

DEMOCRACY

and

DEBATE.ORG

by

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Debate.org is an online debating community that attempts to establish the reputations of its debaters in a highly democratic manner. Debates vary greatly in subject matter – from arts to politics. A debate is always between two members at a time and usually follows a structured process of three rounds. The life cycle of a debate consists of four stages – Challenge Period, Debating Period, Voting Period, and Post Voting Period. The winner of each debate is determined through democratic voting – every member of the community has the option to vote on who they agree with. We intend to apply theoretical concepts published about online communities to Debate.org and – based on this analysis – state what elements we think work well in the community and what elements could use improvement. Moreover, specific ideas relating to the design of a debating-centered online community will be brought forth. The democracy on Debate.org may seem quite fair and efficient on first glance; however, further investigation reveals that it is a problematic democracy, if a democracy at all.

Arguing for the benefits of democracy over dictatorship, Cass Sunstein writes, “...a democracy allows wide criticism and debate by many minds, thus avoiding ‘many a disaster.’ In a totalitarian system, criticisms and suggestions are neither wanted nor heeded. ‘Even the leaders tend to believe their own propaganda; they live in cocoons.’” (2006, p. 202) It may be said, however, that this cocooning effect may exist not only in a dictatorship but in a democracy as well, and the situation on Debate.org exemplifies this statement. An analysis of Debate.org’s extremely interesting demographics page (Debate.org Demographics, 2010) reveals that the community is predominantly Christian, with 49 percent stating their religion as Christianity. The second highest percentage goes to atheism, but it is still trailing far behind with only 17 percent. But when one also notices that 72% of this community is based in the United States, these numbers are hardly surprising. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey reveals

that approximately 76% of US adults self-identify as Christian. (Kosmin and Keysar, 2008, p. 3) Simply because the numbers are not surprising, though, does not invalidate the potentially negative effects of unmitigated cocooning, especially when it comes to a debating community where voting is crucial. Only through finding the well-hidden demographics page is this information revealed to a user; the community does not advertise itself as predominantly Christian in any obvious way. But when one notices that side proposition has won a debate entitled “morality comes from religion,” (End and popculturepooka, 2010) one may get a little suspicious, especially if they are not Christian. The cocooning effect that Sunstein writes of may well be present on Debate.org, as one would imagine that if this same proposition were put forth to a voting community that is less heavily Christian, a different result may occur. Our initial suspicion after inspecting the demographics page and reviewing the debates was that Debate.org may be something of a Christianity cocoon; however, we are unable to state this definitively. We made an attempt to strengthen this suspicion by creating a new debate with the same proposition – “morality comes from religion” – (Grantarp and Kinesis, 2010) and observing how the community responds. The idea was that we would attempt to argue as persuasively as possible for the proposition, with the expectation that the Christian-heavy voting community would still vote against us. Debating against a popular Christian viewpoint within a Christianity cocoon will no doubt be difficult for side opposition, as chances are the larger voting community will not heed the criticisms, as Sunstein suggests. (2006, p. 202) The final debate, however, received only two votes from the entire Debate.org community. This speaks to a larger problem that the community’s voting base is rather disjointed. Certain debates will get many votes, while other debates will get substantially fewer votes for no apparent reason that we have been able to identify. What can be definitively said, however, is that Debate.org is on the surface bipartisan

and secular but further inspection reveals that it is in fact quite partisan, or at least heavily Christian.

Debate.org's voting process is highly problematic in that it is entirely public and anonymity is not even an option. Members can see not only which other members voted but also exactly how they voted. For instance, one of the debaters might go in and see that another debater did not award them any points for spelling and grammar. One would reasonably expect that this extreme degree of transparency in the voting process would lead to problematic situations, such as arguments resulting from hurt feelings. This community's support of a Groups functionality only reinforces the probability of this result. One may easily view all Christians within this debating community by clicking on "Christian" in a profile and generating a long list. The Friends functionality is also relevant here; many Christians in this community are friends primarily with other Christians. (People, 2010) It would be easy, then, for a Christian debater to notice that a Christian friend of theirs actually voted against them on a particular issue, thereby inciting some hostility between the two. The collegial airing of differences that this could potentially lead to is not necessarily negative; however, one must realize that this extreme transparency in the voting process likely leads to self-silencing (Sunstein, 2006, p. 208) in many cases. A Christian will likely sometimes decide not to vote at all on a particular debate because it would require openly disagreeing with a Christian friend. Certain friends may be quite diplomatic about this disagreement; however, others may not be and the disagreement would potentially create a permanent rift in their friendship. Sunstein recommends the Delphi method or a process similar to it in order to counteract this problem self-silencing. (*ibid.*) The Delphi method would in fact be perfect for a community such as Debate.org, where a highly formalized process has already been put in place. The steps of the Delphi method could be smoothly

integrated with the existing iterative process of rounds on Debate.org. The first step of the Delphi method would be to “ensure the anonymity of all members through a private statement of views.” (*ibid.*) As the voting process on Debate.org currently stands, members are asked the question “who did you agree with before the debate?” while voting, and their answer is made known to everyone in the community once they have voted. The Delphi method would provide a means for anonymously developing these pre-debate opinions. The second step of the Delphi method would be to give people “an opportunity to offer feedback on one another’s views” (*ibid.*) and explain why they feel a certain way. Amid this discussion, voters may choose to refine their beliefs and, finally, anonymously submit their conclusions before the official debate commences. In keeping with this process, post-debate votes would be cast anonymously.

Sunstein writes, “anonymity, both in advance and in conclusions, would insulate group members from reputational pressure, and to that extent could reduce the problem of self-silencing. Many groups should be experimenting with the Delphi technique and imaginable variations.” (2006, p. 209) Debate.org would be a healthier community if this advice were heeded by its creators, as there should be no room for self-silencing in any kind of democracy. A healthy democracy allows for a voting environment in which members may vote whichever way they want without fear of repudiation from their peers. Of course, the Delphi method is meant to encourage a group to come up with the “correct” answer. Most debates, however, are meant to be subjective and should not have correct, objective answers. But the application of the Delphi method is still appropriate in the context of Debate.org, because the method could simply be used as a means of improving the overall quality of the voting process, rather than attempting to elicit “correct” answers. By encouraging anonymous discussion between voters, people will be given the

opportunity to formulate more sophisticated opinions about the topic at hand, thus leading to votes that are well-considered.

With a voting and debating demographic so heavily weighted toward a particular group of people – Christians – the presence of a few authentic devil’s advocates may allow for the development of less biased debates and voting outcomes. For instance, when a debate has gone through the Voting Period, a devil’s advocate might notice that users who self-identify as Christian all voted a particular way, thus winning the debate for their side. The community may benefit from a group of individuals who take it upon themselves to point out suspicious patterns such as this because, as Sunstein states, “the advocate facilitates a more sophisticated inquiry into the problem at hand.”(2006, p. 211) Beyond suspicious patterns, devil’s advocates may also improve the overall quality of the debates themselves by interjecting with unbiased criticisms of each debater’s arguments. Debaters on Debate.org actually *choose* which stance they are to take on a position, and this is entirely counter to how debates usually occur in an offline, academic environment. Offline, debaters are usually just informed about which stance they are to take on a resolution, and they must do their best to argue that stance. The point here is that on Debate.org, debaters will therefore often *genuinely* feel strongly about their stance and believe it to be the correct stance. Subjective bias,¹ therefore, is highly likely to emerge in these debaters’ arguments. This is where an unbiased, objective devil’s advocate would benefit this community, pointing out any obvious biases in these debates. Knowing that their subjective arguments will likely get called out by devil’s advocates, debaters will feel more inclined to be as objective as possible in their debates, thus creating more legitimate arguments and making for higher quality debates in general.

¹ We are following this definition of bias: “a partiality that prevents objective consideration of an issue or situation.” (Wordnetweb.princeton.edu)

It is interesting to note that the authority structure of this community is entirely counter to the authority structure of an offline, academic debating community. (Lessons) Debate.org follows the “everyone gets a vote” model, whereas in academic debating the victor will always be decided by one judge or a small group of judges. (*ibid.*) It is conceivable that the community fashions itself to reflect real world debating more closely through the use of moderators.

Through various possible means, a community member could prove themselves to be quite knowledgeable about a particular topic and thus earn the right to moderate a debate about that topic. In keeping with the current sensibility of the community, moderators could perhaps be selected democratically through a voting process for each debate. The community’s Leader Board reputation system could even be put to practical use here. Individual debaters who have accumulated a high win ratio over time may be assigned – or volunteer for – judging duties. This would certainly be more similar to a real world debating situation, as there judges are normally assigned judging duties based on their past successes as debaters. Of course, this suggestion does assume that Debate.org members are currently dissatisfied with the “everybody gets a vote” authority structure, and this is not necessarily the case. Converting Debate.org to an entirely moderator-based community would, admittedly, be a rather extreme solution to the aforementioned voting system problems. However, one must consider that plenty of Debate.org users come to this community in order to develop their real world debating skills.

(asiansarentnerdy and dannyking, 2009) A reasonable explanation behind the youthful userbase on this community is that many of the users are likely involved in their high school debating club and are looking to strengthen their skills through Debate.org. Therefore, the closer this community can be to real world debating situations, the more useful it will be for many of its users. Perhaps, then, rather than mandating the use of moderators across the entire community,

there could just be an option to do so. This option could be selected when proposing a debate and instead of immediately progressing into the Challenge Period, the debate could instead progress into the Judge Selection Period. As mentioned, the community could then nominate and vote on which debaters would be most appropriate to judge this particular debate. If the community's first choice does not accept the judging duties, perhaps the second choice will. This process could be continued until an appropriate judge is selected.

The authority structure may be one area in which Debate.org is contradicting real world debating practice, but the community is adhering quite closely to real world debating practice in another area: language. This is particularly interesting considering the predominant userbase on Debate.org – 18-24 year old males. (Debate.org Demographics, 2010) Online culture has long been dominated by condensed language featuring tweets, captions and soundbites. (Souder, 2010) But on Debate.org, even the youngest debaters – many only 14 years old – (People 2, 2010) try their best to write lucidly in well-structured sentences, and many of them succeed at this quite handily. Debaters who fail to write clearly are even penalized, as the question “who had better spelling and grammar?” is among the voting criteria. Judith Donath writes, “language is also an important indication of group identity. ‘[R]egarding group membership, language is a key factor – an identification badge – for both self and outside perception.’ (Saville-Troike 82) Language patterns evolve within the newsgroups as the participants develop idiosyncratic styles of interaction - especially phrases and abbreviations. Some are common to all groups: BTW, IMHO, YMMV (By The Way, In My Humble Opinion, Your Mileage May Vary).” (1998) No doubt, even utilizing popular online acronyms such as those three would be frowned upon on Debate.org and probably hurt a debater's spelling and grammar score. In order to truly become accepted in this community, then, a refined usage of the English language is generally required.

In order to develop a formidable reputation and get anywhere near the top of the Leader Board, strong writing skills are imperative. (The Leader Board, 2010) The “outside perception” that Donath writes about is also quite relevant here, as debates that look quite well-written will no doubt contribute positively to the community’s image and aura of credibility. No matter how elegantly written the debates are, however, their content may still be dubious. A well-written debate may still make utterly ridiculous claims without any evidentiary support, and this no doubt hurts the credibility of the community.

This concern brings us to the question of “without expertise, how can you assess credibility?” Users on Wikipedia tend not to have expertise, yet that system has emerged as arguably reliable. Can the same be said of Debate.org? The large 18-24 year old userbase on Debate.org suggests that this is certainly not an expert-based community. This is not necessarily a negative attribute, but design steps could nevertheless be taken to ameliorate the concerns. Many people just visiting Debate.org, for instance, will likely decide that they are not interested in reading any of the debates because they are clearly written by amateurs who do not necessarily have any idea what they are talking about. To its credit, Debate.org does encourage the use of reliable sources and even has an option in the voting tool that asks, “who used the most reliable sources?” But often, debaters do not even bother to use any sources at all. There should be a means for a reader to indicate where in a debate they feel there should be a citation. For example, in the debate “Social democracy and MMEs are superior to minarchy and LFEs,” one encounters the statement “nations who have an effective social democratic system of government are at the top of Healthcare (1), Education (2) and Per Capita GDP (3) lists.” (Johnny_Canuck and stephannnie, 2010) This statement comes without any sort of citation, and most active readers would likely desire to see some form of evidence for such a grand statement of apparent fact.

The plug-in WikiTrust was developed for Wikipedia in order to address questionable content problems such as this. (Leggett, 2009) The idea behind the WikiTrust algorithm could be applied to Debate.org as well. With WikiTrust, text is colour-coded based on how trustworthy or untrustworthy a particular statement is determined by the community to be. (*ibid.*) On Debate.org, then, rather than simply having one user indicate that they would like a citation, the entire community may participate by indicating that they also consider this particular statement to be questionable and would like to see it backed up with a source. Similar to WikiTrust, the statement may start out with a light orange background after one user indicates its questionability. As more users also indicate that they find the statement questionable, the colour may intensify from light orange to dark red. A debater may then feel compelled to either remove their statement or find something to support it. The natural concern that then arises is editability – many users will no doubt feel that debaters should not get to edit their arguments after they have been submitted. A solution to this problem might be to allow editability only on statements that have been deemed by users to be questionable, and to always keep a public revision history that details how a particular statement has evolved over time and whether or not certain statements were deleted. This would allow for a more comprehensive debate, as debaters would have the opportunity to reconsider their statements and voters will have the opportunity to view how the arguments have evolved over the course of the whole debate.

Thomas Jefferson hoped “the education of the common people will be attended to, convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.” Since then, we have accepted as a given that the core to democracy is an informed electorate. Without an informed, educated electorate, democracy withers. What constitutes an adequately informed electorate could be argued over, but nonetheless, the idea that

people need to be able to understand and assimilate information put to them by the media is a broadly accepted one. This correlates somewhat with levels of education, since higher levels of education give people a better capacity to comprehend and synthesize information. Debate.org includes a group that has slightly lower levels of education than the populace at large. 51% have some kind of post-secondary education. In Canada, only 25% of adults between 18 and 64 have high school as their highest level of educational attainment, and 60% have some form of post-secondary education. (Statistics Canada) Within the community at Debate.org, 50% have only high school or less, while 21% have university degrees. This is unexpected and counter-intuitive as debating is an activity of intellectual engagement. If people who are the most educated have the least interest in debate, then this reflects badly for the kind of substantive democratic participation we imagine to be integral to our democracy.

Debate.org is an online community that has only a tenuous link with offline credentials. Users have an opportunity to state their profession, but there is no opportunity to validate this or prove it in any way. While you may identify yourself in a profession, you cannot associate yourself with a corporation or institution in your profile. This means there is less of a reliance on evaluation and reputation of offline credential providers. In Debate.org, more emphasis is placed on a debater's eloquence than on their claims to real world authority. Debates place more weight on good citations than on authority derived from credentials and occupation. The motivation behind Debate.org is participation and engagement, not information seeking. While identity deception can play a role on Debate.org, it does not have the same high cost as to someone seeking information. (Donath, 1998) Debate.org members are not interested in other members' claims to truth; they are interested in the external sourcing to be done. The question of credentials and credibility focuses on the evaluation of external sites, rather than of individuals.

Though the cost of identity deception may be lower than in real world interactions, (Ghajar-Khosravi, 2010) the benefits of identity manipulation are not high enough to encourage widespread identity deception. In fact, the argument has been made that online interactions provide greater honesty rather than less. (Miller, 2010) Of course, in situations where identity deception has a higher payoff, such as in communities where reputation counts for more, e.g. Wikipedia, or in online cruising situations, identity deception is more prevalent.

Debate.org is a community infused with the democratic spirit. The members are full of ideas about politics and society, and they are keen to discuss their ideas with others. Members are interested in lively debates with others about issues they feel keenly about. This interaction and the free open airing of controversial ideas is a keystone of support to a real democracy. No society that inhibits free discussion or provides prohibitions on what can be discussed can truly be called a democracy. The feeling of freedom within the site originates from this permissive structure. If anything can be discussed, then we must really have freedom, no? The reality is that freedom and autonomy is constrained on Debate.org. The autonomy is granted and circumscribed. The autonomy on the site is only permitted within specified frameworks. A member may select any topic to be discussed, but only has limited options how to frame the debate. Debates must be fixed in a number of rounds. Voting on the debate will be done in Debate.org's defined and preselected way. You cannot customize the voting structure, except to define the time limit. The voting can only be limited by time, not by number of votes. It would arguably be more democratic to demand that a debate fulfill a certain number of votes (similar to the concept of quorum) to be considered a complete voting process.

Furthermore, the actual policies of the site are not truly up for debate. You may start a debate on any topic, including the policies of Debate.org, but there is no impetus for the administrators to listen to any part of it. They could or they could not, depending on their inclination. An example of this would be how Debate.org reformed its voting system. The debates used to have a “one vote” voting system where each member makes one vote for one side or the other without the ability to distinguish their vote along finer criteria. The new system allows a member to assign points to both sides in various topics. Since this reform, there have been further debates including a push to return to a “one vote” system. This debate has been ignored by the administrators, as they see it as their prerogative to decide what issues to follow.

Debate.org is a separate entity for discussion in the forums, (and is one of the most popular forum subjects) but is not a separate subject for debate. Nonetheless, the site itself is a subject of numerous debates. To further understand the democracy on the site, we offered a debate on the subject of whether or not Debate.org was a fair democracy. This was accepted as a reasonable topic by members. The debate itself revolved around the question of what constituted a fair democracy. The opponent in the debate argued that Debate.org was run by one unelected person who was legitimate in rule but this constituted a fair democracy since Debate.org never intended to elect its leaders or have its members participate in policy formation. This is an ingenious argument that autocrats have probably used before. The opponent did not see anything troubling in the power structures of Debate.org, despite its transparent lack of democracy.

An online community can be brought together by different factors. The motivation to participate shapes what kind of community is formed. The objective of participating on Debate.org, of course, is to argue. The members all have a shared idea of what constitutes fair

play within the Debate.org community. Many of the norms within Debate.org are transplanted from debating societies. There is a formal, methodical process to the debates. Debating opponents are usually courteous to each other and refrain from name-calling within the context of the debate. They refer to their opponents as “my opponent” and hold back from vitriol. One of the voting categories awards points to the participant who had the best conduct. This shapes the conduct in debates, as people ??????????

While the debates themselves have an unwritten code of conduct, it is clear that there are spaces where this code of conduct does not fully apply. The norms are different in forums and personal messages than in the online debates. Within the forums and the comments for debates there is more direct confrontation. The site does encourage provocation and confrontation. Online communities typically try to bond over shared interests (Kozinets, 2002) and then try to protect each other from people who disrupt the community. The shared interest that binds together Debate.org is conflict, so a higher threshold for conflict is tolerated. There is an understanding that a limited amount of provocation is acceptable. Operating above and beyond these levels would be frowned upon. Furthermore, the debate system itself represents a safety valve for conflicts. There is always an opportunity to resolve personal conflicts through the mechanisms of the site. A personal challenge is sometimes used as a method for an interpersonal conflict.

While there is an effort to try and find people who oppose your personal views, there is also an attempt to find people with like-minded views. Just as there is a motivation to seek out conflict within the site, there is also a motivation to try and build friends and alliances. The surface value to these kinds of friendships and alliances is that these people will take an interest

in your debates, and perhaps even vote for you. Of course people like to win, and this sort of relationship building is constructive towards that end, but this is only part of the motivation. A more persuasive explanation is that people are seeking to build connections with people in the community for their own sake, and not for the advantages or reputation that might accrue. People seek to share their experiences with others and build on the relationships that they form, similar to real-world communities such as book clubs or sports teams. (Mangold, 2009)

The site has the potential to be used in different ways, but it is interesting to note what has *not* happened. The site has never been manipulated by any sort of mass online behaviour. It would be easy for a site to become taken over by a group with a specific grievance (i.e. Walmart, Israel, Microsoft) and become a protest site. Online behaviour has shown that individuals who feel they have an axe to grind go online to find like-minded people and create protest sites or take over forums to frame their protests. (Ward, 2009) Debate.org would be an ideal place for this kind of behavior, but there is yet little evidence of it.

The profiles on the site are quite detailed. They include the same demographics as in a Facebook page and then go the extra mile to include: preferred American presidential candidate, American political party, income, debate performance and stance on around 43 American political issues. On these political issues, one takes a stance "Pro", "Con" or "No opinion" and the issues include PETA, Bush, War on Iran, Medical Marijuana and NAFTA. One of the consequences of this display of political opinion is to engender controversy. People react to seeing people with wildly different opinions than theirs, or find community in people with similar views. The Americentrism of the data reflects the preponderance of Americans on the site, and the site's focus on the American political landscape. These profile details lend toward

alliance building. One click on any element in a profile, for example, “Christian” (religion) or “Asian” (ethnicity) or “Military” (occupation) will result in search results for others with the same characteristic. This has the capacity to reinforce the potential for "vote bombing" by allies.

The site has few explicit policies. The site does include a set of privacy settings, and there is a privacy policy. The privacy policy, like the other features on the site, does not appear to have been created with any user input. The invitation to respond to the privacy policy is to mail WebCorp "any questions about this Privacy Statement, the practices of this site, or your dealings with the Debate.org website." (Debate.org Privacy) The decisions are made in a top-down way on Debate.org. The autonomy is granted on Debate.org and circumscribed. In many ways, the democracy of Debate.org is one that is similar to Meiji Japan or Wilhelmine Germany then to an American democracy. Some democracies are seen to derive their sovereignty from the people, whereas in others democracy is portrayed as a gift from the sovereign. Debate.org does not try and derive legitimacy from its members, but instead wears the trappings of democracy, hoping that it will seem democratic by association.

Despite the problems with democracy that are evident in the website, the site enjoys very high levels of public trust. This might seem to be a contradiction, yet it is perfectly logical. The issues of democracy only rise to the surface when people feel that there are poor decisions being made. When the decisions have a high degree of acceptability and respect, then the exercise of this power is seen as legitimate. Kelly’s description of the process of legitimacy building is made in a business context, but it nevertheless holds relevance in online communities:

"It is proposed that the development of trust is affected by the way in which power and authority are exercised within an organizational context. The way in which organisations

create legitimacy in the exercise of power over their employees, and the way in which employees respond to this exercise of power, underpin the levels of trust which exist in the employee/employer relationship. The development of trust, and the existence of mutually reciprocal relationships, in turn impacts strongly on the way in which knowledge is used, shared and developed within the organisation." (Kelly, 2007, p. 2)

Substitute employees for members, and we can see that there is a parallel development of trust and legitimacy on Debate.org. The site enjoys very high levels of acceptance and, consequently, legitimacy.

We have addressed many aspects of Debate.org, but we have not discussed the experience of actually participating in a debate on the site. Unsurprisingly, debating on Debate.org is in many ways like debating in high school on a debate team. Yet there are some significant differences that are worth exploring and add some needed context to our description of the site. One of the interesting aspects on the site is that you can choose to start a debate on any topic or answer any challenge, giving the user a great degree of freedom on what topic to debate on. Traditionally, in competitive debating, the two sides to the debate are given a debate topic and told to come up with arguments for that topic. In competitive debating generally the two sides of the debate have no stake in the particular issue other than coming up with the best argument, but on Debate.org usually one would take a debate that appealed to them on a personal level or interested them on some level. This is quite different obviously, and one would think it could lead to emotions getting involved in the debates, though generally debaters seem capable of keeping their emotions in check. Another aspect that occurs on Debate.org that does not occur in real debating is the presence of a character limit which is set by the user who started the

debate (the minimum is 500 characters, the maximum is 8000 characters, there is no 'unlimited' option). This obviously limits the ability of the debaters to craft long-winded and intricate arguments, though the default 4000 characters allows for a decent-sized argument to be published. One could see it as akin to the time limit that many organized debates impose on the participants in order to avoid a seemingly never-ending Lincoln-Douglas style debate. A last comment on the difference on the manner of debating online versus debating in a more formal setting is that it is generally harder to convey tone on Debate.org. Sometimes this can lead to misunderstandings, given the nature of sarcasm and the fact that people of diverse backgrounds can come to debate on Debate.org. This has the effect of tempering the strength of the words that are used in these debates, trying to get across the main point of the argument without trying to slip in much of the way of nuance or subtlety. That is not to say that nuance and subtlety cannot be used on Debate.org. But it is more difficult to express these traits online than it is in person. This seems to contradict some basic tenants of democracy, especially in a debating site like Debate.org that thrives on open expression between individuals. Democracy is generally about free expression and while this site has many ways for users to express themselves, some of the norms of the site do not seem to encourage free expression, and this means that the idea of Debate.org as a democracy may be a false one.

One of the unique aspects of Debate.org is that it has a Leader Board to list the top users for the community. The Leader Board, while not prominently displayed is also not really hidden within the infrastructure on the site. In other sites where leader boards are prominently displayed, e.g. gaming sites like Starcraft, being on the leader board is generally a sign of a strong reputation within the community. However, in Debate.org this appears not to be the case. Before getting into a discussion on why this may be true, it is worth discussing how the leader board is

decided. The Leader Board in Debate.org lists the top thirty users by 'percentile' as the default, with 'debates,' 'won,' 'lost,' 'tied' and 'win ratio' all displayed on the same page – the option also exists to see which user has the most debates, or tied the most debates. Percentile is used to prevent new users who have won their first debate from jumping to the top of the leader board, displacing long-term users, who will inevitably lose a debate. The Leader Board page lists the top thirty users, but if one so chose they could cycle through the entire listing of users in the community, right down to the user 'Solarman1969' (The Leader Board, 2010) who has the dubious distinction of having the lowest win ratio on the site (minimum 5 debates). It's an interesting way to rank users because it does not take into account multiple factors that could affect the outcome of a debate. This system does not reward users who take on a difficult topic, or one that they don't have the most knowledge of. If the Leader Board were the sole means of determining reputation on the site, then there would be no reasoning to take on hard debates, which people often do on Debate.org. This mere fact warrants a further discussion on how reputation is established at Debate.org and if it has any importance at all.

The Leader Board seemed to be a good place to start looking for how reputation was created and maintained on Debate.org, but it appears that it is not that simple a process. One of the key questions that interested us as outsiders to this community was why people spent their time on Debate.org. For many competitive communities, the Leader Board would be an achievement to strive for and would foster a degree of competition amongst users for the inevitable bragging rights of being on the Leader Board. Yet, this does not seem to be the case for Debate.org. Certainly, the top member nicknamed 'theLwerd' has a certain degree of respect in the community, but that is also because *she* is very active within the community, having over 4000 posts on the accompanying Debate.org forum. (theLwerd) Ostensibly, there is no more

attention paid to the top ranked debaters, as one of the last debates from 'theLwerd' only received six votes, a mildly low total for Debate.org. So, why participate in a debate at all, if winning or losing don't provide some sort of tangible gain or loss? In an odd sort of way, this is why Debate.org works as a functional community. Steven Weber talks about why open source communities work, and this is probably the best model to describe how reputation works on Debate.org. Weber comments “the fun, enjoyment, and artistry of solving interesting programming problems clearly motivate open source developers. Developers speak of writing code not only as an engineering problem but also as an ascetic pursuit, a matter of style and elegance that makes coding an act of self-expression.”(Weber, 2005) Replace the words open source and coding with Debate.org and debating and this model fits perfectly. What Weber is getting at is that despite what one would think of traditional reputation – the existence of hierarchies or similar, that Debate.org works as a community because it eschews the traditional sense of reputation for something more along of the lines of what Weber is proposing for open source communities. A community like Debate.org, if organized along competitive lines would directly encourage behaviour like vote stuffing, multiple accounts and other generally frowned upon activities. There is some discussion on the forums or occasionally on the debates themselves about these behaviours, which occur infrequently. Yet, in one of the debates that we participated in, one of us was accused of being a sock puppet of another user, which we of course, were not, but shows that there is an awareness for that sort of underhanded behaviour. Because of the site's very strict measures for signing up, (including getting a cell phone confirmation to be allowed to vote on a debate) the fears of people vote stuffing are generally mitigated. Yet, returning back to our discussion of Weber and reputation, he comments “open source developers voluntarily choose what problems to work on and show the results to any and

all.”(Weber, 2005) This comment also works for Debate.org. Each user intentionally chooses to participate in a debate so they are working for a common goal, just like open source developers. Certainly there is a bit more competitiveness on Debate.org, because after all it is human nature to look to see if you have won or lost a debate. Overall, though, Weber's points ring true. This is a website predicated on debate, which means that neither side should be seen as inherently right or inherently wrong. The community, ostensibly, is a community that wants to increase their debating skills or see alternative perspectives other than their own. In one of the debates that we participated in, the opponent in the debate openly wondered how anyone could see the debate in any other perspective but his own. Yet when the debate finished he sent a message giving thanks for a polite and open debate, saying that it opened his eyes in many ways. This type of interaction is the norm, rather than the outlier from what our study of the community has shown. It is not so simple to say that reputation does not exist at all on this site; it is just highly diminished in terms of how it is like on other, comparable websites. This actually brings to mind the question of why the Leader Board exists at all on the site, as it only seems to be of partial significance to the community as a whole. The community seems to exist in spite of such attempts to find the 'best' debater. Perhaps Debate.org has found a simple equilibrium for an antagonistic website to work. Ignore the wishes of the designers of the site and focus on the craft of debating. Reputation only will affect a community that makes it a central aspect of the community, and like open source proves, a community can survive without reputation and may even function better because of it.

The remaining question is whether or not this idea of reputation as unimportant makes the site more or less democratic overall. There are good arguments for either side of this question. In a democratic society it should follow that everyone should have the opportunity to share their

own opinion and have their voice heard equally. This makes sense on a visceral level, yet in practice this is not how democracy works or has worked. Inevitably, there are those who speak louder than others and with more confidence. This fact is linked to expertise, which was previously discussed. Democracy doesn't function well if there are thousands of clamoring voices. That is why officials get elected to office to make sure that the mob doesn't rule. All in all, when looking at the system of reputation on Debate.org, it is difficult to say that it is strongly democratic in nature.

An aspect of Debate.org that one could only discover through a careful monitoring of the community is the embedded values of the community. Some aspects of the community are very interesting, and unexpected, considering the strong Christian demographics of the site. The first and perhaps most obvious embedded value of the site is the simple belief that the best argument should win a debate, no matter what the topic is. There have been some absolutely bizarre debates on the side, ranging from rap battles to questions such as “in comparison to Captain Kirk, Captain Picard is a superior captain and leader”(Pathos and Kenesis, 2010) and “sexual abuse already perpetrated by ETs during abductions should be forgiven.”(Chandler and Korashk, 2010) Yet, as facetious as these debates appear to be on the surface, many if not most of them are debated with the utmost rigour and intent to win. In the “in comparison to Captain Kirk, Captain Picard is a superior captain and leader” debate, the two debaters argued over the true definitions of leadership and captaincy and agreed on key terms, just like if the debate was of academic importance. On very controversial issues, many are willing to vote on the side of controversy, given that they made the stronger arguments in a debate. In the debate entitled “Homeless People Deserve to be Where They Are,” the 'pro' side won by a rather significant margin – 12 to 3. (MeganLoaskia and InsertNameHere, 2010) The pro side did appear subjectively to have the

stronger argument, which makes sense, as the pro side emerged as victorious. This example illustrates the community's insistence to reward the best argued debate, rather than the more morally grounded side.

Debate.org plays host to numerous types of debates, from the philosophical to the outlandish. This paper has shown the array of topics that can come up on this site. These debates seem like the outlandish debates that occur on fan websites, yet on Debate.org they are treated like debates equal to those on foreign policy, morality and religion. In fact, the "in comparison to Captain Kirk, Captain Picard is a superior captain and leader" debate received 48 comments, (Pathos and Kenesis, 2010) which is an incredibly high number for any debate, let alone a debate on something of a different topic. The intense nature of fandom surely increases the interest in such debates, yet it should not be lost that this is a debating website that often debates the nature of God and the morality of religion – surely this debating community is more interested in debate on more traditional topics. Yet, the umbrella of Debate.org means that each debate is worthy of debate no matter how outlandish or controversial the topic may be. Any fair proposition with two sides is open to debate and will most likely be embraced by the community with few exceptions. This is almost unarguably one of the most democratic parts of Debate.org. The community has clearly made a decision to treat every viewpoint with respect and dignity. This is much in line with traditional democratic values, a community that embraces the possibility of debate within certain limits. For those that argue that Debate.org is a democratic community, this aspect of Debate.org is certainly among the most democratic.

A last embedded value of Debate.org is there is a clear emphasis on appropriate conduct, good spelling/grammar, and solid sourcing. Within the voting system, a user can vote on who

they agreed with before and after the debate and who used the more convincing arguments, constituting roughly half of the total vote. The other half is based on the questions “who had better conduct?”, “who had better spelling and grammar?” and “who used the most reliable sources?” It is therefore conceivable that one could do well in a debate through the Debate.org voting system by simply having good grammar/spelling, being polite and using reliable sources. Often, because people ostensibly want to win their debates, they use valid and reputable sources, and argue with solid grammar and spelling. This leads to easier-to-read debates with better sources. This seems like such a minor detail within Debate.org, but it allows the community to reward those who are debating with good conduct and using proper sources, setting the standard throughout the community. The last embedded value of Debate.org is really here nor there when it comes to democratic ideals. It's just a part of the community that has grown over time.

Debate.org is a fascinating community. It is a community based on debate and, theoretically, really should not work as well as it does. Yet, although the community itself works there are some significant flaws that lurk beneath the surface of the community. It seems like a very democratic community on the surface, being very much open to debate, yet when one digs below the surface the democratic nature of the site is not so obvious anymore. As Cass Sunstein points out, cocooning can most definitely occur in online communities and with a majority of the Debate.org community identifying their religion as Christian, the possibility exists for a cocoon to form. This paper may not be able to definitively prove that Debate.org houses this kind of cocoon, yet the idea of one existing on this site does not seem outlandish. The voting system seems, in theory, to be a paragon of democratic ideology – what better way to rate debates than having users vote on them? Yet the process is subtly flawed. With a disturbing lack of anonymity, friends of users may be subtly pressured to vote for their own friends in debates

rather than be seen as voting against them. The application of the Delphi method would significantly reduce the amount of peer pressure that can be brought to bear and, if implemented correctly, could improve the debates themselves and the community as a whole. The problem of a lack of expertise and credentials plagues the site. Simply put, if an 18 year old high school user entered a debate with a Nobel Prize winner, there would be no marker that the Nobel Prize winner is of a different prestige level than the 18 year old. One could see this as the most democratic of all possible outcomes, but it jeopardizes the idea of knowledge transfer and really leaves the community lacking any sort of expertise, short of perhaps the Leader Board. Also, if the site was a real democracy, its policies would be open for debate. Yet, although debates have occurred about the site, the site changes only when the administrators change the site, not due to any uproar from the community. That is not democratic by any definition of the word. Within the community, there is also a distinct lack of reputation, which is certainly by design. Even with the existence of the Leader Board, it doesn't seem to carry much credence within the community and hardly seems like a goal to strive for. In a democratic system, the wheat should be able to distinguish itself from the chaff, but on Debate.org there is no point in establishing a winning record of debates. While Debate.org on first glance appears to be something of a rarity on the Internet – a site that rejects many traditional aspects of a community, reputation, authority and credibility, the site has clear design flaws. Thus, while one could argue that Debate.org is a democracy in some ways, a deeper analysis reveals that it could no doubt be made more democratic than it currently is.

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