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Abstract
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Bridging the Spheres: Political and Personal Conversation in Public and Private Spaces

By Robert O. Wyatt, Elihu Katz, and Joohan Kim

For some theorists, talk about politics is infrequent, difficult, divisive, and, to be efficacious, must proceed according to special rules in protected spaces. We, however, examined ordinary political conversation in common spaces, asking Americans how freely and how often they talked about 9 *political and personal topics at home, work, civic organizations, and elsewhere. Respondents felt free to talk about all topics. Most topics were talked about most frequently at home and at work, suggesting that the electronic cottage is wired to the public sphere. Political conversation in most loci correlated significantly with opinion quality and political participation, indicating that such conversation is a vital component of actual democratic practice, despite the emphasis given to argumentation and formal deliberation by some normative theorists.*

Given the dictum, "Two things I never talk about in public are politics and religion," the troublesome fall in news consumption, a continuing slippage in voter turnout, and the controversy swirling around citizens' distrust of government and the decline of America's "social capital" (Putnam, 1995a, 1995b), [1] there is little wonder that questions abound about how little, how reluctantly, and where, if at all, Americans talk about politics. This debate proceeds, incidentally, despite empirical evidence that civic participation is alive and well (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1996; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 1997) and that political conversation is far from a dying art (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 1997).

[1]Both Roper Center (1996) and Pew Research Center (1997) studies challenge evidence for the civic decline in America proposed by Putnam (1995a, 1995b).

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The issue is complicated by the imprecise and shifting nature of the terms used to describe the nature of talk about political matters. We might assume, for example, that talk about politics involves the willingness to argue with a political opponent (who may be a stranger), and that such talk would be impeded by the perception of a hostile opinion climate (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Political talk also might mean deliberation or debate according to formal rules in protected spaces such as legislative assemblies or civic organizations (e.g., Schudson, 1997). Or, talk about politics might refer to informal conversation among acquaintances about governmental happenings reported in the news (e.g., Tarde, 1901/1989).

Regardless of the democratic benefits of purposeful argumentation with ideological opponents or the merits of structured deliberation in formal assemblies, what we term *ordinary political conversation* within the context of daily life forms the focus of our attention. For it is in this ordinary conversation about politics which may at times include informal deliberation or spirited argumentation as well as casual discussion-that we, following Tarde, believe democratic culture receives its most concrete realization. In this study, then, we seek to chart empirically how often Americans converse about politics in various common loci, that is, at home, at work, at worship, in organizations, out in commercial spaces, even in e-mail. We seek to define what subject domains characterize political conversation in an era of shifting boundaries, whether such conversation includes crime, national or local government, the economy, education, religion, personal matters, or foreign affairs. Finally, we seek to understand how freely citizens talk about each of these conversational domains. We then employ survey data to map the shifting nature of political conversation from locus to locus and to develop a redefined, empirically based model of conversational democracy.

We propose that the conversation model of democracy that we discover and explicate is appropriate for an age in which the natures of politics and public space are being reconstituted through new and ubiquitous media technologies that center in the home. In the process, we modify the important work of a number of prominent normative theorists of the public sphere. Though we acknowledge that normative theorists may justly argue that public life would be greatly improved by more widespread formal deliberation and freer purposeful argumentation, we believe that informal conversation among people who largely agree with each other plays a more vital role in democratic processes than is usually recognized. As empiricists, we seek to describe this role; as students of normative theory, we also suggest that democracy can be enriched if the role of informal political conversation is appreciated and such conversation encouraged along with other forms of political discourse.

The Literature on Talk and Politics

Continuing his crusade against loose talk about "the public sphere," Michael Schudson (1997) challenges the axiom that "conversation is the soul of democracy." Political conversation, asserts Schudson, is an oxymoron. By conversation, he reminds us, we mean talk for its own sake among intimates, usually social equals, unbridled by an agenda, unrestrained by rules except those of turn taking, civility, and offering pleasure. On the other hand, talk about politics, what we term *formal deliberation,* is often painful, says Schudson.

It implies an agenda, prescribed rules of order to protect weaker members, and purposefulness; it is oriented toward decision making and the writing of laws. It must proceed instrumentally among interlocutors who disagree-searching for solutions and resolutions. [2] Schudson is asking us, in effect, to reopen the question of whether casual conversation or organizational affiliations underwrite democratic governance. Implicitly, he is challenging our readings of Tocqueville (1840/1969), Dewey (1927), and, more recently, Putnam (1995a; 1995b; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti 1993), Barber (1984), and others. For Schudson, one infers, participatory democracy is the product of deliberate talk about public affairs, not the melange of chatter that goes on in coffeehouses and offices, even if talk of politics emerges now and then along with other idle matters.

As with all good theory, Schudson's challenge realigns the thought of earlier theorists who, before the challenge, all seemed to belong to one camp. Now, we can see that a spectrum of opinion about talk ranges between two poles-from those who hold that casual conversation and informal association include political topics that breed public opinion to those who hold, with Schudson, that conversation and political talk are different things.

With Schudson, other important researchers conclude that politics is divisive and that it is often avoided in casual talk. This is implicit in Noelle-Neumann's (1993) silent minority and in Eliasoph's (1998) ethnography of informal associations, in which even avowedly political groups avoid politics lest they alienate each other or be alienated from the larger society. Postman's (1985) critique of television as unable to sustain a rational argument also shares this view, however implicitly.

Barber (1984) is chief spokesperson of the perspective that ordinary conversation and politics are not inimical:

> At the heart of strong democracy is talk. As we shall see, talk is not mere speech.... Talk remains central to politics, which would ossify completely without its creativity, its variety, its openness and flexibility, its inventiveness, its capacity for discovery, its subtlety and complexity, its eloquence, its potential for empathy and affective expression, and its deeply paradoxical (some would say dialectical) character that displays man's [sic] full nature as a purposive, interdependent, and active being. (pp. 173-174)

Habermas (1962/1989) seems somewhere in between. On the one hand, his "public sphere" requires participants to check their status at the door in order to nullify self-interest, ensure equality, and permit rationality to guide the discussion toward an optimal solution for the commonwealth. On the other hand, he points to London coffeehouses and French cafes and salons as the ideal loci for such conversations. As "communicative actions" in the public

[2]Schudson (1998, p. 300) acknowledges that political conversation can happen at home, prompted by news, but he seems to think of adversarial conversation when he observes that such talk has "invaded the household~ and bears the "seeds of rights-consciousness."

sphere, maintains Habermas, conversations should be altogether different from "strategic actions" in the political system, such as formal discussion and rule-based, rational debates.

Also occupying a middle ground is Simonson (1996) in his analysis of several communication theorists' "dreams of democratic togetherness." For Simonson, political talk takes place variously in various spaces, including "lifestyle enclaves," voluntary associations, and community gathering places. The least amount of important political talk, he argues, takes place in lifestyle enclaves; voluntary associations are the most formal and clearly bounded spaces for significant discussion and community gathering places occupy a middle ground.

Aligning themselves with Barber are other philosophers of ordinary political conversation. Here we find writers like Gabriel Tarde (1901/1989), who thought that the informal conversation of cafes and salons mediated between press reports of the political agenda and a considered public opinion, a point reiterated by Herbst (1994). This understanding of political conversation is also consistent with the observations of Tocqueville (1840/1969) and Bryce (1891), those noted 19thcentury students of American democratic life. Smith and Zipp (1983) found that informal personal relationships with party officials promoted frequent political discussions that, in turn, enhanced citizens' political participation. Lazarsfeld's (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) two-step flow implies, too, that conversation about consumer behavior, fashion, movie going, and public affairs are the subjects of everyday talk among members of the public and their opinion leaders.

Among contemporaries, Gamson (1992) would take this side, at least in the sense of implying that ordinary people are capable of discussing politics in the same ways that they discuss other things. In his analysis of focus-group interchanges, Gamson finds that his subjects may not readily recall many of the "facts" of political life, but they are perfectly capable of discussing political issues that affect them with reasonable sophistication and civility. In a similar vein, Delli Carpini and Williams (1994, 1996) find that focus-group participants use both informational and fictional television programs as stimuli for talk about politics- even, on occasion, talking back to the screen-a finding that affirms the link between news, informal conversation, and the construction of public opinion.

Concerning the freedom with which people speak in ordinary circumstances, Wyatt et al. (Wyatt, 1991; Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, & Al-Haj, 1996) measured how free respondents felt to speak up in 10 public and private communication environments in the United States and among Arabs and Jews in Israel. In all three cultures, respondents felt "very free" to speak up in their own home or the homes of intimate associates. However, they felt only "somewhat free" in more inhibiting public locales such as the workplace or meetings of civic organizations. The researchers also found that, in all three cultures, issues of sociability and the fear of harming or offending others proved generally more important in inhibiting conversation than concerns about personal disapproval, marginalization, surveillance, or punishment. Although these findings do not apply exclusively to politics, they suggest that civil conversation is the norm across cultures and that talk, even in public spaces, is not markedly impeded by internal or external restraints. If these studies provide any clue, the more intimate circles should be the loci of the greatest amount of political conversation, and it should be informal in nature.

Still, surprisingly little empirical evidence exists about the nature and amount of political conversation and the relation of such conversation to news use, opinion quality, and political participation. This inattention to talk in general, and to political talk in particular, is evidenced in the General Social Survey (1999); only twice in its history stretching back to the early 1970s has the GSS included questions about political talk. Our best continuous source of data about U.S. presidential elections, the National Election Studies (1999), has included talk variables since 1984, but the items have usually been asked on the reinterview after the election, limiting their usefulness. Even these data, however, indicate that political conversation is far from infrequent among ordinary Americans (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 1997).

The relation between news use and interpersonal communication has been probed by a number of scholars, though Chaffee and Mutz (1988) remind us that the use of noncomparable scales and varying amounts of error may make comparisons difficult. In a reexamination of the two-step flow theory, Robinson (1976) affirmed that, when interpersonal and mass media sources are compared or in conflict, interpersonal sources can be expected to exercise greater influence, though news media may produce stronger gross effects because of wider use. Interpersonal communication has also been found to enhance media agenda-setting under certain conditions (McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974), though it can also function as a better predictor of issue salience than news use does (Wanta & Wu, 1992). In addition, interpersonal communication seems capable of performing a "bridging function" between respondents' perceptions of problems as personal and as societal issues (Mutz, 1989, May; Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992).

Talk about issues in the news has also been shown to increase markedly respondents' understanding of the news itself (Robinson & Levy, 1986; Robinson & Davis, 1990). Further, controversial issues that prompt wide discussion have been shown to decrease the size of knowledge gaps among populations (Tichenor, Donohue, & alien, 1980).

The effect of interpersonal communication on vote choice, particularly during elections, is the focus of other studies in political communication (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Lenart, 1994; Mondak, 1995). Mondak (1995), for example, addressed the relation of news use and political talk in Pittsburgh and Cleveland during a Pittsburgh newspaper strike, finding no significant difference in frequency of interpersonal discussion or the perception of discussion quality between the newspaper city and the strike city. He did not, however, attribute great importance to this finding because Pittsburgh voters readily found substitute information for presidential and senatorial campaigns. In House races, however, where alternate information sources were scarce, Pittsburgh residents reported considerably less talk.

Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), in a neighborhood-based consideration of the role of talk in election campaigns, queried urban respondents about the people they talked with most about "events of the past election year." Political conversation, they found, is not just a family affair. More than half of frequent discussants were nonrelatives. About two thirds of their respondents reported discussing politics with contacts "only once in a while," a figure rather constant regardless of the type of relationship. Concerning the loci of political conversation, about 70% of discussants lived in the same neighborhood, worked in the same place, or both.

Across relationship categories, only about 10-15% reported disagreeing with discussants "often." Clearly most of this political discussion is not rational-critical debate in rule-bound

assemblies among partisans painfully divided by ideology. The researchers also discovered that discussant influence on vote choice is greatest within families, if respondents correctly perceived their discussants' preferences and if respondents agreed with those preferences. The weight of the evidence here, then, favors a model of informal political influence--of respondents behaving the way they think people of a similar social position should behave based on environmental cues-rather than a model based on rational debate, explicit persuasion, or rule-bound discourse. Unfortunately, Huckfeldt and Sprague generally ignore media use in their models.

Research Questions

Given the vagaries surrounding definitions of what constitutes politics, the frequent focus on vote choice or issue salience as the dependent variable, and the wide neglect of the variety of "spaces" within which conversations about politics emerge, we set out to devise a more expansive method for measuring ordinary conversation about political and personal topics. Within this context, we addressed empirically a number of questions:

First we asked what "politics" means for ordinary Americans. Does the phrase "talking about politics" focus attention too narrowly on the workings of government itself, on personalities, bureaucratic institutions, campaigning, "courthouse" and inside-the-Beltway issues, and not enough on the wide variety of topics that have broader political relevance in the ordinary conversations of everyday life? Is talk about education or crime included when respondents say that they participate in conversations about politics? When they talk about education and crime, do they focus more narrowly on domestic issues concerning the safety and wellbeing of the family? Is talk about the economy a political issue for them, or is it more closely related to personal issues?

We also wondered how different spaces affect the ways various topics are talked about. Are topics such as crime and education considered political, in the sense that they are discussed alongside governmental concerns, if the discussion is held in public loci? Are the same subjects considered personal when discussed at home, where crime may be an intense proximate concern? To address these questions, we developed a battery of nine relatively specific items concerning national and state government, the economy, personal and family matters, religion, entertainment, and the like, avoiding the term politics in any of our questions. We then asked respondents to estimate how much they talked about these items in different places.

Given the common propensity to distinguish between the public and private dimensions of life both among theorists of democracy and in lay discourse, we theorized that the nine items would cluster into public and private-or political and personal-factors or facets when analyzed by factor analysis and multidimensional scaling techniques designed to probe latent relationships. Thus, a priori, we defined national and state government as the center of the public sphere and personal and family matters as the center of the private sphere, knowing, of course, that these terms are used elastically by some scholars and restrictively by others.[3]

Further, we sought to determine how free respondents felt to converse about each of the subject domains in general. We believed that, if political conversation was conceived of as a

divisive, difficult, threatening, or segregated activity, respondents should feel substantially less free to talk about the public-affairs items than about other issues. If, however, respondents felt as free to talk about political topics as other matters, the interpretations of Schudson and others would be called into question or, at least, the fact that ordinary political conversation occurs within congenial environments would be established.

We thus focused on four questions: How much do respondents engage in talk about various subject-specific items in general and in different loci? How free in general do respondents feel to talk about these items? Do these items cluster into public and private domains? Do certain items change their identity from public to private in different loci?

Method

Survey Sample

To address these questions, a nationwide telephone survey of 1,029 adults from the 50 U.S. states was conducted in May 1996 using computer-assisted interviewing and random digit dialing. Once an eligible English-speaking household was contacted, respondents were systematically chosen, rotating gender and age. Fifty-six percent of the sample was female. For age, 31% were 18-34, 35% were 35-49, 20% were 50-64, and 15% were 65 and older. Whites made up 84% of the sample; Blacks, 9%; and those of other or mixed race, 7%[4]

Instrument

Respondents were asked whether they talked about each of nine content-specific items "often," "sometimes," "seldom," or "never." We asked first about the amount of talk "in general" and then in each of six loci: the personal home and the homes of friends and family; clubs, community and civic organizations; worship; bars, restaurants, and shopping malls surrounded by both friends and strangers; work; and e-mail or on the Internet. We also asked how free, in general, subjects felt to talk about these items (“very,” “somewhat,” “slightly,” or “not at all”).

The nine content-specific items included "what the President, the national government and the Congress are doing,” “what your state and local government are doing,” “what is happening in foreign countries,” “how the economy is doing,” “the crime situation and violence in society,” “what is happening in your personal life and your family,” “what's going on in the schools and education,” “your religion and religious beliefs,” and “what is

[3]Our a priori definitions are consistent with the understanding articulated by Rawlins (1998) in a special issue of *Communication Theory* (1998) devoted to examining the implications of and developments in our understanding of the nature of the public and the private.

[4] The U.S. Census Bureau (1996) estimates that, for the U.S. population above age 18, 52% are female. For age, 33% are estimated to be 18-34, 32% are 35-49, 18% are 50-64, and 17% are 65 and older. For the entire population, race estimates are 83% White, 13% Black, and 5% of other or mixed race. Given the acceptable distribution of the demographics, however, data were not weighted. Using the most conservative formulas endorsed by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (1998), the response rate (from all possible eligible units) was 26%, the cooperation rate (from all known eligible units) was 56%, and the refusal rate (from all contacted eligible units) was 17%.

happening in sports, television, music, or the movies." Items were presented to respondents in random order within each locus in order to control for question-order effects.

Analysis

To define the deep structure of the variables underlying the nine talk items in each locus, we used both exploratory factor analysis and multidimensional scaling together with Guttman's (1968) facet theory. To produce the factors, we employed principal components analysis with oblique rotation and an eigenvalue of 1 as a stop criterion. We used the results from the exploratory factor analyses to provide a clue as to which questions should be assigned to which categories, or "facets," in Guttman facet theory. We felt certain that most items would fall easily into political and personal facets, but we also wondered whether certain "bridge" items might prove to be cross-factorial and, hence, might mediate between the public and private. Thus, we speculated that topics such as crime or the economy might be talked about in both personal and political terms, bridging the gap. However, we could only guess at which items would be included in which facets, given the paucity of previous research. We tested the resulting facets across the different loci, using smallest space analysis (SSA) as a confirmatory procedure.

Here, we used Faceted Smallest Space Analysis (FSSA), a program developed by Shye (1992; Shye, Elizur, & Hoffman, 1994) that first maps the items, then mathematically partitions each conceptual map according to the predefined facets. The program also provides a separation index ranging from 0-1 to assess how well each facet scheme fits the data. The separation index may be interpreted much as Cronbach's alpha is used to measure the reliability of additive scales.

Results

Overall Levels of Talk

The "general conversation" variables, that is, those without reference to loci, produced the highest estimates of conversation, averaging more than "sometimes," $M = 3.13$ out of 4.00, across the nine subject domains (see Table 1). Among specific loci, respondents' homes and the homes of family and friends evidenced the greatest amounts of talk; at home, talk averaged a bit above "sometimes" across the nine items. Next came talk at work, followed by clubs and civic organizations, then place of worship. At place of worship, conversation about public and private affairs is relatively sparse, between "seldom" and "sometimes." Talk at bars, restaurants, and malls among both friends and strangers evidenced even lower levels. Then, in last place, came "talk" in e-mail or in Internet discussion groups, perhaps indicating that most users employed this new medium for subjects other than those enumerated in the questionnaire.

Exploratory Factor Analyses of Talk Items and Loci

To understand better the relation between the various subject-specific items, we conducted exploratory factor analysis on the nine "general conversation" variables, with locus unspecified. The analysis produced two factors: Political Conversation and Personal

Table 1. Means and Rank Orders for Nine Talk Variables Within Loci and for Freedom to Talk

Locus	General		Home		Work		Clubs, Comm., and Civic Orgs.		Worship		Restaurants, Bars, Malls		E-mail, Internet		Freedom to Talk	
Crime	3.56	1	3.26	1	3.18	1	3.02	2	2.74	3	2.66	2	1.84	6	3.74	1
Education	3.38	2	3.26	2	3.05	3	3.10	1	2.74	2	2.49	3	2.07	3	3.68	3
Entertainment-Sports	3.12	5	3.11	4	3.10	2	2.61	6	2.10	9	2.72	1	2.21	1	3.69	2
Economy	3.13	4	3.04	5	2.97	4	2.86	4	2.23	6	2.44	4	1.95	4	3.62	4
Personal/Family Matters	3.30	3	3.24	3	2.62	7	2.35	8	2.48	4	2.38	5	2.20	2	3.18	9
Local/State Government	3.06	6	2.91	7	2.86	5	2.92	3	2.26	5	2.31	7	1.81	7	3.58	5
National Government	3.05	7	2.94	6	2.85	6	2.77	5	2.21	7	2.32	6	1.93	5	3.55	6
Religion	2.85	8	2.7	8	2.24	9	2.29	9	3.35	1	2.09	8	1.60	9	3.38	8
Foreign Happenings	2.72	9	2.55	9	2.41	8	2.37	7	2.20	8	2.06	9	1.72	8	3.42	7
Overall *M*/Gross *N*	3.13/995		3.01/1,002		2.81/662		2.71/351		2.48/639		2.39/939		1. 93/132		3.54/950	
Rank by *M*	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		NA	

Note. Individual loci ordered from left by decreasing mean for talk. All scales range from 1 to 4.

Table 2. Factors and Loadings for the Nine Talk Variables in the General Locus

Locus	General		Home/Family		Workplace		Organizations		Worship	Commercial	E-mail/Internet	
	Political	Personal	Political	Personal	Political	Personal	Political	Personal	Single-factor	Single-factor	Political	Personal
National government	.84	-.06	.91	-.10	.87	-.05	.88	.-07	.82	.83	.89	-.02
Local/state government	.75	.02	.86	-.03	.86	-.09	.93	-.18	.82	.82	.73	.15
Foreign happenings	.63	.12	.69	.08	.66	.10	.66	.14	.78	.80	.90	-.15
Economy	.77	-.03	.83	-.00	.87	-.15	.84	-.00	.80	.82	.92	-.17
Crime	.20	.53	.51	.34	.68	.10	.58	.32	.83	.84	.80	.11
Personal/Family Matters	-.15	.70	-.11	.86	-.10	.90	-.14	.87	.69	.61	-.08	.92
Education	.17	.61	.33	.54	.55	.29	.57	.26	.83	.81	.75	.18
Religion	-.03	.66	-.01	.71	.11	.72	.11	.74	.62	.66	.47	.39
Entertainment/Sports	.02	.48	.06	.61	.33	.30	.17	.52	.63	.69	.37	.51
Percentage of variance	34	14	47	12	46	13	49	13	58	59	58	11
Correlation	.37		.50		.41		.45				.40	

Note. Principal components extraction was used with oblique rotation.

Conversation (see Table 2). National government, local-state government, the economy, and foreign happenings loaded highest on the Political Conversation factor. For talk in general, then, Political Conversation is quite conventionally defined as talk about government, the economy, and foreign affairs. Personal or family matters, religion, education, crime, and entertainment sports loaded highest on Personal Conversation (see Table 2). Surprisingly, then, in general conversation, crime and education were talked about more in terms of their personal and family dimensions than their political relevance. Because of the moderate loadings of the Personal Conversation items, it seems likely that the inclusion of additional subjects might have split the factor into additional factors. Personal Conversation here represents something of a miscei1any of items distinguished more by their difference from Political Conversation than by their commonality. [5] The correlation between the two factors was moderate (r = .37).

A similar structure is evident when the locus shifts to the home. Again, a Political Conversation and a Personal Conversation factor emerge with much the same loading as the general-talk variables (see Table 2). Crime, however, swings toward the political side and even education takes on a more pronounced cross-factorial role, though still it loads higher on the personal dimension. At home, this analysis suggests, crime and education bridge the gap between political and personal conversation. Here, the factors account for a more robust 59% of the variance. The cross-factor correlation, r = .50, again suggests that higher levels of one kind of talk lead to higher levels of the other.

When we turn to the workplace, crime and education move definitively into the Political Conversation column, indicating that the focus shifts to the public and governmental dimension and away from the personal aspect of these two "bridge" variables (see Table 2). Thus, as respondents move from place to place, they seem to talk about crime and education in different ways.[6] For talk at work, the two factors again displayed a healthy correlation, r = 41.

When the locus shifts to an important component of the normative public sphere--clubs or community and civic organizations—a pattern quite similar to the workplace again emerges (see Table 2). Crime and education, though still bridging the factors, fall definitively into the Political Conversation column. Thus, in such prototypical "public spaces," crime and education are viewed as government concerns, and the personal, family, and neighborhood dimensions recede; perhaps the discussion is more rational-critical, more deliberative. Here again, however, the correlation between factors is respectable, r = .45.

5 Although we initially designated the two factors Public Conversation and Private Conversation, we were concerned that this might lead to confusion between talk about topics of public concern—our intended meaning—and talk in public spaces. We also felt that those terms might imply greater theoretical distinction between public and private topics than our results would justify.

6 A separate factor analysis of the home variables including only respondents who work produced loadings virtually identical to the factor analysis of all respondents, confirming that the difference is a matter of loci, not respondents who work versus all other respondents.

For the other loci of conversation, we will summarize findings only briefly. The worship and restaurant-shopping spaces both produced single-factor solutions (see Table 2), perhaps indicative of the lower levels of conversation in these places and the lack of differentiation among subjects, when they are talked about at all. However, the political items were predominant in the unrotated loadings. The e-mail environment (see Table 2) found the economy loading highest on the Political factor, and personal/family matters loading highest on Personal Conversation, conforming to a familiar pattern, though the sample is small (N = 132) and loadings are more extreme than in other environments.

Freedom to Talk About Each Subject

Respondents were also asked how free they felt "to talk about each of these subjects in general whenever they come up in conversation." Responses ranged from "very free" to "not at all free" on four-point scales. The means for all items fell between very free and somewhat free (see Table 1), indicating that respondents did not feel particularly inhibited when any subject was raised. They felt freest to talk about crime, followed by sports, education, the economy, state government, national government, foreign affairs, religion, and personal matters. Subjects about which respondents felt most inhibited were personal, not political, issues—countering any assumption that talk about politics is exceptionally painful. Of course, it is also likely that such talk proceeds most often among people who know each other and share a common worldview.

These nine items formed a highly reliable additive scale (Cronbach's α = .87), indicating that freedom-to-talk transcends specific items. When controlled for age, education, income, gender, and media use, there were good partial correlations between freedom-to-talk and the reported amount of talk in each locus; freedom-to-talk proved a good predictor of talk across subjects and loci. The strongest relation was between freedom-to-talk and the factor representing general Political Conversation (partial r = .35), followed by Political Conversation in organizations (*partial r* = .33), at home (*partial r* = .32), then the combined factors at place of worship (*partial* r = .29) and out in public (*partial r* = .26). Weakest correlations were with the Political Conversation factor in e-mail (*partial r* = .22) and in the workplace (*partial r* = .21), perhaps indicating greater tension or greater reluctance in these environments.

We also calculated compatibility between respondents' own political orientation and their perception of the position of most of their family, friends, and acquaintances. On five-point scales (far left through middle of the road to far right), 65% of respondents reported that they and their intimate circle held the same general orientation, and 24% indicated that their orientation diverged by only one unit. Interestingly, such compatibility was not significantly related to the freedom to talk, perhaps because of its very ubiquity.

Confirmatory Smallest Space Analysis for Major Loci

Based on the exploratory factor analyses, the investigators engaged in further descriptive analysis and confirmatory conceptual mapping using Faceted Smallest Space Analysis (Shye, 1992). Thus, we hypothesized the existence of a Political Facet and a Personal Facet, as

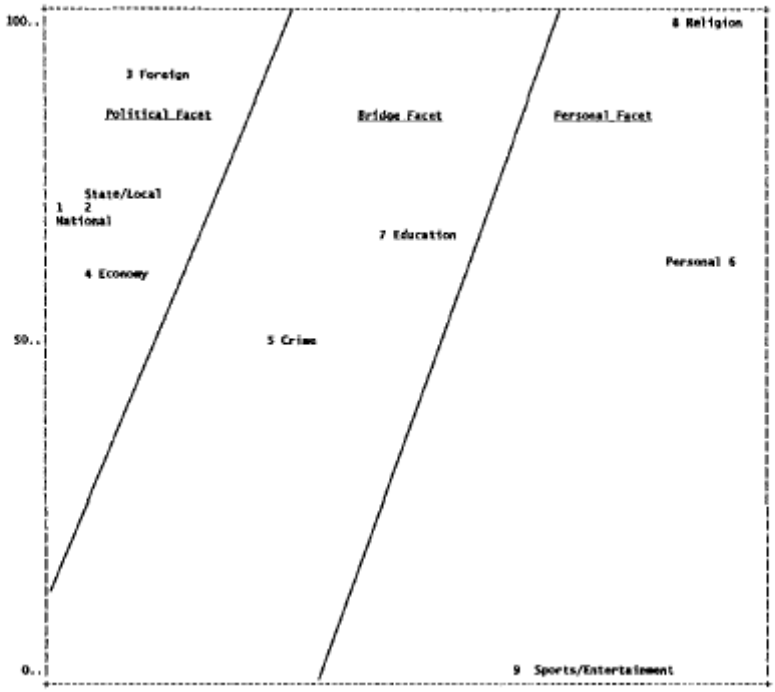

Figure 1. Faceted smallest space analysis map for home variables

factor analyses of most loci suggested. We also added a Bridge Facet consisting of crime and education because these topics seemed to span the political and the personal dimensions of talk. This scheme, if confirmed by FSSA, should help us build a broader theory of talk about political and personal subjects in different spaces.[7]

FSSA easily partitioned “general conversation” and each of the specific loci into a Political Facet, a Personal Facet, and a Bridge Facet. Whether FSSA used parallel lines, concentric circles, or radial lines to divide the space, the partitions fell into place around the appropriate variables. For each locus, there was a perfect fit, separation index = 1.0, confirming the generalizability of the facet scheme, despite shifting patterns from locus to locus.[8]

Because available space limits the number of figures, we will present only two FSSA maps-those for home (Figure 1) and work (Figure 2). These two spaces represent loci with

7 In offering this three-facet scheme, we reiterate that there are good correlations among the factors that emerged from factor analysis. Thus, the facets, though distinct, are not radically separated from one another; they are bordering counties on a small map of the conversational landscape. Although the names for the Political Facet, the Personal Facet, and the Bridge Facet might be confused with the Political Conversation and Personal Conversation factors, we have taken care to capitalize the words "facet" and “conversation" to distinguish the two.

8 A cursory examination of Figures 1 and 2 also will confirm that a two-facet Political-Personal scheme would scale perfectly for either map, as it does in all other loci.

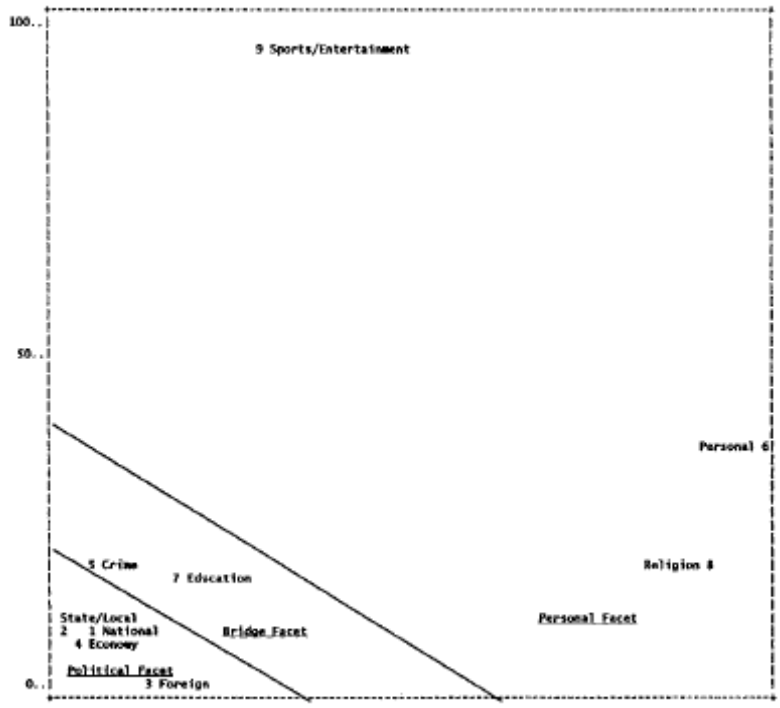

Figure 2. Faceted smallest space analysis map for work variables

the highest mean levels of talk and the largest numbers of respondents (see Table 1). They also illustrate the greatest contrasts among the seven possible maps. Still, in overall pattern, maps for all loci are remarkably similar. The distances among variables shift, but their relative locations remain much the same. From map to map, the direction of the axes may rotate, but that is a trivial artifact of scaling. Though not depicted, we will still describe the maps for each locus.

As is readily apparent in Figure 1, in the home, the four definitive political variables are closely clustered opposite the single variable measuring conversation about personal and family matters. Buffering the Political and the Personal Facets are the Bridge Facet variables of crime and education, which fall at the center. At work and at some other loci, these bridge variables will swing over toward the public side. In factor analysis for the home, one should recall, crime loaded highest on the Political Conversation factor, while education loaded highest on Personal Conversation, though both proved cross-factorial.

Also notable in this diagram is the wide spacing among the three personal items. Talk about personal matters is about as close to the political variables as it is to chat about sports and entertainment, and crime and education are about as near to the political items as to any of the Personal Facet variables. If the left-to-right axis of the FSSA map can be interpreted as representing the political-personal pole, the top-to-bottom axis might range from the most serious or cloaked subject (religion) to the most trivial and open matter (sports-entertainment). Given such an interpretation, the political items, the bridge items, and talk about personal and

family matters are all of intermediate seriousness or openness. One should not be misled by the amount of space separating variables in this or any other concept map-the Political Facet and the Personal Facet variables are significantly correlated. This is a map of a small space indeed.

When we turn to "general conversation" with locus unspecified, FSSA produced a map virtually identical to the general-talk map. Crime did move a bit closer to the Personal Conversation Facet; education, on the other hand, remained at about the same place. Religion fell a bit nearer to Bridge Facet; foreign affairs moved away slightly from the other political variables. Overall, however, talk in the intimate circles of family and friends appeared to be the model for the general talk variables. This finding suggests that talk in general and at home represents not only the most frequent, but also the most typical, configuration for conversation. Indeed, the maps for clubs and civic organizations, for place of worship, and for commercial spaces seemed interchangeable with the maps for talk at home and talk in general.

When we turn to the map for talk at work (Figure 2), we see a pronounced shift from the typical general talk-home talk alignment, though the relative placement of variables remains much the same. Although the hypothesized partitions fit the data exactly, crime and education are now proximate to the Political Facet variables- where factor analysis also aligns them-and the Political Facet and Bridge Facet variables are crowded into a corner. As factor analysis suggested, crime and education are talked about at work more in terms of governmental action than personal relevance. Personal affairs and religion, though talked about relatively infrequently here, have drawn together, far from political and bridge talk.

This configuration suggests that, when personal matters and religion are spoken of at work, the conversation is confined to intimate colleagues. We find a certain disjunction here between the political and the private. Sports and entertainment, though talked about as much as crime or education, stand off alone, separated from the rest of the personal and political variables. In fact, at work, if any subject is talked about in great isolation from private and public concerns, it is the fluff of sports and entertainment-not politics. Presumably, too, sports and entertainment represent nonthreatening, nonserious, time-filling subjects for chitchat, though sports, too, can take on heated connotations.

The place of worship, where principal components analysis extracted only one factor, provided a bit of a contrast to the typical configuration for conversation, though again the facets fit perfectly. Religion, here, has moved away from its isolated position toward the Political Facet. Finally, in e-mail and Internet discussion groups, we find that the Bridge Facet variables are proximate to the Political Facet variables, with religion moving toward the cluster. Though religion is “talked” about least frequently in this locus, these results suggest that its political dimensions are relevant to the focus.

All in all, our findings across the loci imply that political subjects are not discussed in sharp isolation from other topics, a finding amplified by factor analysis. The “life-world” is, hence, less easily divided into the public sphere and the family than some theorists might imagine. Although the level and nature of talk shift from locus to locus, political conversation and personal conversation form a continuum, with bridge variables providing common ground.

The Amount of Talk in the Three Facets

To understand how the levels of political conversation compare with other topics in various loci, we examined the means and rank orders of the nine specific topics across loci. Granted, means are not the ideal measures of the central tendency of ordinal variables, but they are convenient for ranking general priorities. As Table 1 makes apparent, the bridge variables of crime and education achieve the highest overall rank orders. Crime scores first in general conversation, at home, and at work; ranks second in commercial spaces and in organizations; rates third at worship; and drops to sixth in computer-mediated communication. In most loci, crime and education not only bridge the gap between the public and private spheres but are also the most salient topics of conversation—challenging claims that political conversation and personal conversation proceed by entirely different rules. The political conversation variables range around the middle of the rank order across loci, with the economy falling fourth; state and local government, sixth; national government, seventh; and foreign events, ninth. Personal and family matters place in the middle of the rank order, scoring third in general and at home, fourth at worship, fifth in commercial spaces, seventh at work, and eighth in organizations. Except for foreign happenings, religion scores as the least-talked about subject.

If any domain is talked about infrequently, it is not the public and bridge topics, nor personal and family affairs, but religion, which is spoken about seldom except in its own sanctuary-like space. People may say that they avoid talk about politics and religion like the

Table 3. Partial Correlations Between Political Conversation in Each Locus and Opinionation, Consideredness, and Political Participation

Locus of Political Conversation	Opinionation		Consideredness		Participation	
General	.08*	(838)	.15**	(403)	.29***	(832)
Home	.15***	(845)	.16**	(403)	.23***	(832)
Work	.10*	(584)	.05	(299)	.17***	(584)
Organizaton	.08*	(292)	.29***	(162)	.30***	(292)
Worship #	.14**	(522)	.14*	(300)	.21***	(522)
Restaurant/Bar/Mall #	.09*	(792)	.06	(403)	.13***	(792)
E-mail	-.04	(101)	.33**	(61)	.25*	(101)

* <.05, ** < .01, *** <.001. *N* in parentheses. # Principal components analysis produced only one factor, where political items loaded high.

plague, but our results suggest that religion is the more guarded topic. Sports/entertainment seems just the opposite. Scoring fifth and fourth in general and at home, talk about sports and entertainment is the number 1 topic out in commercial spaces and the number 2 subject at work, where such casual talk may fill time without threatening egos or invading personal space.

Talk About Politics, Opinion Quality, and Political Participation

To show that our results represent more than just a theoretical construct in a typology of conversation, we examined the relationship between Political Conversation and other

variables important to the public and political spheres.[9] In particular, we sought to show that Political Conversation in various loci was significantly correlated with the quality of individual opinion and with political participation, when controlled for age, education, income, gender, and newspaper and television news use. Assessing opinion quality is a difficult matter subject to wide interpretation (Price & Neijens, 1997), but we felt that respondents who engaged in higher levels of Political Conversation should hold more opinions about specific political issues (termed "opinionation") and should demonstrate a higher quality of opinion (called "consideredness").

Opinionation comprised an additive scale based on whether respondents gave answers to questions about party identification, political orientation, the obligation of government to provide a "decent living" for the unemployed, and, following a specific emphasis in the survey, support for Medicare against budget cutting. Consideredness was based on interviewer codings of reasons a random half of respondents gave to justify their answer about cutting Medicare to balance the budget. The scale ranged from no reason given to an awareness of both sides of an issue. Political participation was represented by a factor made up of highly loaded items that included contacting candidates, attending political meetings, working in campaigns, and the likelihood of voting in an upcoming election.

As Table 3 shows, political conversation in general, at home, at work, and in organizations—and the combined political-personal conversation factor at worship and in commercial spaces—displayed significant partial correlations with opinionation, when controlled for status demographics and news use. Conversation, then, results in more opinions about political issues. Given the fact that our political conversation questions asked only for general estimates about the amount of conversation while opinionation was based on responses to specific items, we judge this relation important.

Political conversation in general, at home, in organizations, and in e-mail was also significantly correlated to consideredness, a variable based on interviewer assessment of respondents' reasons for holding a specific opinion, which was part of an experimental design asked of a random half.

The combined Political-Personal Conversation Factor at place of worship also correlated significantly with consideredness. Curiously, workplace conversation was not significantly related to consideredness. We found the relation between political conversation and consideredness striking, given the fact that the issue under consideration, though hardly obscure, required some vigilance to understand.

9 To understand demographic correlates of Political Conversation, OLS regression was employed for each locus, using age, income, education, gender, and newspaper and TV news consumption as predictors. Education was a highly significant correlate of each Political Conversation factor except in civic organizations, Newspaper readership proved highly significant in general, at home, at work, and in organizations. Television news played a role in the home and, to a lesser extent, in general Political Conversation. Age played a negative role in worship and in commercial spaces. Maleness and income were the least important predictors.

As Table 3 also shows, all of the political conversation and political-personal conversation factors correlated significantly with political participation, with particularly strong relations at home and in organizations. These correlations of conversation with opinionation, consideredness, and participation testify to the integral role that ordinary political conversation plays in democratic processes. Our findings also suggest that, although civic organizations remain crucial, their reach is limited (35% of our sample) and the level of conversation there (see Table 1) is lower than in the home, which may be the true seat of democratic vice and virtue.

Summary and Discussion

Students of politics, such as Schudson (1997), Postman (1985), Eliasoph (1998), and Noelle-Neumann (1993), argue in various ways that talk about politics, whether deliberative or persuasive, is a form of discourse separate and apart from normal conversation because talk about politics is difficult and divisive. Such formal deliberation or purposeful persuasion must ideally proceed in safe, protected, even contrived environments such as public-affairs organizations or legislatures—if it proceeds at all. In such places, rules and procedures guard the politically weak and those in the minority from the predatory rhetoric of the strong and the majority. Such rules, which also might encourage, in Habermas's (1962/1989) terms, a selfless rational-critical public discussion, separate these modes of political discourse from ordinary conversation. Other students of politics, such as Tocqueville (1840/1969), Bryce (1891), Tarde (1901/1989), and Dewey (1927), have suggested variously that talk about politics and everyday conversation meld together. They generally believe, and we concur, that interlocutors shift readily from the discussion of political issues to aimless chat to conversation about personal issues in a manner that does not markedly separate the public from the private sphere, producing what we term ordinary political conversation. Here, political topics are discussed, and sometimes debated, together with other common events such as a spate of airline accidents, the quality of a movie, the cause of a child's failing grades, or the prowess of the local coach.

The results of our study should reassure those who believe that ordinary political conversation rests close to the soul of democracy, and that talk about public concerns conducted in private, even among family and friends, has political consequences. Our data suggest that national affairs, international affairs, state and local affairs, and the economy are discussed with reasonable frequency (near “sometimes”) in general, at home, and at work, though they are discussed less often at civic organizations, at worship, or out in commercial spaces. Regardless of the subject, we found, respondents felt reasonably free to talk about any of our nine subjects-perhaps because they talk mostly with people with whom they agree. We, of course, believe that wider formal deliberation and purposeful argumentation would greatly enrich democratic processes, but we also believe that informal political conversation is a vital and often unappreciated component of political life.

Rather than belonging to the exclusive domain of public spaces, we found that ordinary political conversation takes place most frequently in one's own home or the homes of friends or family—that is, where most public media are consumed. Such ordinary political

conversation, importantly, was significantly correlated with opinion quality and political participation. Conversation in familiar spaces is more than mere talk; though directions of causation are likely to be multiple, conversation may lead to or result from better thinking and greater action.

These findings appear to embody precisely what Morley (1990, p. 123) had in mind when he urged scholars to "reframe the study of political communication in the media within the broader context of domestic communication (involving the interdiscursive connections of broadcast and other media, family dynamics, and gossip networks)." They fit well with Delli Carpini and Williams's finding (1994, 1996) that people weave television content into their everyday talk about political issues. They also mesh with Livingstone and Lunt's (1994) argument that television talk shows function as forums for negotiation and compromise in a public sphere far more informal and self-interested than Habermas envisioned. Our results also challenge suppositions that personal spaces are weaker loci for talk about public affairs than voluntary associations and community gathering places (Simonson, 1996).

Paradoxically, home appears to be an integral part of the public sphere- the very point, in fact, where the public sphere and the family meet to form a life-world more integrated than Habermas (1962/1989) conceived. This "inward" home, though increasingly connected to the virtual world but isolated from its physical neighborhood, remains a primary space for public business because media bring the external landscape to its confines (Gumpert & Drucker, 1998), It is as if mass communication has revived the salon, where conversation about crime and education leads the agenda, followed by personal matters and entertainment, then the economy, national, state, and local government, then religion, and, last, foreign affairs.

Within this electronic cottage, most subjects are spoken about on average at least "sometimes," At home and elsewhere, distinctively political subject domains (national, state, and local government; foreign affairs) do not function in isolation from more personal issues (family matters, entertainment, religion). As factor analysis and multidimensional scaling suggest, they are spanned by "bridge" items (crime, education) that mediate between public and private, Such ordinary political conversation—though not the structured disputation or purposeful argumentation that some normative democratic theorists advocate—is associated with greater action in the public sphere, questioning again Lazarsfeld and Merton's (1948) classic assumption, supported by Hallin and Mancini (1985), that the American living room is the place where broadcast news goes to die.

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