

IDEOLOGICAL AND LANGUAGE POLARIZATION IN ONLINE POLITICAL DISCOURSE The White House Facebook page

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Abstract – This paper explores contemporary political discourse in computer-mediated communication by analysing the language used in the public discussions on the White House Facebook page during the 2014 State of the Union address, delivered by President Barack Obama. After addressing the notion of the “public sphere” in the context of social networks and political communication, the paper looks at the nature of the language of the discussion in a large corpus of users’ comments. The analysis of the corpus has revealed that the quality of political discourse in US politics has not improved despite the affordances of computer-mediated communication. The deep ideological polarization of Democrats and Republicans, broadly coincident with Pro-Obama and Anti-Obama users, dominates the online discussion: most comments lack relevance, in that they violate Grice’s conversational maxim of Relation, and many of them include abusive language. The corpus is then analyzed by using LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), a text analysis software program which measures words according to their linguistic or semantic category. The results of the analysis in semantic terms (according to seven categories of words associated with “Personal Concerns”) are a further indication that Pro-Obama and Anti-Obama users employ distinctive communication languages which impede dialogue on important issues. This is evidence of an “argument culture”, in which failure in communication seems to be the most distinctive feature.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication; relevance; Facebook; ideology.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that computer-mediated Communication (CMC), and in particular Facebook, one of the most important Social Network Sites (SNSs), has become an important instrument of political propaganda and debate. SNSs have caused a major shift in communication, and it has been argued that they have actually undermined and to some extent even replaced traditional forms of sociality. The role played by SNSs in the elaboration of political discourse has been attracting the attention of discourse analysts. The dramatic shift from traditional mass media (e.g. TV, newspapers, radio) to Web 2.0, which is characterized by interactivity and user-generated content, has deeply influenced the nature of political communication and language. The technology of CMC provides new opportunities of communication between politicians and their electorate, and within the electorate itself. Indeed, while in the past political communication was mainly either one-way (politician-to-electorate) with little or no possibility of a productive dialogue between the two, or within a relatively small group of people (e.g. membership of a party), with the rise of CMC very large numbers of people can access and take part in political commentary, and even, at least potentially, hold a dialogue with their representatives or candidates at a national or local level through personal websites, blogs, Twitter accounts or Facebook pages.

In the face of the pervasive presence of social networks and of the apparent “empowerment”, to use Deborah Cameron’s (2000, p. 179) word, which people claim to

have achieved through better, faster communication, the issue of the effectiveness of SNSs as a liberating means for individuals in the public sphere raises a number of questions. Are the relationships within the very numerous and active online communities which use SNSs for political information and debate more productive than in the past? Has the potential of CMC, and particularly of Facebook, in opening up new avenues of communication within a community, and between a community and its representatives, been fulfilled at all? Since better communication and accessibility should also, in theory, mean ideas being debated openly by more people, and being proposed to their representatives, has the quality of political discourse improved in the age of Web 2.0?

In this paper I will address these questions by discussing some of the features of American political discourse on Facebook. I will analyze a large sample of the users' comments left on the White House Facebook page during the 2014 State of the Union address, delivered by President Barack Obama. The assessment of these comments reveals some of the main features of the political discourse within society – or at least the large segment which uses the Internet on a regular basis to express and, sometimes, debate, political opinions. Indeed, my analysis shows that most users' comments are hardly relevant to the topics “proposed” by Obama in the five statuses published by his staff on Facebook during his speech, and many merely consist of insults to the President, his family and his party. I would argue that the poor relevance of these comments is evidence of the ideological polarization of large sectors of the American electorate. This is particularly true for Obama's detractors, whose comments often consist of “hate speech” and curses of various kinds. There is, of course, a relationship between the poor relevance of most comments and the fact that they come mainly from Obama haters: it is one of the latest examples of the “language war” which has been a typical feature of the American political discourse for a few decades. The body of comments on the White House Facebook page reveals a lack of communication between people of different ideological inclination – an inglorious outcome in this supposedly participative, cooperative and open age of communication, but perhaps not a surprising one, given the increasingly deep divide within American politics.

2. Politics and the Internet

Both in his successful electoral bids in 2008 and 2012 and during his presidency, President Obama has always given priority to the Internet, and his administration has constantly strived to appear to be communicating with the people. The White House webpage shows exactly that: one particular section is called “Engage and connect” and, in its “Social hub” sub-section, web visitors are asked to “talk” to Obama through the various SNSs managed by the White House, such as pages on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Flickr, Google+, LinkedIn and Scribd (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/engage>, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/engage/social-hub>).

The White House's strong presence on the Internet, and its seemingly inclusive engagement with those who “like” or “tweets” it, are typical of modern political communication. Nowadays, SNSs are used by politicians and institutions to keep in touch with the people and, in turn, are seen as democratic instruments used by the people to communicate with their representatives and with each other. This new communication environment has, in the last twenty years, largely replaced the traditional “top-down” political communication. Indeed, Dick Morris (1999), former US President Bill Clinton's campaign advisor, in as early as 1999 predicted a series of major transformations in the way politics would be done, whereby the rise of the Internet would parallel (and actually

be a cause of) the decline of big money politics and the influence of traditional media. This was evident for the first time in 2008, the so-called “Facebook election”, when Obama’s successful presidential bid was considered evidence of the strong grassroots support that he was able to mobilize mainly through social media. Indeed, because of their interactive nature, SNSs are seen as opening up new avenues in politics, in which greater participation and transparency in public affairs might pave the way for a revitalization of democracy itself. The Internet is seen by its most optimistic supporters as producing a major power shift, in which now the many have the power to control the few, that is, the political oligarchies, and can effect change by using their computer keyboard, fulfilling a vital role in that system of “checks and balances” which make up a healthy democracy. Facebook itself is thought to drive openness in public affairs and, as Zuckerberg idealistically stated, “a more transparent world creates a better-governed world and a fairer world” (Zuckerberg in Kirkpatrick 2010, pp. 287-288) – although, it should be added, “better-governed” and “fairer” would not necessarily mean “more democratic”.

By using SNSs, politicians can plug into our lives and approach us directly: most of them have Facebook pages or Twitter accounts, communicate with us in often familiar language, and are keen to be seen doing domestic, everyday activities. However, such connectivity is often only apparent, as most politicians are only accessible on Facebook as “view only”: you cannot “friend” President Obama or British Prime Minister David Cameron, you cannot exchange private messages with them, you can only “like” their pages. Indeed, the use of SNSs by politicians or famous people “is still a largely one-way street, a metasemiotic resource for *appearing* to talk (with the people)” (Thurlow 2013, p. 236; emphasis added). The appearance of interacting with the people is more important than actual interaction, which is virtually non-existent (when a politician holds a “conversation” with net users, it is usually in well-organized and carefully managed Q&A sessions). While the technology gives us the impression (and the *possibility*) of a two-way communication, the reality is that most politicians are not interested in opening a true dialogue and in listening to ideas from their constituents, but only in mobilizing them around some new initiative or message. In politicians’ Facebook pages there is a double series of one way, unidirectional interactions: a politician talks to users by leaving a message on the Facebook wall, and users are invited to “leave a comment”, but their replies to the politician’s status are rarely answered by the politician himself or herself, and, therefore, there is no actual two-way dialogue. Some interaction may take place within the community of users, who often discuss the issue introduced by the comments of the page owner.

Given the technological possibilities that are available for discussing issues freely and quickly, one wonders if SNSs may become a virtual agora in which a new public sphere can take shape. In particular, social media, with their accessibility and speed, almost naturally invite participation, reciprocity and interaction, as issues can be debated online from one’s own computer at home, without even meeting face to face. According to Habermas (1974), the public sphere is “a realm of our social life, in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Habermas 1974, p. 49). A public sphere is formed by private individuals who care about public affairs, have different opinions and debate about them. The prerequisite for any functional public sphere is that all citizens must be given equal access to it, and they must have freedom to express their opinions publicly and without restraint on matters of public interest. On the surface, the availability of CMC technology seems to create the ideal conditions for the formation of a public sphere as it provides virtually everyone with the possibility to participate in the democratic process. According to this technologically deterministic view, the Internet could become a

virtual agora for deliberative democracy, that is, a place where informed discussion between individuals can lead to consensus and policy-making on certain specific issues of interest to users. However, what happens in actual political discussion on the Internet often reveals an altogether different picture from the ideal public sphere. Looking at political discussions on any specialized or non-specialized site (e.g. readers' commentaries on online newspapers, "walls" of politicians' Facebook pages, comments on YouTube videos of political footage), it clearly emerges that rational, productive discussion is quite rare, as partisan statements, insults, and "flaming" seem to be the norm. Thus, full accessibility to the technology of SNSs does not automatically determine the creation of a democratic process.

The features of social media are so diversified that it is impossible to draw general conclusions on the nature of political discussion on the Internet. While the availability of technology is not in itself the cause of political discussion, it should be said that technology may facilitate (or impede) discussion and deliberation. Indeed, the quality of online political discussion depends on a series of factors: the presence (or absence) of moderators, who might guide the discussion within certain standards of language and topic relevancy; the availability (or lack thereof) of politicians, who interact with users; and finally, the design of the place where the discussion takes place, as different platforms allow users to be involved in different ways (Stromer-Galley and Wichowski 2011). The quality of discussion largely depends on how the technology is designed. In a medium in which reciprocity is not encouraged, discussion will almost certainly be of a low quality, often consisting in "flaming" or "trolling". On the contrary, if the medium, by its own visual and "threading" features, encourages lengthy comments or discussion and facilitates deliberation, then the possibility of productive political discussions is very high (Wright and Street 2007). Some political blogs are explicitly designed for thorough, informed discussion and many consist of discussion forums with threaded discussion in which interaction is encouraged and single themes are discussed by users. On the contrary, other online forums may not be constructed in such a way, and discussion often consists in talking without listening, with users confirming their own ideas in often aggressive or insulting messages.

Political discussion of a high quality rarely takes place on Facebook walls, if the categories outlined by Stromer-Galley and Wichowski are to be taken into account. A moderator who directs the discussion according to constructive criteria is sometimes present, and he/she is usually the page owner, who may respond to the users' comments either by counter-commenting or, when comments are deemed inappropriate, deleting them and banning their authors. In the case of the White House Facebook page, this apparently does not happen, as many insulting and often violent comments do not seem to be removed by the page administrator. Insult itself is a category of speech protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and the removal of curses from the White House page by the page administrator would certainly be seen as a breach of a constitutional right and an attempt to stifle free speech.

The features of Facebook do not necessarily encourage users to interact productively and to discuss issues intelligently. "Comments" written on the "wall" in response to the politician's status are often just that, comments, and do not always consist in, nor are followed by, rational discussion between users who support shared or diverging views. Indeed, the opposite often happens: users may express admiration and support, or opposition and sometimes even hatred, for the page owner, but politically constructive debate does not seem to take place very often. In the design of the Facebook wall, sometimes it is possible to "reply" to a user's comment, opening up a sub-thread in which

more users can discuss the particular issue raised by the user. However, in the White House Facebook page in 2014, single comments could not be commented upon by users opening a new thread under a user's comment, and it was only possible to respond by writing a new comment. This new comment in response to a previous one would often appear on the wall many comments and several minutes after the initial comment, might not have been read by the first comment's author, and further discussion on the topic may have been impeded. On the White House Facebook page, the effect of this is a series of comments in which a coherent principle is not always discernible. Some users reply to Obama's initial comment; other users counter-comment on some other user's comment, while still others just prefer to insult the President with little or no relevance to the topic introduced by him. The resulting text, made up of the President's status and the users' comments, is a very disjointed linguistic unit, in which it is very difficult to discern cohesion and coherence.

3. Issues of relevance and coherence

While SNSs have become attractive instruments of sociality, not all communication is smooth and fluent, as cooperation between "speakers" and coherence in discourse are not always respected. The breakdown of coherency and linearity of discourse, a frequent feature of the "conversations" taking place on Facebook walls, occurs very often on the White House Facebook page, and may be viewed within pragmatic function, following Grice's cooperative principle and Relevance maxim.

According to Grice (1975), verbal communication between people can be effective only if they cooperate with each other in their speech acts. Participants in a conversation implicitly accept the existence of a purpose in their exchanges, and to that purpose they direct their verbal interactions. Talk exchanges are to a great extent cooperative efforts: they do not consist in a series of disconnected remarks, and there are at least some principles linking these remarks. Therefore, speakers produce meaningful interactions when they obey what Grice terms the cooperative principle. This principle takes place only if verbal exchanges respect the so-called maxims: Quantity (the speakers' contribution should be as informative as is required, and never more than that), Quality (what is said has to be true, and false information should not be given), Relation (the information given should be relevant to the topic of the conversation), and Manner (speakers should avoid obscure or ambiguous expressions, and should be brief and orderly). The adherence to these four maxims is expected from speakers when they engage in conversation, but if these rules are not followed and are "flouted", then the conversation may not make sense. Of Grice's four maxims, according to Sperber and Wilson (1986), the most important is Relation, defined as the Relevance that conversational exchanges have with each other and with the general topic of the conversation. Relevance is the "newly presented information being processed in the context of information that has itself been previously processed" (Sperber and Wilson 1986, pp. 118-119). Accordingly, speakers or participants in the conversation, in order to be understood throughout their exchanges, keep their utterances relevant to the original topic of the conversation.

Grice's cooperative principle and Relevance maxim are beginning to be applied to CMC. Synchronous CMC, including Facebook Messenger, can be analyzed in terms of conversation features. Herring has applied Grice's theories on CMC by addressing the specific modality in which messages are exchanged. In particular, she analyzed synchronous CMC, such as chats, where messages are exchanged quickly and almost in

real time. For this reason, chats resemble real conversation very closely and should be treated as such when issues of relevance and coherence in discourse are discussed. However, general principles regarding relevance in conversation exchanges over CMC will somehow differ from those governing spoken face-to-face conversation because of the different modality involved. The variety of conversation platforms in CMC also ensures that a single, one-size-fits-all model applicable to all kinds of “conversations” taking place in both synchronous and asynchronous CMC cannot be produced.

According to Herring (2013), issues of relevance are related to those of coherence in discourse. Conversational relevance is itself a form of coherence across turns of talk. Herring argues that online communication is often disjointed and interactional coherence undermined because of the technical properties of CMC. In both one-way and two-way dialogues over synchronous CMC, there are two sets of problems which affect linear and coherent communication: first, feedback cannot be simultaneous because messages do not overlap and users have a limited set of audiovisual cues (unlike face to face communication); second, “turn adjacency” is disrupted because messages are posted by the system in the order in which they are received by it, with no regard to who sends them, nor to their content (Herring 1999). Yet, these factors, which would supposedly hinder communication, are considered habitual by users, who do not “get lost” and can easily follow the twists and turns of the conversation. Furthermore, incoherence and disruption in relevance are ritually used when playful situations are created within communication over CMC, sometimes with the result of the intended or original topic of conversation repeatedly changing, without causing a disruption in communication (Herring 1999 & 2013). Optimal relevance is rarely achieved, its rules are relaxed because of the constraints of the medium itself, to the point that loosened relevance is the norm in recreational synchronous CMC (Herring 2013). Sustained cross-turn coherence is therefore very difficult to achieve in synchronous CMC, but this may be due not only to the technical features of CMC, as CMC users who produce messages without a thematically sequential order may not even be aiming at optimal relevance or at being relevant at all. Their main target may be phatic social exchange, without worrying about consistency and linearity in either the structure of their dialogues or topic development.

Herring’s reflections on conversations within CMC may be applied to the analysis of Facebook walls, albeit with some provisos. The comments on Facebook walls, an asynchronous kind of CMC, are also a form of conversation. Grice’s idea of “The initial proposal of a question for discussion” as the direction or purpose of a conversation to which speakers/listeners adhere (or disobey) can be identified in the status published by the Facebook page administrator, an “initial proposal” which is answered by many speakers who “leave comments” and are also potential readers and commentators of other comments. These talk exchanges can be seen as collective efforts toward some form of conversation, as all participants *should* agree with the dialogical proposition of the page administrator. A Facebook wall may, therefore, potentially at least, become a sort of multi-party chat, where users may exchange opinions. However, this does not always happen. On a Facebook wall the conversation often goes one way: users comment on the status published by the page administrator who, most of the time, remains silent. Furthermore, just as in “real” verbal exchanges, the conversation may be undermined by the disruptive verbal behavior of many individuals: many of the many-to-one “conversations” on a Facebook wall can hardly be classified as relevant, coherent or constructive, as they consist mainly in insults.

4. Analysis of the users' comments on Obama's statuses

The White House Facebook page is an excellent place to observe the breakdown in coherence and cohesion in political discourse in CMC. Evidence in this sense comes from the activity taking place on the White House Facebook wall during Obama's 2014 State of the Union speech, delivered on January 28, 2014. The State of the Union is one of the most important rituals of Washington politics: it is a summary of what the President has done up to that moment and an outline of what he or she intends to do in the year ahead. The users' interaction and their comments to Obama's statements may be an opportunity to see the nature of current political discourse in the USA.

During his speech, Obama published five Facebook statuses, each consisting of a verbal text and a photo. They were as follows, in order of publication:

- A. President Obama's State of the Union is about to begin. Don't miss it → [#SOTU](http://wh.gov/sotu)
- B. "It is you, our citizens, who make the state of our union strong." —President Obama in his State of the Union address: [#SOTU](http://wh.gov/sotu)
- C. "Here in America, our success should depend not on accident of birth, but the strength of our work ethic and the scope of our dreams. That's what drew our forebears here. It's how the daughter of a factory worker is CEO of America's largest automaker; how the son of a barkeeper is Speaker of the House; how the son of a single mom can be President of the greatest nation on Earth. Opportunity is who we are. And the defining project of our generation must be to restore that promise." — President Obama in his State of the Union: [#SOTU](http://wh.gov/sotu)
- D. "Climate change is a fact. And when our children's children look us in the eye and ask if we did all we could to leave them a safer, more stable world, with new sources of energy, I want us to be able to say yes, we did." —President Obama: [#ActOnClimate #SOTU](http://wh.gov/sotu)
- E. "The America we want for our kids—a rising America where honest work is plentiful and communities are strong, where prosperity is widely shared and opportunity for all lets us go as far as our dreams and toil will take us—none of it is easy. But if we work together, if we summon what is best in us, with our feet planted firmly in today but our eyes cast towards tomorrow—I know it's within our reach. Believe it." —President Obama in his State of the Union: [#SOTU](http://wh.gov/sotu)

The first status is non-descriptive and functions as an alert to viewers to the imminent beginning of the President's speech. The second status highlights the importance of the occasion by paraphrasing the speech title itself, while the third and the fifth statuses focus on traditional core values of the American Dream (opportunity for everyone and success for those who deserve it). The fourth status addresses a very specific and highly contentious political issue, namely climate change.

The five statuses prompted a high number of comments,¹ which were never answered by the status' "author" (i.e. the White House staff). Therefore, we mainly find a "many-to-one" style of communication, with users replying to the text and/or the photo, but the "person" who prompts the conversation never takes part in it. There is a very small number of users who also communicate with other users, and some kind of asynchronous conversation occasionally takes place. All in all, we can categorize the comments in the corpus under analysis, found on the White House Facebook page, as follows:

¹ As of December 1, 2015, there were 661 users' comments on status A, 383 on status B, 1281 on status C, 1408 on status D and 1304 on status E.

1. Comments on the *written text* published by the White House;
2. Comments on the *photo* published by the White House;
3. Comments on both the written text and the photo;
4. Comments that are not relevant to either the written text or the photo, but which may or may not be relevant in political or personal terms, as they may be about Obama;
5. Comments in reply to some other user's comment, which may belong to any of the above four categories and which may or may not generate further comments.
6. Comments that are completely irrelevant to either photo, text or other users' comments.

Looking at the first 200 comments for each status (1000 comments in total, in Table 1), the imbalance between the number of the anti-Obama comments and that of the pro-Obama ones is impressive, although the figures are less a measure of Obama's popularity than a result of the higher internet activity by those who dislike the President.

	Anti-Obama	Pro-Obama	Neutral or cannot be ascertained
A.	129 (64.5%)	55 (27.5%)	16 (8%)
B.	115 (57.5%)	44 (22%)	41 (20.5%)
C.	85 (42.5%)	83 (41.5%)	32 (16%)
D.	117 (58.5%)	47 (23.5%)	36 (18%)
E.	87 (43.5%)	95 (47.5%)	18 (9%)
Total	533 (53.3%)	324 (32.4%)	143 (14.3%)

Table 1
Figures and percentages of the comments of the corpus.

Many comments on Obama's statuses, both friendly and hostile, consist mainly of brief messages of generic congratulations or insults. Only a few users reply to Obama's statements with comments relevant to the President's status or the photo, and only a tiny minority holds a dialogue with other users. The majority of the people who leave comments are not interested at all in discussing the topic of the post in constructive terms. This raises serious questions on the dialogic features of a Facebook wall. Seen in terms of Grice's cooperative principle, this communication is rarely effective, topic decay occurs for most users, and the meaning originally intended for comments is obscured. Communication between users, and between users and Obama, is expressed in a linguistic code which is largely inconclusive, irrelevant and "flouted".

Obama's announcement that he is ready to deliver the State of the Union ("President Obama's State of the Union is about to begin. Don't miss it") attracts all kinds of answers. Many users reply with sarcasm that they are watching something else on TV. Thus, on the surface relevance is kept, but no serious political argument is addressed, as

people prefer to use sarcasm rather than engage with the possible issues at stake in Obama's imminent speech:²

- A7. ND: Na....Big Bang Theory is on TBS
 A9. PT: Sorry watching Bad grandpa.
 A96. CH: I am watching "the biggest loser", not watching his version.

Obama's announcement prompts other negative and sarcastic responses on the fact that the event itself is televised:

- A54.RB: Saw it last year. I don't watch repeats.
 A36.ZJJS: I'm busy watching paint dry

Many users justify their refusal to watch the SOTU on the basis of their utter hostility to Obama, insulting the President:

- A45. DH: Ready for the lying machine (Obama) to start spewing his BS.
 A50.BT: who want to listen to that lying rat?
 A71.MO: not watching the lying son of a whore...

Conversely, favorable comments seem to respond to Obama's announcement more directly, as users wish him well for the imminent speech:

- A2. LB: I won't miss it!!! I love you Mr. President!!
 A4. LBa Good luck. Please unite this fragmented country
 A34. JS Praying for you President Obama
 A35. TWC Give them hell, Mr. President!
 A40. JW Goodluck Mr President!

Ironies on the State of the Union speech itself also appear:

- A94. RDM: Pathetic state the Union is in... Never been worse...But then we never had a total FRAUD as POTUS..

Some users refuse to engage in discussions of any kind, using insults and swearwords and making reference to low physical or moral qualities:

- A27.MS: puke
 A97. JB: My ass was itching but It's nice and clean and dry now ☺
 A42.PL: PIECE OF CRAP LIAR!!!!
 A111. DV: All lies.

while others prefer to address one of the hottest issues of the day:

- A110. AJR: BENGHAZI
 A136. CR: Benghazi

These one-word comments refer to the terrorist attack on the US Diplomatic Mission in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, in which four Americans were killed. It was an

² Users' names have been replaced by initials to protect privacy. Comments have been classified according to the five statuses and numbered in chronological order of publication.

event for which Obama received some of the harshest attacks of his presidency. While one can see the broad mental association motivating the users' assertion (Obama is the President of the USA, so he is in charge of foreign policy and is, therefore, responsible for the events of Benghazi), the users do little or nothing to contribute to effective communication within the community debating Obama's SOTU other than fielding a point in a single word which, in terms of its experiential meaning in the context of the "comments", is irrelevant.

Interaction between users consists of two kinds. There are some replies to individual users' comments:

A85. DG: We know what state it's in... A MESS. THANKS OBAMA!

A97. DA: And, DG, do you remember the Bush years? Think before you post.

while other users address the authors of negative comments as a whole:

A90. DA: The hate and ignorance in these comments is dangerous and offensive. Resorting to juvenile name calling and even threats will not solve this country's problems. Be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

A118. KS: Watching and haters shut-up because you are rude and crude.

A140. AK: Calling names is easy and discredits you. You seem like children having a tantrum.

A154. LGLD: I see the TROLLs are working overtime tonight

A157 NP: There are people here that have no respect for traditions, no respect for the office of the Presidency, and really a disgraceful lack of respect for the very concept of America. Put it to you this way: I'm retired military and a vet. I served under Reagan & Bush The Lesser, two of the worst Presidents in American history. Yet I NEVER did any name-calling, to say nothing of both subtle and obvious racial innuendos and even LESS so actual threats the the lives of either man; that would be utterly unthinkable. You people are less than the bacteria that grow in toilets that have not been cleaned in months. You utterly disgust not only me but in fact all the reasonable people in this nation. Please leave.

However, this dialogue of sorts is quite rare. The digressive or irrelevant nature of most comments nullifies communication and any chance for informed political debate.

Further evidence of the poor relevance and low quality of the debate taking place on Facebook walls can be seen in the comments left on a more specific issue raised by Obama in his State of the Union, namely climate change. The highly controversial nature of the issue lends itself to analysis in terms of relevance and coherency in discourse. Obama's written status is published together with a photo, showing the President and his two young daughters in a very informal setting, smiling and sitting on a couch (Image 1).



Image 1

President Barack Obama and his daughters, published in White House Facebook page during the 2014 State of the Union

The potentially dramatic issue of climate change is accompanied by the image of a happy family, and the relationship between the two is that Obama implicitly addresses the issue of climate change by inviting people to look at the future benefits that their children, just like, presumably, his own, will gain from dealing with the issue now. The photo provided Obama haters with the perfect opportunity to attack the President and his family, with no regard whatsoever of the issue at stake:

- E21. DM: The 3 scumbags
- E24. BL: Oh, my gosh. Stop with the sappy pictures already.
- E32. JKR: Terrorist with his terrorist kids!!!
- E113. KR: ur hand on ur daughters ass is just plain creepy!!

The photo induces some Obama supporters to express feelings of admiration towards him and his children, again completely disregarding climate change:

- E9. DB: good family & good family values!!!
- E29. EASHV: Nice pic
- E39. BB: OMG!! The girls are growing up so fast!!
- E75. HPC: Great family God blessing !
- E96. YLC: President: Your daughters are so cute and pretty.

Other users respond to Obama's words and answer his arguments by deriding his concern about climate change:

- E31. AM: Of course it is a fact! We have four seasons and it is called 'weather.'
 E49. DA: Did he really insinuate that coastal flooding and droughts, are caused by carbon monoxide?
 E102. MW: Of course the climate changes... it's been changing for millions of years now.
 E110. FC: Climate change is a fact in the sense that the earth goes through a cycle on its own . Other than that saying it is man made is not a fact at all.
 E127. DM: Climate change? It's called winter, spring, summer and fall!

Although many of these negative comments are again quite sarcastic, they are somehow coherent with the issue raised by the President in his speech and, in various degrees, whether they agree with his words or not, fulfill the Relevance maxim.

Again, as in the case of the comments on the first status published by the White House, there is some limited interaction between users:

- E113. KR: ur hand on ur daughters ass is just plain creepy!!
 E156. LAP: KR, your interpretation of his intent in this picture I find much creepier.
 E117. JH: Global warming is a joke its -36 with over 6ft snow drifts. Its almost as big a joke as Obama's speech.
 E139. AH: JH, don't insult climate scientists like that...i know rocks with more intelligent thought than an obama speech and the climatologists aren't that bad.
 E95. BLB: Obama I still stand beside you and your a strong man as well to put up with a unknowledged nation
 E126. JRS: BLB... Unknowledged isn't a word and you have other spelling errors? Casting a stone?
 E150. DC: BLB you must be on dope to stand beside Obama he's one of the reasons our congress is so divided. He's not willing to compromise instead he shoves laws down our throats no matter how much we say we don't want it.

Climate change is discussed by some users by raising two very contentious issues related to it, that is, fracking and the Keystone pipeline:

- E12. CSL: Fracking is hurting the land and air and water we need. Stop the destruction.
 E22. AG: Agreed. So let's end fracking.
 E34. BHD: No Keystone XL! There is no compromise Mr President! There is no safe way concerning fracking and Natural Gas!
 E140. JBM: Yes to the keystone! You yuppy bastards complain and you still live off the blood of the working man. .. and your sorry asses are still driving to and fro and powering your big shitty houses with natural resources!

The tone of the above remarks is very militant. The mention of the projected Keystone pipeline denotes a certain degree of knowledge of issues related to climate change which is quite rare in the context of the comments published on the White House "wall".

Informed comments, however, are the exception, as most users resort to offending language. There are many offending wordplays on the President's name, such as "Oliar" and "Ovomit". To many of his enemies, Obama is just a liar. In the first status only, "liar", "lies" and the various inflections from the verb "to lie", including "lying", appear in 43 comments, one third of the total anti-Obama comments; in 22 out of the 115 responses to the second status; 8 out of 85 to the third; 11 out of 117 to the fourth, in 19 out of 87 to the fifth. A question naturally arises: how can a constructive dialogue on politics be constructed if the main interlocutor is considered a liar by so many people?

5. Different languages, different ideologies

The tone and content of the majority of comments of the sample of texts analyzed in this paper denotes an alarming lack of interest in constructive dialogue among the public engaged in online politics. There is alarming evidence of the poor quality of online political debate in the USA, as the reiteration of insults to the President, his family, the Democratic Party, and liberals in general easily prove. The lapse in coherence and cohesion in the texts analyzed can be seen in the fact that very few political points are being seriously debated and there is little or no discussion on the issue defined by the status.

There are social and cultural motivations behind the use of insults: they are a sort of safety valve through which strong emotions and repressed anger are directed against some hated person or group. This verbally aggressive behavior is considered as an expression of social difference: in many kinds of social contexts, abusive language is common when there are power differences and tensions are high. Indeed, insults are usually considered a language phenomenon typical of classes which feel marginalized, and their use of cursing towards the dominant social groups reveals a state of tension and certain aggressive tendencies within society (Jay 1999; Mateo and Yus 2013). It would not be difficult to recognize such tendencies within the American political discourse, a discourse which since 2008 has been characterized by constant Republican and right-wing attacks to Obama. The President's socially hegemonic position certainly prompts his detractors to insult him. While the social status, whether marginal or not, of those insulting Obama on Facebook cannot be fully ascertained solely on the basis of the comments left on Facebook, it is certainly true that cursing, especially in public "spaces" such as Facebook walls, can hardly originate from the most educated and polite classes of society. Insults of the kind directed at Obama are rooted in the traditional hatred of the right-wing grassroots for anything associated with the liberal elites. Furthermore, the unrestrained accessibility and the public and informal setting of a Facebook page provide Obama haters with the perfect chance to display their feelings in a very uninhibited way.

Verbal abuse and rude language have become a distinctive trait of American politics, at least in its less institutional channels of communication. This phenomenon in many respects both reflects and increases the deep ideological divisions of the American electorate. Its extreme polarization takes the shape of a "language war" between opposing factions, which do not acknowledge the possibility of productive discussion and exchange of ideas and, therefore, resort to heated language and insult. Writing at a time when the Internet did not have the importance it has now, Robin Lakoff (2000) argued that

When there is a sharp polarization and an essentially even division of the population between the two sides: when the fight is such that there is, or seems to be, no possibility of compromise or commonality of view: the debate can only progress by turning up the heat, since there is little chance of turning up the light (Lakoff 2000, p. 65).

Language data of the kind surveyed on the White House Facebook page has confirmed the phenomenon of ideological polarization. The rise and popularity of Social Media have provided new avenues of communication for the sort of highly partisan politics which has become common in the USA, offering the chance to the most militant segment of the American electorate to "turn up the heat" and to express their disagreement, and often their mutual hatred, publicly, with little or no possibility of informed debate.

The sharp polarization between Democrats and Republicans, broadly matching in the "anti-Obama" and "pro-Obama" fields, is seen not only in the near-impossibility of

having a dialogue in a public forum, but also in the distinctively different language used by them. There are certain key semantic features in which Democrats and Republicans sharply differ. These features have been here assessed with the LIWC software.³ LIWC counts the words associated with specific fields, such as home, religion, work, etc., breaking them down in percentages according to specific categories.

The most useful semantic area is what LIWC calls “Personal concerns”. It includes seven categories – work, achievement, leisure, home, money, religion, death – which reveal certain key features in the users’ ideology (Table 2).

	work	achieve	leisure	home	money	religion	death
Anti-Obama	3.41	2.36	0.60	0.25	2.32	0.36	0.22
Pro-Obama	5.02	4.30	0.65	0.49	1.10	1.05	0.06
Total corpus	4.00	3.08	0.62	0.34	1.87	0.61	0.16

Table 2
LIWC results (%) for words related to “Personal concerns”.

The difference in the figures between the two camps are quite startling, and can be summarized as follows:

1. Anti-Obama users use words related to “money” more than twice than pro-Obama users. This may point to a stronger preoccupation with the economy among the most conservative sections of the electorate. However, Obama supporters use lexis related to “work” significantly more often than by anti-Obama users (5.02% vs. 3.41%), and the same happens with words related to “achievement” (2.36% vs. 4.30%). In both cases, most comments refer to Obama’s own work and achievement.
2. Religion is present in the pro-Obama camp almost three times more than in the anti-Obama texts (1.05% vs. 0.36%). Unlike what may be expected, the anti-Obama front did not draw from religious dictionary to attack the President, but used other semantic areas for that purpose. A reading of the comments of Pro-Obama followers reveals that they made larger use of this set of lexical items because they used religious language mainly to formally thank the Almighty for Obama’s presence.

³ LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count), 2007 version. The corpus had to be amended in order to make it more manageable and reliable for LIWC analysis:

1. Misspellings have been corrected to allow LIWC to gauge a wider text sample.
2. URLs as well as hashtags and emoticons have been eliminated as they are not read by LIWC and would have affected the overall results in quantitative terms.
3. Some users quoted from Obama’s status on Facebook to refute or attack it. These quotes would have affected the results and have been omitted.
4. Quotations from anti-Obama messages taken by pro-Obama users, and from pro-Obama messages by pro-Obama users, have also been omitted for the same reason. Quotations from other authors or sources confirming either position have been retained.

The corpus analyzed eventually included 17.005 words.

3. Words related to death are used much more often by the anti-Obama field (0.22% vs. 0.06%). This is due to the fact that anti-Obama people frequently wish for the President's demise in very explicit terms.

The above data is further evidence of a highly polarized political spectrum within those people who choose to engage in political discussion on the Internet. The two groups of users employ profoundly different languages, and it is not surprising to see that productive communication and exchange of ideas are hardly possible.

Differences in language are the discursive elaboration of ideological differences, and what happens on the White House Facebook wall can be placed within the broader context of U.S. politics. Ideological polarization has dominated American politics for some time now and has been a constant feature of "establishment" politics. The polarization of the political community engulfs Democratic and Republican elites at all levels, both in the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as in their relationship with the White House, especially when the President belongs to a party different from that holding the majority of either House. However, ideological polarization is a phenomenon taking place not just at the level of party officials and activists but also among large sections of voters and the general public. If Democrats and Republicans seem to battle over each single issue, partisanship affects American society as a whole. The sharp division of the political community between "two armed and hostile camps" (Sinclair 2006, p. 308) is mirrored as well as intensified by the passionate, strongly divisive and often verbally violent public debate between these two "camps" on a number of key issues – taxes, foreign policy, health care, abortion, education, the environment, gay rights, and the role of government in economic and social policies. In two of its recent surveys, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press has found that, while the majority of the American public does not have extreme views and does not consider either party a threat to the nation, the growing ideological gap between Democrats and Republicans is greatest among that section of the electorate which is most actively involved in the political process. Political involvement itself includes more than just voting at elections: more and more Americans, both on the left and the right, take part in campaigning, fundraising, and participation in debates, and this is reflected in their online behavior as well (Abramowitz 2013, pp. 42-45). The analysis of the language used by this segment of the electorate is therefore crucial, if we want to understand the most important formal features of the current political debate.

The ideologies of the supporters of the two parties seem to be at polar opposites, as partisan animosity has increased substantially and has never been so strong. The share of people who express negative views of the opposite party among both Republicans and Democrats has more than doubled since 1994 (Pew Research 2014a). Hostility, even contempt, toward the opposing party is constantly increasing, and is now the most powerful factor to motivate people to vote (Pew Research 2014b). There are stark differences between the highly motivated sections of the electorate of the two parties even when it comes to matters involving everyday life, such as the choice of housing and neighborhoods, marital preferences, and even preferences as to choices between walking or driving (Pew Research 2014a; Tuschman 2014). No wonder, then, that such mutual hostility also permeates online behavior. Those who participate in political discussions on the Internet tend to be the most interested in (offline) politics and the most ideologically committed. Therefore, their highly partisan opinions make them unlikely candidates to engage in constructive discussion, and there is a very high possibility that opposing groups engaging in a common forum will resort to cursing and offensive talk.

6. Conclusions

This paper has analyzed a sample of the users' comments to Obama's 2014 State of the Union on the White House official Facebook page. The analysis has focused on the relevance of the users' comments on Obama's statements and on the semantic differences between pro-Obama and anti-Obama comments. The poor relevance of most users' comments and the deeply diverging language used by the two fields indicates the low level of the political debate in an important segment of CMC. People with different ideologies sharing the same (virtual) space speak quite different languages and do not communicate with each other, other than by cursing or by posting comments which are often irrelevant to the discussion. It is clear that political discussion of a certain level can hardly be achieved on Facebook, or at least on the page of one of the world's most important institutions. The White House Facebook page might have been the ideal example of digital equality and diversity in CMC, as common people could have developed serious and reasoned discussion in a virtual place managed by the world's highest ranking politician (Spilioti 2015, p. 138). Instead, we find a virtual agora where verbal chaos is the norm, a common phenomenon in many other online political forums, where political discussion has become "an insult to democracy" (Thompson 2002).

Yet, people with different ideological profiles do not necessarily have to produce the degree of mutual hostility that can be found on the White House Facebook page. Disagreement in political conversation is the basis of sound deliberation within democracy and is an essential component in the development of an informed public opinion as it brings into play a large spectrum of different opinions and perspectives. Indeed, deliberation includes both speaking one's own opinion and hearing others', and it has been proved that rational discussion between people with diverging political opinions can bring about deliberative opinion, i.e. a fuller understanding of one's own and others' point of view (Price et al. 2002). However, the kind of disagreement often showing up on Facebook walls, including the significant sample of texts analyzed in this paper, does not seem to be particularly constructive. Highly polarized arguments often descend into cacophony: far from bridging differences or at least opening civilized, deliberative debate between people of different ideological inclinations, as happens elsewhere on the Internet (Norris 2002), the comments on the White House Facebook page reveal a highly polarized pool of internet users who are not interested in developing discussion but only in asserting their own opinions as "loudly" as possible.

The sample of texts analyzed here proves that we are still living in an "argument culture", as Tannen (1998) would put it, that is, a culture dominated by interpersonal and social conflicts which invests all areas of society and leads to social alienation and separation. This is paradoxical, if we think that CMC was believed to have heralded an age of supposedly open, interactive, democratic communication and sociality. The kind of language used on the White House Facebook page proves that CMC still has a long way to go to become the fully egalitarian instrument capable of creating a healthy, deliberative public sphere that many hoped it would become.

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“It is you, our citizens, who make the state of our union strong.”

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“Here in America, our success should depend not on accident of birth, but the strength of our work ethic and the scope of our dreams”

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