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# Evidence in Online Political Discourse: How Everyday Citizens Argue about Politics on Social Media

Diane Leverich

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# **Evidence in Online Political Discourse: How Everyday Citizens Argue about Politics on Social Media**



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Patrick Thomas, Ph.D.

April 2018

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## Abstract

This thesis project examines evidence use and participatory dynamics in political conversations on the social networking site Reddit.com. Reddit.com is a network of user-created, interest-based forums in which users, or *Redditors*, engage in discourse with others about any topic of their interest. I selected the politically-motivated forum, or *subreddit*, *r/PoliticalDiscussion* for examination and collected 1,000 of its most recent conversations, or *threads*, to compose a data corpus. I read, categorized, and analyzed these conversations in terms of how Redditors participated in the subreddit and how they incorporated evidence into their discussions of politics. Two rounds of qualitative data coding revealed that participatory dynamics in *r/PoliticalDiscussion* are brief and time-bound; contributors participate through writing primarily in moments of relevance or topical interest. Furthermore, acceptable standards for discourse and evidence use in this subreddit rely on acknowledgement and adherence to general guidelines, efforts to maintain empathy and civility, and the self-policing of digital content by contributors and moderators. These results lend support to the idea that knowledge-legitimation and credibility are group-specific components of everyday argumentation online.

## Dedication and Acknowledgements

I dedicate this honors thesis to my patient and empathetic advisor Dr. Thomas, for without his encouragement and guidance the project would still be merely an idea. I'd also like to thank my loving parents, who read countless drafts of this project and offered gentle but much-needed criticisms. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the self-motivated, dedicated, passionate Redditors on Reddit.com whose writing inspired me to learn more about the way everyday people make sense of politics in digital spaces.



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## Introduction

As a society, we have experienced a “transcendence” away from print media and toward computer-mediated communication, or *CMC* (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 37). While traditional print media is still widely revered and used for personal, academic, and professional purposes, many of our day-to-day interactions now involve communicating digitally. In response to this transcendence, over time we have developed sets of unique languages, protocols, and norms essential for Internet interaction within varying contexts.

Undoubtedly, technological advancements in digital media and online communication have provided us with endless possibilities for creating, discovering, and sharing content. We can now interact with others more quickly, efficiently, and through a larger variety of digital mediums than ever before. Furthermore, computer-mediated communication has deeply influenced business practices, ease of travel, security measures, and government relations globally.

However, the rise of *CMC* has also created an entirely new myriad of problems. Some of these problems include: 1) determining a method to store and analyze the massive amounts of available digital data, 2) adjusting to the rapidity of change and development on the Internet, 3) navigating the diversity of Internet languages and digital literacies, 4) the focus of this project: determining the credibility of Internet content and how to incorporate it as evidence in discourse.

This thesis examines participatory dynamics and evidence use within user-created and politically-motivated conversations on social networking sites. Specifically, I

observed and analyzed the subreddit r/PoliticalDiscussion on Reddit.com, searching for patterns in how Redditors use the technical features of the network to participate in political discourse. Additionally, I collected data regarding what types of evidence Redditors employ when discussing politics on r/PoliticalDiscussion, how others respond to this evidence, and how the credibility or ethos of evidence employed is policed by group members. Conducting this content analysis of politically-motivated conversations on Reddit.com revealed substantial insight into how Internet content may be circulated and legitimated, underscoring how knowledge-building and standards of credibility are contingent on context, group-affiliation, and digital literacy.

## Literature Review

Each channel of computer-mediated communication functions using “technology that facilitates textual production” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 54). These technologies, combined with the possible methods of participation they enable, facilitate the existence of innumerable digital spaces in which users create, share, and discuss Internet content. Complex and rapidly-evolving discourse in these spaces fosters diverse and multiple *digital literacies* essential to effective communication and meaning-making. Becoming digitally literate within a given channel of CMC involves acknowledgement and understanding the channel’s: 1) technical features, 2) possible methods of communicative engagement, 3) established cultural, linguistic, and stylistic norms. While some of these components are intentionally developed by users within the space, others come to fruition naturally through participation and interaction.

Use of the appropriate digital literacy in a particular digital space allows Internet users to more effectively “disperse and distribute knowledge” and engage in meaningful discourse with one another (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, pp. 47). Digital spaces driven by shared interest and mediated by distinct digital literacies can also be referred to as *affinity spaces*. Affinity spaces are maintained through collective motivation and communal intelligence. All circulated content in an affinity space is legitimated, evaluated, and policed by active and invested community members. Therefore, determining what is relevant, valid, or credible within an affinity space is group-specific. Standards of acceptable discourse and means of information distribution vary subjectively from one group to the next. These discrepancies challenge the practicality of assuming that all

digital spaces legitimate knowledge in the same way. Furthermore, they complicate the process of attempting to objectively perceive and evaluate online content. Development in CMC has exponentially increased the difficulty in determining what is truly credible or factual, especially when transitioning from one affinity space to another.

Reddit.com is divided into over a million different affinity spaces, or *subreddits*. Subreddits are forums collectively sustained by participants who share and facilitate knowledge production through writing. Reddit.com users, or *Redditors*, can join various subreddits to “find, share, rate, and discuss content and opinions in real time from all over the web” (“About”, 2006). While the network explicates a list of guidelines for users to follow, the network’s individual subreddits are primarily self-policed by community members and *moderators*. Like other users, moderators are interest-driven participants within the subreddit motivated to ensure productive, meaningful discourse.

Since its founding in 2005, Reddit.com has grown rapidly and tremendously. The network’s most recent study of user demographics, conducted in January of 2017, reported over 274 million unique visitors: 54% from the U.S. and the remaining 46% from across the globe. The study also revealed that, in terms of visitor traffic, Reddit.com is the “5<sup>th</sup> largest site in the United States” overall (“Audience and Demographics”, 2017). Because Reddit.com’s user base is so statistically large and demographically diverse, the network provides innumerable opportunities for group affiliation and involvement. This makes Reddit.com a prime social network for further investigation.

Forming a massive web of subreddit affinity spaces, Reddit.com is one of many “networked publics,” or “publics that are restructured by networked technologies” (boyd, 2010, pp. 1). Networked publics constitute the complex relationship between Internet



users, digital technology, and online communication. The typical Internet user participates in various and multiple networked publics. This means that users will likely create, evaluate, and legitimate online content in a variety of ways depending on purpose, context, and group-affiliation. Discrepancies in meaning-making and knowledge legitimation between and across networked publics often leads to passionate discourse and argumentation. This discourse may pertain to conventionally controversial subject matters like values, religion, or politics, but realistically can arise over any topic imaginable. Additionally, networked publics give allow freedom to move in, out, and between affinity spaces, meaning users can be exposed to many different digital literacies and methods of building communal knowledge.

Even within a singular affinity space, the ways in which users employ evidence and produce arguments in discourse varies. Studying an individual subreddit, particularly one in which controversial topics are debated, can reveal some truths about the complexity of knowledge legitimation and building credibility on the Internet.

Complex relationships and intersections between affinity spaces are mediated by each CMC channel's affordances and limitations. Recognizing and developing a deeper understanding of these influences aids researchers in more effectively studying language and discourse online. boyd (2010) explicates several social networking site (SNS) affordances such as:

- *Persistence*: content published online within a networked public is automatically “recorded and archived”
- *Replicability*: published content in networked publics can be copied or “duplicated”
- *Scalability*: the “potential visibility” of Internet content within networked publics is very large
- *Searchability*: published content in a networked public can be found simply by searching for it (boyd, 2010, pp. 7)

She also discusses several dynamics of SNSs, including:

- *Invisible audiences*: there is relative ambiguity in who will view published content on networked publics, and audience members are often not “co-present”
- *Collapsed contexts*: there is difficulty in “maintaining distinct social contexts” because networked publics do not have “spatial, social, or temporal” boundaries
- *A blurring of the public and private*: because of networked publics’ collapsed contexts, the public sphere and private sphere are more difficult to distinguish (boyd, 2010, pp. 10)

Several of these SNS affordances and dynamics are particularly applicable to Reddit.com and can facilitate a better understanding of how the network functions to create and distribute knowledge. Reddit.com exemplifies “persistence”, for example, as it maintains a massive archive of all content posted by Redditors. Also, the network’s “scalability” allows Redditors a seemingly unlimited capacity to add and/or delete content. This content is available online to the general public and is “searchable” through use of search filters and categorizations developed by moderators, as well as through search engines like Google.com. Therefore, Redditors cannot be entirely certain of what kind of audience they are addressing, even if the majority of this audience consists of fellow subreddit members. This uncertainty lends support to the “invisible audience” dynamic.

To reiterate: societally, we rely now more than ever on digital media and CMC for up-to-date news and information. The Internet is composed of many diverse and interacting affinity spaces, each with their own method of producing and evaluating knowledge. From the interactions between affinity spaces emerges networked publics of ideas, information, and experiences. While the Internet has allowed us to reinvent and

reimagine ways in which we communicate and share knowledge with others, it has also posed issues regarding how to measure the accuracy and credibility of this knowledge.

Controversy pertaining to veracity, credibility, and reputability of sources material became especially apparent in the 2016 Presidential Election. While not entirely a new controversy, this divisive election made the credibility of political information online an important aspect of election coverage. Before the election, political participation was firmly rooted in bi-partisanship. Both Democrats and Republicans firmly solidified their respective political viewpoints and fervently pitted these positions against one another in digital spaces. Political content online published by mainstream media seemed to become as equally bi-partisan, eliciting suspicion from readers about its accuracy and objectivity.

After the election, everyday citizens, or those who lack political power or influence, participated in politics through marches, protests, petitions, and other genres as a means of making their voices heard. Attempting to avoid derisive or aggressive arguments that became commonplace during the election, people also turned to online discussion forums to strengthen their political knowledge and engage in civil political discussions.

### **Political Participation on Social Networks**

Studying discourse online is certainly not a new phenomenon. The ways in which individuals interact and communicate in digital spaces has been a widely-discussed topic in academia since the popularization of the Internet. Past studies regarding online political discourse in particular rely heavily on survey and interview methods of data collection, providing researchers insight into how those who use digital spaces perceive

the information they encounter (Vraga et. al, 2015; Kim, Y., 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Conroy et. al, 2012; Kim, D., 2012).

Vraga et. al (2011) investigated factors influencing participation in political conversations on Facebook.com by conducting twenty in-depth interviews and a qualitative survey of young adults. Users reported that Facebook.com's political environment, commonly tied to "rants, drama, and virulent disagreement," forced them to develop certain attitudes such as heightened sensitivity toward self-censorship (Vraga et. al, 2011, pp. 287). It was not the existence of disagreement that users found so off-putting, but rather the polarizing and condescending tone of these disagreements (Vraga et. al, 2011, pp. 288). This study revealed that political discussions on networked publics like Facebook.com often become uncivil or emotionally-motivated, perhaps due to a lack of guidelines for discourse or a lack of self-policing by participants.

Adversely, Kim, Y. (2011) conducted research on SNS usage and exposure to political difference. Referencing the 2,254 respondents of Pew Research Center's questionnaire about the 2008 Presidential Election, researchers cross-referenced:

"whether [respondents] (1) had gotten any campaign or candidate information from these sites; (2) started or joined a political group supporting a cause on an SNS, (3) revealed the presidential candidate they were voting for; (4) discovered from the sites which presidential candidate their friends voted for and (5) signed up as a "friend" of any candidates on an SNS" (Kim, Y., 2011, pp. 973).

Results concluded that SNSs help Internet users develop socially through the exchange of information, interaction with others, and exposure to dissimilar political viewpoints (Kim Y., 2011, pp. 976). These results further emphasize the importance of

affinity spaces and networked publics in developing individuals' political knowledge and broadening their political perspectives, as SNSs can provide users with a much wider pool of political content than available in print media.

Another survey of politically-interested Internet users by Kim, D. (2012) examined users' perceived credibility of news and information on 40 of the top political blog sites (according to BlogPulse's index). Respondents answered questions pertaining to their political involvement, political interest, trust in the government, political efficacy, strength of political affiliation, Internet usage and activity, and demographics. These political blogs were found to be moderately credible sources for political information, "scoring 3.74 out of a 5-point scale" (Kim, D., 2012, pp. 429). This score was attributed to these political blogs' thorough analysis and commentary rather than the veracity of the information they published. Respondents were also more likely to find these blogs credible if they interacted with "various news content and other users under the networked, collaborative nature of online journalism" (Kim, D., 2012, pp. 430). From this survey, it is clear that perceptions of credibility about varying types of evidence are contingent on a user's comfort and familiarity with said evidence. The survey also raises questions about how affinity spaces like blogs, or subreddits on Reddit.com, develop group-specific mechanisms and criteria for determining acceptable evidence online.

While the aforementioned studies provide pertinent insight regarding what people value from online political content, few studies have focused on actual conversations between politically-interested Internet users. For this reason, my study relies on an in-depth content analysis of political conversations on Reddit.com to determine the specific

forms of evidence people employ while discussing politics online and how this evidence influences discussion and the building of communal knowledge.

However, the limitations of studying solely political conversations must also be considered. Wojcieszak and Mutz's (2009) survey studied solely *non-political* conversations, searching in particular for instances of naturally-occurring political discourse. Focusing on apolitical chatroom/message board usage and the frequency of political discussion in these digital spaces, researchers surveyed 1,386 participants and found that "roughly half of participation in nonpolitical chats or message boards nonetheless involves some discussion of political topics and controversial public issues" (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009, pp. 45).

This study suggests, online political discussions arise frequently even in digital spaces that are not politically-motivated. However, because my study pertains to the nature and composition of political arguments—rather than the mere existence of them in everyday discourse—I found studying political discussions in politically-motivated digital spaces to be most appropriate. Moreover, naturally-occurring political discussions in apolitical digital spaces are nuanced and sporadic, making them considerably more difficult to effectively analyze in terms of evidence and credibility.

### **Evaluating Online Political Discourse**

Political discourse and argumentation on the Internet is rather different from political discourse in professional or academic settings. While the goal in each case is attaining a better understanding of particular political topics, online political content is often perceived as inferior to normative academic standards. Still, many scholars have attempted to make sense of political discussions online by comparing this discourse to

established academic concepts or theories. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) analyzed political conversations posted on the U.S. White House's Facebook.com and YouTube.com pages, evaluating these conversations using the SIDE (Social Identification/Deindividuation) Theory and theories from Habermas. Researchers found that, while the technical features of the White House's SNS pages had the potential to encourage political participation and civil deliberation, only eight percent of examined discussions contained evidence from outside sources to expand or strengthen their claims (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013, pp. 1160). It seems that, unlike argumentation constructed in academic settings, the inclusion of cited evidence in online political discussion is not as highly prioritized.

Another means of evaluating online political discussion, Kim, Y.'s (2011) study also compares political discourse on the Internet an established standard; he analyzed social networking sites in the context of deliberative democracy. Accuracy of information, use of outside evidence, and effectual explanation—as components of deliberative democracy—were used as guidelines in determining whether conversations in these digital spaces were truly democratic. Research revealed that political discourse on the Internet enhances democracy by increasing the “heterogeneity” of the political discussion network (Kim, Y., 2011, pp. 975).

However, while political discussion online is certainly more heterogeneous than political discussion in print media, the content of these discussions is not guaranteed to be any more reliable. Conroy et. al (2012) discovered that while there is a strong correlation between participation in online political discourse and exposure to political difference, no such correlation is present between this participation and actual political knowledge (2012, pp. 1544). The dual nature of these results signifies that while political discussion

in digital spaces certainly allows users to encounter widely-varying and unique political views, not all of these views may be based in fact or enhance the users' actual understanding of politics.

As further means of evaluating online political discourse, researchers have examined the effects of online political discourse on people's values. Overall, there remains significant disagreement regarding whether engaging in political discourse online advances or deteriorates our ethical and moral principles. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) reason that because SNSs increase our identifiability, they also increase our personal accountability (pp. 1166). Participants feel obligated to adhere to social norms, such as civility, while discussing politics online, as their profiles can often be linked directly back to them. On the other hand, as mentioned above, Vraga, et. al (2011) claim that potentially hostile climates on popular SNSs like Facebook.com could pressure users to censor their political views due of retribution by other users. Also, while politically-affiliated affinity spaces and networked publics can act as democratic spheres for political discussion, these spaces can also be *less* democratic due to their deindividuated nature and the "social and spatial distancing of users" they create (Jackson & Valentine, 2014, pp. 201).

Variations in these studies suggests that the conditions and attitudes of political conversations online depend on a multitude of factors, including the channel of CMC being used, how users are held accountable for the content they produce or share, and how participants are positioned with respect to one another in a given affinity space.



## Credibility in Online Political Discourse

Credibility was analyzed by early theorists as *ethos*, or “the persuasive appeal of one’s character, especially how this character is established by means of the speech or discourse” (Burton, 2007). In the days when ideas were developed and shared orally rather than through physical writing, philosophers like Aristotle considered rhetors with “practical intelligence,” “a virtuous character,” “goodwill,” and the best intentionality for their audience as those who possessed strong *ethos* (Homiak, 2016). Online, we assume that our peers’ identities are genuine, or that their profiles hold at least some baseline *ethos*; however, knowing that we craft our own online identities to achieve particular social or professional goals, we must consider that perceived credibility online can be easily fabricated and manipulated. However, credibility online can also be developed legitimately through participation in affinity spaces.

In academic settings, accurate and detailed information is often valued over the intentionality or mindset of its author. It is considered ethically responsible to cite sources and provide supporting evidence for any argument or claim made in academic writing. Academic credibility is held to an extremely high standard so that original ideas are not stolen, and all argumentation is based in reason and observable evidence. Interestingly, writing and discourse outside of academia is often held to this same standard. The rationale behind this belief is questionable, especially when considering that academic and nonacademic discourse often differ in terms of intentionality, context, formality, and composition. Several of the previously mentioned studies (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013) indicated a lack of cited outside evidence in online political

discourse, perhaps suggesting that discussions of politics online prioritize the exchange of ideas over use of outside sources.

In practice, credibility can take a variety of forms. As networked publics are an integration of technology, people, and practices, credibility is determined and developed in innumerable ways. What is considered credible within one affinity space may not be valued at all in another; some online political discussions hold rhetorical ethos of the author to the highest standard, while others find factual data to be most convincing. Essentially, credibility is not determined merely by the objective accuracy of evidence, but also by what type of evidence is perceived as most appropriate and pertinent by community members to the discussion at-hand. Ergo, notions of credibility depend on group-affiliation. Personal credibility and group credibility, for example, can each be defined by a different set of parameters.

The credibility of online information is frequently questioned because the authorship and expertise of such information cannot always be readily determined. Internet content can be published as authorless (posted anonymously or under a username), without a time-stamp, and can easily cite false source (as the Internet is not policed by fact-checkers). However, familiarity with a digital space is positively correlated with perceived credibility. CMC channels frequently used by an individual are likely the channels this individual will rely on for information and news.

We must think of credibility as an entity constructed in a particular affinity space, with characteristics that change depending on who is talking about it. All content on Reddit.com is published or shared based on personal interest. Because each subreddit has a distinct way of legitimating and policing knowledge among community members,

different kinds of evidence will be privileged in different subreddit affinity spaces for different purposes.

However, even if the digital space is familiar, original content can be stolen and changed. The replicability of Internet content “means that what is replicated may be altered in ways that people do not easily realize” (boyd, 2010, pp. 8). The potential alteration or fabrication of original content becomes an even bigger problem when pertaining to issues with moral or ethical components, such as political discussions on Reddit.com. Redditors, like participants in other digital affinity spaces, come to disagreements when there is notable ambiguity about the credibility of evidence presented.

## Methods

This study focuses on how people incorporate evidence into argumentation. As addressed previously, online political conversations exhibit evidence use in argumentation because these conversations are rooted in controversial topics like individual morality, ethics, convictions, and ideology. Furthermore, discussions and arguments about politics online have become more frequent and passionate in light of the 2016 Presidential Election. I deliberated the limitations and affordances of several different social media websites and networks, considering organizational structure (the technical affordances of the site used for organization and categorization of content), how information/knowledge is created, perpetuated, and shared between users, and the participatory dynamics of the sites' user bases. These considerations led to the social media platform Reddit.com as a site worthy of further examination.

### Technical Features of Participation on Reddit.com

Reddit.com is an online community composed of smaller communities called *subreddits*. Subreddits are user-created and interest-driven forums, facilitated by voluntary, active moderators who ensure high-quality content and adherence to community/subreddit guidelines. Reddit.com users, or *Redditors*, can search through Reddit.com's topically-categorized network of subreddits, making it relatively easy to find interesting or relevant threads. Reddit.com automatically subscribes new users to popular subreddits (subreddits with large and active subscriber bases), but Redditors can further customize their homepage and the content they view by subscribing or unsubscribing to any subreddit of their choosing ("reddit 101: Ahri-ly easy guide to

reddit basics”, 2014). Figure 1 depicts the typical Reddit.com homepage, which displays the most popular threads of the day and provides search and navigation tools for users.



**Figure 1. Reddit.com Homepage**

Reddit.com maintains its own content policy regarding what can and cannot be published on the site. For example, digital content that is “illegal,” “involuntary pornography,” “violent,” “threatening,” “deceptive,” “confidential,” or “spam” is explicitly prohibited (“Reddit Content Policy”, n.d.). The policy also offers guidelines about behavior and etiquette on Reddit.com. Users are expected to act respectfully and keep an open mind when engaging in discussion. Prohibited behavior includes “vote manipulation,” “breaking Reddit,” (hacking) and “creating multiple Reddit accounts to evade punishment or avoid restrictions” (“Reddit Content Policy”, n.d.). Reddit.com expects adherence to these guidelines but does not police individual subreddits; as the

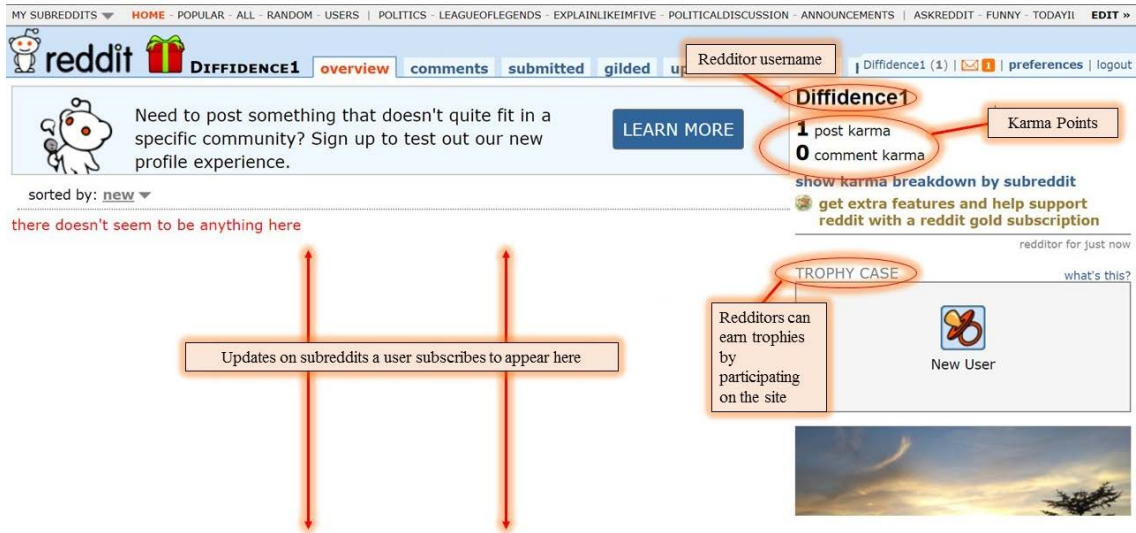
content policy states, “Reddit provides tools to aid moderators, but does not prescribe their usage” (“Reddit Content Policy”, n.d.).

In terms of technical features, there are several ways in which Redditors can actively participate on Reddit.com. For one, any Redditor can create their own subreddit on any topic of their choice. Subreddits are composed of *threads* and *subthreads* (also called *posts*), comments, and voting. Subreddits can be listed as a *public* subreddit so that any Redditor can subscribe or a *private* subreddit with set rules that govern admittance. Redditors also have the option to post content in any subreddit they create or subscribe to. To initiate a thread or subthread, Redditors publish either their own original content in the form of *self-posts* or *text posts* or posts based on links to external web sources. Fellow Redditors can comment on posts to initiate further discussion. For ease of searchability, posts are automatically categorized based on the subreddit in which they appear. For example, typing keywords into the search bar and clicking on an interesting thread will navigate to the subreddit the thread was posted in. Within each subreddit, posts are organized hierarchically by both chronology and voting results based on other Redditors upvoting and downvoting posts.

*Upvoting* and *downvoting*, a secondary means of participation on Reddit.com, allows Redditors to have input in what is considered high-quality content. Redditors upvote posts they find unique, interesting, and compelling, and downvote content they find illogical, irrelevant, offensive, off-topic to the subreddit, outdated, etc. Reddit.com’s sorting algorithm organizes posts based on the number of upvotes received in a given time period. While all content on the network is eventually archived, this algorithm allows well-received content to be *more* accessible to Redditors by appearing higher up

on the home page. Conversely, content that is not well-received and/or cumulatively downvoted moves farther down the home page and becomes *less* accessible. To prevent voting manipulation by “spam bots,” or Reddit.com accounts that are not associated with actual people, the cumulative point total received on a post is typically “fuzzed” (“Frequently Asked Questions”, 2018). This means that the point totals for displayed for a given post may not be numerically accurate but are still representative of results from the voting process.

A tertiary incentive to participate on Reddit.com is the collection of *Karma Points*. Karma Points give Redditors an idea of how the content they publish is received by fellow users. These points are awarded based to two categories: *Link Karma*, awarded when a user creates a post using external content and the post is upvoted, and *Comment Karma*, awarded when a user’s comment on a post receives upvotes. Despite having little value outside of the network, Karma Points are ethos-builders for Redditors; the more a Redditor has, the more obvious the merit of their contribution to Reddit.com (“Frequently Asked Questions”, 2018). Figure 2 shows an example of a Redditor’s profile page, where subreddit subscriptions, Karma Points, and trophies appear.



**Figure 2. Reddit.com User Profile Page**

The technical design of Reddit.com’s network allows a multitude of possibilities for participation among Redditors. Reddit.com’s focus on user-created, interest-based communities gives users the option to tailor their accounts for their own personal needs. Therefore, Redditors view only the content they want to view. If they so choose, Redditors can participate merely through upvoting and downvoting, or only by subscribing to and reading subreddits. The technical features behind Reddit.com, combined with the many possibilities for user participation, form a distinct digital literacy that Redditors must learn, understand, and use as members of the site.

### **Examining Political Arguments on Reddit.com**

Contrary to popular belief, Redditors are not merely *Internet trolls*, or those who behave in a “deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose” (Zezulka & Seigfried-Spellar, 2016). Those who moderate and maintain subreddits are certainly invested in the content to a high degree; this is evidenced by the sheer amount, complexity, and thoroughness of



writing occurring on the site. Furthermore, acting within the constraints of community guidelines, subreddit guidelines, and overview by active moderators, Redditors are actually encouraged to remain civil and discussions are guided by the overarching context of the subreddit itself. Most Redditors abide by these regulations for civil discourse and, if not, are sanctioned for it by subreddit moderators.

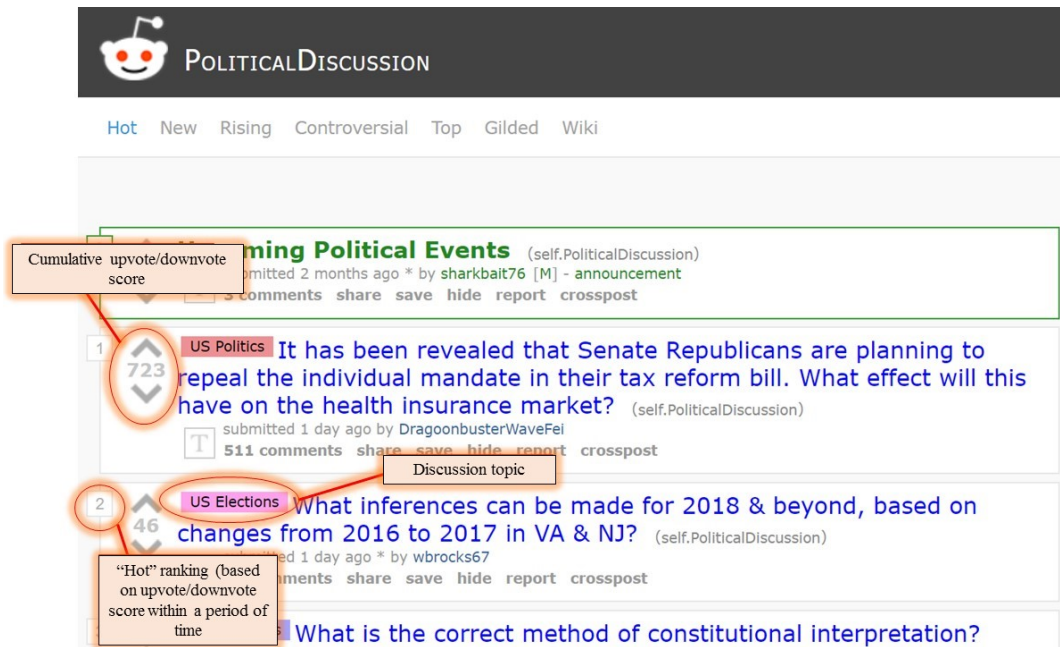
The technical affordances of Reddit.com, such as Karma Points and trophies, give the site a political dimension that enhances some user's social capital over others. Therefore, in subreddits, participation begets a power that can be legitimated and maintained by Redditors simply by participating on Reddit.com. Additionally, since Reddit.com itself is not designed expressly for political discussion, existing political subreddits maintained by Redditors can be considered both user-created and interest-based. Subreddit participants build ethos and credibility simply by being active members of the subreddit and engaging with other members about various political topics. Frequent contributions that are well-received by community members (visible through the cumulative voting process) may warrant a Redditor to feel powerful and perhaps more knowledgeable than others.

There are a multitude of politically-based subreddits available for examination on Reddit.com. The largest of the political subreddits, r/politics, boasts over three and a half-million subscribers and a wealth of content facilitated by its 45 moderators. While the sheer size of r/politics eliminated it from a feasible scope of examination, the subreddit provides links to affiliated political subreddits grouped by political party, political candidate, political issues and causes, and more. One subreddit listed is r/PoliticalDiscussion, appearing under r/politics' General Interest category of politically-

affiliated subreddits. r/PoliticalDiscussion appears to be a microcosm of r/Politics, as r/Political Discussion is: 1) an open, public subreddit, 2) a subreddit with clear, discrete guidelines, and 3) an active community with a more manageable subscriber base than r/Politics.

As of April 2018, r/PoliticalDiscussion has just under a quarter of a million subscribers. Approximately 200-300 subscribers are simultaneously active within the subreddit at any given time. The subreddit is organized by eight different discussion topics: U.S. Elections, Non-U.S. Politics, Legal/Courts, U.S. Politics, International Politics, Legislation, Political History and Political Theory. Per r/PoliticalDiscussion guidelines, threads published regarding any of the eight discussion topics must begin with the original poster (OP) asking a discrete question. Subscribers are then encouraged to civilly respond in any way of their choosing.

r/PoliticalDiscussion's homepage, shown in Figure 3, is organized in a manner similar to Reddit.com's main home page. The subreddit's "hottest" threads of the day appear near the top of the page along with any announcements posted by moderators.



**Figure 3. r/PoliticalDiscussion Homepage**

The sidebar on r/PoliticalDiscussion’s homepage (Figure 4) includes information about comment rules, discussion rules, discussion topics, related subreddits, and a list of moderators. The subreddit’s basic guidelines are rather similar to those explicated in Reddit.com’s content policy, such as “keep it civil” and “do not submit low investment content” (“PoliticalDiscussion”, n.d.).

Additionally, r/PoliticalDiscussion includes a Wiki Guide in their discussion of submission rules titled “Tips on Writing a Successful Political Discussion Post”. This 2,994 word document, developed over several years by r/PoliticalDiscussion’s twelve moderators, prescribes rules for conversation structure, style, and developing high-quality content on the subreddit. Several sample discussion threads are also included in the Wiki Guide to provide Redditors with concrete examples of both acceptable content and violations of content rules. Moderators define what is considered a “good” post, thereby modeling how deliberation on r/PoliticalDiscussion should take place. In short, the “Tips

on Writing a Successful Political Discussion Post” document is an instructional guide for r/PoliticalDiscussion’s unique discourse.

Questions or comments regarding subreddit rules or moderation? Please let us know via [modmail!](#)

**Comment Rules**

Keep this subreddit **HIGH QUALITY** by observing [Reddiquette](#) and the subreddit rules:

- **Keep it civil.** Do not personally insult other Redditors, or post racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise discriminatory content. Constructive debate is good; [mockery, taunting, and name calling](#) are not.
- **Do not submit low investment content.** This subreddit is for genuine discussion. Low effort content, including memes, links substituting for explanation, sarcasm, and non-substantive contributions will be removed per moderator discretion.
- **No meta discussion.** This is not a subreddit for discussing what’s going on on reddit; conversation should be focused on the topic at hand. Meta content includes talking about reddit, other subreddits, redditors, and moderators. All meta content will be removed.
- **Warnings.** The rules are intended to maintain the high quality of the subreddit, and garden-variety violations will be met with a reminder from the moderators. Users who demonstrate an inability to consistently follow our rules will however be banned at moderator discretion. Please also note that severe violations of the civility rule may result in an immediate permanent ban.

Further details regarding these rules are available [here](#), and recent clarifications to the civility rule regarding taunting and mockery can be found [here](#).

**Submission Rules**

**Wiki Guide: [Tips On Writing a Successful Political Discussion Post](#)**

New submissions will not appear until approved by a moderator. We ask for your patience while we work through the queue.

Submissions should be inviting and pertain to the topic you want to discuss. This is best done in the form of a question or questions. Please observe the following rules:

- Do not use all caps.
- Do not use tags (e.g. `[Serious]`).
- Do not use derogatory, demeaning, or otherwise inflammatory titles.
- Do not ask loaded or rhetorical questions.
- Do not submit content that does not discuss politics (such as meta posts, discussion of other subreddits, other redditors or moderators).
- Do not create **DAE, ELIS, CMV, or TIL** type submissions.
- Do not create submissions to soapbox your political agenda.

[/r/PoliticalDiscussion](#) is here to discuss and ask about current politics. It is not for here for you to soapbox or campaign. Please post your opinion pieces to our sister subreddit, [/r/PoliticalOpinions](#).

- Do not post links to news or blogs. You can post sources to provide background or supporting information, but you must provide a summary of the source. Do not circumvent text only submissions by simply posting a link in the text box or copying material from an outside source.

**Discussion Topics**

Choose a topic to search.

- US Elections
- Non-US Politics
- Legal/Courts
- US Politics
- International Politics
- Legislation
- Political History
- Political Theory

**Similar Subs you might or might not enjoy:**

- [/r/PoliticalOpinions](#)
- [/r/Ask\\_Politics](#)
- [/r/NeutralPolitics](#)
- [/r/ChangeMyView](#)
- [/r/GeoPolitics](#)
- [/r/WorldEvents](#)
- [/r/PoliticalScience](#)
- [/r/Economics](#)
- [/r/UKPolitics](#)
- [/r/WorldNews](#)
- [/r/Politics](#)

For specific debates

- [/r/AskAConservative](#)
- [/r/AskALiberal](#)
- [/r/DebateCommunism](#)
- [/r/DebateFascism](#)
- [/r/LibertarianDebates](#)
- [/r/DebateAnarchism](#)

**MODERATORS**

- davidreiss666
- BagOnuts [Extra Nutty](#)
- starryeyedsky
- Matt5327
- rkrish7 [Picard/Riker 2016](#)
- CrapNeck5000
- Prodigy-II [The People’s Mod](#)
- Precursor2552 [Keep it clean](#)
- Anxa [Ph.D. in Reddit Statistics](#)
- SapCPark [Ban Hammer Aficionado](#)

...and 9 more »

Figure 4. r/PoliticalDiscussion’s Sidebar Content

## Collection of Corpus

To begin preliminary examination of r/PoliticalDiscussion, 1,000 of the subreddit’s most recent threads were collected. While, by default, the main page of a given subreddit displays posts based on a time-bound voting system (appearing under the “Hot” tab), posts can also be viewed in reverse-chronological order (appearing under “New” tab). The first 1,000 threads displayed in the “New” tab were compiled into a file folder using RedditExtractor, a data extraction software lent to me by another student. From these 1,000 threads, further analysis was limited to threads pertaining to one of r/PoliticalDiscussion’s eight discussion topics. The U.S. Politics category was chosen for examination because it allowed a narrower scope of research and a cohesive subject

matter directing the topic of conversation. Also, this category seemed to be discussed most often, as it contained over 500 (565) of the 1,000 posts.

30 individual threads (20 percent of the larger corpus) were chosen at random from the U.S. Politics category. Data from the 30 threads was downloaded from RedditExtractor and originally converted into 30 individual Rich Text Files (.rtf) for the purposes of beginning preliminary observation. However, coding the data electronically was outside the capabilities of RedditExtractor. Therefore, hand-coding the threads was effective, despite also being more time-consuming.

### **Coding of Corpus Data**

To more closely examine the ways in which Redditors participate on r/PoliticalDiscussion, preliminary data was hand-coded in an Excel workbook. The first round of coding for each of the 30 threads allowed me to determine: 1) the number of Redditors that contribute in each thread, 2) how many times each Redditor contributes throughout the thread, 3) which Redditors initiate questions and subthreads, 4) which Redditors contribute frequently across subthreads, 5) instances in which two or more Redditors extend discussion.

After this preliminary coding, I then created a comprehensive list of all active users within the corpus to reveal patterns of individual user participation *across* threads and patterns of collective participation as representative of Redditors on r/PoliticalDiscussion. To ensure that methods of data coding were logically sound, 10% of the 30-thread corpus was given to an interrater to examine and record on an Excel spreadsheet. The interrater simple agreement was 88.88% (16 agreements out of 18 total).

I later conducted a second round of coding to examine types of evidence used in discussion within the 30 threads. I based my methods for this round of coding on a constant-comparison method, as a component of Grounded Theory, as first explicated by Glasser & Straus (1967). This coding was also provided to an interrater, and together we reconciled disagreements in coding methods for evidence types. Disagreements most commonly pertained to recognizing and defining hypothetical evidence, determining what constituted as an uncited reference to an external source, and the difficulty in distinguishing when Redditors were establishing their own credibility as actual evidence versus when they were merely stating their credentials. Reconciliation between the interrater and I allowed for refinement and, in some cases, reconceptualization of code definitions.

I also took note of how others responded when particular types of evidence were presented, as well as instances in which credibility of evidence was called into question, for the purposes of better understanding how contributing Redditors determine what is credible and what is not in political conversations on r/PoliticalDiscussion.

## Findings

### Participatory Dynamics on r/PoliticalDiscussion

Since its creation six years ago, r/PoliticalDiscussion's subscriber base has grown to 249,450 Redditors. As mentioned in the Methods section, hundreds of readers can be found on the subreddit at any given time. The all-time "hottest" post on r/PoliticalDiscussion, as determined by the upvoting/downvoting process, received a cumulative score of over 22,000 votes and elicited 2,400 comments from both subscribers and non-subscribers. ("PoliticalDiscussion", n.d.) Clearly, participation on r/PoliticalDiscussion is frequent, active, and attracts traffic from multiple spheres of the Reddit.com community.

To effectively participate, Redditors must adhere rather closely to r/PoliticalDiscussion's genre conventions—almost all of which are thoroughly explicated in the subreddit's submission guidelines (refer to Figure 4 in Methods). First and foremost, all threads submitted to the subreddit must address one of the eight listed discussion topics (U.S. Politics, Non-U.S. Politics, U.S. Elections, Legal/Courts, International Politics, Legislation, Political History, or Political History) by posing a discrete question. "Loaded" and "rhetorical" questions are explicitly forbidden, as well as questions that fail to provoke deeper discussion (i.e., "Thoughts?") ("PoliticalDiscussion", n.d.). To initiate a thread, a Redditor may ask, for example: "Do politicians deserve the presumption of innocence? Why or why not?". Once the question posed to initiate a thread is submitted, it is added to a queue and reviewed by moderators before being published to r/PoliticalDiscussion.

Furthermore, r/PoliticalDiscussion's submission guidelines contend that if a Redditor's question links external content, this content must be summarized rather than being simply "circumvented" or "[copied] material from an outside source" ("PoliticalDiscussion", n.d.). These guidelines in particular aim to ensure that all threads submitted to r/PoliticalDiscussion will elicit accessible, productive, and meaningful political discourse.

Like in any other subreddit on Reddit.com, Redditors also participate on r/PoliticalDiscussion by upvoting/downvoting content, replying to threads (either directly or by creating a subthread), and responding to the replies of others. The subreddit's moderators enthusiastically encourage use of all available means of participation, stating that Redditors should use their "power" to "upvote quality content," "downvote content that detracts from the quality" of r/PoliticalDiscussion, and "*report* content that breaks the rules" ("PoliticalDiscussion", n.d.). The reporting of content by subscribers allows moderators to more quickly and efficiently find, edit, or delete inappropriate content.

### **Participation in the U.S. Politics Category on r/PoliticalDiscussion**

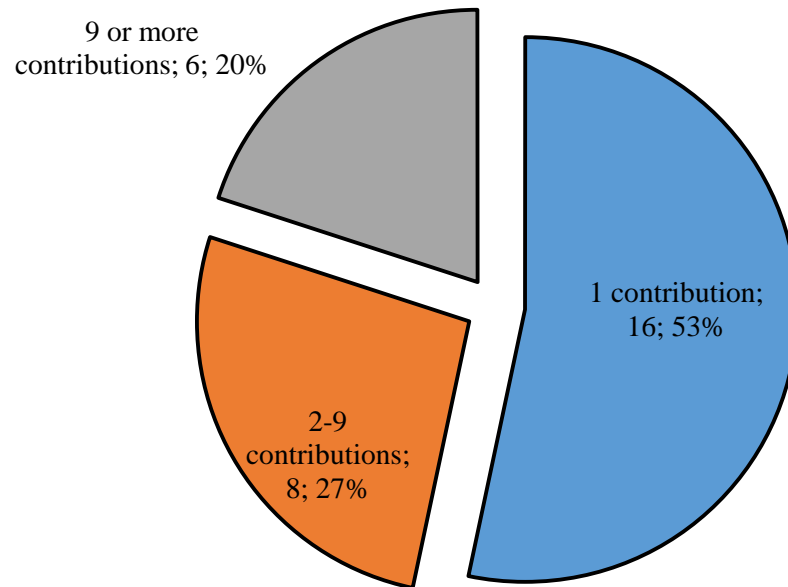
As noted previously, I chose to examine only one of r/PoliticalDiscussion's eight available discussion categories to establish a basis of topical cohesion. Considering that over half of the threads in the corpus appeared in the U.S. Politics category, I predicted participation within this particular category would appropriately represent r/PoliticalDiscussion's holistic participatory dynamics. Additionally, the U.S. Politics category discusses content that is at least somewhat familiar to me as a U.S. citizen with novice political knowledge (as opposed to, for example, the International Politics category).



The first and last 15 threads within the U.S. Politics category on r/PoliticalDiscussion were selected from the larger corpus to more closely examine possible patterns in user participation. These threads constitute 30 distinct examples of user-created, interest-based political conversations initiated in a digital affinity space. The 30 threads were divided into 523 subthreads and composed of 4,208 total contributions. These contributions were made by 1,374 active Redditors and up to 368 deleted accounts.

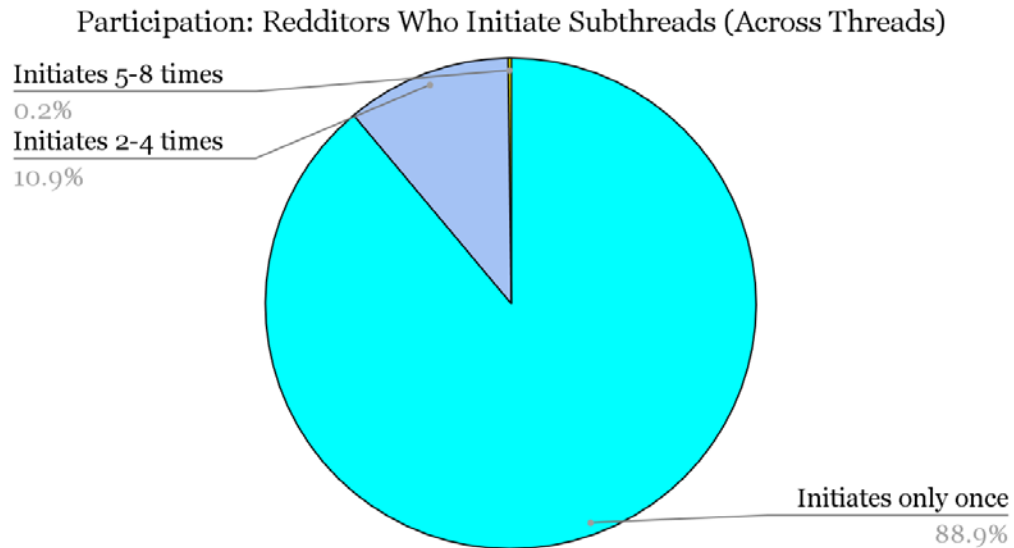
As mentioned earlier, members of r/PoliticalDiscussion must initiate a thread by asking a thought-provoking question in order to have their submission approved by the subreddit's moderators. Each of the 30 collected conversations were initiated by Redditors driven by their interest in politics. 53.3% of the 30 (16/30) threads were initiated by Redditors who contribute on only one occasion across threads and never again. By comparison, only 26.7% (8/30) these threads were initiated by users who contributed moderately (2-8 contributions across threads), and the remaining 22% (6/30) of threads were initiated by Redditors who contributed frequently (9 or more contributions across threads). These findings are expressed graphically in Figure 5.

### Participation: Redditors Who Initiate Threads



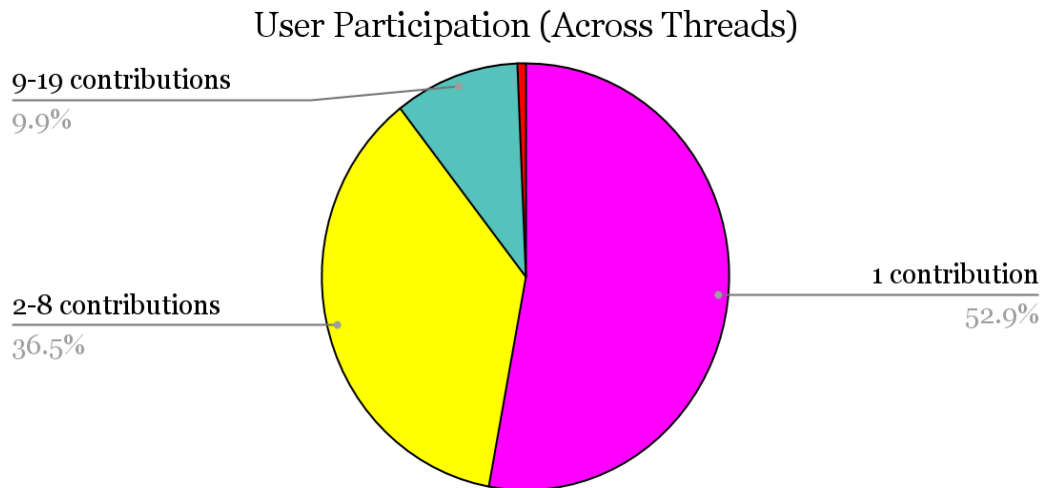
**Figure 5. Redditors Who Initiate Threads in the U.S. Politics Category of r/PoliticalDiscussion**

In the 30 collected conversations, Redditors participated by creating a subthread on 523 occasions. Of these 523 subthreads, 88.9% (465/523) were initiated by Redditors who contributed on only one occasion and not again. 10.9% (57/523) of these subthreads were initiated by Redditors who contributed moderately (2-4 times across threads). Less than half a percent, or 1 of the 523 subthreads, was initiated by a Redditor who contributed on more than 5 occasions. The participation across the 30 threads of Redditors who initiated subthreads is show in Figure 6.



**Figure 6. Redditors Who Initiate Subthreads (Across Threads) in the U.S. Politics Category of r/PoliticalDiscussion**

Redditors also have the option to participate in discussion without threads or subthreads, instead responding to others' threads and subthreads to move the discussion forward. 1,886 Redditors participated in the 30 selected threads from r/PoliticalDiscussion only through contributing comments and replies. 52.9% (997/1,886) these Redditors contributed on only one occasion across threads and not again. 36.5% (688/1,886) contributed moderately (2-8 times across threads). 9.9% (187/1,886) users contributed frequently (9-19 times across threads). Finally, .6% (12/1,886) users contributed on more than 20 occasions across threads. Figure 7 represents this data graphically.



**Figure 7. User Participation (Across Threads) on r/PoliticalDiscussion**

This data pertaining to participatory dynamics in the U.S. Politics category of r/PoliticalDiscussion reveals that, when examining each available method for participation in political discussion individually (including initiating threads, initiating subthreads, and commenting/replying), most Redditors contribute in writing on only one occasion. Rather than a select number of Internet users passionately arguing back and forth, participation on r/PoliticalDiscussion involves many people, from many backgrounds, political affiliations and opinions, each briefly contributing to the subreddit's constantly-evolving discourse.

Reddit.com's technical features of participation, such as upvoting/downvoting process, enable Redditors to remain engaged in discussion even without contributing written content. It seems apparent that contributors in these 30 sample conversations are paying close attention to the discussion at hand, interjecting only in moments where they feel their contributions may be relevant.

However, there were several Redditors participating in these political discussions that contributed disproportionately more often than across threads than others. The most frequent contributor in the corpus, for example, contributed on a total of 60 occasions ( $60/4,208$  contributions = 1.4% of all contributions composed by this user) across 10 separate threads (or 33.33% of the sample). Notably, this particular Redditor contributed only through commenting, replying or, hypothetically, voting. The Redditor in the corpus who contributed the next most frequently contributed 39 times (0.93% of all contributions) across 12 separate threads (40% of the examined threads). This user initiated one thread as well as initiating one subthread.

Methods of participation are diverse and variable within this corpus. While a select number of Redditors contribute on a regular or frequent basis, most seem to choose one or two particular moments in which to engage in discussion. This data suggests that Redditor's participation in U.S. Politics discussions on r/PoliticalDiscussion may be topically-driven; hypothetically, they may contribute frequently to discussions in other topics (whether politically-affiliated or not). However, U.S. Politics threads on r/PoliticalDiscussion seem to involve the integration of knowledge from a large body of participants to strengthen this body of participants' communal understanding and perception of politics.

The infrequency and brevity of written participation by most Redditors in the corpus may also implicate the importance of Reddit.com's unseen methods of participation and the support these methods lend to the "invisible audience" dynamic. For example, some Redditors may choose to participate only by reading content published by others which, in terms of data collection, is impossible to measure empirically. Others

may only utilize the cumulative voting process feature of Reddit.com, rather than producing written content—these users are essentially “invisible” as well.

### **Evidence Use in r/PoliticalDiscussion**

The coding schemes were delineated from the corpus based on types of evidence used to examine topical units of discussion. Two rounds of coding revealed seven distinct evidence types employed across threaded conversations in the corpus. These evidence types are included:

<b>Evidence Types</b>	<b>Evidence Codes</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Frequency (Across Threads)</b>
Example-none	EX-N	Contributor references evidence without citing a source	1,844
None	NONE	No apparent evidence is provided by the contributor	1,173
Hypothetical	HYPO	Contributor constructs a hypothetical situation as evidence	965
Experiential-none	E-N	Contributor provides background knowledge or experience as evidence	472
Hyperlink	HL	Contributor provides evidence with a cited external source	342
Hyperlink reference	HL-REF	Contributor references evidence with a cited external source previously provided by another contributor as evidence	68
Internal reference	IN-REF	Contributor references evidence previously provided by another contributor	37

## Discussion

### Evidence as an Argumentative Strategy on r/PoliticalDiscussion

While engaging in political discussions in the U.S. Politics category of r/PoliticalDiscussion, many Redditors chose to provide their background knowledge or experience (coded as E-N) as evidence—often in narrative form. These personal narratives were used as a method of pushing the conversation forward and adding a fresh perspective to the topic at-hand. Generally, experiential knowledge seemed to be valued as a legitimate form of evidence. Several of the conversations within the corpus, for example, discuss governmental policies and regulations that often vary from state-to-state. In these cases, Redditors contributed experiential evidence regarding how implementation of these policies and regulations would affect them based on their geographical location and knowledge of their own state's law.

If not explicated in narrative form, experiential knowledge as evidence took form of establishing one's credentials as a baseline of ethos or credibility. Some contributors felt that mentioning these credentials alone was sufficient enough to support the claims they made. Others mentioned their *lack* of experience when discussing topics that were perhaps less familiar to them.

Also, contributors frequently constructed hypothetical situations as evidence to address issues such as: 1) how a candidate may act or what decisions they will make in a particular situation, 2) how a proposed policy or law may be implemented, 3) how a political problem (perhaps pertaining to finances or legislation) could be solved. Hypothetical evidence was often combined with reference to evidence without a cited

source (EX-N), suggesting that these particular contributors were speaking primarily from experience and memory rather than external evidence.

Notably, evidence provided with a cited source (HL) was not automatically considered credible by contributors and became subject to frequent skepticism and criticism (Anarchaeologist, 2016; dem0n0cracy, 2017). While in academic settings cited evidence is typically highly-revered, it seems cited evidence in the U.S. Politics category of r/PoliticalDiscussion was not anymore highly valued than other evidence types, such as experiential knowledge and hypotheticals. In fact, discussions regarding the objectivity, veracity, and interpretation of cited sources were present in 56.66% (17/30) threads.

However, similarly to standards of credibility in academia, cited evidence came most commonly from external sources that would be considered reputable or reliable by the general public. These external sources were typically more readily accepted as evidence if accompanied by a summary or explanation provided by the contributor. This is perhaps an indication that Redditors participating on r/PoliticalDiscussion may have at least partially internalized the subreddit's general guidelines (such as not merely circumventing data). Though the list of cited data was lengthy and rather diverse, the most frequently cited sources in the corpus are listed below:

<b>Frequency Cited Sources (HLs)</b>	<b>Frequency of Use (Across Threads)</b>
Wikipedia	19
Twitter	18



Washington Post	9
Pew Research Center	9
CNN	6
CNBC	4
New York Times	2
Wall Street Journal	2

### Responses to Evidence on r/PoliticalDiscussion

Incorporation of *some* form of evidence is clearly important to contributors of this subreddit. In half of the corpus (15/30), Redditors requested a source of evidence from other contributors if none was originally provided (Clausewitz1996, 2016; insubordinance, 2016; LittleToke 2016). Furthermore, if the evidence provided by a contributor was ambiguous or unclear, other contributors asked for clarification, elaboration, or further examples in 53.33% (16/30) threads. Generalizations such as “as polls now suggest...” (imcoolyes, 2016) or “all data says...” (CheeseWithWhine, 2017) were not well-received and met with suspicion. Once cited evidence was deemed acceptable by the members of the subreddit, this evidence was met with civility and graciousness. Users frequently thanked others when they provided evidence, occasionally even if this evidence did not cite a source.

Different types of evidence used on r/PoliticalDiscussion may be indicative of different types of responses from contributors. Often, when one contributor provided

experiential knowledge as evidence, other contributors were encouraged to provide evidence in the form their own life experiences. Employing this type of evidence was particularly effective when answering questions about political party affiliation (MapleLoaves, 2017; two-years-glop, 2017; Daghostofalegend, 2017). Interestingly, experiential knowledge as evidence in U.S. Politics discussions on this subreddit was rarely used as a means of refuting or discrediting other contributors' experiences. Instead, the inclusion of this evidence type provided additional perspective, further enriching or complicating the topic being discussed.

### **When Evidence is Not Used on r/PoliticalDiscussion**

This study found no significant correlation between frequency of participation among contributors and the amount or types of evidence they employed. It therefore seems that evidence use is not a necessary condition of participation in political discussion in the U.S. Politics category on r/PoliticalDiscussion.

Not surprisingly, threads in the corpus initiated with questions pertaining to background knowledge, opinion, or personal belief had fewer instances of cited sources than those pertaining to practical questions about policy implementation or current events.

More significantly, however, reference to evidence without citing a source (EX-N) was the most common form of evidence employed in the corpus. Contributors frequently mentioned news stories they saw on television, videos on social media, or other external evidence without providing specifics. When speaking in a more general sense or providing metacommentary, these contributors were not criticized for failing to

cite these types of sources and were typically taken at face-value. However, some contributors found themselves in disagreements over subjective opinions and struggled to maintain civility or find common ground. In the midst of a heated debate with another Redditor regarding the practicality of President Trump's proposal to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, one contributor promptly ended the discussion, saying "our basic facts and truths are different" (TooMuchChaos2, 2016). This statement itself offers a potential explanation political discourse arises in the first place.

### **Participation and Content Policed on r/PoliticalDiscussion**

The general guidelines prescribed by r/PoliticalDiscussion moderators appear to be effective and decently-respected by community members. The majority of contributors in the corpus maintained civility and respect for others participating. However, 10 of the 30 examined threads in the corpus involved some form of intervention from r/PoliticalDiscussion's moderators. In most cases, moderators interjected only to warn contributors not to "submit low investment content" (Callox, 2016; Anarchaeologist, 2017; arrowsight, 2017). Other than this request, moderators did not often interject into conversation unless they also had something to contribute about the topic. One could assume this means that the moderators of r/PoliticalDiscussion are relaxed in their methods of policing content and the distribution of knowledge. However, it is also possible that these moderators review content frequently enough that derogatory or false information is quickly removed from the subreddit.

On two occasions, content published by a contributor was policed and removed by other subreddit contributors (rather than moderators). In these cases, the cumulative upvoting/downvoting feature worked effectively and allowed users to decide what

information and content was acceptable within the affinity space, and the contributors' content was deleted from the thread (SailingPatrickSwayze, 2016; Tularema, 2016).

Through the constant policing of threads by both moderators and concerned contributors on r/PoliticalDiscussion, members of the subreddit consistently evolve their unique digital literacy.

## Conclusion

There is no denying that our society's methods of finding, evaluating, and circulating content are becoming increasingly digitized. The rapid development of CMC channels and forms of communicative engagement online have allowed all of us to become a just a little more connected with one another; we can now share ideas and stories with strangers across the globe in the blink of an eye, learn of current events the moment they occur, and engage in discussions that may even deeply influence our attitudes and perceptions about controversial topics like politics.

Alongside this ever-evolving digital connectivity arose massive amounts of digital data on the Internet pertaining to every topic imaginable. As we attempt to wade through this content and learn more about our world through online discourse, digital affinity spaces have been established by individuals eager to engage in meaningful conversation with others. As a web of interest-based affinity spaces, Reddit.com is one of many networked publics that enables its users to participate in civil political discourse through writing.

Politically-interested Redditors in the U.S. Politics category of r/PoliticalDiscussion work to build their individual and collective knowledge of the current divisive political climate by engaging in political discourse with one another. Though, in the corpus, most contributors only participated through writing on one or two occasions, it's clear that there is a wide breadth of participation occurring behind the scenes.

Furthermore, contributors' frequent references to uncited evidence and their own experiential knowledge suggests that perhaps cited evidence is not always the highest form of "truth". Depending on context, application of digital literacy, and norms of group affiliation, standard for evidence use and credibility in varying affinity spaces are never quite the same.

Due to time constraints, I was unable to conduct interviews during this study. However, it would be fascinating in future studies to see a combination of content analysis and interviews within politically-affiliated affinity spaces to see how contributors' production and circulation of online content compares to their perceptions of it.

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