



A virtual European public sphere? The Futurum discussion forum

Scott Wright

To cite this article: Scott Wright (2007) A virtual European public sphere? The Futurum discussion forum, Journal of European Public Policy, 14:8, 1167-1185, DOI: [10.1080/13501760701656403](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760701656403)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501760701656403>



Published online: 07 Nov 2007.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 374



[View related articles](#)



Citing articles: 7 [View citing articles](#)

A virtual European public sphere? The Futurum discussion forum

Scott Wright

ABSTRACT This paper empirically analyses whether ‘Futurum’, the online discussion forum linked to the Convention on the Future of Europe, constituted a public sphere – and, if so, what kind. Although the debates were discursive and had an institutional context, they were not filtered into the convention process and had an unrepresentative group of participants and thus they sit ill at ease with established conceptualizations of the public sphere.

KEY WORDS Deliberative democracy; electronic democracy; internet; political communication; public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

The Future of Europe – Debate website (Futurum) was set up by the European Commission as an easily accessible gateway to information on the European constitutional process. The aims were not limited to the provision of information though: the website was to provide ‘instruments for exchanges with citizens’ that give ‘civil society the means to make its voice heard in a real European public forum’ and should, thus, ‘help bring the European Union closer to its citizens and reduce the perception of a democratic deficit’.¹ To this end, an online discussion forum was developed as a fulcrum for structured debate amongst *individual* citizens.² This made a much broader virtual debate possible than that which took place in the Convention on the Future of Europe itself – akin to a general public sphere – predominantly focused on the constitution process.³

The absence of a broad-based public sphere at the European level is widely recognized. Eriksen argues that:

What hampers democracy at the European level today is the lack of a common, law-based identification and the possibility for a pan European discourse – *a single European space* – in which Antonio in Sicily, Judith in Germany and Bosse in Sweden can take part in a discussion with Fernando

in Portugal and Julia in Spain on the same topics at the same time. The debate on the future constitution of the EU is a paradigmatic case for such a venture. (Eriksen 2005: 358; original emphasis)

According to Fritz Scharpf (1999: 187 – see also Abromeit 1998) such a transnational public sphere is problematic due to the ‘triple deficits of the lack of a pre-existing sense of collective identity, the lack of a Europe-wide policy discourse, and the lack of a Europe-wide institutional infrastructure that could assure the political accountability of office holders to a European Constituency’. Generally, the first of these deficits is considered most worrying as it helps to produce the others, and because the latter may be solvable by redesigning the institutions of Europe.

There is, however, according to Alex Warleigh (2003: 50–5), the potential for collective identity to be produced through what he calls critical deliberativism. Critical deliberativism is both a model of, and tool for, the application of deliberative democracy in the European Union (EU) context. For Warleigh, one of the strengths of deliberative approaches is that they do not assume a pre-existing sense of community, and that the process of deliberation can help to produce a deeper feeling of mutuality from the bottom up. Although Warleigh does note the potential for the internet to facilitate critical deliberativism, he does not discuss this in detail. However, if critical deliberativism ‘is capable of harnessing diversity as an asset in democratic communication’ and can lead to the creation of ‘common interests and understanding’, Futurum could be an important tool in solving the democratic deficit – at least as outlined above (Warleigh 2003: 53).

A similar argument – explicitly related to the internet – has been put forward by James Bohman. He argues that the internet *can* facilitate a transnational public sphere but that (a) its practical existence is dependent on the agency of citizens who must create it through their participation and deliberation,⁴ (b) it is unfair to judge online public spheres by the same criteria as face-to-face public spheres, and (c) a transnational public sphere would be very different from national ones and must, thus, be conceptualized and judged differently. Bohman (2004: 57) argues that currently online fora are ‘weak’ (general) publics but that they could become ‘strong’ publics if they can ‘exercise influence through institutionalized decision-making procedures with regularized opportunities for input’. At the transnational level, for Bohman, the distinction between weak and strong publics is much more fluid due to the polycentric institutional architecture – and hence the need for a polycentric conceptualization of public space. The problem, for Bohman, is designing an appropriate feedback mechanism between the public sphere and decision-makers.

Given the importance of a transnational public sphere suggested by this literature, the potential for one to be facilitated on the internet – and the many studies that have analysed both the democratic deficit and the EU’s constitutional process – empirical analysis of Futurum (and other transnational online fora) to date has been limited.⁵ Empirical analysis is important

because, as Cederman and Kraus (2005: 299; original emphasis) note: ‘Quite often it is taken for granted that what the Internet *could* and *should* do is already becoming an empirical reality. Yet, unfortunately, noble political intentions do not always find immediate reflection in actual trends.’ This article will attempt to fill this gap in the literature. Given the different conceptualizations of transnational public sphere(s) it is necessary to analyse Futurum to determine whether, in practice, it did constitute a public sphere, and, if so, what kind. Eriksen’s distinction between general, strong and segmented public spheres will be used to frame the analysis (Eriksen 2004, 2005, who builds on Fraser 1992). To determine the extent to which Futurum fits these models, both the structure and policy impact of the discussions are analysed. Analysing structure and impact, however, is not enough; following both Warleigh’s and Bonham’s arguments that a public sphere must be *created* by citizens through their engagement in deliberative communication, it is necessary to analyse how citizens make use of such spaces. The underlying question is whether Eriksen was right to claim that a transnational public sphere in which people from a range of countries could discuss the constitutional process was missing. It is, thus, necessary to analyse the debates themselves. The research questions are a synthesis of those used in previous studies that have analysed whether online discussion fora are democratic, deliberative public spheres (Hill and Hughes 1998; Davis 1999; Wilhelm 2000), adapted to take account of the transnational, multilingual context. I will, thus, ask:

- 1 What countries do people post from?
- 2 Who participates, and does a small minority dominate?
- 3 Is there a dominant language used in debates?
- 4 Are messages ‘deliberative’?

The paper will show that Eriksen’s conclusion was at least partially wrong: Futurum provided a single European space for transnational discourse on the development of a European constitution. It involved people from numerous countries, who debated in a range of languages. However, it will be argued that Futurum did not fit neatly into the general, strong or segmented models of the public sphere because it was (a) institutionally run, (b) open to anyone who had the ability and desire to participate, and (c) did not inform policy-making.

FUTURUM: A VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE?

According to Habermas’ revised theory of the public sphere (1996: 373), it is a room, analogous to a large hall, with many differently styled and segmented discussion spaces. Dahlgren (2005: 148) explains that: ‘a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates – ideally in an unfettered manner – and also the formation of political will (i.e. public opinion).’ The dual requirements of the public sphere to be both a broad communication network that helps to

shape and (re)create public opinion through deliberation and a locus for will formation and collective action led Eriksen (2005) to develop three categories of public sphere: overarching general publics, transnational segmented publics and strong publics.

Eriksen (2005: 345) describes the general public sphere as a communicative space or network with 'informal streams of communication' and 'not aimed at achieving particular results'. It is, thus, normally independent of the state, though institutions shape the precise nature of the public sphere by encouraging and discouraging certain forms of communication, and giving access rights to certain groups of people. Initially, the argument that a general public sphere is created when individuals deliberate creates a normative problem: Futurum was provided, designed and moderated by the institutions of Europe.

Strong publics take the institutional context a step further: they have direct relations to the political system. Strong publics can range from parliamentary debates to policy fora, but they are not, typically, general, open debates – which, allegedly, Futurum did facilitate. Strong publics consist of: 'institutionalised deliberation close to the centre of the political system that is legally regulated, viz. sites in which there is a requirement to provide justification and there is a stronger regulation of discourses' (Eriksen 2004: 10). However, strong publics are 'a method of informing but not necessarily determining the process of representative government' (Curtin 2003: 58). Eriksen (2004: 19) argues that the formal Convention on the Future of Europe, whose virtual arm was Futurum, constituted a strong public.

Eriksen has added a third conceptualization that builds on the idea of multiple overlapping public spheres (Habermas 1996; Schlesinger 1999; Schlesinger and Kevin 2000) – the segmented public. Segmented publics, in the European context, are the policy networks (epistemic communities) populated by bureaucrats, experts and organized interests (Eriksen 2005). The segmented public is problematic for Eriksen because it is unclear, to borrow from the EU's own moniker, how 'unity in diversity' can actually be achieved. Is there enough sense of collective identity for decisions to be made (typically by the unrepresentative few) and accepted by all, or, to borrow from Warleigh, can it be generated through the deliberative process itself?

General, strong and segmented public spheres are thought to have considerable democratic value. Equally, they each have an institutional context, and thus the structures that surround such public spheres – in this case the underlying policies and design of the forum – need to be determined before analysing the quality of the discussion produced and the representativeness of the participants.

THE FUTURUM DISCUSSION FORUM

Futurum is an asynchronous threaded discussion forum.⁶ Similar to institutional design theory (Goodin 1996), the structure of a discussion forum, like that of a debating chamber, is thought to influence the nature of the debate that takes place (Wright 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Wright and Street, forthcoming). According

to Axelsson *et al.* (2003: 495) ‘technology plays an important part’ because ‘the medium amplifies certain aspects of language encounters’. Similarly, the non-technical structures such as moderation policies may influence the debate: ‘it is the rules for rational communication that govern the formation of opinions. It is the *interaction process* itself that generates results’ (Eriksen 2004: 9; original emphasis). Thus, it is necessary to analyse both Futurum’s design and its non-technical structures such as its moderation policies.

Futurum’s online debates were moderated by a civil servant to ensure that messages did not breach its pre-defined editorial policy. This stated that the ‘discussion corner is designed to give European citizens complete freedom to express their views on, and discuss, the future of Europe. This discussion corner is democratic. We do not censor the content or form of contributions IN ANY WAY.’⁷ This emphatic statement in support of free speech was contradicted by a list of ‘basic rules of politeness and respect’ that respondents were required to adhere to for the sake of ensuring ‘a democratic debate’.⁸ For example, content ‘must not be illegal, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, libellous, vulgar, obscene, threatening for the private lives of other people, hateful, racist or objectionable in any other way’ if a message was to be posted.⁹

Moderation is generally considered necessary because the perceived anonymity of online communication weakens the norms of constitutive (or self) censorship¹⁰ that govern face-to-face interaction. Without these moral and social cues, people appear to feel freer to use vulgar language and thus legitimate reasons exist for governments to moderate content in online fora (Wright 2006). The moderation rules on Futurum were quite vague, giving the moderator interpretative leeway over what constituted a legitimate post. It must be noted, however, that the number of censored posts was claimed to be very low, and of these censored messages, most were blocked because they were deemed irrelevant.¹¹ Nevertheless, the fact that such rules existed, and were enforced by an employee of the institution, effectively meant that Futurum could not be a general public sphere in the Habermasian sense as this must be free from governmental control.

A further structural factor that can influence the debate is the funds allocated to the project and how these were used. The total budget for the entire Future of Europe debates was €9.5 million, with €2.15 million devoted to the online facilities (European Commission 2001: 17). This included some €200,000 for the ‘active promotion of the website and the discussion forums’ (European Commission 2001: 9, 17). However, no formal advertising was undertaken aside from leaflets being placed in libraries and Euro-information centres, and thus the potential for a broader base of participants – beyond the already interested (and, perhaps, segmented) minority – was lost.

POLICY IMPACT OF FUTURUM

The Communication, mentioned above, argues that the discussions must be taken into account by political authorities. It states that: ‘In order to ensure that the debate is productive and that the objectives of the Declaration of

Nice are really met . . . the opinions expressed must be listened to, examined, summarised objectively and passed on to the political authorities' (European Commission 2001: 4). To this end, it calls for an 'efficient feedback mechanism to ensure contributions are summarised and channelled back to the political level for information and reaction' (European Commission 2001: 9). There was a budgetary allocation of €450,000 for the analysis and summary of all the different discussions and €200,000 for their evaluation in the Legislative Financial Statement. Furthermore, the Communication argues that a 'key criterion for a successful debate' is that it 'is constantly stimulated by contributions from politicians and other senior officials' (European Commission 2001: 9). These feedback and communication mechanisms might have provided a sluice from the more informal, 'general' public sphere on Futurum to the strong (or at least segmented) public sphere in the Convention. The development of such sluices has long been considered problematic: 'Due to the sharp distinction between opinion formation in the general public sphere and will-formation in parliamentary assemblies, it becomes difficult to explain in what sense public deliberation and political decision-making are connected' (Eriksen 2005: 347).

On both counts there was a difference between the rhetoric and the reality. First, the online debate was not listened to, summarized or otherwise fed into the Convention process.¹² A summary was made by a *stagiaire* (trainee) but this was for internal use only. Second, although some politicians made introductory posts to debates, and occasionally left a post debate response, politicians did not directly interact with citizens. In fact, politicians' messages were positioned separately, at the top of the page.¹³ This appears to have been to make their messages visible, though it may also have created a feeling of separation. Given the potential importance of these linkages, and the rhetoric of listening and interaction, it begs the question: Why were the discussions sidelined?

In spite of the rhetoric, the general policy was to discourage interaction between citizens and politicians on the discussion forum. It was feared that this might give people a false impression that the online discussions were influencing policy. Similarly, if civil servants were to respond on behalf of political leaders, this might give citizens a false impression of interaction.¹⁴ Thus, politicians were generally asked to participate in live web-chats that facilitated 'direct' contact with citizens. The principal reason for not summarizing and feeding discussions into the Convention was that the Commission and Parliament could not agree the structure and details of this process, as well as issues about whose responsibility it was. Further concerns were raised about the nature of the debate, and its participants, who were perceived to be a relatively anonymous, largely unrepresentative group, and how to effectively and fairly summarize the debates.

We can see from this analysis that a broadly pessimistic view was taken of the democratizing potential of online discussion fora. The cited downsides, though valid, also applied to the offline submissions from civil society groups (which were at least 'heard' within the Convention) (Closa 2003; Lombardo 2004).

Including synopses of online discussions alongside the offline ones would, arguably, have made the debate more representative of civil society as a whole by broadening the range of feedback in line with the above proclamations.¹⁵ Similarly, if it was clearly explained how posts were used (no explanation was given apart from the positive statements above) the problem of misleading people could be mitigated. Following the arguments of Scharpf and Bohman, this lack of clarity may have strengthened rather than reduced the perceived democratic deficit.

This is not to say that the discussions were not perceived to be of value. The online forum was conceived as a kind of public sphere where

Individual citizens are confronted with people who may live in different parts of Europe and have different perspectives. That in itself is valuable. That is an instrument – it is a space – which is provided for people to encounter and exchange their views. This is not fake and can be significant for the individuals concerned. This is a service to the individual citizens for themselves to use.¹⁶

This (re)conceptualization of the role of Futurum, which is akin to a general public sphere, was different from the rhetoric. Put simply, whether conceived or intended as a general, strong or segmented public sphere, in practice, Futurum's structural arrangements posed issues: as Futurum was run and moderated by the European Commission, its position as a general public sphere is questionable; as there was no formal link to the Convention it did not constitute a strong public sphere; and as the debates had an open access policy their position as a segmented public is also questionable.

Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman have put forward a model for organizing government-run online discussion fora that might resolve these issues. They argue that such fora could be run by an organization, broadly similar to the BBC, which is 'publicly funded but independent from government' (Blumler and Coleman 2001: 4). This organization would 'foster new forms of public involvement in civic affairs' and lead to the creation of an 'electronic commons' that 'would be neither a talking shop in splendid isolation, nor a replacement of representative by direct democracy. It would be instead an open-ended, institutionally backed extension of people's opportunities to make contributions to public policy on those matters that specially concern them' (Blumler and Coleman 2001: 4–5). Public bodies would have a duty 'to react formally to whatever emerges from the discussion' (Blumler and Coleman 2001: 16) thus creating a direct but independent link between the general and the strong public spheres – potentially resolving the awkward position of Futurum. Although not discussed by Blumler and Coleman, if a strong or segmented public sphere is desired, the model could be adapted. For example, it is possible to limit who can participate by making a forum accessible only by password. Civil servants or politicians with direct experience of the policy being discussed could also be asked to participate in, or facilitate, the debates, with the independent body undertaking the censorial duties. By absolving political institutions of direct responsibility for the censoring of messages, this model also

limits the danger of public relations issues developing around when it is legitimate and illegitimate to censor (Wright 2006).

Although Blumler and Coleman (2001: 20) note that there could be a role for such a body at the EU level, they do not discuss the particular problems that this would create. First, it is questionable whether such a body could have, or develop, trust and legitimacy at the EU level given its polycentric character and the lack of a pre-existing transnational public service (or similar) broadcaster. Second, it is unclear *where* and *how* such a body would feed its reports into the political process at the EU level, given both the complexity of the decision-making system and the multilingual, transnational debates. Third, there remain questions about how such reports would be produced, and whether an independent body would produce useful feedback to policy-makers given the range of issues at the EU level. Finally, there is a concern about what they mean by requiring public bodies 'to react formally to whatever emerges from the discussion', and how this would be achieved, in practice, across the different EU institutions.

ANALYSING FUTURUM

To determine whether citizens used the facilities to create a transnational public sphere, it is necessary to analyse both who was using the site, and how they did this: the effects of human agency (and the cues and barriers therein) on political communication have often been ignored in the debate about virtual public spheres (Muhlberger 2005).¹⁷ The answers to these questions also have implications for the feasibility of government-run discussion: the deliberativeness of online fora is not a given; most studies find the quality of debate to be poor (Wilhelm 2000; Davis 1999).

The analysis was conducted on a range of random samples from Futurum's General Debate. This was selected because it was easily the largest debate on Futurum.¹⁸ This meant that the sample size had to be varied depending on the depth of analysis required. This was based on the assumption that the larger the sample, the more representative the analysis would be. The alternative was to analyse the threads selected for the qualitative analysis. Although this may have been more systematic, it would have provided a relatively narrow appraisal of the discussions.

WHO IS PARTICIPATING AND ARE THE DISCUSSIONS DOMINATED BY A MINORITY OF USERS?

This question will be divided into its constituent parts. However, both relate to claims made within EU documentation (and are important for understanding the nature of the public sphere) which suggest that debates must have an element of representativeness, attract people from a range of countries (i.e. bring the citizens of Europe closer together), and be available in all the official languages (access): simply showing that discussion is occurring is not enough.

The oft cited digital and linguistic divides mean that online participation at the EU level cannot occur equally right now (Norris 2001; Phillipson 2003).¹⁹ The emphasis on representativeness is linked primarily to the general public sphere; arguably, in strong and segmented public spheres having the 'right' people (experts, representatives and the like) is more important. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to analyse what occurred on the forum to determine whether a public sphere was formed. This will be undertaken by counting and comparing posting patterns; the given country of origin; and the languages used in messages.

Taking domination first, in the General Debate there were 4,420 posts from 871 different users: 5.07 posts per user. Of this 871, 43.5 per cent of users seeded new discussion threads – suggesting that discussions were not dominated by a small group of people. There were, though, notable differences in the number of seed messages. The majority (76.5 per cent) only started one thread, but the three most prolific seed posters actually made 9.7 per cent of all seed messages in the General Debate and 20.1 per cent of all messages. The minority did, thus, influence the overall shape of the discussion. The extent of their influence requires further analysis though.

The three most prolific seed posters generally posted seeds with recurring themes:

- Turkey's potential membership
- European language
- Anti-UK membership
- In favour of a federation of nation states.

This helped to focus the subject for debate on 'their' issues. Moreover, messages were often repeated either exactly or in parenthesis. For example, 'Marson' made three seed posts entitled 'establishing the EU borders' (and many others that discussed the subject) with very similar texts, and three seed posts entitled 'EU the Superpower' with exactly the same message text. They also influenced the discussions by posting longer messages: the three core posters averaged 422 words per message while the overall average was just 297 words. The results suggest that Bohman (2004) and Warleigh (2003) were right to emphasize that public spheres are discursively created (or at least shaped) by citizens.

The analysis of poster location takes advantage of Futurum's requirement that people give a country of origin, chosen from a drop-down list with 193 options. There is, of course, no guarantee that respondents gave their actual location; the figures offer us only a guide. In fact, a number of posters repeatedly changed their country of origin. Most notably, a core poster, 'Hans Thijssens', sent 200 messages giving his location as Holland, but a further 79 posts from 30 different countries. Having noted this problem the findings can be presented. There are too many countries to present the data for each, and thus only the EU15 (as was) and the two other biggest contributors will be listed (USA and Turkey).

Figure 1 shows that there were significant, surprising discrepancies between countries, not necessarily related to internet access. Greece, which has the lowest internet penetration in the EU15 at 33.7 per cent, is over-represented statistically, while Sweden, which has the highest internet penetration at 74.9 per cent, is significantly under-represented.²⁰ The strong showing from Turkey was largely because of the most frequent poster, 'WolfWolf', who made 495 posts, the majority of which related to Turkey's proposed EU membership. The results suggest that a broad range of nationalities participated, with no relationship to internet penetration.

As noted above, the digital divide draws into question the feasibility of a virtual general public sphere because equality of access (though not necessarily participation) is considered fundamental. That internet penetration varies so greatly means significant proportions of people simply do not have access to these putative public spheres. This is reinforced by variations in people's ability to use the internet and online fora, even when they do have access – be it from home or another source such as work or public library. Combined with Futurum's lack of visibility to the general public (the vast majority of whom were probably unaware it existed), and question marks about who would have the desire to participate given the topic at hand, one can assume that a relatively narrow section of the European populace was participating (either by posting messages or solely reading responses – known as 'lurking'). Concerns about the representativeness of participants are reinforced by the analysis of language usage and sex of users.

Language usage has important implications for the nature of discussion, and who can participate. This is because if one language dominated it could create a linguistic barrier, excluding those who did not understand it. Analysis of language use on Futurum (Wodak and Wright 2006, 2007) showed that threads starting in a language other than English received far fewer responses. Although English seeded threads featured six different languages, more than nine out of ten posts were solely in English, and only 2.4 per cent of posts did not feature some use of English.²¹ A qualitative critical discourse analysis of a multilingual (English seeded) thread showed that users were actually interacting in different languages (as opposed to merely posting personal opinions in a different language without engaging in a debate).²² The results for the non-English seeded threads were more even, with nine languages evident. Of these, just under half were in French, and 14.7 per cent were in English. In fact, there were nearly as many Spanish and German posts as there were English. This suggests that even in a public space deliberately designed so that discussion could take place across a range of languages – and it is evident that a wide range of languages were spoken by users – people chose English as the lingua franca for communication.

To further develop our understanding of who participated, the sex of the participants was analysed through their adopted usernames (Davis 1999: 155). If it was not obviously a male or female name, it was marked as uncodable. Of course, there is no way of determining a user's sex for certain because men

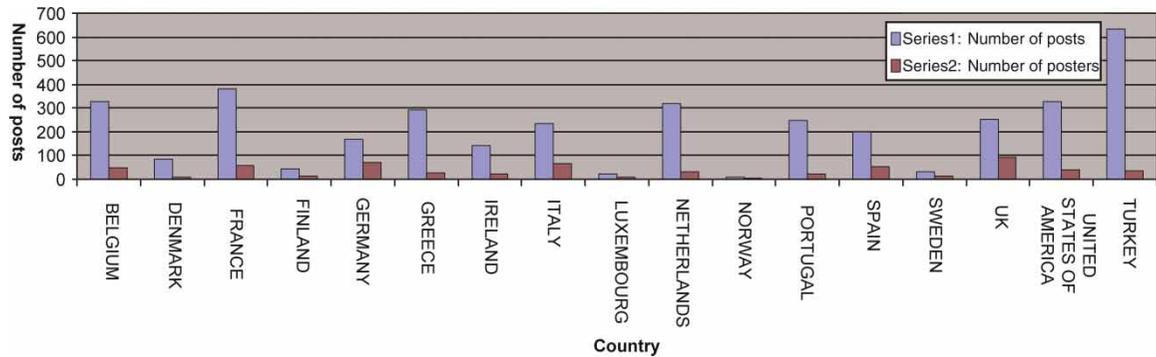


Figure 1 Number of posters by country of origin

Source: <http://www.europa.eu.int>

can adopt a woman's name and vice versa: the results offer only a guide. The analysis showed that 58 per cent of respondents presented themselves as male, 5 per cent as female and 37 per cent were uncodable. Thus, by this measure at least, the discussions were male dominated and unrepresentative. The uncodables might redress this imbalance if their sex was known, but there is no guarantee of this.

THE NATURE OF DEBATE

The analysis has thus far concentrated on who participated, and whether the minority was dominant. It is still necessary to analyse the discursive quality of the debates to see if people's style of participation was creating a general public sphere. A qualitatively oriented content analysis, previously developed by Wilhelm to analyse deliberativeness in Usenet discussion fora, was adopted.²³ Content analysis combines the unobtrusive nature of participant observation that discussion board analysis affords with an equally unobtrusive analytical technique (Hewson *et al.* 2003: 46–7). This study concentrates on his first two research questions, drawn from Fishkin's (1995) conception of deliberative democracy:

- 1 To what extent do participants of virtual political groups solely provide ideas and information versus seeking information from other members?
- 2 To what extent do participants of political groups exchange opinions as well as incorporate and respond to others' viewpoints?

The coding categories are operationalized in Table 1. Although applying the coding schema is subjective, Wilhelm's coding categories, and his explanation of how they were executed, are specific and detailed enough to conclude that similar judgements were made. Wilhelm operationalized the categories by stating that if a message did not seek, seed, or reply it was coded as solely providing information (and thus of limited discursive value). The sampling method for this analysis was to randomly select 10 per cent of seed messages, controlled for by the length of thread, and analyse all the posts within the thread. This ensures that the sample was representative of the overall thread lengths.²⁴ The analysis is presented in Table 2.

The results show that the general debate on Futurum was discursive. This finding is somewhat surprising given that many empirical studies (Davis 1999; Wilhelm 2000; Hill and Hughes 1998) have concluded the exact opposite. In this sample from Futurum, only one message did not seek, reply or seed a discussion. This suggests that there is the *potential* for a general transnational public sphere (and, perhaps, a segmented or strong one depending on its composition) to be created by participation in online discussion fora. Of further interest is that online discussion fora do appear to weaken the distinction between general, strong and segmented public spheres: the latter are typically predicated on the assumption that it is simply not possible for larger-scale discussions to be constructively hosted within an institutional (hearing) context

Table 1 Coding categories

<i>Tag</i>	<i>Full name and definition</i>	<i>Question</i>
PROVIDE	PROVIDE: a message that is solely providing information from other participants in the form of facts, opinions and the like	Q#1
SEEK	SEEK: a message that includes evidence of information seeking in the form of queries, open-ended remarks, and the like	Q#1
SEED	SEED: a message that plants a seed for discussion, usually providing the groundwork for a topic, always the first in a series of reply messages	Q#1
INCORP	INCORPORATE: a message which incorporates opinions or ideas drawn from others, whether they be experts or other citizens but <i>not</i> those who are participants in the exchange in question	Q#2
REPLY	REPLY: a message that is the response or reply to another message previously posted	Q#2

(Bohman 2004). The findings from this study, though obviously limited in their scope, suggest that the quality of online discussion can be sufficient for it to be 'heard'. The unresolved question is how to sluice this information into the policy-making process and the extent to which it should be used to influence decisions.

This raises the question of why the discussions on Futurum were successful given the previously negative findings. There appear to have been a number of reasons. First, the structures surrounding the discussions may have affected interactivity and deliberativeness. In particular, pre-moderation appeared to have been important in keeping messages related to the subject. The moderation of messages also appeared to create a respectful atmosphere, although the claimed lack of need for censorship suggests that other factors were at play. Second, users were not, as best as can be told, 'average' citizens but people who were well educated and very interested in the EU.²⁵ This might be

Table 2 Content analysis results

<i>Content categories (%)</i>	<i>General discussion Futurum (%)</i>
Provide	0.2
Seek	43.0
Seed	14.8
Incorporate	53.6
Reply	86.4

Source: <http://www.europa.eu.int>

explained by the lack of advertising: generally, only interested people would have gone to the website and come across the discussion. Third, the dominant minority kept the discussions ticking over and occasionally fostered what might be described as a community atmosphere (for example, by wishing each other a Merry Christmas or to enjoy holidays).²⁶ A final factor is that the discussions appeared to have an institutional context and this, one would assume, encouraged a serious level of debate (Coleman 2001: 120).

CONCLUSION

The findings show that Futurum was 'a single European space' but because of the digital and linguistic divide only certain Antonios and Julias could participate (Eriksen 2005: 358). Taking each research question in turn:

- 1 People posted from a range of countries and this was not related to internet penetration.
- 2 As best as can be told, the participants were atypical and unrepresentative, with a small minority who appeared to dominate the discussions both with the volume of their seed posts and replies, and by attempting to focus the debates on certain topics. This dominant minority may, however, have promoted interactivity and helped to develop some semblance of community by their active interventions.
- 3 English did become the dominant language on the forum, though a significant minority interacted in other languages – particularly when a thread was started in a language other than English. Some participants attempted to broaden the debate by translating their messages into different languages.
- 4 The indicators used to measure deliberativeness showed that the forum was interactive in the sense that messages either replied to an existing message, sought information or answers to questions, or used external materials to support their arguments: only one message was found to just provide information.

Thus, Futurum facilitated an interactive, transnational discourse largely focused on the development of a European constitution. The fact that the discussions were discursive contradicts the findings from most other analyses of online fora, and appeared to be because of a well-designed interface and atypical participants. However, their unrepresentativeness also calls into question the validity of sluicing the debates into the formal Convention process: online fora may serve to amplify the voice of the already active minority. Such decisions are informed by the institutional structures that shape both the nature of debate and type of public sphere that is formed.

Structurally, three findings are particularly important. First, as censorship was being conducted by people working for an EU institution, Futurum sits uneasily within the general public sphere categorization. Second, as the discussions were not sluiced into the Convention process, it did not operate as a strong public sphere. Third, as Futurum had an open participation process, its position

as a segmented public sphere is questionable: further analysis of the participants' background is necessary before a definitive answer can be given. Thus, Futurum may, through the discursive process (Warleigh 2003), have facilitated the development of a sense of collective identity considered problematic by Scharpf (1999). Concurrently, as decision-makers chose to ignore the debates and were moderated internally, Futurum may also have reinforced Scharpf's concerns about limited Europe-wide policy discourses and institutional infrastructures to hold the political élite accountable.

Biographical note: Scott Wright is a lecturer in Media and Society in the School of Political, Social and International Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

Address for correspondence: Scott Wright, School of Political, Social and International Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, Norfolk NR4 7TJ, UK. email: scott.wright@uea.ac.uk

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Stephen Coleman, John Street, Erik Oddvar Eriksen, and the anonymous JEPP referee for their constructive and helpful comments. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions, Granada, 2005; Voice and Citizenship, University of Washington, 2004; and Rethinking European Spaces, Royal Holloway, 2005.

NOTES

- 1 http://europa.eu.int/futurum/about_en.htm. Last accessed 14 January 2007.
- 2 Futurum was by no means the first online discussion hosted on Europa. However, it was one of the first systematic attempts to use such technologies to engage the broader EU populace, and was developed out of the Dialogue on Europe initiative.
- 3 The Convention was a structured meeting to debate a future constitution for Europe tasked with bringing together a broad range of 'representative' bodies including non-governmental organizations, politicians, and civil society groups. However, the Convention was criticized for only 'marginally' improving accountability and because its steering organs had a 'pre-eminent position' that could bias debates (Closa 2003: 21).
- 4 Though the power of agents is limited by institutional factors: individuals 'have control only through assenting to an asymmetrical relationship to various agents who structure the choices in the communicative environment of cyberspace' (Bohman 2004: 53). A further concern is whether citizens, through human agency, have the desire or capacity to participate in such spheres (Muhlberger 2005).
- 5 Wodak and Wright (2006, 2007) analysed the multilingual nature of the debates, combining empirical and discourse analysis. Winkler and Kozeluh (2005) analysed the broader Your Voice in Europe project and found the discussions to be of a high deliberative quality. Cammaerts and van Audenhove (2005) undertook three case studies of online fora (ATTAC mailing list, LabourStart forum and an Indymedia

Forum) and concluded that online fora can contribute to an emerging transnational public sphere.

- 6 There are many possible ways to structure online dialogue. In relation to discussion fora, they can be developed in the style of a bulletin board with no threads so that the most recent message, no matter who it replies to, goes on top. They can also be developed for synchronous communication, similar to MSN Messenger, in which participants take part in textual conversation. Finally, it is possible to have verbal conversations either one-to-one or in larger groups using software similar to microphone controls in debating chambers (Leug and Fisher 2003; Iyengar *et al.* 2004).
- 7 http://www.europa.eu.int/futurum/documents/contrib/editorialpolicy_en.htm (original emphasis). Last accessed 14 January 2007.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Constitutive censorship relates to the latent, taken-for-granted rules by which discourse is structured (McGuigan 1996: 155).
- 11 Interview with a senior Commission official, 18th May 2004. Considering the passion that the EU can evoke, it could be considered surprising that more censorship was not necessary. This might be explained by a lack of awareness of the forum amongst opposition groups, or because people were pre-censoring themselves.
- 12 Interview with a senior Commission official, 18th May 2004.
- 13 http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.home&Debate_ID=-8. Last accessed 14 January 2007. No specific search was made for political figures posting within discussions because it would have been impossible to identify them given the number of countries involved. However, during the content analysis of the general discussion no messages from political figures were identified.
- 14 A previous analysis of the Downing Street website (Wright 2002) found similar differences between the rhetoric of two-way communication and the actual practice of it.
- 15 The problem with bias when summarizing also applies to the offline discussions. Similarly, the assumption that people would perceive the forum as a mechanism for two-way communication with the President of the Commission appears unfair because a similar claim was not made for the offline discussions: it could be made clear that 'official responses' were written by civil servants.
- 16 Interview with a senior Commission official, 18th May 2004.
- 17 The creation of a virtual public space does not automatically constitute a public sphere; this is dependent on how people choose, or not, to use it. There is a distinction in the literature between those, such as Schlesinger and Kevin (2000), who argue for a transnationalization of national public spheres and those who argue for a socially constructed community of communication (Risse 2002). For a discussion of the literature see Van Os (2004: 9) who argues that: 'one should consider the emergence of a European community as created through social practice and deliberation, that is to say by participation of citizens in public debates held in this exact same European community.'
- 18 It must be noted that the nature of the discussion in the General Debate may be different from other topics as it gives people greater freedom to communicate on the issues that interest them. The analysis is not, thus, necessarily representative of the debate occurring in other topics.
- 19 However, as internet penetration increases – furthered by national and EU-level policies – this problem should decrease. Moreover, Coleman and Gotze (2001) argue that a broad base of participants is more important than their representativeness.
- 20 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm>. Last accessed 14 January 2007.

- 21 Translation websites, though far from perfect, may help to mitigate the linguistic divide and they were occasionally used by participants to translate their messages in an attempt to garner wider responses. http://ec.europa.eu/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.detailthread&Debate_ID=-30&message_id=-20725. Last accessed 22 February 2007.
- 22 http://ec.europa.eu/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.detail&Debate_ID=-30&Message_ID=-21206. Last accessed 9 February 2007.
- 23 For a detailed account of the methodology, see Wilhelm (2000), and for further details of the methodology and sampling used here, see Wright (2005a).
- 24 Wilhelm's methodology has a weakness: only the first ten messages of each thread were analysed. This is problematic because as debates develop it is likely that they change in character, becoming more interactive, with shorter messages, as people reply to previous posts and subdivide into different topics. However, it must be noted that changing the sampling method might partially explain the difference in results between the two studies.
- 25 The following threads have been selected to highlight various aspects of the nature of the debate such as their multilingualism, atypical participants, discursiveness and levels of information, argumentation, engagement and tone:
 - 1 http://ec.europa.eu/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.detailthread&Debate_ID=-30&message_id=-1579
 - 2 http://ec.europa.eu/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.detail&Debate_ID=-30&Message_ID=-14870
 - 3 http://ec.europa.eu/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.detailthread&Debate_ID=-26&message_id=-14244
 - 4 http://ec.europa.eu/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.detailthread&Debate_ID=-26&message_id=-13980. Last accessed 23 February 2007.
- 26 http://ec.europa.eu/comm/coreservices/forum/index.cfm?forum=Futurum&archive=1&fuseaction=contribution.detail&Debate_ID=-30&Message_ID=-15004. Last accessed 14 January 2007.

REFERENCES

- Abromeit, H. (1998) *Democracy in Europe*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Axelsson, A., Abelin, A. and Schroeder, R. (2003) 'Anyone speak Spanish?: language encounters in multi-user virtual environments and the influence of technology', *New Media & Society* 5(4): 475–98.
- Bohman, J. (2004) 'Expanding dialogue: the internet, public sphere, and transnational democracy', in P. Shane (ed.), *Democracy Online: The Prospects for Political Renewal Through the Internet*, London: Routledge, pp. 47–61.
- Blumler, J.G. and Coleman, S. (2001) *Realising Democracy Online: A Civic Commons in Cyberspace*, London: IPPR/Citizens Online.
- Cammaerts, B. and van Audenhove, L. (2005) 'Online political debate, unbounded citizenship, and the problematic nature of a transnational public sphere', *Political Communication* 22(2): 179–196.
- Cederman, L.E. and Kraus, P.A. (2005) 'Transnational communication and the European demos', in R. Latham and S. Sassen (eds), *Digital Formations: IT and New Architectures in the Global Realm*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 283–311.

- Closa, C. (2003) 'Improving EU constitutional politics? A preliminary assessment of the convention'. Available at: http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofPoliticsInternationalStudiesandPhilosophy/FileStore/ConWEBFiles/Filetoupload,38346_en.pdf. Last accessed 14 January 2007.
- Coleman, S. (2001) 'The transformation of citizenship', in B. Axford and R. Huggins (eds), *New Media and Politics*, London: Sage.
- Coleman, S. and Gotze, J. (2001) *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation*, London: Hansard Society.
- Curtin, D. (2003) 'Private interest representation of civil society deliberation? A contemporary dilemma for European Union governance', *Social and Legal Studies* 12(1): 55–75.
- Dahlgren, P. (2005) 'The internet, public spheres, and political communication: dispersion and deliberation', *Political Communication* 22(2): 147–62.
- Davis, R. (1999) *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eriksen, E.O. (2004) 'Conceptualizing European public spheres: general, segmented and strong publics'. Paper presented to CIDEL Conference: *One EU – Many Publics?*, Stirling.
- Eriksen, E.O. (2005) 'An emerging European public sphere', *European Journal of Social Theory* 8(3): 341–63.
- European Commission (2001) *Commission Communication: On Certain Arrangements for the Debate on the Future of the European Union*, COM (2001) 178 final. Available at: http://europa.eu.int/constitution/futurum/documents/offtext/com25042001_en.pdf. Last accessed 14 January 2007.
- Fishkin, J.S. (1995) *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fraser, N. (1992) 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 109–42.
- Goodin, R.E. (1996) *The Theory of Institutional Design*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996) *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hewson, C., Yule, P., Laurent, D. and Vogel, C. (2003) *Internet Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, London: Sage.
- Hill, K.A. and Hughes, J.E. (1998) *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Iyengar, S., Luskin, R. and Fishkin, J.S. (2004) 'Deliberative public opinion in Presidential Primaries: evidence from the online deliberative poll', *Voice and Citizenship*, University of Seattle, Washington.
- Leug, C. and Fisher, D. (eds) (2003) *From Usenet to CoWebs: Interacting with Social Information Spaces*, London: Springer.
- Lombardo, E. (2004) 'The participation of civil society in the European Constitution-making process'. Paper presented to CIDEL Workshop: *Constitution Making and Democratic Legitimacy in the EU*.
- McGuigan, J. (1996) *Culture and the Public Sphere*, London: Routledge.
- Muhlberger, P. (2005) 'Human agency and the revitalization of the public sphere', *Political Communication* 22(2): 163–78.
- Norris, P. (2001) *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillipson, R. (2003) *English Only Europe? Language Policy Challenges*, London: Routledge.

- Risse, T. (2002) 'How do we know a European public sphere when we see one? Theoretical clarifications and empirical indicators'. Paper presented to: IDNET Workshop, 'Europeanization and the Public Sphere', EUI, Florence.
- Scharpf, F.W. (1999) *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schlesinger, P.R. (1999) 'Changing spaces of political communication – the case of the European Union', *Political Communication* 16(3): 263–79.
- Schlesinger, P.R. and Kevin, D. (2000) 'Can the European Union become a sphere of publics?', in E.O. Eriksen and J.E. Fossum (eds), *Democracy in the European Union – Integration through Deliberation*, London: Routledge, pp. 206–29.
- Van Os, R. (2004) 'Investigating the concept of European public sphere in an online environment'. Paper presented to: 'Changing European Public Spheres: New Cultural and Media Contexts in Western and Eastern EU – Prospects and Challenges'. ESCUS, Sheffield University, Sheffield, UK, 23–24 September 2004. <http://oase.ucl.ru.nl/~vanos/Van%20Os,%20ESCUS%20conference%20revised%20paper.pdf>. Last accessed 14 January 2007.
- Warleigh, A. (2003) *Democracy and the European Union: Theory, Practice and Reform*, London: Sage.
- Wilhelm, A.G. (2000) *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace*, London: Routledge.
- Winkler, R. and Kozeluh, U. (2005) *Europeans have a Say: Online Debates and Consultations in the EU*. Final Report available at: http://epub.oew.ac.at/0xc1aa500d_0x0010b24e#search=%22%20winkler%20%22europeans%20have%20a%20say%22%22. Last accessed 14 January 2007.
- Wodak, R. and Wright, S. (2006) 'The European Union in cyberspace: multilingual democratic participation in a virtual public sphere?', *Journal of Language and Politics* 5(2): 251–75.
- Wodak, R. and Wright, S. (2007) 'The European Union online: language, policy and practice', in B. Danet and S.C. Herring (eds), *The Multilingual Internet: Language, Culture and Communication in Instant Messaging, E-mail and Chat*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, S. (2002) 'Dogma or dialogue? The politics of the Downing Street website', *Politics* 22(3): 135–42.
- Wright, S. (2005a) 'A comparative analysis of government-run discussion forums at the local, national and European levels'. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of East Anglia.
- Wright, S. (2005b) 'Design matters: the political efficacy of government-run discussion forums', in R. Gibson, S. Oates and D. Owen (eds), *Internet and Politics: Citizens, Voters and Activists*, London: Routledge, pp. 80–99.
- Wright, S. (2006) 'Government-run online discussion fora: moderation, censorship and the shadow of control', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 8(4): 550–68.
- Wright, S. and Street, J. (forthcoming) 'Democracy, deliberation and design: the case of online discussion forums', *New Media and Society*.