On the Correction of Online Debate

Sebastian Benjamin

November 17, 2016

Abstract

This paper explores the current issues with online discourse, and provides examples of web platforms and their design decisions that lead to issues regarding said discourse. This paper then provides an informal specification for a centralized web platform that attempts to rectify these design missteps, and thus facilitates structured, intellectual online debate on any subject. While this paper has few specifics regarding the implementation of such a platform, it is hoped to be followed up by a more informal series of essays and blog posts detailing the creation of such a platform.

1 The Problem with Online Debate

There is a discourse problem on the internet. The conventional wisdom is always that you shouldn’t interact with people on it; left and right, you always hear that comments are the slums of discussion, never to be utilized as a “proper” source and, indeed, never to be even mentioned lest some content creator somewhere has an aneurysm due to YouTube PTSD. People ban comments[3] on their own content channels all the time, opting to utilize a more structured medium like reddit to try to assuage some of the torrent of filth that they see in them.

Yet, even more structured streams of discussion like Reddit or Twitter have their own problems. Twitter streams are quick-moving waterfalls of words, conveniently packaged into 140 character units of quickly-forgotten sludge. It is, because of the enforced brevity of it’s basic unit of discourse, inherently hindering to having a deep discussion, due to the fragmented level of concentration it enforces as part of it’s business model. While many
argue that the benefits of the internet outweigh this difficulty, (I would be one of them) it is difficult to dismiss the arguments[1] [5] of the studies done on this phenomenon. Additionally, Twitter encourages communal brigades against controversial members of it’s community, due to the visibility and accessibility of it’s users. Anyone, at any time, can create a new account and instantly have access to everyone in the community, and send any message they wish to anyone. Twitter is an inherently unsegregated community; unlike Reddit, there are no subreddits, subforums, or sub-communities. The closest we have are hashtags, but they don’t enforce any conformity. Anyone can tweet anyone else any message under the #throwbackthursday hashtag, but you’d better be posting about food on reddit’s r/food. This lack of segregation combined with Twitter’s lack of structure can lead to a frigid intellectual environment where people are afraid to take contrarian positions due to a fear of being attacked.

Reddit, on the other hand, doesn’t have this issue as much – it is far more structured. The problems with Reddit are more multifaceted; the upvote model that it champions as the method for people to use as a tool for online democracy in practice leads to more of the same community brigading that Twitter has to deal with, albeit for different reasons: a study[4] showed that comments with more upvotes are more likely to gain even more upvotes, leading to a runaway effect of voting. The default Reddit filter is by votes, so the highest voted comment and it’s associated comment chain (which may be between 2x and 50x less voluminous than the number of votes cast for the top comment, or “OP”) usually buries comment chains located below the top comment, leading to one consensus by the Reddit community on the issue. In other words, once a comment has any advantage over another, even by one vote, is is exponentially more likely to become the top comment. The top comment gets more replies than any other comment, leading to a higher likelihood of burying the comments below it.

This may not necessarily be a bad thing, if the goal is to reach a single consensus on an issue and to not see the argument of the other side! This is fine on a site like Reddit – after all, the Reddit echo box is a very real phenomena that it’s users don’t seem to want to actively work against – which is, in the end, usually dedicated to entertainment and otherwise associating content with the clever jokes and groupthink that defines this generation of social media. Unfortunately for our purposes, this is exactly what we do not want. When you look at the typical stages of debate in real life, the bulk of which
have been officially codified and improved for hundreds of years at this point, and as such has at least a precedent of success, you’ll find that not only do both sides (hopefully) get equal time, but that they both take turns speaking. Reddit might somewhat naturally enforce the second point, as you’ll only ever be reading one comment at a time, but it utterly fails to rectify the first point, making the second one moot anyhow.

Enter Hacker News. This site, designed by the somewhat estimable Paul Graham, seeks to rectify some of the problems that Reddit has, saying that “Reddit had different goals from Hacker News. Reddit was a startup, not a side project; its goal was to grow as fast as possible. Combine rapid growth and zero censorship, and the result is a free for all.”[2] The Hacker News FAQ states that Hacker News is for “Anything that good hackers would find interesting... If you had to reduce it to a sentence, the answer might be: anything that gratifies one’s intellectual curiosity.”[6] In other words, Hacker News tries to avoid rapid growth and maintain a community of highly educated “hackers” which drive the intellectual discourse level higher than the average social media site.

Unfortunately, despite this and other measures that Graham implemented to try to keep Hacker News as a bastion of intellectual discourse, (such as powerful algorithms that parse and manage the content of the posts) it still suffers from the same issues that Reddit has, albeit probably on a higher intellectual level: groupthink, burying of opposing points, and (perhaps more subtly, but as so probably more insidiously) vitriol. It has gotten to the point that the site has it’s own reputation on the internet, just like any other, because of the way people act on it. It’s known for the techno-libertarianism that drives all of Silicon Valley, due to it’s startup oriented culture, much like how 4chan is known for social conservatism and Reddit is known for being liberal almost to the point of socialism.

Hacker News, in other words, has it’s own audience, just like most other sites. It’s audience is highly-educated libertarians who seek to find other such people to interact and debate with. This is fine – we’ve had cloistered communities since the dawn of the internet – but the unfortunate aspect of this culture is that we do not have a good, centralized way to debate on the web. Reddit is the closest we have to this sort of environment, as it possesses an upvote system, but the aforementioned issues with Reddit preclude using it as a serious platform for debate. It seems, then, that there is in fact room for a new platform, one dedicated to fostering a “proper” debate environment that suits
everyone. Instances of these sorts of websites exist, but none have taken off for one reason or another. What “proper” means in this context will be explored shortly, in the next section, but there’s a few more things to say about the topic while we’re on it.

For one, consider whether fostering “proper” debate might be antithetical to the internet entirely. It seems as if this is the case, at least with social media. The issue with social media seems to be the methods by which we actually engage in conversation with one another. This varies slightly from platform to platform, but it has mostly remained stagnant for the last twenty years.

Consider this scenario. You wish to say something about some meaningless post on Facebook. You get a dialog box; the white canvass, inviting yet paralyzing in it’s freedom. You out a banal response on your keyboard, and you press ENTER or hit the Send button. Moments later, the mediocrity rushing through hundreds or thousands of miles of fiber-optic cable and thousands of miles of airwaves in a trip that could potentially circumvent the globe in a journey codified and developed by thousands of engineers over the course of the last half century, your text ends up stored for all eternity on a database somewhere. The poster refreshes their page, and they see your painfully dull message to them, that had been rushed there after you misguidedly decided that you wanted to put it out there for everyone to see.

The same process goes for Reddit. And Twitter. And emails, essentially. Facebook. 4chan. Ebay. Amazon. All of these platforms, along with every other platform on the face of the planet, use the exact same formula:

\[
\text{DialogBox} \rightarrow \text{SendButton} \rightarrow \text{Internet} \rightarrow \text{Server} \rightarrow \text{Computer}
\]

Now, there is of course a time and a place for this kind of interaction. After all, comment sections can sometimes be necessary for the website to function properly. Certainly, Reddit and Twitter would not be at all the same without this tried-and-tested list of steps. However, it seems to be antithetical to the process of debate; after all, this process is essentially not structured in any way whatsoever. If I wanted I could, right now, copy the entire contents of this essay and paste it into any of those platforms (well, except Twitter) regardless of the topic at hand and there would basically be no way to deal with it besides manual moderation or vote-burying.

The rest of this essay, as it outlines what online debate should be and what a platform
to host such a debate would look like, will thus take into account the current methods of interacting with the rest of the users on the internet, as said methods are the primary way you influence the content that is posted. Along the way, we will try to improve upon and expand the current models of debate, and force users into adhering to it by design.

2 The Platform

It seems fair to say that the process of debate that works in real life also would work online. This process goes something like this:

1. Each member/team gets one side of the debate – for the purposes of online debate, let’s say that there are two sides to each debate, and that multiple can be held if the issue is more multifaceted than that.

2. Each member gets some time to organize and prepare their statement. In real debate, there is an actual phase for this, but in online debate there are no distractions; the opposing points are on the screen for you to read over whenever you’d like, so the most likely way to implement this is to just set a time limit for each debater.

3. Create a speech structure. This is the part that would vary between debate types: there could be a plain-text mode, a structured mode, and others. This step is the one that will most likely affect the ability of the platform to do well, as the method of delivery affects the ability to moderate points and assist in the incentivizing of useful discussion.

4. Deliver speech with structured reasoning. The delivery should be automatically handled by the website, so this isn’t anything the user needs to worry about.

5. Provide citations. This could be extremely interesting, and perhaps even vary with the mode of debate, but there needs to be a way to keep the debaters beholden to the sources.

The first step is probably one of the more controversial. Nobody is saying that all debates, or even the most interesting, can be split into two sides that are opposed to each other enough to warrant a debate. However, consider the gamification aspect of the website – all websites want users, and as Reddit, Stack Overflow, Code Wars and
even Facebook have historically shown, gamification is the best way to incentivize user investment in the platform. Gamification is essentially all of the game aspects of the platform, whether it be win/loss ratios, a point system, or power dynamics based on participation in the platform (moderator privileges due to winning debates or voting). Through gamification, user participation can go up, but a platform needs to be very careful on what it incentivizes with said gamification.

The aspects of gamification that this hypothetical debate platform could benefit from seem straightforward. Obviously, the debates need to have winners and losers, and that means voting by people who aren’t the ones debating. These “audience” votes could serve as an excellent metric for who the best debaters are, if utilized alongside the win/loss ratio, and these combined metrics would incentivize better debate habits (even if you lose, if you don’t lose in a landslide – that is, your debate is popular, very contested, and thus very persuading to many different people – the ranking algorithms could take that into account and still rank you higher than someone who wins debates with no contest at all) than either of them alone.

The second step is interesting because it presents a more static view of online debate than the typical forum or comment chain allows. Each side has an absolute spotlight, without any interruptions or talk-overs that could occur, especially in a classroom setting, when debating in real life. However, it may be useful in this platform to allow the audience to arbitrate the sides as they speak. Depending on the mode, the audience could take on a role beyond that of voters, and become more of a judge-and-jury group. The spotlight would thus be shared at all times between the current debater and the audience, who could call them out on logical fallacies, contradicting or not supplying a citation for a claim, or otherwise doing things that aren’t in the spirit of the debate. This “community moderation” is the model most favored on Reddit, albeit more rather than officially codified in the platform itself.

The third step is the most in-depth of the process, and the one that requires the most forethought in the design and implementation of the platform. The speech structure is essentially the method by which the users actually interact with the site. For instance, on Reddit, the speech structure might be the comment boxes and the upvote/downvote buttons. This could be incredibly simple; the website could just have a big text box where users could take turns debating against each other. It seems, however, that if one were
to want to incentivize debate that is “useful” and follows the general steps of a “good”
debate in real life, then that person would want a system more complex than the one
championed by default on the internet. In other words, the reign of the blank comment
box would have to be fought on this platform.

There are many different possibilities for this platform, but the one that makes the
most sense coagulates around a central premise: that of the audience acting as a judge
and arbitrator. The audience should be given tools to curate the debate, and once it is
over, to vote on the debate. The voting aspect is quite simple – just make it a simple
binary vote between the two debaters, and reveal the vote counts at the end so that there
wouldn’t be a “winners” bias – but the curation aspect is much more complex and most
definitely depends on the method by which the debaters interact with the website.

The method that seems the most rigorous to me is the Questions at Issue method.
Essentially, this method states that, for the debaters to agree on an issue, they must
agree on each of the six elements of a logical argument: Fact, Definition, Interpretation,
Consequence, Value, and Policy. These are defined as such:

1. **Fact:** Each member of the debate must agree on the facts of the case at hand.
   Each debater is responsible for providing his or her own citations to back up any
   claims that they might make. To this end, the website would need to have a
   bibliography section where the debaters can each put their citations – they can
   then add a reference after whatever claim they make. The audience, if they wish
to, will have special privileges allowing them to challenge a source as biased, untrue,
or misleadingly used.

2. **Definition:** The instigator of the debate will be able to define whatever terms he
   or she wishes to use in the debate, if those terms happen to be esoteric or otherwise
   unknown to the common user. These terms will remain fixed throughout the debate
   – the opposing debater will have to argue in the terms of the debater who started
   the debate. The audience need not have a tool to change these, as they are, again,
on the instigator’s basis.

3. **Interpretation:** The interpretation of the sources is where the first major element
   of the debate comes in: claims. Each debater will be able to make up to an
   arbitrarily limited number of claims in support of or against a certain topic. They
will need to cite portions of the claim that require citations, but the meat of the argument will start with the interpretation of the sources.

4. **Consequence:** This is where most of the rest of the debate comes in. Essentially, once both debaters agree on the interpretation of the sources at hand, they will need to argue about what the consequences are. If something in an article is true, what comes of it? What happens, based off of this interpretation?

5. **Value:** This is where to debaters talk about the moral aspect of the debate. They argue about what the value of the consequences are; if abortion causes the crime rate to go down in inner cities, is that worth the fact that we are losing potential future human life?

6. **Policy:** This is where, like in politics, the debaters argue over what we, as a group/party/society should do to affect the changes that they’ve agreed should occur in the previous steps.

The idea is to identify which stage the debaters disagree on and to try to build off of that. Any argument in the last four stages is built off of claims, which are in turn based off of citations interpreted in terms of the definitions. Thus, we can distill the essence of the debate portion of the platform down to three basic aspects:

1. **Claims:** These are the basic unit of the debate. These could probably be provided in enthymeme form: “x because of y.” An example of a claim would be: “animal rights are not as important as saving human lives, because animals do not possess cognition.”

2. **Definitions:** A definition for a word used in a claim helps the debating parties to interpret it. The importance of definitions is paramount, as a difference in definitions can completely change the meaning of a sentence. Consider the previous claim in the context of these two definitions: “Cognition: the quality of possessing higher-order thinking” seems to promote a debate about the value of higher-order thinking, while “Cognition: the quality of possessing the ability to feel” seems to promote a debate more about the ability of an animal to feel. These definitions can be relatively arbitrary, so it seems like it could be the responsibility of the
instigator of the debate to define their terms, so that everyone debates within the same framework.

3. **Citations**: Citations form the basis of the interpretation. Essentially, a citation will be either a statistic or a quote from an expert or journalist studying the field at hand. Citations, just like any other section of the debate, can contain bias, so the opposing debater will need a tool to report if a citation is wrong or biased.

## 3 Conclusion

The platform would need a method for each debater to make a claim about their side of the argument, as well as make counterclaims about the opposing debater’s claims. Each debater would have a method to create citations, and a method by which to curate the opposing side’s citations. Finally, the instigator would be able to create definitions when creating the debate, and the opposing debater would have to argue within the context of those definitions. This back-and-forth would go on for X number of rounds, each lasting Y number of minutes. After the rounds, each side would have a plain text box round to summarize and conclude their debate, and a round of voting would go on for Z minutes, where Z is a time much larger than, but related to the amount of time each round took.

After Z minutes, voting would cease and a side would be declared the winner. Nobody would be able to see the tally of votes until the end of the voting period, to avoid the reddit vote-burying affect. The winner would gain points (call them something cheesy, of course!) related to how close the debate was – if it was a blowout, they’d gain fewer than if it was extremely controversial and competitive. The winner also would get a nice boost to their win/loss ratio.

This system seems to be the best for creating a platform that has both the gamification aspects necessary to keep people engaged, and the structure necessary to reduce trolling. There is, of course, ample monetization potential as well, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

One more thing – the nice thing about this platform is that it wouldn’t need moderation. Unlike reddit, this platform would be able to naturally filter out the sorts of troll posts and troll users that plague sites like reddit, Twitter, and Facebook, through community moderation. Popular controversial posts would be voted up and have more
people following the debate, and those would hopefully be the posts that have actual intellectual discussion going on in them, so any troll would be buried by the rising tide of good posts. Hopefully, that would lead to an extremely high quality front page, and thus more people to help grow the community.
4 Works Cited

References


