpreting these results within Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer's (2014) theoretically-based caution against agreement-orientated discourse, suggests that our sample witnessed regular opportunities for juxtaposing divergent reactions to news stories and thus, potentially, for substantive deliberation.

However, since our expansion of Brooks and Lutton (2015) yields only a very broad impression of reason-giving, our application of Adams (2014) was attentive to the presence or absence of different types of evidence and warrants, both in isolated opinions and during conversational threads. In the next section, we begin by reporting our results for the prevalence of problem definitions and proposals, as well as the inclusion or omission of evidence and warrants.

7.2 Conclusions, evidence and warrants

Opinion-statements (SOs) in Brooks and Lutton (2015) correspond with conclusions in Adams's (2014) model. Expressions of agreement and disagreement, whether evidenced or not, typically include opinion-statements (i.e. conclusions). Some posts also adduce evidence and/or warrants that are explicitly linked with earlier posts: "I agree with your interpretation of the statistics, consider the following". Reflecting this, we instigated our application of Adams (2014) by first coding the presence of different types of conclusions, evidence and warrants, as a prelude to a more finely-grained reading of combinations and interactions.

Table 4 indicates the preponderance of problem definitions.

Table 4: Frequency of individual features from Adams' (2014) model

Forum		11	22	33	44	55	66	77	88	99	110	111	112	113	114	115	116	117	118	Totals
Conclusions	Problem definitions	30	28	59	60	77	167	38	7	9	26	16	23	26	36	11	9	24	5	661
	Proposals	9	11	20	17	20	52	19	1	1	7	5	8	8	10	4	4	9	7	212
Evidence	Facts	20	20	32	27	41	92	26	3	5	11	10	10	22	26	8	3	13	13	382
	Stories	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	7
	Personal experience	4	5	5	4	4	25	9	0	0	0	1	4	6	0	3	0	0	2	72
Warrants	Conditionals	6	9	20	16	10	27	18	4	1	7	3	5	5	5	5	1	7	3	152
	Value statements	0	0	4	1	1	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	11
	Analogies	3	2	2	4	2	18	5	2	1	2	1	1	2	6	1	1	1	0	54
	Meta-proposals	0	0	0	1	3	2	3	2	0	1	5	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	21

Previous research on racism in South African affirms its status as one of the most vexing public problems. Its impact on individuals and groups is pervasive, given its centrality in national policy-making and the distribution of resources (Cresswell et al. 2014; Steyn 2015). Our results suggest that user comments to race-relevant news stories are saturated with opinions expounding the details of the problem, but comparatively fewer proposals for its resolution.

Citations of evidence occur far less frequently. When they occur, the results evince a predilection for factual statements (382 *vs.* 72 personal experiences and 7 stories). This might seem conducive to deliberation. However, most instances omitted a rigorous referencing system in favour of opaque allusions, as elucidated in the exemplars below. Additionally, sharing personal experiences of racism and collaboratively interpreting them could expand dominant understandings, and we do not interpret its lower count positively. Such findings suggest a continued assumption that user comments to news stories should favour factual exchange, which might inhibit assigning meaning to personal experiences or developing alternatives modes such as stories. Warrants were the least frequent component, and were most typically configured as conditionals.

Table 5 offers a more textured summary of conclusion-evidence-warrant combinations. Contravening Adams (2014), whose deliberators rarely failed to cite evidence but often omitted warrants, our findings record that conclusions unsupported by evidence of any type prevailed across our sample, followed by conclusions and evidence, but without connecting warrants.

Table 5: Results from the combination of elements from Adams' (2014) model

Forum	11	22	33	44	55	66	77	88	99	110	111	112	113	114	115	116	117	118	Totals	% of total posts	No. of linked posts
Conclusion-evidence-warrant	9	8	14	16	10	37	19	3	1	6	6	6	7	8	4	3	2	0	160	19.5	2
Conclusion-evidence	11	11	18	14	26	51	11	0	3	5	3	6	11	17	3	0	10	9	209	25.7	12
Conclusion-warrant	0	2	6	3	4	1	1	0	0	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	2	3	29	3.6	10
Conclusion	15	16	18	27	35	74	14	2	3	8	8	11	10	12	2	7	10	4	276	33.9	15
Evidence	0	2	1	1	5	12	0	0	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	3	0	30	3.7	16
Evidence-warrant	0	0	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0.6	3

We aimed to respond to Adams's (2014) caveat that although counting conclusions, evidence and warrants in each individual post offers a fruitful analytic agenda, researchers should also be alert to collective practices, such as linking evidence and/or warrants in one post to earlier conclusions. However, such collaboration rarely occurred. Isolated conclusions remained the dominant composition.

Considering that most conclusions were composed as problem definitions suggests that the user comments clustered around opinion-statements aimed at fathoming the character and manifestation of racism as a public problem, unreinforced by evidence. However, reading the results alongside our findings for agreements and disagreements suggests that once participants entered conversations, evidence became more regular, while warrants remained infrequent. Agreements and disagreements with peers inevitably feature in dialogues consisting of at least two turns. We therefore turned our analysis to the prevalence of conclusions, evidence and warrants in conversational threads/strings. Before detailing these, we offer a discourse analysis to exemplify how warrants operated in our sample.

8. How warrants enhance comprehensibility

8.1 Conditionals

Among other things, what makes an argument comprehensible is an interlocutor's effort to explicate its underlying logic (Adams 2014, 2). Consider the example of a conditional warrant below (for clarity, we sketch the background to commenters' posts, and refer to each commenter as *he* or *she*, depending on whether they identify as male or female):

> Let's say it like it is... This is utter bullshit. If there had been any poster such as he claims, there would have been pix of them in the media and all hell would have broken loose. And does he REALLY think that any of what was a minority of Whites in what was very much a protest by Blacks, would be mad or stupid enough to hold up a racist poster... They would have risked been beaten to a pulp, or worse.

April 2017 saw nationwide protests after President Jacob Zuma replaced Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan with Malusi Gigaba. Zuma claimed that the marches were evidence of a racist onslaught in that the posters on display depicted black people as monkeys. In the above excerpt, the commenter generates a problem definition when he maintains, through a vulgar pejorative, that the president's accusation

is nonsensical. A conditional warrant attaches this conclusion to the apparent omission of factual evidence: "there would have been pix of them". The warrant takes the form of a subjunctive, or a counterfactual conditional (Sakama 2014): had Zuma's allegation proven true, then evidence would have emerged from media "pix", and "all hell would have broken loose". Through this subjunctive or counterfactual conditional, the commenter repudiates the antecedent that some marchers carried racist posters, and challenges fellow discussants to question the President's logic. This coheres with Sakama's (2014) assertion that a lack of evidence (such as "pix") can bolster the conclusion that an opponent has made an argumentative error, and that counterfactual conditions expound the link. The commenter employs the same pattern in the statement "They would have risked been beaten to a pulp, or worse". A counterfactual conditional links the racial composition of the protesters to the conclusion that Zuma's charge is unfounded.

The next extract exemplifies a contentious conditional:

> Sadly after all this time, Saffers still seem obsessed by race, finger-pointing, and victimism. Are you all so comfortable that you can afford the real issues, eg. getting a government that is by the people, for the people, and not voting for idiots, or crooks? SA does not belong to any "racial group", it is God's own country and if people weren't so focused on trivia, they might appreciate their good fortune to live in what could be a paradise. For God's sake stop squabbling.

The commenter refers to black people with a particularly offensive blend of "South Africans" and the racially pejorative word "kaffirs", when he offers up the conclusion that they remain preoccupied with racism, victimisation, and "finger-pointing". The logic underlying this conclusion depends on trivialising racism in comparison to government corruption, as attested by the conditional warrant that if black people were not obsessed with "trivia", they might be thankful for what they have. Belittling racism through this conditional denies the consequences of apartheid and racial discrimination. In this sense, the warrant is precisely what opens the comment to critique. We explore participants' attentiveness to these dynamics when we turn to conversational threads.

8.2 Value statements

Besides conditionals, value statements constitute another kind of warrant that an interlocutor may use to good effect. The following excerpt responds to a fellow participant's claim that: "whites are outnumbered 10 to 1 so when black people say racist things the reaction will only be one tenth of the reaction to white racism":

> That should not be the case; a wrong act is wrong even if it is performed by my brother. If people are genuinely against a certain form of discrimination, they should stand against it no matter where it comes from. That is the measure of a great nation with high moral standards.

This commenter agrees with his fellow discussant's conclusion by defining this state of affairs as problematic, exploiting his evidence ("whites are outnumbered 10 to 1") to produce a conditional warrant ("If people are…against…discrimination, they should stand against it"), and a value statement ("That is the measure of a great nation with high moral standards"). The value statement here constitutes a warrant for the simple reason that it is a belief that is offered to fellow discussants as justification for supporting the previous discussant's conclusion. It is a belief or value that the commenter puts forward as one that should guide action in South Africa. What is interesting, and simultaneously problematic, is that a value statement necessarily incorporates a conclusion, so that it too requires a warrant, which in turn may need yet another and another warrant, yielding "an infinite regress" (Adams 2014, 6). However, even though value statements do not allow discussants to "get "to the bottom" of an argument" (Adams 2014, 6), they may yield insights into the norms that members of a social group accept as guidelines for conduct.

8.3 Analogies

The next extract illustrates analogy warrants:

> Sadly colonialism has been reduced to black vs white. In nature without the bush fire there is no rejuvenation. In all of human endeavours different groups are competing. If one group falls behind it is taken over. In todays terms we have corporate takeovers. In the past we had wars / colonisation. The rest of the world fell behind Europe so Europe colonised the world. Now unless one is forced to change one does not. So to say that Africa or the Americas would have changed withhout colonisation is just plain false. Is colonisation good for the colonised individual- hell no, the person is defeated and subjugated. Is it good for the region over time - hell yes, the region is forced to rejuvenate itself to get out of the subjugation and in so doing it has to adopt aspects of the oppresor otherwise it cannot modernise and remove the oppresor.

Here the commenter problematises a reduction of colonialism to racialised conflict, specifically "black vs white", suggesting that it is replete with other

dynamics. This is followed by the position that although colonialism may initially be damaging, it is necessary if a "region" wants to achieve regeneration, culminating in: "colonisation...is good for the region over time" because "the region is forced to rejuvenate itself to get out of the subjugation". The commenter exploits two analogy warrants in an attempt to illustrate his logic. First, he compares the initial suffering of a subjugated people to a bush fire: without a bush fire, nature cannot revitalise itself. Similarly, people cannot achieve progress if their sovereignty is not initially subjugated by a powerful invader. Second, the commenter likens colonialism to a corporate takeover, inferring that oppression automatically catalyses social development among the subjugated.

Like value statements, analogies are susceptible to infinite regression since the viability of comparing two separate domains remains vulnerable. Alert to this weakness, researchers in logico-philosophical traditions hold that the strength of an analogical argument correlates with the number of similarities between the domains in question (Adams 2014). Even under conditions of close similarity, analogies are always partial. For example, a corporate takeover (as opposed to a hostile one) generally occurs with the mutual approval of the directors of both corporations. In the excerpt, both the bush fire and corporate takeover analogies are inflected to conclude that the subjugated must "modernise". This assigns to oppressors the right to adjudicate which human attributes/traditions merit imitation and which are expendable. It relies on a longstanding Eurocentric narrative of superiority and a mission to save the presumably backward other (Steyn 2015). Both analogies are, consequently, open to critique, both for the incompatibility of its respective domains and for the ideological work that each analogy performs by constructing colonialism in ways that naturalise and rationalise its systems.

However, it is precisely this exposure of an argument's mode of reasoning that make warrants conducive to deliberation, at least potentially. Theoretically, the vulnerabilities inherent in analogies and other warrants can invigorate exchange and counteract stagnation, forgetfulness and conformity by interrogating their feasibility.

9. Meta-proposals/Core arguments

A final warrant that emerged from our data is what Adams (2014, 6) refers to as meta-proposals or core arguments. The extract below originates from a forum discussing Vanessa Hartley, a South African Facebook user who accused "Africans" of "flocking to Hout Bay in Cape Town" and behaving "like stupid animals". The commenter below responds to a fellow discussant's criticism that

Hartley has no right to complain about conditions in Hout Bay, since she is not a resident, but a temporary visitor who has "herself flocked there":

> Did she [Vanessa Hartley] just pitch up, no job, no house and look around and decide which spot she likes and where she is going to Squat? Never mind WHO the land belongs to, never mind service facilities not existent, never mind no water, never mind no TOILET facilities an d thus pullution, never mind Health Hazard, never mind FIRE HAZARD from cooking with dangerous fuels. Never mind overcrowding and health hazards and creating Ghettos. AND ALL against regulations. STOP looking for Racism behind every bush and stone and start looking at REALITY !! I do not think so !

The conclusion that Hartley's post should not be read as racist contains several components. First, the commenter argues that although she is visitor, she is not a squatter. By citing Hartley's socioeconomic background, the commenter positions her as an observer of, rather than a contributor to, the problems that plague Hout Bay. A meta-proposal links Hartley's socioeconomic status to the conclusion that the charge of racism is unfounded. Meta-proposals express a social dynamic that "cut[s] across specific policy issues" (Adams 2014, 6), rather than a moral value. In this case, it holds that solving social and economic problems demands a realistic assessment. Therefore Hartley should not be denounced as racist for making an evaluation grounded in the factually observable problems posed by overcrowding and pollution on beaches in Hout Bay.

Meta-proposals are subject to the same weaknesses as value statements and analogy warrants, and can therefore provoke deliberation in similar ways. Unfortunately, given the significant disparity between the number of conditional warrants *vs.* analogies, value statements, and meta-proposals, as well as the relatively low number of conversational threads that exceed more than two expressions of agreement or disagreement *(cf.* Table 5), conversations rarely engaged with warrants other than conditionals. Consequently, our analysis of interactional threads is focused on conditional warrants.

10. Conversational threads/strings

Following the 2015-2016 News Year's Eve celebrations, Penny Sparrow, a South African estate agent, lambasted beachgoers for acts of vandalism. She tweeted a resolution to address black South Africans as monkeys. Its racially essentialist tone instigated a nationwide furore. The thread below was sourced from a forum on her tweet. Commenter 1 poses a problem definition, with an evidentiary reference and a conditional warrant inserted into the middle of this problem definition:

> This is the price we pay for being westernised. We will always be monkeys, lacking and pathetic. Because our forefathers couldn't read or write, land was taken, without any consideration for the black owner's livelyhood, for his heirs. We will always need permission from people like Penny to enjoy beaches, be seen humans or even draw breath.

Membership among "westernised" black South Africans supplies the subject position from which Commenter 1 constructs the problem. From here, the problem underpinning Sparrow's racist outburst is centred on its symbolic allusion to a much broader devaluation and dehumanisation of non-white South African lives. In this post, becoming "westernised" signifies a process of accepting a hierarchical evaluation of human lives that consigns black South Africans to an inferior position. Penny Sparrow's aspersion is taken to diagnose a historically-rooted problem: the oppression of black South Africans, and the legacy it casts into the present: "We will always be monkeys". To support this, a non-cited (SN) factual reference to this historic marginalisation is offered by citing the educational exclusion that marked apartheid South Africa: "Because our forefathers couldn't read or write, land was taken". A conditional warrant in the same line, links this factual reference to the problem definition: the educational exclusion enforced on black South Africans further enabled and justified the expropriation of land and property, with the result that poor black South Africans continue to suffer dehumanisation, and Penny Sparrow's polemic is read as symptomatic of this problem.

At this junction, two other commenters enter the conversation. Since page constraints inhibit a thorough-going analysis of these two, we offer this brief summary. One expresses agreement and extends the problem definition by adding an ancillary conclusion: "the problem with the black man is his inferiority complex". The second commenter also proffers a new proposal based on an evidentiary statement and a cognate problem definition: "more blacks [should] renounce [South African President] Zuma's statement that the trouble in SA started the day Jan v Riebeeck landed at the Cape. I think it's fair to say that maybe both these statements [from Sparrow and Zuma] aren;t good for the country".

Next, Commenter 3 enters the thread with:

> uhh, you forefathers didn't own any land. The land, people and cattle belonged to the king, if the king said jump and you didn't, you were killed, if the king wanted your wife as his own, he took her (with you probably being killed), your forefathers life was spent serving the king and going out to decimate lesser tribes and take their cattle and land.

This message does not directly contest the evidence cited earlier, but attempts to admit additional information. It proffers a non-cited reference to monarchical rule in some sections of pre-colonial southern Africa, grounded in a historically contested interpretation (Steyn 2015). It alludes to Shaka and Dingaan, 19th century kings of the Zulu (as affirmed in a subsequent message cited below). Discursively, this creates a bedrock for concluding that Africans had been subject to dispossession under dictatorial rulers prior to apartheid interference. It falls short of evoking the well-worn construction of colonialism as saving Africans from barbarism. More importantly, however, the contribution fails to warrant its connection with the disenfranchisement and present-day racism included in Commenter 1's post. In particular, its connection with the dispossessions enacted by apartheid legislation is unclear, especially since the consequences of those laws remain central to the current distribution of wealth in South Africa, including the educational inequalities that Commenter 1 cites (Steyn 2015).

This is not to say that the post is argumentatively dysfunctional, but that it shows a lower commitment to mutual intelligibility. A research perspective attuned to communicative economy and subtle discursive functions (Steyn, 2015), could read Commenter 3's contribution as imputing black South African poverty to African-led dictatorships that predate apartheid marginalisation. From a deliberative standpoint, however, if this reading were intended, its link with Commenter 1 remains opaque. It does not clearly speak to the latter's contention regarding the stigmatisation and poverty that presently confront black South Africans. Commenter 1 responds:

> We probably would have lived well under kingship, we do not know. All we know is we have nothing in our land. Why are we still living in shacks?

Implicitly, Commenter 1 orients this rebuttal against the omission of a warrant in Commenter 3's message. The contention is that although the particularities of Africans' lives under local forms of government in 19th century Africa are uncertain, contemporary conditions are more directly observable and more easily evidenced: "Why are we still living in shacks?". In this capacity, the post targets and critiques the connection between Commenter 3's construction of pre-colonial Africa and the problem definition that Commenter 1 initially advanced.

As Adams (2014) proposes, warrants often become the pivotal points of dispute. In this exchange, an interpretation of power relations and its potential entwinement with race is at stake. Commenters are concerned with the danger of allowing one interpretation to predominate. This provokes a comparison of historical narratives, each of which are contingently linked with contemporary racial identification and social positioning in South Africa. Both narratives are

drawn into an assessment of how they might override or at least complicate the conclusions that each deliberator takes them to support. Commenter 3 attempts to admit a different set of evidence to the discussion, but a dearth of warrants hinders both commenters' ability to articulate how the sets of evidence and conclusions can, or cannot, be reconciled. Consequently, both narratives become involved in a discourse that pervaded our sample but consistently evaded resolution: a jockeying over the relative role of past and contemporary white racism in the racial injustices that mark South African society.

For example, this evaluation is observable in Commenter 1's above-mentioned post. Perhaps feeling unable to repudiate Commenter 3's factual references, Commenter 1 aims disagreement at its connection with the problem definition that she/he opened with: the definition of Sparrow's invective as disclosing a continuing deprecation of black South Africans, and particularly the poorest sections of society, who constituted the primary target of Sparrow's outcry. Commenter 3 reacts with:

> please then explain why african tribes used to sell their own people as slaves to the arabs long before whites did the same...?or does slavery only start to count when its a white man doing it?also, please explain why, when a white man came to a king in south africa to try barter for a piece of land (didnt go in and shoot everyone and then demand land) on the furthest borders of the kings province, the king betrayed and slaughtered this man and 100 of his followers (breaking a deal that he had already agreed to). This king then sent out his army to slaughter the rest of this mans party (women, children old people...)

This argument deploys several non-cited factual statements. One involves the practice of selling members of defeated groups into slavery, prior to the European colonisation of Africa. The second cites a treaty negotiated between a white descendent of Dutch colonialists, Piet Retief, and a Zulu king Dingaan. Spatial constraints preclude a detailed treatment of the historical nuances invoked here, but for the purpose of the present analysis, we note that neither fact is cited in isolation. Instead, both are made serviceable to a specific conclusion: "does slavery only start to count when its a white man doing it?". To elaborate, both historic events are summoned as facts pointing to a problem: the oppression of African peoples has origins beyond European colonialism and South African apartheid, but only white injustice draws attention. From Adams's (2014) perspective, what remains missing is an effort to link this argument to Commenter 1's original thesis.

Again, a discursive psychological analysis of communicative economy can gesture to the kinds of identity work that such arguments might advance. For

example, it can read Commenter 3's post as claiming that white South Africans are unjustly policed for racist remarks, and that doing so denies other histories of oppression on the African continent. However, Commenter 3's message nevertheless fails to reflect a commitment to making such argumentative linkages comprehensible. We argue that Commenter 1's next response attests to this omission by (again) implicitly highlighting the absence of a warrant. In the next post, Commenter 1 repeats the earlier pattern. The rejoinder is orientated to the omission of a warrant by repeating the claim that regardless of pre-colonial histories, present inequalities continue to reflect a racialised inflection:

> Most of those kingdoms are long one. The ones that are left do not even have anywhere close to half the wealth white people enjoy. African people suffer in Africa fact!

Commenter 3 responds with an analogy between corrupt leadership in other (unnamed) African nations and President Zuma. The terms of the metaphor critiques Zuma for the suffering of black South Africans:

> yeah, take a closer look at these africans suffering... you will find a black leader living in wealth and opulence with his cronies and generals. a similar scenario playing out in south africa.....zuma and his ANC cronies are living the high life

If applied retroactively, this analogy might explicate the connection between Commenter 3's earlier references to oppressive African leadership and contemporary injustice, by suggesting that present problems represent a continuation of that past. Read in isolation, it provides a new account of black South Africans' current problems, premised on a new warrant. Commenter 1 questions the viability of this metaphor:

> If you can prove the after effects of that tragedy in today's urban society, then we can talk.

Commenter 1 rejects the analogy, but the specific grounds of this disagreement remain problematically undeveloped. After this post, further attempts to clarify the opposing positions are abruptly terminated. Commenter 1 exits the forum, while Commenter 3 engages other participants.

11. Conclusion

This analysis does not address deliberative quality wholesale, especially since quality depends on the co-occurrence of numerous factors. Instead, we underscore a specific conversational dynamic of reason-giving, using a triad of evidence, conclusions and warrants. All arguments inevitably involve an

ideological inflection, but on the above analysis, warrants become a site for contesting the ideological functions that arguments can accomplish, such as adjusting explanations of contemporary racial injustice. The imprecise quality of the non-cited factual references (SNs), which far exceeded cited references (SCs), also make the sets of evidence fruitful avenues for deliberation, particularly since more carefully curated selections of evidence could also refine conclusions. Nevertheless, conversational strings of more than two turns hinged on implicit disagreements over warrants, as illustrated in the analysis cited above.

Having selected our sample on the criteria that it must involve race-relevant matters, our analysis suggests that all conversational threads exceeding two posts involved patterns that dovetail with the one limned above. To elaborate, some commenters strove to construct racism as a set of problems that do not stem exclusively from persons and histories identified as white. Opponents, by contrast, worked to entwine specific individuals (such as Vanessa Hartley and Penny Sparrow) and histories (including apartheid and colonialism) with contemporary racial inequalities and injustices. Both interpretative arcs resonate with discourses beyond user comments to news, including South African tertiary institutions and student activist groups. Proponents of both have reported frustration with the resistance maintained by opponents (Cresswell et al. 2014; Steyn 2015). Although theoretically the news platform under study proffers opportunities to prevent the stagnation of both narratives, the processes involved in presenting and substantively contrasting them, are stifled by a paucity of warrants (Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer 2014). Put differently, vying to be heard at the expense of intelligibility truncates the platform's potential for fostering critical exchange and reciprocity.

Table 5 shows that combinations consisting of conclusions, evidence and warrants were not as prevalent as isolated conclusions or conclusions with evidence. Han and Brazeal (2015) demonstrate that exposure to civil messages prompts the imitation of that civility, however our findings suggest that this does not seem to apply to other deliberative behaviours such as the inclusion of warrants. Building warrants into some posts did not dispose peers to include warrants of their own. Despite this low count, our analysis of threads suggests that warrants were nevertheless at stake, often precisely when absent or when implied rather than explicated. Participants often left bodies of evidence, such as historical accounts, unquestioned while nevertheless staging disagreements or articulating uncertainty with the way evidence is linked with conclusions. Thus, although the preponderance of evidenced agreements and disagreements derived from our application of Brooks and Lutton (2015) shows some positive developments in news user comments, a dearth of warrants poses a different challenge.

We therefore propose that analysing warrants offers insights into the enactment of deliberation in naturally-occurring online settings. Moreover, they seem cardinal for the contestation of ideology, notably when deliberation is suffused with the analysis of power relations that are sensitive to participants. We also suggest that the way some participants implicitly question the omission of warrants, reflects a measure of critical evaluation and an awareness that simply citing information does not adequately reinforce conclusions.

Unfortunately, attempts to link evidence and warrants across different posts, as a method of augmenting comprehensibility and argumentative robustness, occurred infrequently (Table 5). In the exemplar from conversational strings cited above, third parties did not enter the debate to adduce additional evidence, supply warrants where they were lacking, or to provide additional conclusions that reinforce or complicate either side. Read in conjunction with the relatively low number of conversational strings exceeding two posts, suggests that these user comments forums primarily function as a site for expressing views, rather than engaging and recalibrating existing views.

Nevertheless, when discussants enter dialogues evidenced agreement and disagreement become more frequent. In such cases, deliberation is not curtailed by lack of evidence, but by the imprecise citations of evidence, combined with a weaker commitment to intelligibility by means such as warrants.

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