Webforum design and debate practices during the 2007 French presidential campaign

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Abstract
During the last French presidential election, online forums have become a major place of political debate. In order to evaluate the impact of the "institutional design" (Wright, 2006) on citizen deliberations, we wanted to work on three questions:
- What were the level of participation and interactivity of these debates?
- What types of online debates were practiced during this campaign?
- What was the impact of interface and institutional designs on debate features?

Our corpus is made of threads produced on five forums: desirsdavenir.org (Ségolène Royal), jeunespopulaires.com (Nicolas Sarkozy), UDF.org (François Bayrou), orange.fr (a portal site) and forum-politique.org (a specialized site). We first analysed the global participation and the level of interactivity of all the threads produced between November 2006 and April 2007. Then, we have selected a sample of "political debate" threads from each site in order to characterize the pragmatic features of the interactions. Activism organisation, site problem and leisure discussions have not been observed. We analysed the types of speech acts, the argumentative devices and the links between the messages of approximately 100 threads. Finally, we have used descriptive and multidimensional statistics in order to characterize and quantify the different types of debates observed (proposal debate, election forecast, dispute, candidates attacks, etc.). After Needham (2004) or Wright (2006), our results point out the influence of institutional instructions on debate forms. The availability of status cues also seems to have specific effects on debates as shown in the "computer-mediated groups" studies (Lemus & al., 2004).

Key words: forum, online deliberation, citizen, institutional design,

1. Introduction

After a period of intense theorization, empirical studies of actual political debates between citizens begin to test the ideal of a deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 1995; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Dahlgren, 2003). Studies of the democratisation of political practice show a rather weak and non-representative citizen participation to public debates whether they are face-to-face (Blondiaux, 2000; Delli Carpini & al., 2004) or online (Mulhberger, 2004; Wojcik, 2005; Oates & Gibson, 2006). The observation of debate practices in newsgroups (Vedel, 2002; Davis, 2005) and political party forums (Serfaty, 2002; Marcoccia, 2006) show a high proportion of short messages, numerous personal attacks and a high concentration of participation. Beyond these common points, observed variations suggest an influence of the « interface design » and more generally of the « institutional design » on online debate

practices (Wright, 2006). As an example, highly facilitated forums with self-selected (Weiksner, 2005; Beierle, 2004) or randomly selected participants (Price & al., 2002; Iyengar & al. 2003) have shown that respectful and argumentative debates can occur more frequently and have important impacts on political knowledge or opinion change.

In order to contribute to the empirical work on this question, we have studied a sample of political debates produced on the forums of UDF.org (François Bayrou's party web site), jeunespopulaires.com (youth organization's web site of Nicolas Sarkozy's party), desirsdavenir.org (Ségolène Royal's web site), forum-politique.org (the most active French web forum specialized on politics) and orange.fr (one of the major French portal web site). Before presenting the main results of this study, we will first describe the « architecture » of these forums and present our estimation of the debates participation and interactivity during the six month prior to the first round of the French presidential election (between November 2006 and April 2007).

2. Architectures of the forums

The five forums studied are moderated and asynchronous devices of message exchange. The forums of desirsdavenir.org (DA), jeunespopualires.fr (JP) and orange.fr are moderated *a priori* although the forums of udf.org (UDF) and forum-politique.org (FP) are moderated *a posteriori*. The architecture of DA forums contrasts with the others on different dimensions: forums general organization (number, durability, instructions), available information on participants and visual presentation of the threads.

2.1. General organisation of the forums

UDF, JP and FP forums use the same "classical" software (php BB), which offers a more or less restraint number of permanent forums. These forums are not introduced and defined by wide themes. FP has 17 "political" forums, while JP and UDF only offer 3 and 5 forums on "political debate". Orange uses a specific interface with several categories of forums (society, finance, informatics, sports, music, etc.). At least 26 forums are clearly dedicated to "political debate": 14 forums in the category "Society" and 12 in the categories "World", "Ecology", "Employment" and "Education". A different interface is used by DA web site (the freeware "Phorum") that offers more than 150 forums on precise themes, usually introduced by the candidate's questions or suggestions.

Table 1: UDF, JP, FP, Orange and DA forums general organization

UDF	Jeunes Populaires	Forum Politique	Orange	Désirs d'Avenir
Society Economy International Institutions Project forum Party life The web site	France International "Debates with party official" In federations Party life Chat section	Presidential election 10 French politics 6 International Affairs 7 Life of ideas 4 Technical 2 Activists	14 Society 6 World 5 Ecology 3 Employment 3 Education 14 Travels 11 Informatics 10 Sports, etc.	100 Presidential treaty forums 7 "Participative debates" 15 Other debates 12 Current events 33 Local forums Supporters forum

Some DA forums have been limited in time by Ségolène Royal "participative campaign", during which the candidate was explicitly asking for citizen's suggestions in order to enrich

or amend her program. DA debate forums are generally introduced by a text signed by the candidate. For instance, the introductive texts of the first "participative debate" present a diagnostic, some political goals and ask three or four questions that are opening a discussion thread. With these starting messages, the Internet users are asked to evaluate several suggestions of public policies and to produce new proposals. For example, one of the threads about education is introduced by *" is it necessary to consider school support an assignment to public education, as done in several northern European countries?"*. These solicitations exemplify the candidate general appeal to the citizen participation to her presidential program widely heard in traditional media.

2.2. Thread information, operation and presentation

DA and Orange forums distinguished from UDF, JP and FP forums by available information, possible operations and visual presentations of threads. In these three forums, a lot of general information is available from the front page: number of threads and messages of each forum, number of replies and "views" for each thread, user name and number of users on the web site and on each forum, etc. On thread pages, there is more or less detailed information about the authors of the messages (number of messages, seniority, location, websites, etc.). On the contrary, DA and Orange forums interface does not give any type of information about participants and very little information about forums and threads. However, the five forums offer a quite elaborated message browser (by theme and/or by author).

Table 2: Main interface features of forums

	UDF	Jeunes Populaires	Forum Politique	Orange	Désirs d'Avenir
Main Page information	Nbr of threads and messages per forum Nbr of members - Nbr and user name of online visitors			Nbr of threads and messages per forum	Nbr of messages per forum
Forum Page information	Title of threads - Nbr of replies User name of original and last author Date of last message				Title of threads and messages - Users rating of messages
	+ Nbr of views & Messages unanswered			-	
Thread Page information	Seniority - Nbr of messages - Location of authors			Only user name	
	-	+ Avatar			
Visual Presentation of threads	Posts pilled without linkage (Linear mode)				Threaded mode
Author profile information	Date of registration / Nbr of messages % of the total messages Nbr of messages per day Link "all messages of author"			No profile information	`
	-	+ Contacts	-		
Research possibilities	Research by key-word (in the title or in the message) Research by author				
	-	+ List of members		-	

The visual presentation of UDF, JP, FP and Orange uses the linear mode, although DA uses the strict threaded mode. With the linear mode, it is easier to have a quick look at the general description of the threads on a first page and then read the messages one after another without a click. As we can see in figure 1, the threaded mode of DA looks like the Usenet forums and is less common on French web. This display mode shows more clearly the address of a message but hinder the list of threads. Furthermore, it is not possible to see more than one message per page on the interface of DA although it is possible to see from twenty to thirty messages per page in the other display mode.

Subject	Evaluation
Nuclear isn't the solution by archimède the 10/02/07 15:13	★★★☆☆
Re: Nuclear isn't the solution by un francais en californie the 11/02/07 22:43	★☆☆☆☆
Re: Nuclear isn't the solution by Maurice CAILLAT the 12/02/07 09:25	☆☆☆☆☆

Figure 1: Threaded mode of DA interface

Through these different architectures, the Internet users debate since August of 2002 for FP, February of 2003 for UDF, April of 2004 for Orange, November of 2005 for JP, and February of 2006 for DA. In order to describe the use of these devices of online discussion during the presidential campaign, we first analysed several participation indicators.

3. Participation and interactivity of the forums

A lot of general information about participation is available on the four forums, but these data have different disadvantages: periods are not equivalent, nothing is said on the participation concentration and parties have electoral incentives to exaggerate these data. For these reasons, we analysed all the thread pages of the five websites in order to specify the intensity, interactivity and concentration of the discussion participation between October 15th of 2006 and April 15th of 2007. This analysis has been run on « political » forums. We have not studied the other technical, militant or « leisure » forums (approximately 18% of UDF messages and 45% of JP, 25% of FP, 40% of Orange and 30% of DA messages).

Table 3: Participation between November of 2006 and April of 2007.

	UDF	Jeunes Populaires	Forum Politique	Orange	Désirs d'avenir
Number of messages	25 614	33 168	98 755	112 000	48 000
Number of threads	1842	1413	3686	28 000	13 000
Average size of threads	14	23	27	4	4

As we can see in table 3, the participation to DA and Orange forums has been wide[1], but with far less interactivity. In table 4, the atypical lengths of DA thread appears clearly: many very short and a few very long threads coexist. Two threads started by the candidate exceed 1000 messages.

Table 4: Distribution of messages by size of thread (in %)

Size of threads	UDF	Jeunes Populaires	Forum Politique	Orange	Désirs d'avenir
1-10	17	8	8	**56**	**62**
11-20	**20**	15	8	16	14
21-50	**31**	**37**	24	20	5
51-100	15	**23**	**25**	6	3
101-200	8	11	**21**	1	2
>200	9	6	**14**	1	**14**
	100% (25 614)	100% (33 168)	100% (98 755)	100% (112 000)	100% (48 000)

Running out of time, we have not estimated the number of participants on similar periods. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that since the beginning of the forums, the number of registered users announced is almost the same for the forums of UDF (5535), FP (5039) and JP (3987). DA announced an approximate number of 50 000 posters and Orange does not display this type of information. Concerning the concentration of participation, the twenty most active users have posted more than 50% of messages on FP, more than 40% on JP, approximately 30% on UDF and only 7% on DA.

4. Pragmatic and argumentative features of debates

To describe the type of debates and quantify their frequency, we have run a second analysis that specifies the pragmatic and argumentative characteristics of a sample of 104 threads (975 messages).

4.1. Sampling procedure

This sample has been selected with a stratified random procedure in order to avoid the bias linked to the thread titles and our political interests. The 200 selected messages per website are as representative as possible of the total population by size of thread, periods and variety of forums. We have systematically selected:
- The first threads of less than 10 messages of the 1st day of each month,
- The first thread between 10 and 20 messages of the 10th day of each month,
- And the longest threads between the 20th and the end of each month.

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[1] These figures are an approximation for DA (because of the inaccurate representation of short threads on the interface) and are a sample-based estimation for Orange (because of the high number of threads). Morevoer, we have not studied the political discussions that sometimes occurr in forums which are not explcitely "political" (supporters, religion, chat, etc.).

We derogate from our rule three times for the UDF and JP forums in order to select at least one thread of more than 10 messages thematically comparable to the other forums. Considering the specific structure of DA threads, we have over-represented the messages included in long thread with the intention of analyzing at least one by popular thematic (economy, education, justice and ecology). For all forums, we have only analysed the twenty to twenty-five first messages of the long threads for obvious reasons of feasibility.

4.2. Analysis variables

Our analysis is based on several pragmatic and argumentative variables (Desquinabo, 2007) which come from the pragmatic tradition and especially from Charaudeau (1995) and Chabrol and Bromberg's (1999) classification: inform, compare, explain, exemplify, quote, evaluate, agree or disagree (the interlocutor speech), forecast, conduce, dissuade, compliment, blame, refute or admit (a fault), defend (someone), joke, make fun, approve or contest speech practices (theme, style, speech acts, etc.). We have detailed the type of content of some of these speech acts in order to account more precisely for the types of debates practiced. We have encoded specifically:

- Argumentation founded on consequences (Perelman, 2002) and argumentation founded on experience,
- Blame or compliment addressed to interlocutors, groups (teachers, strangers, etc.) or politicians
- Incentives to vote for and against a candidate,
- Proposal of general goal and proposal of specific policies.

We also differentiate the « given » speech acts (to inform) from the asked one (to ask for an information) and from the replies (to accept to give an information). Among the different linked between speech acts of a given interlocutor (Roulet & al., 2001), we have coded the argumentative and contra-argumentative links. These analysis categories are exemplified in the figure n° 3 extracted from a thread of DA.

Fewer cars, more trains! Message of jerome67 the 05/02/07 at 21:31	<MESSAGE=104> <Identity=?>
Hello,	Civility
Today, if you are two or three in a car, it's cheaper than train.	Justification of the Policy Proposal by a Comparison
It would be useful to program a wide policy to reduce the price of train, tramway and underground ticket in order to conduce the road users to join the rail (…)	**Policy Proposal** Justification of the Policy Proposal by its Consequences

Figure 2. Example of a message analysis

4.3. Types of debates

Thereby, we analysed 975 messages coming from 104 threads produced between November 2006 and April 2007. We will present the main results of different statistic analysis produced with the software Lexico 3 of the Syled-Cla2t (Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3). We first compared the pragmatic and argumentative practices of the debate threads (more

than 3 messages). In order to explore the relationships between our variables, we first used a factor analysis of our sample of threads. The two main factors found differentiate three sets of threads. The analysis of the statistical specificities of these sets describes three types of speech activities more or less practiced according to the web sites: value debate, dispute, election forecast and candidate support.

The most frequent type of speech activity can be called "value debate" (34% of the threads). This kind of thread is mostly coming from DA, UDF and Orange. This type of debate is characterized by argued and controversial proposals of general values or public policies. The argumentations are mostly founded on information:

> " *The progress of teaching in France during the last century is demonstrated by a study on the different adults skills according to their age* " (UDF, Society forum)

The argumentations are also based on plausible consequences:

> "*For the merchandise traffic, more piggyback will allow to reduce our energetic bill and our carbon emission*" (DA, Environment forum)

The posted messages are relatively long (between 500 and 800 signs for most of them). Personal attacks between authors are rare, but attacks against groups (elected, trade unionist, teachers, etc.) are quite frequent.

The second type of speech activity observed is the "dispute" (29% of the threads). This kind of threads is mainly produced on the JP and the UDF forums. Attacks against political adversaries are generally responded by supports of the attacked personalities in short messages (between 50 and 200 signs). These debates often result in personal disputes between the discussants, sometimes with teases, sometimes with insults. A typical message of "dispute" is the following:

> "*On this topic, I understand (Royal): to live with the "people" Paris north-east is horrible. Besides, that's what Sarkozy is doing with Neuilly! So please, stop put this kind of things in light if you don't want the Left using it. You make me think about Pecress doing this; lousy counterproductive!!*" (JP, France forum).

The third type of speech activity can be called "political chat" (26% of threads). This activity is mainly represented in our sample of FP and Orange threads. In this type of debate, a few Internet users exchange forecasts, general attitudes about candidates and jokes. Quotation is widely used in very short messages of 50 to 100 signs. For instance, in a thread of the Presidential election forum of FP, "Pedrovikash" quote and disagree "Atlantiste" with his forecast and make fun of him at the same time:

> Atlantiste had written:
> "*Sarkozy is the next president of the republic. It's written*"
> Pedrovikash:
> "*The most important thing is to believe it*"

An analysis centred on the five forums confirms the results of the thread analysis. The UDF and Orange messages have many similar features: the frequency of candidate attacks, election forecasts, conceding and argumentations based on quotations. The messages posted on FP are the shortest and generally have a double quotation, a candidate attack, a joke and a signature about general principles. The messages on JP are generally short and are characterized by general evaluations, interlocutor quotations, disagreement and attacks of candidates, groups or forum users. Finally, the DA messages are the longest and have a high proportion of policy proposals which use an argumentation based on plausible consequences.

5. Conclusion

Globally, the forums analysed have had very active debates during the last presidential campaign. But in accordance with the classical observation on the "digital divide" (Muhlberger, 2004), much of the messages have been posted by a small number of participants. Nevertheless, our results confirm that the exchanges on the Internet are full of conflicts, but these clashes are not bounded to polemical exchanges and therefore suggest a potential impact of the Internet on a possible "deliberative disagreement" (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), generally avoided in assemblies at which citizens are present (Elisasoph, 1998). If our study did not compare online debates with debates where people are physically present, it seems likely that the characteristics of the device (no physical presence, limited identity cues, written, asynchronous, with hyperlinks, etc) could encourage a more controversial participation and a more sustained and elaborated argumentation than in face-to-face situations (Witschge, 2004). The device impacts have been showed by many researches in the « computer-mediated groups » field (Lemus & al., 2004) which attribute most differences between "face-to-face" and "online" argumentativeness to the degree of availability of status indications. Our results confirm this hypothesis. As a matter of fact, the forums giving more information on participants' social status and participants' seniority on website and pushing more to "private" communication (FP and JP) are the one whose participation are the most concentrated and whose exchanges are the less argued. But this factor is not systematically related to the quality of debates, as shown by the analysis of Orange forums. The deliberative features of DA threads are also probably linked with the specific institutional frame of this forum: DA was supposed to be a "participative forum" and Ségolène Royal explicitly solicited argued policy proposals. Moreover, this appeal to citizen participation to her presidential program has been widely heard in traditional media. This "likelihood of political influence" factor (Blondiaux & Sintomer, 2002; Hartz-Karp, 2005) has certainly been central to motivate participation and frame the debates.

Therefore, it seems likely that, even if the Internet does not encourage per se controversial and sustained debates, some institutional systems and technical devices can encourage them. Thus, after George (2002), Bekkers (2004), Needham (2004) or Wright (2006), our study suggests that the institutional frame of online discussions strongly influences their characteristics. We should now specify this link: what kinds of influences have interface information? Threads presentation? Moderators' role? Likelihood of political influence? These hypotheses will have to be tested on other web forums in different political contexts in order to deepen our knowledge of the constraints, practices and potentials of online debate.

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