Examining political discourse on a crafting website

Laura Steibel O'brien
laura.steibel.obrien@gmail.com

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EXAMINING POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON A CRAFTING WEBSITE

Laura O’Brien, M.A.
Department of English
Northern Illinois University, 2019
Joseph Bonomo, Director

Websites dedicated to leisure pursuits are often used to connect with others over a shared interest. Some allow and encourage participants to engage in discussion. This project examined the ways that one crafting website, Ravelry, attempts to maintain civil discourse among its users, as opposed to the sometimes hostile and aggressive interactions found on other sites. The study looked at its discussion moderation practices as its users discussed politics and then analyzed how this related to community norms and practices of civil public discourse. Discourse analysis of words, phrases and interactions within representative discussion threads suggest that while Ravelry’s guidelines aim to create an atmosphere of warmth and inclusion, assistance from moderators, discourse norms enacted and enforced by users, and expectations of civil behavior work in concert. The study also found that while some participants discouraged any political discussion on the site and preferred to keep it politics-free, others were aware of the historical interplay between craft, rhetoric and politics.
EXAMINING POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON A CRAFTING WEBSITE

BY

LAURA O’BRIEN
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Thesis Director:
Joseph Bonomo
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Some online participatory spaces were created to promote an interest in a particular subject or hobby and, given the benignity and minutiae of that subject matter, might be expected to eschew difficult, provocative or inflammatory discussion. The website Ravelry, for example, is used by 8 million crafters as a compendium of all things fiber and the interests of most of its users are centered around in yarn and its related crafts. However, when such a website also allows the opportunity for public discussion and interaction, the resulting discourse behavior might surprise those who, perhaps stereotypically, believe it to be a neutral, nonthreatening space for finding baby blanket patterns – and those surprised would include many of the site participants themselves. What happens when the discussion at Ravelry turns from one’s passion for knitting socks to arguing about politics, for example? In this study, I wanted to examine instances of discourse on a platform where this kind of discourse is, for some, an unwelcome surprise and for others, a natural outgrowth of their interests. Given the spectrum of voices on a website like Ravelry, what is required to keep its discourse civil, if indeed that is the participants’ and the website’s goal? Do its participants naturally engage civilly or is more guidance required? What are the factors that encourage or discourage civility?
Crafting Website: Ravelry

Ravelry is an aggregator of data on fiber crafts that include knitting, crocheting and other fiber-related activities such as spinning, dyeing, and weaving; it also serves as an online community. Launched in 2007 by a wife and husband team (she a knitter, he a computer programmer), Ravelry boasts around 8 million registered users, about one million of whom have been active in the last month, spanning the globe, concentrated largely in the U.S.

Participants in Ravelry must register by submitting an email address; when they are registered, they can then create a page to represent themselves with a screen name (required), an avatar and personal information. This home page displays the running total number of projects, plans, patterns, yarn, emails, and forum posts the user has created. Participants are encouraged to create a project page for each item they create, citing project details such as materials used and where they were purchased that create a seemingly endless database of information on their craft. Users are encouraged to post and write as much as they want about the progress of their project including ratings for their pattern and materials. Users can search among thousands of knit and crochet patterns, often free, and see photographs of the examples of other Ravelers who have made the same pattern. Ravelry's databases are comprehensive and sophisticated, containing an extraordinary compendium of crafting materials along with a user-friendly interface to locate and utilize them. The site also offers many opportunities, through forums and group discussions, through its own email system, and with the comment sections of patterns, for users to interact and engage, serving as its own social media platform. Every part of the website encourages textual and visual rhetoric and public discourse. Given the current divisiveness in public discourse, how does a site like Ravelry maintain civility?
Can we apply the civil tradition to current technological interactions? Gergen (2001) describes the civil tradition as featuring “among other characteristics ...respect for the other...the avoidance of hostility or direct antagonism...modesty” (p. 71). He asserts that civil discourse should “proceed without diminishing” other participants (p. 72). However, he notes that the blessings of this kind of exchange are only generally bestowed on those that conform to the rhetorical norms of the group.

Sociologists, psychologists, linguists and media studies academics recognize the impact that technology has on human connection, particularly the internet platforms that allow communication and discourse among strangers. Much has been made of the negative, vitriolic rhetoric that lately permeates public discourse, especially discourse mediated through social platforms. Perhaps Gergen did not anticipate that hostility and aggression, well-documented negative features of social media participation, would become the rhetorical norm in some spaces, especially against those deemed marginalized by a platform’s community. Users of mainstream social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest have at least a modicum of control over the kind of discourse that shows up on their self-selected (more or less) feeds, and they can control what they see and read and can keep others from seeing and reading. However, in these and other platforms, trolling thrives as an ecosystem, both as a deliberate act of antagonism (not excluding the ‘bots that have been discovered recently) and as a prescriptive way to argue with views and opinions that differ from one’s own. Phillips (2015) examined the role of trolls and trolling specifically, but her work finds larger context in what trolling represents: among other things, a culture that seems to value dominance and suppression.
The same could be said of Milner’s (2013) findings regarding online rhetoric: an assumed dominant culture suppresses and antagonizes anyone who attempts to push back on its majority, effectively chasing off dissenters, often using humor and irony to do so. Milner believes that by sheer articulation, marginalized voices might be heard, and the dominant culture forced to engage. However, this seems idealistic, an assumption that the small amount of leeway those voices found in his study made an impact or a lasting effect on harassers. Kenski, Coe and Rains (2017) note the worryingly widespread phenomenon of incivility, exacerbated by social media’s easy accessibility and circularity. They’ve attempted to identify, predict and codify reactions to incivility in public discourse to gauge its negative effects. They found that there were types of incivility (name calling, ad hominem attacks, vulgarity) which reliably occur when average citizens participate in the comment section of newspaper articles, creating varying levels of animosity and incivility. Uncivil discourse often seems to be the norm rather than the exception.

It is not untenable to believe that “civil” civil discourse may only come as a result of censorship and heavy moderation (Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014). Lampe, Zube, Lee, Park, and Johnston (2014) agree that moderators are essential to keeping discourse civil. Walther and Jang (2012) have explored discourse in participatory websites and broken down the roles that moderators and participants play in shaping social media use. The presence of moderators may contribute to the perception of safe space -- that is, the presence and practices of those moderators and administrators may give the impression of freedom from aggression and hostility (Lampe et al., 2014).
Ravelry and Online Participatory Spaces

In today’s social media climate, participatory spaces can sometimes be hostile and unwelcoming, especially for women and/or those perceived as out of a particular website’s community norm, often white, cis-gendered, male, and heterosexual (see Phillips, 2015; Milner, 2013; also see Sparby (2017) on aggression on digital social media). In contrast, Ravelry’s general atmosphere is intentionally positive and welcoming and may offer users a respite from the rhetorical aggression found elsewhere online wherever people have the opportunity to freely post and comment. It is a space for makers and creators to present their work and connect with other makers and creators, where harassment and trolling are dealt with firmly and conclusively, not only because the administrators and moderators are paying attention but also because the essential purpose of the website is crafting, and the majority of users are there to find patterns and materials. It also offers opportunities for discussion. Coupled with actively enforced moderation policies, Ravelry has developed an online participatory space in which users can express themselves with seemingly little fear of the harassment or animosity that might dissuade the timid among them from expressing themselves online and in public. Users can participate in forum discussions about their favorite designers, about controversial issues, about ever-popular cats and dogs. Many of these groups serve, like Facebook, to offer easy communication for logistical purposes (craft meetups, charity projects) and involve banal and mundane discussions. Ravelry is not just a website about crafting with social media capability, although that is an important component. Its practices have historical foundations with modern implications for online participatory culture, and for “feminized” work, often in participatory spaces. Therefore, it is important to make the distinction between the rhetoric, identity building, and social interaction
privileged in craft culture and other types of nerd/geek and popular culture online communities in which participants of like-minds gather to interact. Ravelry is grounded in a DIY maker movement that intersects with ideas about class and gender. The individuals who engage in activities of the late 20th/21st century DIY movement such as knitting, quilting, woodworking, urban gardening, gourmet/vegetarian/organic cooking, and craft beer are exhibiting more than appreciation. They use the aforementioned “recovered” domestic arts as a way to relax, to express themselves, to take a break from mass-produced goods, and to learn and then pass on long-admired but no longer financially viable skills. Additionally, the interest and participation in the “slow” handmade production of objects can be a point of pride and vehicle for affiliation (see Rice, 2016).

This current DIY movement is as much a public endeavor as a private one, compelled by social media. Gauntlett (2011) describes the impetus to craft as an antidote to passivity and a conduit to connection. Gauntlett notes the natural follow-up to this creativity is to share it, and his concept of Web 2.0 notes how crafters frequently create their own media in order to learn and teach others (the rise of YouTube how-to videos, for example). While he asserts that making is frequently sought out in pursuit of happiness, he is more concerned that participants in the DIY culture find “social capital,” becoming better citizens of the world in doing so.

Domestic Arts and Gendered Spaces

Because the particular subject examined here, with an emphasis on knitting, crocheting and other fiber-oriented arts, has typically been considered a gendered activity, it is important to look at its history as a set of skills and a feminized practice. Parker (1984) sees the history of fiber craft as a history of women. Embroidery, for example, became “feminized” when
threadwork made by women became set apart by the Catholic Church; what was once practiced by both men and women became domesticated, and therefore feminized and diminished in respect. Goggin and Tobin (2009) note that handcrafting represents something more than the utilitarian. They examine “the overlooked and despised categories of women's decorative arts and home craft activities as sites of important cultural and social work” (p. 1). Springgay (2010), Kurtyka (2016), and Goggin (2015) investigate the possibilities for feminist ideology and political rhetoric through crafting, including craftivism, knit-in-publics and yarn bombing, which involves physically applying craft and rhetoric to public spaces.

Ravelry and Public Discourse

On the surface, Ravelry appears to be a space where fiber enthusiasts connect about their passion for crafting and support each other in everyday life. In this vein, Ravelry users engage in rhetoric that can be personal and profound, and the virtual community can become an important part of a crafter’s practice. Much of what is seen on Ravelry is banal and serves as a catalyst mostly to further crafting. The bulk of the site is made up of specific data for the materials needed to produce crafted items: exhaustive lists of patterns, yarns, yarn merchants, necessary yardage, etc. Ravelers provide this information, along with descriptions, depictions, and enthusiasm. Self-created and -directed groups and their discussion forums make up a portion of what is found on Ravelry. These groups represent a small but often active and vocal subset of this crafting community, and this is one place where many interactions between site users take place.

Within forums created to discuss controversial subjects such as political opinions, disagreement can be intense but usually does not completely devolve into flaming or verbal
abuse due to Ravelry’s carefully constructed rules of discourse throughout the site. Many groups have one or more moderators who enforce Ravelry’s general rules as well as a group’s more voluntarily particular rules; this may contribute to the quality of discourse that takes place. It should be noted that controversial subjects appear to be anything that can be anticipated by moderators to elicit disagreement or has created disagreement in the history of the group (or other groups). Wherever disagreements can be anticipated, rules are created specifically for them, and the forum is then well policed. These rules may be about the tone, rigor, and subject of discourse, or rules followed for traditional debate. There might be a trigger warning for a discussion about painful subjects such as sexual assault. Conversely, some groups by design indulge in free-wheeling and potentially inflammatory rhetoric might forbid participants to scold them for their strong, perhaps offensive opinions and colorful language.

Site founders and administrators have anticipated the possibility of incivility and have the final word on whether posts and posters have overstepped their guidelines; they also need not explain or justify their actions, much to the chagrin of those blocked and greyed out when they have committed transgressions. Additionally, although users can share identifying information about themselves, they can also choose to remain fairly anonymous, with no more than a usable email address and user name of their choice needed to participate, potentially rendering their interactions anonymous and possibly emboldened to incivility.

Norms of the site’s rhetoric and discourse seem to be absorbed and practiced by users throughout the site, giving a sense of community norms self-enforced. And while these rules and norms can be the subject of intense disagreement themselves, they appear to make Ravelry a space in which users can choose to participate in friendly argument, if they wish, in a way that maintains their psychic and mental safety when they interact.
Crafting and Political Rhetoric

Often these discussions turn political. It is no surprise that many Ravelers are interested in politics since crafting, especially crafts practiced by women, has a long history of political activity as well as cultural meaning. However, as DeLuca (2015) points out in her study of the image-curating website Pinterest (a site that similarly values crafting, among other things), many users go to websites like Ravelry and Pinterest for an escape from the negativity and provocation of the political landscape and resent the intrusion of the political into their enjoyment of craft. Additionally, when one discovers and/or disagrees with the politics presented by a designer or fellow Raveler, it may taint their interactions and enjoyment of the site. Here one sees Ravelry’s moderation mechanisms come into play (as there is little moderation happening in groups that tout their favorite cashmere blend), which poses larger questions: can any place in which people gather, whether online or in person, be free from politics? Should it be? Is it ever acceptable to be apolitical? This study will look at what happens when an avowed (for some) apolitical community engages in political discussion.

Methodology

As a researcher studying rhetoric, I am interested in how, online, people presumably unknown to each other can come together over a subject like crafting and engage in lively discussion about topics other than crafting. We have seen on other social media platforms that discourse can become combative, especially when tackling controversial subjects but also in the course of mundane discussion in which aggressive and abusive language may be used in fellow participants’ comments, especially those from marginalized groups (see Ravelry and
Participatory spaces above). These sites, like 4chan, are often intentionally set up to allow free rhetorical reign and pride themselves on free expression, whatever the negative fallout for participants. In contrast, Ravelry seems to prize its inclusiveness, and, frankly, good manners.

The secret in creating this environment, I believe, occurs through the cooperation of users, moderators, and administrators in following and enforcing the discourse norms found on the site.

This study focused on a pair of discussion threads – centered on a pattern using a particular political statement – and the discourse interactions found in them. I examined the way the participants enact Ravelry’s mission of inclusivity and civil discourse in a welcoming, non-hostile space to interact online. The research addressed the following questions:

- How do Ravelry’s users, moderators, and administrators perform and enforce its goals for public discourse?
- How do they work to further this goal, through policies, community norms, and moderation practices?
- Based on my examination of sample discussions, how does it work (or not)?

Textual Data

Ravelry has many features that make it useful for the examination of digital rhetoric: it is an online space; it contains a large corpus of texts; its content, by and large, is voluntarily composed by its users who are writing about a wide range of subjects and coming together over a shared interest; at 8 million users, it can be discovered a public participatory space (no vetting is required as part of registration). Additionally, Ravelry’s users happen to be mostly women, making it presumably a gendered space, which may or may not have further implications.
(although beyond the scope of this project). The interface design encourages visual and textual rhetoric by making it simple to produce with unlimited space to do so.

Methodology for this study was based on Grabill and Pigg’s (2012) research that analyzed a science website, using the discourse found there as a way to “characterize and understand communication interactions” (p. 103) and further noted that their particular site was useful for studying “public engagement in open digital places” (p. 100). Ravelry’s abundance of text and interaction offers a similar opportunity in a similar setting. Using the textual data found in its administrative and moderating policies sections, in comment sections, and group/forum discussion, I examined how civil discourse is promoted and maintained in this community. I analyzed the way these discussion threads are moderated, what kinds of moderations are experienced by its participants, and how or whether that changed discourse behaviors.

Choosing Discussion Threads

This project focused on discourse found on the site, created by site users. Choosing the best threads to examine involved making choices among 1,000s of groups and their discussion threads. Groups and forums are discoverable through a few methods. The groups and forums home page allows users to find “largest”, “most active” and “most posts” groups. Many groups focus on a particular geographic location, or a particular designer or yarn; type “Chicago” or “Blue-Faced Leicester Wool” into the group search box and one might find “Chicago Knitters” or “Blue Face Lovers” groups to join, sometimes pending approval (one can always lurk, but if approval is not granted, may not participate). In most of these groups, users plan meetups, discuss favorite TV shows, troubleshoot projects, etc. These spaces offer little beyond praise or information about their given subject to make rhetorical analysis worthwhile.
On the other hand, some of the most active forums are where users can debate more generally or “act out” rhetorically. The deliberately controversial groups yielded threads that were juicy by design but therefore contrived. I assumed and expected that participants there would be potty-mouthed, provocative or funny in these spaces (or else risk scorn and blocking for violating those groups norms). It is worth mentioning that the debate and controversy threads seem to be populated by many of the same people, some whose posts number in the tens of thousands. Those users participate heavily in the groups of their choice, which is not necessarily true of other users, who may never discernably participate in any groups or discussions.\(^1\) Therefore, those more active discussion participants may be considered outliers who are not representative of Ravelry users as a whole.

However, other active, well-read/used forums are much more neutral in subject matter and tone, ostensibly informational and predictably not controversial; a thread that flouted the rules there would be noteworthy. The handful of forums Ravelry administrators maintain, as a group known as the Main 6, is set up to automatically include all users to answer technical questions, gather suggestions, and make announcements. In my estimation, these threads were those most likely to be read by ordinary, possibly low participation users who are not necessarily looking for an argument, but rather for answers to technical or site-related questions about Ravelry. Therefore, the forum question/thread starter “Is Ravelry becoming politicized” stood out in my search because it was not a technical or information-seeking question; the reaction of participants, administrators, and moderators to this unexpected question might be illuminating.

\(^1\) Is impossible to know, without hand-counting and manually cross-referencing, how many registered users participate in forums and discussions.
The catalyst for this question was the discovery, by the original poster of the “Is Ravelry becoming politicized” thread, of a politically (rhetorically) provocative pattern s/he found offensive. The generic winter hat pattern additionally offers intarsia (colorwork within the pattern that creates decorative elements) graphing for the letters required to spell various anti-Trump sentiments including obscenities, as well as male genitalia, the middle finger gesture, and simple but recognizable cartoons of Trump. It was presented on the Patterns page, a dynamic, algorithmically changing collection of knit and crochet patterns, usually represented by a thumbnail of the pattern – for this very public page, the designer chose to name the pattern “Not for Trump Fans” and because the graphics depicted on the actual pattern would have violated Ravelry rules, displayed a picture of her dog instead of the hat and marked the pattern with a “Mature” warning. Clicking on the thumbnail reveals the true pattern contents. This pattern garnered over 750 often heated comments, which is unusual for a pattern. Additionally, and surprisingly, the comment section of patterns appears to be free of moderator/administrator interference. However, presumably, it is still subject to Ravelry’s etiquette guidelines. I felt this made the comment section of this pattern particularly instructive in examining discourse on the site, especially within a space that gave the illusion of neutrality (or at least, puppy innocence).

Using these two particular threads also allowed me to test my questions about presence of moderators: while the Main 6 thread has a named moderator (in association with site administrators), the comment section does not. Comparing the discourse found on these threads might yield some insights about whether the presence of a moderator changes the discourse of the participants. As noted above, Ravelry has certain expectations of participant discourse regardless of the presence or absence of a moderator. Does it actually enforce them?
Ravelry Community Rules of Etiquette

Any examination of the discussion found on Ravelry must begin with an understanding of its community guidelines and “etiquette” rules for interaction. Ravelry expects that users know how to behave themselves in public. Its first rule of etiquette is broadly worded: “First and foremost, be excellent to each other” (“RavEtiquette”). It assumes users have similar and specific ideas of what “being excellent” means and also of how to enact that excellence. The remainder of this first RavEtiquette rule – “Give your fellow Ravelers the benefit of the doubt and be constructive in critique or debates” – also assumes that users will understand what exactly the benefit of the doubt or being constructive means. Other rules are not quite so broad or open to interpretation, with recommendations on everything from sales pitches to personal spats to hate speech to excessive emoji use. Site administrators reserve the right to censor and remove speech that does not conform to their guidelines: “We do our best to be fair and nice people...we will not take abuse (our call) and we reserve the right to deny you access to the site at any time” (italics added). Hate speech is broadly but comprehensively defined:

Words, phrases, or images deemed by Ravelry's owners to express, either deliberately or unknowingly, hatred or contempt towards a group of people, based on areas such as their ethnic, cultural, religious or sexual identity, gender, socio-economic class, or with reference to physical health or mental health, are not allowed. Posts or images deemed by Ravelry's owners to be hate speech will be deleted by Ravelry administrators or group moderators, possibly without warning, and additional consequences may apply to the poster. (“Ravelry Community Guidelines,” 2017, italics added)

These categories would seem to cover all potential actions that administrators might take against perceived abuse of discourse rules, leaving final decisions up to management and thwarting argument from disgruntled users.

Many groups and forums have discussion behavior rules specific to the group. However, all discussions and threads are based on and subject to Ravelry’s general “etiquette” rules. These
are the supposedly ironclad rules discussed in the introduction noted above and enforced at the site administrators’ discretion without warning. These provide the basic tenets of usage for participants; in their way, they also distill Ravelry’s values. However, I was interested in how and whether they are enforced, and who does the enforcing? The moderator, the administrator, the participants?

Ravelry Discourse Rules

The two sets of rules listed below served as the benchmark for analyzing the two selected threads. Did users comply with the general rules of the site while posting on the Pattern comment thread? Did posters follow the general etiquette rules as well as the Main 6 forum rules on the “Is Ravelry becoming politicized” thread? Did those rules affect the patterns of the discourse within those threads? What patterns of discourse emerged? Did the presence of a moderator affect the discourse on both threads?

For brevity’s sake, I have paraphrased, condensed and highlighted the etiquette rules from the site’s Community Guidelines pertinent to the threads I examined, excluding rules that did not apply to the discussions examined.² These rules applying to the overall site are outlined here as follows:

RavEtiquette

1. Be respectful:
   a. Keep negative comments - about someone’s designs, for example - to yourself
   b. No personal attacks, harassment, or threats
   c. No hate speech or hateful imagery

² I excluded rules on copyright infringement, fundraising, violating (other) group rules, disclosing personal information about other users, and objectionable avatars here.
d. Don’t abuse the administrators, they’re (only) human

2. This is a kid-friendly website
   a. Refrain from adult language on Main 6 boards
   b. Boards other than the Main 6 have other adult language rules

The Main 6 group of forums uses a handful of additional rules to eliminate discourse it
does not wish to address in their particular threads, along with RavEtiquette guidelines. Again,
these are paraphrased for brevity and pertinence to the thread.

Main 6 Discussion Rules

1. Look to the moderator posts for directions on discourse and ignore at your own risk
   (thread may be closed down otherwise, user may be censured, etc.)

2. Follow community guidelines/etiquette rules (as outlined above: no personal attacks and
   no hate speech).

3. Don’t be a jerk (DBAJ)

4. No religion or politics

5. No discussion of moderator decisions

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3 For example, if someone starts a thread on topic A, carrying on a sidebar conversation about topic B may get you a flag from the moderator.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

I collected the 135 posts from the Main 6 “Is Ravelry Political” thread and the 750 posts from the comment thread of the Hat pattern thread spanning from May 2018 to July 2018. These comments were separated into a spreadsheet, chronologically as they appear in the forum discussion.\(^1\) To avoid any violation of user privacy, no poster names were used and are hidden with a number or letter where necessary for clarity within examples, except for the Original Posters (OP), the moderators (M) and the pattern designer, simply called Designer.

Within each thread, I noted a) repeated words, language and phrases (“disgusting!” “I love it!”); b) responses that were variations on a theme (political opinion, the history of art/rhetoric/craft); c) knowledge of the ethos and ways of Ravelry, including Ravelry discourse rules, discourse rules in general, and the following/flouting/violating of those rules and d) instances of any kind of moderation by moderators or participants. I also noted the overlap of these instances between the two examined threads (knowledge of rhetoric/crafting, knowledge of the way Ravelry works). Conversely, I was interested in what kinds of comments appeared in one thread but not the other and what might account for those differences in occurrence?

\(^1\) There are features of each post, such as opinions about the post that can be checked -- Like, don’t like, love, educational -- that I did not examine, as they do not change the algorithm of threads (i.e. posts don’t move up or down in prominence depending on upticks).
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Main Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Why and when moderation is used, when is it not used?
2. In reaction to what discourse?
3. How and when are the policies invoked and enacted (or not)?

The study examined moderation practices found within Ravelry as utilized in

- written and posted policies of the sites’ administrators
- general administrative practices as they pertain to language and discourse
- administrative and participant enforcement of community norms through the management of discussion
- user participation in moderating and enforcing group discourse norms
- Texts in threads:
  - Not for Trump Fans pattern and comment section (hereafter listed as Hat Pattern)
  - Is Ravelry becoming politicized? (hereafter listed as Main 6)

Because the posting of the Hat Pattern containing political rhetoric prompted the post about politicization on Ravelry on the Main 6 boards, those results will be highlighted first. I noted patterns of discourse and interaction, familiarity with Ravelry rules, familiarity with civil discourse, and instances and types of moderation occurring within the two threads.
Thread One – Hat Pattern:

This comment thread ultimately grew to 750 comments before it ran out of steam. The timing of the threads coincides with the White House child separation actions at the US-Mexico border, among other pieces of political news; political tensions were running high on social media everywhere. See Table 1 for samples of the patterns of discourse.

Table 1
Patterns of Discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of posts</th>
<th># of posts Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>262</td>
<td>Favorable (Love it/Thank you) → 71 of these came with anti-president sentiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Unfavorable → 32 of these came with exclamations of disgust and/or shaming → 25 with “no place for politics on Ravelry” sentiments; → 6 came with personal or threatened physical attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Crafting/Art has always been political</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comment thread for the Hat Pattern is mostly favorable for the design and the designer. The first of the pattern comments offered love, thanks, and reports of laughter (“I love you!”,”Thanks for this!”). Some offered their favorable comments but negative views on the current political administration in a spectrum of rhetoric that ranged from the horrified to
bemused to dumbfounded and from simple (‘F*** T*****’) to the more elaborate. This is a typical longer comment:

thanks for the super pattern and the wonderful and heartfelt writeup. What is sad and disgusting is that people could be so ignorant of basic American civics knowledge that they think that this ‘person’ has any right to play loose and easy with the basic dignity of the office, the sanctity of the rule of law, and the balance of powers that is the basis of our government. If that weren’t enough, throw in dealing in secret with enemy powers, being a sanctimonious hypocrite and lecherous. Oh yeah, mean as heck, vicious to veterans, blasé to weather victims, willing to trash the planet…

The designer did not address the positive comments methodically but did occasionally engage with a compliment or a technical question.

Negative comments disparaging the designer and the pattern began to surface early on, often in pairs (which may just be timing). This exchange, comments 12 through 17, sets the tone of the discourse for the rest of the thread:

Commenter A: Sad!

Commenter B: I think this is a disgrace!

Designer: You think the hat is a disgrace, or the president?

Commenter B: The hat!!!!!

Designer: I am sorry your feelings are hurt by the hat, and that you find it to be a “disgrace”. I tagged it as “mature”. I named it “Not for Trump Fans”, so that people who are Trump fans would know that it is not for them. Then I put a picture of a dog as the pattern photo, so that people would not inadvertently see something that would offend them. Apparently, you looked at it anyway.

The designer is in no way obligated, beyond politeness or interest, to reply to any of the comments users leave. However, she chose to monitor and engage with the commenters, acting as “moderator” of her own thread (and eventually interacted with all commenters over 80 times)
non-apology that she used consistently throughout the rest of the thread, which could be paraphrased as: “I’m sorry but not sorry you have such a negative feeling about seeing the thing I warned you about in every way possible.”

As the comments continued, the designer-as-moderator modified her response tactics several times. Some of the exchanges had to do with the child-appropriateness of the pattern’s rhetoric; others about the subject of knitting itself:

Commenter C: This is a disgrace…Knitting is a joy and you had to pull politics into it. Shameful!!!!!!!!

Designer: I agree wholeheartedly that knitting is a joy. Knitting this hat has brought me great joy, and, judging by the comments, it has brought joy to others as well. That was my intention in publishing it; my intention was not to anger you.

The complaint against politics having a place in Ravelry is prominent and came up many times in this thread. However, pro-pattern participants, as well as the designer, were quick to point out the connections between crafting, knitting, art and politics; the designer concurred and summed up the possibilities of a site like Ravelry for political discourse:

Commenter J: And everyone saying knitting isn’t political is just silly. The current maker movement is political. The history of knitting is political. Whether you like it or not, politics is a fact of life…

Designer: My impression is that it [Ravelry] has always been political. Have you taken a look at the discussions in the forums (outside of the main forums, of course)? Because it’s hard to find a forum that doesn’t have some kind of political debate going on, even in the cat forums. Ravelry is much more than a yarn- and pattern-database. It is a community of people, and - like it or not - people talk about politics.

Where most commenters are one-and-done, some commenters begin to respond to the political rhetoric of other commenters:

Commenter E: hope as the Country’ economy grows, you realize who is responsible…I really do pity people like you. True racists. Shame on you. In spite of
people like you, the economy grows…

Designer: Thank you for your input. As far as I know, “orange” is not a race.

Commenter E: [Commenter D]! The economy is in good shape thanks to the diligent service of our last president.

Eventually, commenters battled among themselves from their political positions backed up in some cases by links to outside information. Although it would be too easy to condemn the outrage of the anti-pattern commenters, the ad hominem attacks, schoolyard bully taunts and political generalizations did seem come from that flank, such as this comment by a participant who at first seemed to just be trolling but eventually participated in a heated battle with several other commenters: “If I see someone wearing this hat, a flaming bag of dog shit is heading right for it.” There were also several instances of uncivil interactions among posters when the designer seemed to step away from monitoring the comments (see “Moderation Practices” below).

Ravelry Rules

Without a moderator to keep things under control, some participants took it upon themselves to clarify the rules of discourse on Ravelry in this comment section. Clearly, the designer was aware that the pattern contained inflammatory rhetoric and intended it to have a reaction. She also seemed to know the rules when it came to using profanity or depictions of genitalia (the pattern contains but displays neither in its title or description page). Two users quoted the Community Guidelines rules at length in their complaints against the pattern. However, the designer believed she had followed the rules appropriately:
Designer: (1) Donald Trump is not an ethnic, cultural, religious, or sexual identity. 
(2) This pattern has been up for several days. The editors are aware of it. 
It has not been deleted.

This user takes exception to the use of obscenity, even though the particular offensive word is 
allowed and used frequently on the site:

Commenter F: you are violating user agreements with your language “F Trump”, look 
it up.

Designer: What is not part of the user agreement is any specification on use of the 
word “fuck”. In fact, if you do a pattern search for “fuck”, you get nearly a 
full page of results. And those are just the patterns with the word “fuck” in 
the pattern name. There are plenty that do not have the word “fuck” in the 
name.

As these comments/exchanges show, some commenters were aware of and interested in 
the guidelines used by the site to control discourse and interaction. The designer was also aware 
of them. However, as sweeping as the community guidelines are, the language used makes them 
open to interpretation -- and without a moderator, those interpretations are necessarily self-
serving. For example, one commenter may well imagine that the designer violates the rules as 
defamatory, vulgar, obscene or abusive, given the pattern’s rhetoric on face value, or another can 
assert that the F word is verboten, while the designer can point out various instances where 
vulgar language is used in many places on Ravelry without censure from The Powers that Be 
(TPTB). One participant’s interpretation of hate speech found in the pattern may hinge, for 
example, on the deliberate “hatred or contempt” s/he feels the pattern shows for its depicted 
subject or the subject’s followers, whereas the designer sees no violation because the depicted 
subject is not a “group” or an ethnicity. In addition, although not a conclusive factor for the 
argument, the designer points out to Commenter F that the pattern has been out in public for a
sufficient length of time (and attention), or for other users to have flagged her, to have been discovered by the site administrators, who have not removed it or blocked her

Civil Discourse

If civility is to be practiced in this particular moderator-free public forum, the users must be somewhat aware of either the norms of the site in particular, as shown above, and by the norms of discourse in general, and be willing to enact and self-enforce them. Many users adhere to particular community discourse norms, sometimes calling attention to the ways they see them being flouted or violated [italics added]:

Commenter G: Respect is a right of any individual until they demonstrate that they do not deserve it. *Lying, name calling, boasting, ridiculing, bullying* and willful ignorance do not make one worthy of respect, regardless of their political position…Actually discussing why someone feels a particular way is often helpful; if you can get beyond the partisan vitriolic blather, most folks are not idiots…

Commenter H: You’re leaving comments with the apparent intention of generating conversation, and your comments contain assertions that are not common knowledge. *How are others to engage with you if they don’t understand you?*

Commenter I: …the only comments that are not “civil” are those of the pattern-critics. Only in their comments I read words like “*ill-bred*, *flaming bag of dog shit*” or “*shame on you*”. Those who deal with these unfriendly, rude and uncivil comments do this in a very friendly and civil way. Just saying…

Moderation Practices

Without an officially sanctioned moderator, many Ravelry rules were violated in the Hat Pattern comment section, in particular “no personal attacks.” For instance, the designer was told “you are disgusting” and “you should be ashamed” several times. Many posters denigrated other
posters from opposing political parties. And while the designer was not officially the moderator, when she stepped away from the site for a while, several extended sidebar off-topic (but related to politics) interactions ensued, some that could be characterized as bullying, some juvenile, some trolling—in other words, uncivil. Comments that might have alerted a moderator went unchecked by the designer, the perceived authority figure.

It is also notable that in this comment thread, the administrators of the site do not appear to enforce any of the etiquette rules that guide the site, even though many participants violate or flout Ravelry’s discourse rules. Obviously, with 1,000s of posts daily, the administrators cannot monitor all forums. However, given the unusually large number of comments for this pattern, the presence of agitation over it in other threads and the probability that someone who disliked it might “report” it, it is unlikely that they are not aware of Hat Pattern drama.

Thread Two – “Is Ravelry Becoming Politicized?”

This Main 6 thread was introduced by a user who wanted to know if Ravelry was becoming politicized, triggered by the Hat Pattern described above that had gone to the top of the algorithm she used to find new and exciting projects, “hot right now”; 4,409 users read the ensuing posts, although there were only 72 voices who had actively participated in the thread (this information is available at the top of all discussion forum threads). (See Table 2)
Table 2

Patterns of Discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of posts</th>
<th>Pattern Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>If you don’t like it, don’t look at it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Crafting/Art has always been political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ravelry Practices and Rules</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 6          | Moderator moves:  
|            | 2 DBAJ (Don’t be a Jerk);  
|            | 2 Whooshes (merging threads together to consolidate) (aka housekeeping)  
|            | 1 Off Topic;  
|            | 1 LOCKDOWN of thread to close |

The original poster (OP) who began this Main 6 thread asked the following question, in reaction, it turns out, to the Hat Pattern:

Let me start by saying I love Ravelry. It is a great place to keep up with what is new and trending and to connect with lots of awesome people. One of my favorite places is Hot Right Now¹…so many talented designers! I have noticed in the last few days that several patterns have shown up there are ones that are political. How do I say this…I don’t go to Rav to have more political opinions thrown at me, there are plenty of other places I can go for that. I just hope that Rav stays as apolitical as possible…just my opinion

¹ The Hat Pattern’s placement on the site is subject to the algorithm of the site. Ravelry’s pattern selector can sorted on new, most popular, hot right now, etc. Once a pattern is discovered, by whatever sorting process, such as new, it will garner “hits” that may make it “hot right now,” a measure that then builds on itself (as many users point out in the comments, the more people are enticed to go and look at the offensive pattern due to the drama those complainers are causing over it, the longer it will stay at the top of the “hot right now” sort, thus continuing to be offensive).
The first eight comments after this original are similar: If you don’t want to see something (political stuff, in this case) on Ravelry, don’t look at it. The following are typical of these sentiments and attempt to be instructive:

R2: …it’s very very clear these patterns won’t be for everyone. The titles alone are warning to stay far far away if you don’t want to see political content...

R7: They’ve been marked mature, had pictures of cute puppies as the main image and a warning in the title. One really had to go looking to find the content.

R8: For those you take offense to, or simply don’t want to see, the “hide” option comes in handy. In the search results, there is a down arrow below every pattern, click the “hide pattern” option and it will disappear.

By comment 10 of this thread, the OP has signed off, having said his/her piece: “Thanks all for your thoughts…and letting me know I could filter for mature content.” The thread then continues for another 125 comments, although the original thread may have been half that long; the moderator has combined this thread with another thread from elsewhere discussing the same thing.

As with the comments section of the hat, many participants on this thread cite the history and the intersections of crafting, rhetoric and politics:

R10: Art is deeply entwined with politics and has been for eons. If you want to stay apolitical as possible, I suggest you ignore all art from the cave paintings to present, in every medium from music, literature, sculpture, fiber, and paint…

R36: Madame Defarge may have been fictional, but Les Tricoteuses were only too real.

But not all users agree with or are interested in this historically (and rhetorically) significant use of craft:

R39: I joined Ravelry because I consider the knit and crochet community the peaceful people. Most members make items for their own enjoyment and the enjoyment of others as gift and for charity…I do not understand we are using knit and crochet items as political statements.
Unlike the Hat Pattern comment thread, the participants in this thread seem to inherently follow Ravelry’s and the Main 6’s rules: they do not engage in blatantly uncivil discourse, sidebar conversations are kept to a minimum or are closed down, and long entanglements between political factions are non-existent. This may be due to where the thread is located (in the Main 6 forums) or to the presence of a moderator. This may also be because the participants are responding to a question they feel moved to answer (or to enact the community norms of answering) and for which the forum is designed, whereas in the Hat Pattern comment section, participants are responding to an object, in this case one designed to create a reaction, where the designer of the object then chooses to respond to comments and engage in rebuttals. This comment may summarize how, in this case, Ravelry’s discourse rules work rather seamlessly, as noted by the commenter: in its design, Ravelry expressly allows for opinionated discourse, but provides users with (technical) ways to avoid rhetoric they might find upsetting:

R45: And isn’t it great that we not only are all allowed our opinions and views but that [Administrator’s name] has given everyone who uses the site multiple ways to NOT see things we don’t wish to see?

Within this thread are instances in which the commenters announce or enact the site norms, reminding of “the way things are” on Ravelry, and one instance of someone actually deleting his/her own comment because of an imagined Ravelry rule violation (addressing someone personally in the thread).

Interestingly, in this Main 6 thread no one addresses that the forum expressly forbids political discussion. Participants instead talk about talking about politics – in other words, the thread manages to skirt the issue of violating the rules of “no politics” by discussing discussion.
Civil Discourse

Participants in this thread appear to understand and enact the norms of civil discourse, especially as it occurs on Ravelry, tacitly deeming it a civil place overall. This comment highlights the poster’s feeling that Ravelry is a civil place:

R28: ...I find Rav one of the more civil places to debate and discuss politics when it comes up...I am sad about the coarsening of public speech elsewhere though…

This comment gives a more thorough explanation of how to conduct civil discourse on a site like Ravelry, and why it works:

R29: The only time I see the “offensive” or “political” patterns is when someone complains about them...there are a lot of different kinds of people here. If every pattern that could possibly offend someone was eliminated, what would be left?...This is why we practice tolerance. So that our views too will be tolerated, even if not shared….There are lots of other groups who do what they want. I don’t have to participate in those groups or even know of their existence if I don’t want to...

Although the presence of the moderator may put the participants on their best behavior, the posters in this thread seem follow the conventional norms of civil discourse as a matter of course and choice.

Moderation Practices

Actual moderating for content (versus housekeeping) by the moderator takes places only twice for instances of uncivil behavior (expressed as Don’t Be A Jerk [DBAJ]), one seemingly for criticizing Ravelry’s practices and administrator. I will not quote it because it has been greyed out, but it pertains to warning participants they are being watched by “rubberneckers” who lurk on threads looking for drama to then mock elsewhere, that political discourse is rampant here and disagreeing with the site admins is a bad idea. Another poster was censured
with a DBAJ for posting a meme depicting elderly ladies incompetently attempting to use technology in response to complaints about bugs in the pattern. The moderator also pulls back some “off topic” side bar exchanges to keep the conversation flowing. And finally, the moderator closes down the thread after the 134th (combined) comment.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

Ravelers and Rhetoric

For many Ravelers, the ones who come to the site for escape from the world, who come just for the patterns and the yarn talk and the cat pictures, the presence of political chatter, let alone the ferocity of rhetoric and feelings it can generate, is surprising and unwelcome. Other users, including the ones interested in engaging in this kind of discourse, seem to understand that the activity of handcraft, and especially fibrecraft, has deeper meaning than some of its practitioners realize; some are even well-versed in its history. Goggin (2015) studies fibrecraft from an “epistemic and an ontological perspective that values making over made, production over consumerism, and process over product,” and further gives credit to the way this opens up crafters to “new roles for rhetors and interlocutors” (p. 155). And Goggin quotes Gauntlett’s assertion that acts of creating and making “provide space for thought and reflection and helps to cultivate sense of the self as an active creative agent” (p. 155).

That the act of making has profound cognitive, social and intellectual influence on the maker might be the farthest thing from users’ minds when they visit the site, and for some, there is absolutely no place for rhetoric, political or otherwise. They want Ravelry to be comfortable and as politically neutral as they feel their craft is. However, the impulse to share and connect, as laid out by Gauntlett (2013), is foundational to the site. Users may not be not looking for trouble or even interaction, but the impulse to share their work and look at the work of others is
ever-present for practical reasons (how will this look on me?) and aesthetic reasons (luxurious yarn, pleasing designs, beautiful photography). By participating and interacting with the site’s affordances, Ravelry users perform civil public discourse (by filling out their personal page biographies, for instance, or posting their pattern-making narratives) as a matter of course. These bits of textual and visual rhetoric make up the bulk of the site. Users may also unknowingly or unwittingly follow the Ravelry civility tenets because, again, why argue about blankets? And they may inadvertently participate in a long history of craft and its tendency to create not just mittens, but rhetoric, whether they like it or not, by virtue of using the site.

Ravelry and Civil Public Discourse

Ravelry is first and foremost a data site, much of which was provided by its users, who include amateurs, professionals and businesses. It is designed to assist in the making of fiber-related objects and in its structure and technology; it privileges those needs and activities above discussion. However, the creators of Ravelry seem to understand crafting’s historical and political roots. Although the site is not explicitly political, the opportunities for self-expression, connection and interaction, political or otherwise, and the administrators have anticipated how this can work well and how it can go awry.

In creating not only an interactive database but also a social media platform, they have given careful thought to the ways in which public discourse can become corrosive, threatening and exclusionary. Their rules on “no politics” (in certain spaces) and “no religion” are the stuff of Thanksgiving dinner discussion precautions, but there are more than enough examples of popular websites, including sometimes those that can at least control who can see one’s information, like Facebook, where a toxic discourse atmosphere prevails around those subjects.
The language of their rules, and especially their omniscient and omnipotent threat of who participates and who is banished, permeates through the site and may evoke at least a grudging obedience by the users, as shown by the threads examined here. The presence of helpers in the form of moderators, where they exist, also helps to uphold these discourse tenets.

However, the rules for interactive behavior on Ravelry are not prominently displayed – one needs to go looking for them and, as with other user agreements on other platforms, agreeing with the site rules is done with a check in a box, no reading of them necessary. Adherence to and understanding of Ravelry’s broad and open-to-interpretation tenets of kindness, excellence and niceness is assumed (users will either pick up on the site’s vibes intrinsically or will experience some sort of censure to set them right) or, as-written, aims to circumvent the harsher reality of public discourse on a social media platform. Given the hidden nature of the rules and regulations of the site, a user may pick up on cues (the cute dogs, the proliferation of positive comments) that help them navigate and absorb its norms. But it is no guarantee of civil discourse.

Obeying the Rules, or Not

The two discussion threads chosen here may operate differently because they serve different purposes. The comment section for the Hat Pattern was more heated and reactionary than the Main 6 discussion thread about it. This may because commenters were giving a gut reaction – thumbs up/thumbs down – to a material object. Because the material object cannot be divorced from its, in this case, political rhetoric, commenters focused on that rather than construction innovations or yarn choice or color (although some tried), and the responses to it had more complexity beyond the surface. A reaction of “I love it” does not necessarily mean the poster is in love with the hat itself but must also refer to the sentiment displayed. Similarly, the
response of “shameful” or “disgusting” refers not to the hat’s construction, but to the reaction the rhetoric evoked (and sometimes to the designer herself). In this intense discourse situation, participants chose a side and stuck to it, often flouting both Ravelry and general discourse norms with incivility such as name calling and bullying. The presence of the designer within the discussion evoked some back and forth, and perhaps that presence, a presumably real person behind the evocative pattern, tempered more corrosive discussion. Given the pervasive threat of censure by the site administrators, however, the tone of the whole Hat Pattern thread was surprisingly antagonistic, and many participants did not display the “excellence” that the site expected of them. And of course, the antagonism might be in the eye of the beholder – who was antagonist, the designer or her detractors? Moreover, perhaps the mechanisms for finding bad behavior are not as omniscient as users are led to believe.

The Main 6 thread question about the Hat Pattern was really a plea for banishing politics from Ravelry, and the thread had a more meta quality, about crafting, about discourse, about Ravelry. DeLuca (2015) points out the possibilities for digital citizenship on a similar site devoted to similar pursuits, even when users do so inadvertently (and might not be happy about it) that seems an apt comparison for what takes place on Ravelry. The participants here often evoked an explicit knowledge of Ravelry rules but, more importantly, also its ethos, signaling they were aware of and enacting its norms. Many responses to the original poster – “of course you’ll find that on Ravelry” followed by “don’t look at it if you don’t like it” – demonstrate an awareness of the way digital media works as well. By offering ways to avoid seeing what is upsetting, through technology, by changing habits, the thread participants acknowledge there is no way to banish politics even from a site for knitting and crocheting, but there are ways to be less threatened by them. Meanwhile, although the moderator’s actions were minimal, her/his
presence kept the conversation moving, streamlined, and practically scorn-free (notably, although, one instance of “grey ing out” involved criticism of the administrators and another, eye-rolling over a perceived lack of technical prowess by another user, was fairly mild but maybe not so nice). While the original poster signed off quickly, having stepped on the proverbial wasp nest, the remaining participants continued the discussion of politics and Ravelry. And although most of the participants in this thread disagreed with the original poster on many levels, including, it is easy to assume, politically, they were, mostly, nice, as Ravelry would hope they would be. On the other hand, the absence of moderating practices on the Hat Pattern thread may lead one to suspect that the administrators are not as committed to civil discourse as they contend they are, despite site directives. One way to look at Ravelry’s discourse rules is as in loco parentis; the trade off to that kind of parental authority is a free and powerful tool that gives users license for creativity and self-expression. But is the threat of an authority figure an effective way to ensure civility (and the general readability of a thread)?

A question has been floated by scholars now looking at Ravelry from rhetorical and sociological viewpoints (see Shen, Yoder, Jo, & Rosé, 2018)—who gets moderated there and why? For example, there are some users who believe that politically conservative voices are moderated or silenced more often than politically liberal ones. Early in Ravelry’s history, a group of vocal conservative Ravelers was blocked from the site and went on the internet to complain about it. (“Badge of Honor,” 2009). Since then, a handful of forums have been created on Ravelry to offer a place to talk about conservative issues without restraint from what those users see as the liberal thought police. These include threads that support the current president in a way that most other political talk on the site does not. While they still must follow the general rules of the site, as a group, they can make up their own rules about who they will moderate and
block when they object to their responses. This also highlights the question of what constitutes hate speech on the site (not that the site has any obligation to defend the first amendment). In the abstract, if it is acceptable to direct hate-filled speech toward a political figure that is generally disliked on the site – Gergen’s (2001) conforming to rhetorical norms – with impunity, turnabout should be fair play. In the Hat Pattern, even the designer’s comments in defense of the hat’s rhetoric play a bit fast and loose with the semantics of Ravelry’s discourse directives. However, because, seemingly, one side’s general ideology (they would dispute this) and therefore opinions might seem or be closer to hate speech – it is ever okay to want to knit a confederate flag pillow? – the site may have no choice but to restrict some rhetoric that is considered hateful, ignore similarly hateful speech directed at someone they disagree with, and thus take on the accusation of unfair bias.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This project examined the discourse behaviors of participants on a website devoted to fiber crafting that also offers a social media platform. This website was chosen for its large amount of user-generated text and numerous extensive discussion threads on a variety of subjects not related to craft. A very small snippet of discussion on a contentious subject in a space that might be considered apolitical was examined to discover whether the discourse practices found there can illuminate the ways users interact online, especially in a specific discourse community. But because of the scope of the project, many questions remain unanswered, leading to further study: even on a site that has been thoughtfully constructed to maintain civil discourse, what subtle and not-so subtle rhetorical behaviors might threaten it? What rhetorical elements might find their way to the site to disturb it? Should it be disturbed by those elements rather than remain complacent about politics or apolitical altogether?

It is an understatement to assert that hostile aggressive discourse behavior on social media platforms is entrenched, inescapable, and as concerning as ever. The ability and desire to communicate globally across the internet quickly turned into the ability to troll and antagonize. But often this becomes an accepted, if uncomfortable, feature of interaction, constituting a new kind of public discourse, and perhaps a need for a new definition of civil. Coe et al. (2014) demonstrated that there is a spectrum of incivilities, some more troubling for users than others, and not as uniform or obvious as one would suspect. Comparisons to 4chan or reddit might not
be productive, as those sites enact their own rhetorical ecology. And what constitutes uncivil discourse in the comments section of a major newspaper may not violate accepted practices of civil discourse per se but might be shunned or censured on Ravelry. Through their community guidelines and moderation practices, the administrators at Ravelry have decided on their definition of civil, and for the most part, its users enact the discourse norms the site has established; this is true within subsets of discourse communities there as well.

In that vein, the study showed that users, moderators and administrators may tolerate “uncivil behavior” as long as it follows the discourse norms of the community. To facilitate civility without quashing the right to disagree, those practices of discourse may depend on a willingness for all involved to entertain rather than chase away differing opinions, which is not the same thing as flouting discourse norms, although the visceral reaction (everywhere) to opposing viewpoints would say otherwise.

A component not defined or studied in this project (beyond its scope) is that Ravelry invites a certain level of quality of discourse based on its broad appeals for good behavior (be nice, be excellent, be kind) as well as its syntactic/word level rules. Additionally, moderators are helpful in not only keeping discourse civil by enforcing rules, but keeping it moving, on topic, and streamlined, adding to the facilitation of higher quality discourse that may contribute to the general good-feeling found on the site. Perhaps the expectation of a higher quality of discourse (and discourse behavior) contributes to this as well.

Some Ravelry users demonstrated resistance to considering the historical or political aspects of crafting and making and their rhetorical ramifications; further, there was resistance to the idea that those ramifications might appear on the site and might need to be dealt with rather than ignored or even banished. While this resistance is a predictable reaction, it belies the
sometimes-hidden significance of our leisure pursuits. Recently, the crafting community has been simmering with accusations across social media platforms of racism and cultural appropriation, followed by a backlash similar to those found in the threads examined in this project by crafters who do not understand the fuss, are irritated that politics and the culture wars have entered their crafting world, and just want to be left alone to knit or sew (Saxena, 2019). As is often the case, sometimes those who decry political issues in (supposedly) neutral spaces ignore the fact that escape from politics is a luxury many people cannot afford. And sometimes a sock is just a sock. As a space devoted to inclusivity as well as to its crafters, Ravelry can be at the forefront of these discussions, making it a continued site for study of discourse communities and cultural/rhetorical ecologies. The question is, whose voices will be heard there? Who will contribute to and control the discourse?
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