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# Debating the Events of September 11th: Discursive and Interactional Dynamics in Three Online Fora

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Abstract

This study examines the constituencies, patterns of interaction, and ideologies in three online fora created to discuss the events of September 11th, 2001. Drawing on comparative case studies, the research explores the frames and discursive styles used by Brazilian, French, and American participants to articulate their views about this polarizing topic. The research identifies commonalities and differences across the three cases with respect to trends in posters' participation, interaction patterns between forum participants, and the ideological content of the posts themselves. Interpretive examination of posts from the three sites elucidates linkages between modes of discourse, ideological positions, and faction membership. The article addresses the effects of these discursive proclivities by examining how participants in each forum create stable ideological divisions. It illuminates how different interactional strategies may facilitate or inhibit continued dialogue in the face of division.

September 11th and the Internet

Internet researchers have begun to explore political talk generated in online discussion spaces, such as asynchronous threaded exchanges in Usenet groups and the contributions in synchronous real-time chat rooms sponsored by commercial entities such as Yahoo and AOL (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Stromer-Galley, 2003). Online fora are excellent settings for studying how different types of naturally-occurring discourse evolve among people personally unknown to one another (Weger & Aackhus, 2003). Forum spaces make it possible for participants to pursue mutual understanding, engage in disagreement, and display knowledge. Such online venues also allow participants to express their feelings and engage each other in reasoned argumentation (Steinkuehler, 2002).

Some of the research on political discourse online has been designed to ascertain whether such discourse can equal the quality of deliberative offline discourse in terms of coherence and other "dialogic" properties (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2004). The findings from this research show that compared to chat dealing with less "serious" topics, online discussions on political topics exhibit high levels of interactivity and topical coherence, as measured by standard coding procedures. There are fewer "off-topic" posts from participants in these fora than from contributors to other discussion spaces. In online spaces devoted to political discourse, posts are more likely to address previous posts in the manner befitting a real deliberative debate (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2004, pp. 15-17). If the dialogic properties of online discussion spaces depend on the topic at hand, one might expect genuine dialogic exchanges about topics that are at once



impersonal and serious. The discussion spaces created in response to the events of September 11th, 2001 afford a chance to explore these issues further.

The events of 9/11 offer a unique opportunity to examine online political discourse in response to a riveting event with global media coverage. Internet researchers estimate that in the first 48 hours following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon buildings, 13% of American Internet users visited an online discussion space, far exceeding the normal participation rate of 4%. Some 28–33% of American Internet users posted their thoughts or read other posts by visiting fora and other sites ([Jones & Rainie, 2002](#); [Schneider & Foot, 2004](#)). Data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project<sup>1</sup> indicate that 46% of the posts addressed how the United States should respond to the attacks, while 19% of the posters consoled others. The majority of the Pew study respondents (57%) judged the online discussions to have been “civil rather than angry,” and 72% deemed them “rational rather than heated” ([Jones & Rainie, 2002](#), p. 36), perhaps because 57% of the discussions did not debate policy but rather discussed people. These findings suggest that, in many exchanges, the strong feelings aroused by the event did not prevent people from articulating their opinions in ways conducive to deliberative debate.

Despite these intriguing survey findings, we know very little about the discursive content of posts, or how citizens of other countries have used Internet chat or fora in response to 9/11. As of yet, there is little content analysis of the Internet discourse produced by members of non-Anglophone fora. One content analysis, a study of Estonian online discourse, shows that the events of 9/11 could serve as a topic for reasoned argumentation, albeit mixed with strong expressions of emotion ([Vengerfeldt, 2003](#)). Participants discussed the United States' potential response to the attacks and its right to punish the perpetrators. However, this research, while valuable, deals with a limited slice of data from a single-nation user population. As such, it cannot shed light on the long-term trajectories of discourse and interaction as they evolve in multi-national fora. To do this, it is necessary to carry out comparative case studies ([Ragin, 1987](#)).

## The Case Studies

The present article employs a comparative case study approach to illuminate the discourse produced in three fora specifically dedicated to exchanges about 9/11 in Brazil, France, and the United States. Among the very few newspaper fora dedicated explicitly to discussions of 9/11, there are three that stand out for their longevity, vibrancy of discussion, and capacity to attract discursively-engaged constituencies. The study takes advantage of data from three long-running fora hosted by *O Estado de São Paulo*, *Le Monde*, and *The New York Times*, each a prominent newspaper in its respective country. These newspapers established online fora immediately after 9/11 to provide venues for the public to discuss the causes and consequences of the attacks for each nation and the world. All three opinion fora are thus explicitly designed to facilitate discussion about a uniquely compelling and significant event with worldwide media exposure. To the individuals participating in them, the fora signal a new stage in the evolution of online communication. As a poster to the *NY Times* forum writes: “Never before have the citizens of the world had access to such instant communications like e-mail and Internet postings. Instantly we can show either our support or our hatred.”

These fora are not subscriber-based but are open to the general public.<sup>2</sup> Further, unlike the online discussion spaces examined by previous researchers, these fora are not designed to attract users pre-disposed to discuss specific political agendas. Rather, newspapers establish these venues for individuals to express their views on a dramatic event with global import. In addition, the fora are designed in such a way that participants can go back and review the messages posted the previous hour, day, or week. This design feature facilitates ongoing dialogic argumentation. In fact, users could review all posts from the first weeks of the forum through the one-year anniversary of 9/11. Perhaps most important, two of the three fora cater to non-Anglophone constituencies. Studies of online political discussion produced by non-Anglophones are badly needed in light of the dominance of Anglophone studies of the Internet ([Danet & Herring, 2003](#)). Finally, each forum caters to a population that is situated differently with regard to the trauma and vulnerability created by the terrorist attacks ([Collins, 2004](#)).

Previous research suggests that different national groups employ different frameworks and regimes of justification when defending a viewpoint or attacking opposing views. French nationals typically appeal to structural and cultural factors when trying to account for the actions and motivations of individual and collective actors, whereas Americans refer to religious, psychological, and historical factors ([Lamont & Thévenot, 2001](#)). The French are particularly adverse to frames that approach issues from the standpoint of a dualistic morality, a stance favored by Americans. Comparing French and American post-9/11 discourse therefore affords an angle of view that is theoretically profitable because it allows the researcher to compare and contrast two different folk theories about how the political and social world works ([Lamont, 1992](#)). The inclusion of the Brazilian data, a discourse from the periphery that is largely understudied, similarly makes it possible to explore the extent to which Brazilian folk theories that explain the actions and motivations of public actors resemble the folk theories advanced by discourses from the center.

The findings of this study illuminate how a contentious and deeply divisive set of political-cultural issues can serve simultaneously to unite and divide people separated by distance, culture, and political orientation. In so doing, the research advances the study of online community<sup>3</sup> on three levels. On a semantic level, the research shows how online discussion contributors with different sets of views and ideological orientations express their views. On an interactional level, the analysis uncovers patterns in posters' participation and interaction patterns among forum participants, as well as delineating how interactional strategies may facilitate continued dialogue in the face of division. On a social-behavioral level, it charts similarities and differences between patterns of participation, power, conflict and consensus, and group membership by obtaining frequency distributions for particular behaviors. This tri-level perspective enables us to understand how fora can simultaneously be sites of consensus building, civil disagreement, and passionate conflict.

## Evidentiary Base and Methods

The data are drawn from posts generated in the three discourse fora from September 11, 2001 through October 29, 2001, when the Brazilian forum ends. This time period captures both immediate and later reaction to the attacks, including reactions to the first phases of the military intervention in Afghanistan. I gathered 15,764 posts from the *NY Times*'s “A Nation Challenged,” 15,951<sup>4</sup> from *Le Monde*'s “The September

11th Attacks in the United States,” and 1,844 from *O Estado*'s “The First War of the Century.” For each of the three sites, each day's postings were recorded in a digital format that preserves the sequencing experienced by the participants.<sup>5</sup> In addition to forum posts, I conducted interviews in New York, São Paulo, and Paris with members of each forum staff.

The inquiry employs a comparative, multi-method approach to analyze the three case studies. In the first stage of analysis, I reviewed a random probability sample of 400 posts from each forum (N=1,200) to assemble an inventory of the issues addressed in the posts and the frames used to interpret those issues. As the Brazilian forum was underpopulated relative to the French and American fora, it was necessary to oversample from it relative to the others. After developing an analytic framework and coding scheme, I then generated a second random sample of the data (N=600 posts) and coded this sample. These procedures resulted in an inventory of the issues addressed in the posts and the frames used to interpret those issues. They also reveal each post's relationship to the majority and minority positions on the issue under discussion. In addition, to analyze the micro interactions within the forum, I generated a third sample of the data in strings or threads of 100 posts from each forum during the same time period (N=600 posts). These procedures yielded rich textual data that I present in the form of excerpt commentary.

## Analytical Framework

The comparison deals simultaneously with three levels of analysis: the interactional, the social-behavioral, and the semantic (Herring, 2004). I identify trends in the frequency of types of posts and in the composition of the forum constituencies during crucial time periods. I track the proportion of regular posters as compared to “pop-in”<sup>6</sup> posters; national, expatriate, and international participation;<sup>7</sup> the percentages of ideological posts from each camp; levels of interactivity; affirmation and sanctioning; and shifts in the cognitive burden measured by the average number of words per post. The interactional patterns are analyzed by measuring the number and proportion of posts that are responsive to prior posts from different users. In the analysis corresponding to the social-behavioral level, I examine patterns of participation, power, conflict and consensus, and group membership by calculating frequency distributions for particular behaviors. I also employ interpretive procedures such as deciphering the content of messages for signs of personal sympathy or hostility directed at other posters, or impersonal sympathy or hostility directed at the views they are advancing.

In order to advance the analysis at the semantic level, I exploit the techniques of “frame” analysis devised by researchers studying offline political discourse (Gamson, 1992). In this way I combine the “coding and counting” (Herring, 2004) approach common in content-based Internet studies with more interpretive approaches entailing a subjective element of judgment. Traditionally such coding schemes accommodate “objective” coding categories such as direct reference, interactivity, and illocutionary status (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2004). In contrast, issue frames require an interpretive strategy aimed at teasing apart the meanings of the various underlying frames used by posters. Here I take my cue from the work done by cultural sociologists interested in offline discourse on political topics (Fisher, 1997).

I employ the concepts of positions and frames in my interpretive analysis of the forum discourse. Three primary ideological positions are identified: anti-Americanism, anti-anti-Americanism, and pro-Americanism. Anti-Americanism is defined as “ordinary hatred and habitual resentment against America or Americans” (Rigoulot, 2004, p. 9). In contrast, anti-anti-Americans view unreflective anti-Americanism as intellectually unsound. Anti-anti-Americans critique what they view as unfounded and overzealous anti-Americanism (Gopnik, 2003; Roger, 2002). Unlike pro-Americans, they rarely voice their partisan views unless faced with this position. While both anti-Americanism and anti-anti-Americanism are common stances in the Brazilian and French fora, only the American forum is marked by a normative pro-American stance in immediate reaction to 9/11. This stance defends the United States and American people by the same means as anti-anti-Americans. However, it represents more than a reaction and celebrates the contribution that the United States and the American people have made to the world.

Proponents of all three stances employ various frames when articulating their views. A particularly salient example is “expansive” versus “constrained” frames of the United States and Americans (Hart, 1999). Expansive frames refer to the United States and Americans as a people, a symbolic nation, a body of values, and/or an abstraction. Constrained frames refer to the United States in highly specific or concrete terms as a political entity represented by specific administrations, presidents, foreign policies, and governmental or military acts.

## Forum History and Structure

Although each of the three fora was created in direct response to 9/11, there are important differences among them (Table 1). These differences include discourse structure, moderation, times of operation, life span, and dominant language. In this section I overview each forum to provide a framework for how each is moderated, to ensure that data are understood within the constraints imposed in each venue.

**Table 1. Forum overview**

	<i>O Estado</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>NY Times</i>
<b>Discourse Structure</b>	linear	threaded	linear
<b>Moderation Style</b>	invisible	invisible	interactive
<b>Moderation of Posts</b>	rarely interventionist	regularly interventionist	regularly interventionist
<b>Open for Posting</b>	24/7	24/7	moderator must be present
<b>Weekdays</b>	24/7	24/7	extended business hours
<b>Weekend</b>	open	open	usually closed
<b>Life Span Year One</b>	49 days	continuous	continuous
<b>Dominant Language</b>	Portuguese	French	English

The Brazilian newspaper *O Estado* hosts the forum entitled "The First War of the Century." Like *O Estado's* other fora, which are generally devoted to current events, this forum uses a linear, rather than threaded, structure. Open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the Brazilian forum receives 3,000% more activity than other fora hosted by the site. Forum staff reports that response to 9/11 was a defining moment that ignited record participation in "The First War of the Century." However, unlike its French and American counterparts, the Brazilian forum was abandoned by users at the end of October 2001 (Figure 1). Forum activity devoted to the "War on Terror" does not revive until the war in Iraq.



**Figure 1.** Forum posts from 9/11/01 to 8/29/01 \*Minima in the *NY Times* data indicate weekends when the forum was closed

The Brazilian forum has one moderator who acts in an "invisible" capacity, rather than being an active participant in the forum. Posts must be in Portuguese and must not contain profanity or hate speech. The moderator deletes what he considered to be offensive posts. However, during our interview he reported that he was surprised by the relatively low number of posts necessitating an intervention.

Participation in *Le Monde's* forum began in one of the five "international" fora named "L'Amérique." Unlike *O Estado*, *Le Monde's* fora center both on themes and/or current events, as well as geographic locations. There are continent-specific fora for each area of the globe. Thus, immediate response to 9/11 took place in the forum devoted to the Americas.<sup>8</sup> Although the forum was closed on the 11th of September, it re-opened on the 12th. In the following days, participants generated unprecedented levels of posting concerning 9/11, indicating the need for a space devoted uniquely to these events. In response, on September 17th, the moderators opened a new forum: "Terrorism and Anti-terrorism." After its tens of thousands of posts rendered it increasingly unwieldy, this forum was recorded in two archives of posts from September 2001 through October 2002 entitled "The September 11th attacks in the United States."

Moderators immediately opened yet another forum for participants. They have continued this process through the present, such that there is a forum for each new phase of the events stemming from 9/11 through the occupation of Iraq. Staff concur that the 9/11 forum is a watershed event that generated unprecedented levels of participation that continue to grow over time. Like the Brazilian forum, the French forum is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Activity continues throughout the weekend, although there is often a drop in participation on Sundays. While the majority of posts are in French, moderators allow posts in any language. From time to time, Americans read the French posts and respond in English, eliciting French responses such as, "As you are obviously capable of reading the language of Molière, I will write to you in French."

While the fora hosted by the *NY Times* and *O Estado* are linear such that all posts appear in chronological order, *Le Monde's* forum is organized in threads arranged chronologically, based on the date of the first or originating post. Each time a new message is posted, the author must either respond to another post or begin a new thread. Therefore, French posts that technically address another poster might have a looser connection than do posts on the Brazilian or American site where participants must directly address another poster by name or quote. While posters to the French forum simply reply to any post in a thread, posters to the American and Brazilian fora have to either cut and paste the other user's name or quote them in their own post to mimic thread interactivity.

These two formats create another difference in the interactional dynamic. The linear or consecutive American and Brazilian formats make the center of current interaction clear; it is always at the end of the forum at the last post. In contrast, *Le Monde's* thread-based format makes it impossible to locate current participation at a central venue. Due to the concurrent threads, activity might simultaneously occur on any of the open threads at any point in the forum. While it is most likely for participants in the French forum to engage with the most recent threads, there is no center of activity that all participants experience together. In contrast, the fora hosted by the *NY Times* and *O Estado* are chronological records of posts that may or may not be related to adjacent posts. Thus, while it is easy to pinpoint "current" participation at any point in time by going to the last post in the linear succession, it is also more difficult to ascertain "threads" of discussion in the American and Brazilian fora (cf. Herring, 1999).

Moderators at *Le Monde* do not consider it their role to be active participants either by posting to the forum or writing prompts to guide discussion. However, they moderate the forum twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The four moderators divide this period of twenty-four hours into four six-hour blocks of time. Each is responsible for one of these segments, with the francophone moderator in Canada working what is the nightshift in France. They do this because of the explosive nature of the discussion. The moderators regularly use their extensive rights to delete posts, suspend users, and ultimately exile them from the site if their posts become too offensive. Banned users are informed of their sentencing via email. Selectively edited posts are the only telltale signs of the moderator's presence visible to the entire forum.

The American forum hosted by the *NY Times* also attracted unparalleled levels of participation. "A Nation Challenged" began within hours of the attacks and continued until shortly after the one-year anniversary of 9/11. The first year's postings were first archived and, subsequently, removed. Like its French counterpart, the *NY Times's* forum was continually regenerated through the war in Iraq and the ensuing occupation. Forum staff report that participants have always been "passionate" about expressing their opinions. When the one-year anniversary of the Iraq War occasions a new forum in this cyclical renewal, one of the posters announces, "Let the bloodshed begin." For this reason, the forum is open only when the moderator can be present. This usually means between 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. EST through the early evening on weekdays, which may have an effect on participation from posters in other time zones in both the United States and the rest of the world. In the days following 9/11, international posters used various languages, but this was unusual as posts are almost always in English.

The *NY Times's* forum is heavily moderated by the Crossmaster. The moderator or "Cross" regularly deletes posts and steers the conversation on the forum through direct interventions. Further, the forum regularly posts prompts for discussion; these change with current events in the "War on Terror" and other associated current events. The Cross is a regular participant who often joins in discussions. Reading the forum posts, one feels a certain level of intimacy between regular forum members and the Crossmaster, who is visibly omnipresent. When the moderator deletes posts, members sometimes react vocally, attempt to post again, or directly challenge the Crossmaster's

decision. The forum closes and opens at the Crossmaster's discretion, eliciting a series of salutations as normative behavior, ensuring that civility prevails at the opening and closing of the sessions.

### Findings: Discourse in the Three Fora

This section presents trends in each of the fora beginning with *O Estado*, followed by *Le Monde*, and concluding with the *NY Times*. While all of the fora are anchored in ideological divisions between anti-Americans versus anti-anti-Americans and pro-Americans, there are a number of other similarities and differences across the fora. These are apparent both during the week following September 11th and in the last week of October when *O Estado*'s forum ends.

Trends are evident in both the frequency of posts and composition of the forum constituencies during each of these crucial time periods. When we compare discourse in the three fora at the end of October, we see that the majority of forum members are regular posters with high levels of critical interaction based on ideological differences. However, key differences are evident in the percentage of expatriate posts, affirmation versus sanctioning, and the average lengths of posts. We also see that American and French national posters dominate their respective fora.

All three fora are rife with expressions of ideological and political-cultural stances that run the gamut from anti-Americanism to anti-anti-Americanism to pro-Americanism. However, these divisions are the product of different processes in the three fora. In the Brazilian forum, a clique of Brazilians writing from the United States dominates and drives the anti-American versus pro-American cleavages. *Le Monde*'s forum is also marked by discursive conflict oriented around an anti-American semantic axis. However, the majority and minority viewpoints are distributed throughout the user population rather than directed towards "outsiders" as in the Brazilian forum. Instead, a distinctive anti-anti-American position emerges through the dialogic flow among members recognized by each other as legitimate spokespeople for their standpoints.

Pro-American stances are normative in the *NY Times*' forum immediately following 9/11. Although antagonisms are initially dormant, they revive with the military intervention in Afghanistan between those who support and critique the Bush administration's choice of response. Though a critical stance becomes dominant, the anti-American position is less articulated than in the French or Brazilian fora where it acquires the status of the dominant view. While the anti-American discourse is acceptable in the Brazilian or French fora, American participants are hesitant to self-identify as such.

Finally, as participants negotiate the ideological conflict, they also employ different interactional strategies. American and French posters engage each other in reasoned argument through informal, shorter posts that employ humor. In contrast, the Brazilian forum is dominated by an outsider group of expatriates who adopt a formalized, epistolary style necessitating longer posts.

#### *O Estado De São Paulo*: 9/11/01-9/17/01

In immediate response to the attacks, participation in *O Estado*'s forum peaked on September 11th with a record 692 posts (Table 2A, Figure 2A). Brazilian posts on 9/11 and 9/12 account for 900 posts or almost 49% of total posts in the forum's lifespan. Over 60% of all posts made to the Brazilian forum, or 1,119 posts, occur within the week following 9/11.

**Table 2A. Forum posts 9/11/01-9/17/01**

Date	<i>O Estado</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>NY Times</i>
9/11/2001	608	0	60
9/12/2001	292	156	1019
9/13/2001	78	511	991
9/14/2001	52	412	551
9/15/2001	26	404	0
9/16/2001	14	430	0
9/17/2001	49	351	284
Total	1119	2264	2905



**Figure 2A.** Forum posts 9/11/01-9/17/01

These initial numbers indicate the vast number of pop-in posters who come to the fora immediately after the attacks to express emotion and then never return. Immediately after September 11th, pop-in posters contribute 75% of posts to the Brazilian forum, compared to 25% for regular posters (Tables 3A and 3B, Figure 3).

**Table 3A. Regular and pop-in posters 9/11/01-9/17/01**

	% Posts From Regular Posters	% Posts From Pop-In Posters	% Posts From Moderator
<i>O Estado</i>	25	75	0
<i>Le Monde</i>	60	40	0
<i>NY Times</i>	63	36	1



**Figure 2B.** Forum posts 10/23/01-10/29/01

Given the nature of their participation, pop-in posters do not generate interactive posts.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, due to the flood of pop-in posters, only 15% of all posts address another poster in the first week at *O Estado* (Table 4A, Figure 4).

**Table 4A.** Interactions between posters 9/11/01-9/17/01

	% Addresses Another Poster	% Does Not Address Another Poster or Begins Thread
<i>O Estado</i>	15	85
<i>Le Monde</i>	24	76
<i>NY Times</i>	41	59



**Figure 3.** Regular and pop-in posters

Of all interactive posts in which participants address one another, an overwhelming 80% are critical or make negative judgments about another poster. In contrast, only 13.3% of interactive posts are affirming or positive in nature; 6.7% are neutral (Table 5A, Figure 5).

**Table 5A.** Affirmation and sanctioning in interactive posts 9/11/01-9/17/01

	% Posts Positive/Affirming	% Posts Negative/Critical	% Posts Neutral
<i>O Estado</i>	13.3	80	6.7
<i>Le Monde</i>	16.7	50	33.3
<i>NY Times</i>	17	63.5	19.5



**Figure 4.** Interactions between posters

Of Brazilian posters in Brazil, 81.6% are pop-in posters, and 18.4% are regular participants. There are no international posters. However during this initial week, 8% of posts are from Brazilians living in the United States; 100% of these expatriate posters in the sample are regular contributors (Tables 5A and 5C, Figure 5). There is immediate dissensus that divides the forum into opposing camps: anti-Americans versus anti-anti-Americans and pro-Americans. In the week following 9/11, 37% of posts on *O Estado's* forum include a negative statement criticizing either the United States or the American people compared to 16% who defend the United States from these critiques. While Brazilian posters adopt an anti-anti-American stance, only the Brazilian expatriates may be classified as pro-American (Table 6A, Figure 6).

**Table 6A.** Anti-American and anti-anti-American posts 9/11/01-9/17/01

	% Anti-American	% Anti-Anti-American or Pro-American	% Non-Ideological
<i>O Estado</i>	37	16	47
<i>Le Monde</i>	53	17	30
<i>NY Times</i>	4	4	92



**Figure 5.** Affirmation and sanctioning in interactive posts

### O Estado de São Paulo: Discourse

The vast majority of Brazilian posters come to the forum in immediate response to 9/11. Their posts are defined by a collective outpouring of emotion such that many treat the forum as a cathartic digital space. In the early afternoon of September 11th, Brazilian pop-in posters flood the forum, express disgust at the terrorists, call for prayer, fear WW III, and appeal for peace. The majority of these emotional responses come from pop-in posters who do not return to the forum.

In contrast, regular posters quickly divide into ideological camps that last the life of the forum. Competing discourses lock the forum in fierce combat between anti-Americans and anti-anti-Americans. Anti-Americans frame their arguments with historical references that frame 9/11 as a just reaction to the United States' imperialism and past deeds. An anti-American, Roberto,<sup>10</sup> defines 9/11 as the direct result of American foreign policy. Simultaneously, he is unconcerned with Americans' suffering and critiques posters who oppose this view as "hypocritical:"

Let's stop being hypocritical and look at what really happened. Americans do exactly what they want with the entire world. And when someone goes against them and uses the same arms as they do, they turn themselves into victims...remember that Americans killed millions of innocent Japanese and nothing happened (Atomic Bomb), and in Vietnam (Napalm) therefore I don't think that Americans are

really suffering so much. We reap what we sow. They planted arrogance and hunger in the world and now are reaping that which they have sown.

Another anti-American, Rex, also expresses this stance:

...the attack was really a masterpiece. They should have also destroyed the Statue of Liberty and other American symbols. Life imitates art. Independence Day but without a North American victory. The United States is the biggest assassin of the world. Besides globalization, they kill millions over the entire world from hunger and war. Congratulations to the authors of this deed that will shame the United States for a long time.

For these anti-Americans, 9/11 is a day of ripe satisfaction. They see the United States as deserving the attacks and express glee or happiness about the victims. With such posts in the first hour of the forum's existence, the battle lines are drawn between the two factions.

In response, anti-anti Americans reject the anti-American framework as both illogical and morally inappropriate. One anti-anti-American poster immediately challenges Rex's assertions: "Rex's observation and interpretation are absurd and oversimplified. It is sad to read this kind of opinion in such a moment as this one. The people affected by the attack are innocent and workers such as any of us." Anti-anti-Americans repeatedly emphasize complexity of world political systems and the victims' humanity. Further, anti-anti-Americans call upon values such as liberty and democracy for all peoples; they abhor the victims' suffering as members of humanity. Like this anti-anti-American, they emphasize the need for compassion and solidarity:

It is sad to see how people express their opinions about what is occurring in the U.S....terrorism constitutes the most serious threat to world peace, human liberty and democracy. May God help and sustain the victims' families, for certainly justice comes from God. I express my solidarity for Americans and cry for the victims.

This anti-anti-American defends transnational values and calls for mercy for all human beings, including Americans. Rather than being pro-American, the majority of these posts call for what they see as a balanced view of the American people or the United States. In this way, they employ the frame of justice in defining the attacks as against "humanity" and "democracy."

In the week following 9/11, there are two pro-Americans who defend the United States and its people in terms of politics, culture, and "American" values. Not surprisingly, they are two Brazilians living in the United States: Fernando and Victoria. In the week following 9/11, these vocal Brazilians express shock at the number of anti-American comments. They unleash a torrent of posts defending their new homeland. Fernando writes:

Reading the posts here...I hope that President Bush's missile program will protect the skies of the United States. I also hope that it will serve to protect us from the nonsense coming from pseudo-intellectual Brazilians who revel in their anti-Americanism.

While these pro-Americans admit to the United States' faults, they hotly defend their adopted country. Many Brazilians on the forum react negatively; they call Fernando and Victoria "traitors" who have "abandoned" Brazil by "fleeing to the United States." In response to such remarks, these expatriates post with great fervor.

### O Estado de São Paulo: 10/23/01-10/29/01

By the end of October, the percentage of anti-American posts increases from 37% to 46%. In like manner, pro-American and anti-anti-American posts climb from 16% to 42% in October (Table 6B). By the last week of October, there are far fewer neutral posts (12%) than in September (47%). The forum's entire debate revolves around these two groups: the pro-American and anti-anti-Americans led by the Brazilians residing in the United States, and their detractors, the anti-Americans.

There is also a change in the forum constituency. In September, 92% of all posts come from Brazilians, 81.6% of whom are pop-in posters. By the end of October, 58% of all posts are generated by Brazilian participants in Brazil, of whom 65% are regular posters. Just after 9/11, the only self-defined expatriates on the Brazilian forum are Fernando and Victoria who are living in the United States. Later, a new group of Brazilian expatriates has joined the forum such that 42% of all posts come from Brazilians living abroad (Tables 8B and 8D, Figure 8). Brazilian expatriates living in a country other the United States generate 12% of all posts. In addition, Fernando and Victoria have been joined by other Brazilians in the United States such that Brazilian expatriates living in the United States generate 30% of all posts on *O Estado's* forum.

**Table 8A. National and international posters 9/11/01-9/17/01**

	% Posts From National Posters	% Posts From Expatriate Posters	% Posts From International Posters
<i>O Estado</i>	92	8	-
<i>Le Monde</i>	93	4	3
<i>NY Times</i>	92	-	8



**Figure 7. Shift in cognitive burden in forum posts**

In addition to the evolution of ideological camps, we see other shifts in the forum constituencies. Most striking, the number of posts for the week has shrunk to a mere 90 posts (Table 2B, Figure 2B), and the flood of pop-in posters has slowed to a trickle. Average forum participation during the last week of October indicates that regular posters account for 76% of total forum posts compared to 25% during the week following 9/11 (Table 3A and 3B, Figure 3).



These regular users address, question, quote, affirm, critique, and insult other users such that all posts become a collective product of the group's interactions.

In *O Estado's* forum, posters address each other in 78% of posts (Tables 4B, Figure 4). The vast majority of interactions among posters (69.3%) are still critical in nature, while only 25.6% of posts addressed to another user are affirmative in nature and 5.1% are neutral. This represents a shift in the percentage of both critical and affirmative posts from the week following 9/11 when these percentages were 90% and 13.3%, respectively. Thus users are more likely to interact, but they are slightly less likely to critique another participant and almost twice as likely to affirm another poster (Table 5B, Figure 5).

Finally, there is a shift in the "cognitive burden" (Stromer-Galley & Martinson, 2004, p. 19) imposed by posts' average length and complexity. This shift is evidenced by the average number of words per post. Brazilians bear an incredible 319.17% increase in words per post, from 120 words following 9/11 to 383 the final week of the forum (Table 7, Figure 7).

**Table 7. Shift in cognitive burden in forum posts**

	Average Number Words Per Post 9/11/01-9/17/01	Average Number Words Per Post 10/23/01-10/29/01	Percent Change
<i>O Estado</i>	120	383	319.17
<i>Le Monde</i>	295	131	-55.59
<i>NY Times</i>	170	114	-32.94



**Figure 6. Anti-American and anti-anti-American posts**

In sum, at the end of October, the majority of Brazilian forum members are regular users. These regular users have high levels of interaction with each other; these interactions are likely to be critical or negative based on ideological differences driven by Brazilians living in the United States. These interactions take place in posts that are over three times longer than those following 9/11.

### O Estado de São Paulo: Interactional Strategies

By the last week of October, more Brazilian expatriates join Fernando and Victoria in the forum. As a regular poster analyzes, "One thing that I have noticed in this forum is that the discussions end by turning into a battle between Brazilians in Brazil and the Brazilians from the United States." Indeed, by the end of October, 17% of total posts respond to either Fernando or Victoria. Some responses are supportive, but many are critical. By this time, in response to increasing numbers of critical comments, Fernando has long been using formalized expressions in his posts.

Sir...For this reason, my disagreement with your theory, IN NO WAY affects your integrity and honesty in explaining your thinking and in no way affects my admiration for your gentlemanly behavior towards all here. Thank you very much for the opportunity to have these discussions with you Sir. Most affectionately, Fernando

Fernando takes care to address others as "Sir" and "Madam" (see de Oliveira, 2003, on the importance of address forms in Portuguese). He also writes affirmative comments to both his supporters and detractors in an attempt to encourage dialogue.

While most posters do not go as far as he does, many begin to address each other formally, refer to each other in the third person, employ the formal form of "you," and even begin to sign their posts with warmer salutations: "Mr. Mario, Thank you for your words of solidarity...Sir you have touched upon a very important point...Affectionately yours..." This is not to say that the critical posts are not vituperative. During this same time, one of Fernando's detractors calls him "Mr. Evil." However, those who hope to maintain a civil environment for discussion do their utmost by adopting highly formal interactional styles. An anti-anti-American congratulates Fernando and Victoria for their efforts:

Dear Fernando and Victoria, I have accompanied this forum for long enough. I am in favor free speech. I would like to ask you a favor... continue to write what you think even if you are attacked on a personal level. As Mr. Fernando has said, we must attack the message and not the messenger. Your contributions are very important for the "diversity" of this forum. Affectionately yours, Maria.

The posts become longer and longer in length with this highly stylized form. Some posts adopt an epistolary format to accommodate a more formal style. Both their length and formal quality lend a serious tone to the interactions.

### Le Monde: 9/11/01-9/17/01

*Le Monde's* forum peaked on September 19th in response to the new forum being opened (Figure 1). However, immediate response to the attacks was still significant. There were 511 posts on September 13th and over 400 posts per day until Monday the 17th when participation dipped to 351 posts (Table 2A, Figure 2A). The total for the first week is 2,264 posts, which is greater than the total number of posts in the entire Brazilian forum.

Immediately after September 11th, pop-in posters account for 40% of French posts, while regular posters generate 60% of posts (Table 3A, Figure 3). While regular posters are highly interactive, the large numbers of visiting pop-in posters do not interact with other posters. Mirroring the Brazilian forum, the influx of pop-in posters artificially lowers the total number of interactive posts to 24% (Table 4A, Figure 4). Of those posts that are interactive, 16.7% affirm another poster or group of posters, while 50% are critical or sanction another participant or

ideological camp. In contrast, 33.3% are neutral ([Table 5A](#), [Figure 5](#)).

In terms of nationality, French posters generate 93% of all contributions ([Table 8A](#), [Figure 8](#)). Of these, 60% are regular contributors and 40% are pop-in posters. In addition, French expatriates living in the United States account for 4% of all posts. Americans in France and the United States account for another 3% of all posts. While 100% of Americans posting to *Le Monde* are pop-in posters, 100% of French expatriates are regular posters ([Tables 8C](#)).

In the week following 9/11, 53% of posts on *Le Monde's* forum include a negative statement criticizing either the United States or the American people. Seventeen percent of posters defend the United States from these critiques by adopting an anti-anti-American stance ([Table 6A](#), [Figure 6](#)).

### **Le Monde: Discourse**

Like the Brazilian forum, the French forum is immediately torn by ideological divisions. As the ideological warfare escalates, French posters immediately call one of the factions the "anti-Americans." There is more than a hint of Schadenfreude among the anti-Americans. One of these posters shares, "On TV we heard, 'The symbols of capitalism have collapsed in the United States.' Who can, in all honesty, pretend to not have had, in that very moment, a brief moment of secret pleasure?" Like Brazilian anti-Americans, these French posters take joy in the September 11th terrorist attacks. Another anti-American French poster defines the United States as malignant and frames emotional response as negative American behavior.

Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, you would do better to consider your world and political history. The U.S. is the cancer of this planet and the cancer has taken root in the beast with the investiture of GW Bush the fascist.

Like their Brazilian counterparts, these anti-Americans do not sympathize with the victims because they frame 9/11 as the United States' just desserts.

Sanctioning of both content and emotion begins immediately in terms of the anti-American and anti-anti-American debate. When some of the first posters express grief and compassion towards the victims, these pop-in responses are ignored or even reframed by the anti-American camp as with the following pop-in poster, "First shock, fear, worry...then anger, hatred, desire for vengeance...and now I feel nothing other than disgust...disgust towards human nature, disgust towards myself...disgust towards the Muslim fanatics, authors of these monstrous terrorist attacks ...Matthew 16 Years Old." Like many anti-anti-Americans, Matthew recognizes, and mourns, the victims' humanity. Yet, a regular French poster responds to Matthew with fervor: "Voilà! That's exactly how the American public opinion reacts: like a sixteen year old adolescent. And that is the heart of the problem..." This anti-American negatively frames sympathetic response as immature American behavior.

The anti-anti-American camp mobilizes in response. They frame such unsympathetic reactions as more than objectionable; they perceive them as attacks on democratic values dear to the French:

Odious. Some people, even on a day like this one, continue to say the same old story...All of them can be categorized: enemies of the United States, enemies of liberty and democracy. Their "regrets" and "condolences" made up at the last minute are empty.

For anti-anti-Americans, anti-American rhetoric is an attack on shared values between France and the United States, such as democracy. As such, the anti-Americans are the "enemy." Further, the degree of animosity expressed towards the United States pushes non-ideological participants into taking a stance. French participants report that the unremitting anti-American comments during the immediate week following 9/11 galvanize them to become anti-anti-Americans: "I align myself with posters' messages of support towards the American people! Although I am not terribly appreciative of Bush's politics, it never crossed my mind to justify this monstrous attack as do some of the imbeciles here..." Another anti-anti-American poster explains how he is forced to take sides in the ideological struggle: "I also was very shocked by certain statements on this forum and expressed myself against them as did numerous other French people." Anti-anti-Americans make the distinction between the "real" France and forum members: "Here, some participants are exalted leftist intellectuals, who think that they are the salt of the earth and the voice of France. The real France stood still for three minutes today to honour your death." Thus the ideological struggle becomes a battleground that forces regular posters to take sides. In opposition to the anti-Americans, some posters defend the United States, while others uphold what they frame as the ideals of France.

### **Le Monde: 10/23/01-10/29/01**

By the end of October, posters are slightly less likely to make anti-American posts. While 46% still do so, anti-anti-American posts increase from 17% to 32%. Non-ideological posts have dropped to 22% of all posts ([Table 6B](#)). Although the flood of pop-in posters to *Le Monde* slows, at 2277, the total number of posts has remained at the same level as the week following 9/11 ([Table 2B](#), [Figure 2B](#)). Regular forum members dominate both the forum and the discourse camps by the last week of October by generating 90% of total forum posts compared to 60% during the week following 9/11 ([Table 3B](#)).

Further, interactivity has greatly increased ([Table 4B](#) and [Figure 4](#)). On *Le Monde's* forum by the end of October, posters address another participants in 90% of posts compared to 24% in September. Of these exchanges, 80% are critical, 6.7% affirming, and 13.3% neutral ([Table 5B](#), [Figure 5](#)). As with *O Estado*, at the close of October, regular users dominate the forum, predominantly in a negative or critical manner. However, unlike Brazilian participants, at the end of October French interactive posts are much more likely to be critical, slightly less likely to be positive, and significantly less likely to be neutral than they were following 9/11 when these percentages were 50%, 16.7%, and 33.3% respectively.

However, there is a dramatic disparity between the Brazilian and French fora concerning expatriate posters who have reduced their participation in the French forum. By the last week of October, international posters and expatriates are very low in number in the French forum. The French expatriate regular posters (4%) and American pop-in posters (3%) coming to *Le Monde's* forum following 9/11 slow to .5% each; both groups become pop-in posters ([Tables 7B and 7D](#)). Finally, there is a shift in the cognitive burden contrary to that

experienced on the Brazilian forum. At the end of October, French posts are only 131 words on average, which is a 55.59% decrease from September when posts average 295 words ([Table 7](#), [Figure 7](#)).

### **Le Monde: Interactional Strategies**

As the discourse camps battle, posters are not content merely to regurgitate strong discordant opinions. Rather, the French develop an interactional rewards strategy that facilitates and enlivens interactions. They employ humor as a powerful tool to sanction users from opposing camps. These posters use sarcasm, mockery, and ridicule regarding other posters' intelligence, sometimes using *ad hominem* attacks:

Delightful comparison. And of such rare intelligence. Is it possible to push moronic anti-Americanism further than you do? I doubt it. However, anything is possible. Human idiocy has no limit, even if you push the envelope as far as it can go.

Posters combine intellectual oneupmanship with substantive critiques designed to entertain as well as instruct:

I would like to say this CLEARLY. If you think that 1) the CIA, 2) the Mossad, 3) the DGSE, 4) the Jewish Agency or 5) my grandmother (cross out the superfluous choices) are responsible for this massacre simply for the pleasure of leaping to Kabul and building a pipeline, I believe that you truly mislead yourself. As for Bin L, I do not think he is an idiot. I think he is mad as a hatter. Nuance. Translations for those who have trouble understanding: I prefer drinking beer with Bush and Powell than mint tea with Bin L. and the gang. Or better yet, I prefer gin with Mohamed VI than vodka with Bin L. Is this clear?

These posts ridicule the other's social skills, reasoning, and intelligence.

The French also employ black humor. One anti-American suggests that two of the anti-anti-Americans go join the war in Afghanistan:

Are you still here? But it is only two hours away by plane. Be careful once you arrive...there are anti-personnel mines made by your friends. PS, since you are going there, take your friend Jean895 with you. He can raise the troops' morale.

Another anti-American jokes, "They are recruiting... (Haven't you heard?) Berlusconi's message about Western superiority over the Middle East. Hurry up, you are going to miss the train..." These French posters use humor to underscore or reiterate their ideological stances, while also sanctioning other posters. At the same time, humor allows users to display their own intellectual prowess in what could otherwise become a deadening repetition of ideological views. Unlike their Brazilian counterparts, the French often write concise, incisive posts as opposed to longer, more formal contributions.

### **The New York Times: 9/11/01-9/17/01**

The highest levels of forum participation in the *NY Times* occur on 9/12 with 1,019 posts ([Figure 1](#)). The following days collect 991 and 551 posts, respectively, before the forum closes for the weekend. By the following Monday, posts drop to 284 for a total 2,905 for the week ([Table 2A](#), [Figure 2A](#)).

Immediately after September 11th, pop-in posters account for 36% of American posts. Regular users contribute 63%, while the moderator writes 1% of posts ([Table 3A](#), [Figure 3](#)). Although the effect is not as severe as in the Brazilian and French fora, pop-in posters lower the total number of interactive posts to 41% of all posts ([Table 4A](#), [Figure 4](#)). Of these interactive posts, the minority affirms (17%) and the majority critiques (63.5%) another poster or group of posters ([Table 7A](#), [Figure 7](#)).

Americans account for 92% of all posts to the *NY Times*, of which 67% are regular posters ([Tables 7A and 7C](#), [Figure 7](#)). There are no self-defined American expatriates, but international posters contribute 8% of total posts; of these, only 12.5% participate regularly, while 87.5% are pop-in posters.

Unlike the Brazilian and French fora, only tinges of the anti-American and anti-anti-American debate are initially present on the American forum ([Table 6A](#), [Figure 6](#)). Americans draw together in a time of solidarity. Only 4% of posts to the *NY Times*' forum are critical of the United States during the week following 9/11. Only 25% of these (1% of all posts) are anti-American or employ statements equating the attacks with metajustice. Instead, 75% (3% of all posts) are anti-American in that they criticize the United States' past choices with an eye to considering the best possible response to 9/11.

While Brazilian (30%) and French (26%) anti-Americans are concerned with a retrospective account of blameworthy behavior that caused the attacks, Americans are more concerned with the future. For Americans, the most important problems are fighting terrorism (54%) and defining a just response that does not violate "American values" (27%). While 61% of Americans discuss how the United States should fight terrorism, only 17% of Brazilians or 24% of the French do so.

### **The New York Times: Discourse**

Theories of cultural trauma explain how individuals most affected by such events feel the need to unify and put aside differences in immediate response ([Sztompka, 2000](#)); this is certainly the case for Americans post-9/11 ([Collins, 2004](#)). In the week following 9/11, there are few anti-Americans and many pro-Americans. While there is some discussion of past American foreign policy as blameworthy (7%), unlike Brazilian or French posters, most American posters reject the idea that the United States deserved or provoked the attacks. This pro-American post exemplifies this stance:

In response to "We should ask ourselves if the root cause of this level of hatred lies in the forethought of destruction of the Western civilization or is it something that lies deep within our past actions, our current steps and the foreign policy followed by the U.S."

I have heard this a lot lately and frankly it makes me angry. Why? Because the statement implies that somehow WE are responsible for the attack. It implies that the anger against the United States is just even if the methods go too far. The attack on the U.S. was so immoral that

the act stands condemned by itself without any need to understand it. I submit that the anger against the U.S. by these fanatics is irrational and not justified. U.S. policy is not what is at issue here. I point out that the last two wars the U.S. has engaged in were to defend Muslims, the Gulf War and Kosovo as well as helping the Bosnians and we also helped the Afghans defeat the Soviets. All worthy fights. Give the U.S. some credit!

Forty-six percent of all posters use one of the following frames: an attack on civilization, the West, democracy or liberty. Others frame the attacks in terms of conflict between good and evil. Discussion centers on the future of the United States or the duty of the United States to defend those in these inclusive categories.

Rather than looking at the past to assess blame, American posters look to the future. Immediately following 9/11, even self-defined "liberals" expect Americans to rally together behind an appropriate military response. As one pro-American states, "I am a lifelong liberal who is all for invading." These posters deem it unproductive to criticize American foreign policy or President Bush. As a second pro-American writes, "I don't understand how looking down on the president will help anything. It turns your stomach, doesn't it?" Such critiques are defined as inappropriate given the present suffering, as yet a third poster expresses: "As a staunch critic of George W. Bush I will not seriously critique him on this point in this time of turmoil for all Americans." When a small number of posters criticize the United States or President Bush, their remarks are not well-received by pro-Americans:

Disagreeing with the President during a time of extreme national crisis, instead of offering your support is not only stupid, is not only brainless, does not only trivialize the brutal murder of thousands of New Yorkers, but is an affront to everything American.

In sum, as this American poster eloquently states, "How can you bash us now at a time like this? You rotten piece of garbage."

However, as the initial reaction to 9/11 subsides, the anti-American and anti-anti-American division in the *NY Times* appears in the United States' continued response to 9/11. The ideological camps solidify once the United States begins its military activity in Afghanistan. In this way, while the Brazilians and French have long been debating events from anti-American and anti-anti-American camps, this style of division belatedly appears on the *NY Times*' forum. As the conflict escalates, a growing group of posters is increasingly critical of the United States as a political entity. They believe that the American military and media should be scrupulously questioned:

Who to believe: a government and military that have lied to us in the past, and a quiescent media that do little more than channel press releases, or more varied sources throughout the world? The government and military may well be telling the truth, but past experience teaches us to be wary and seek confirmation elsewhere. There are more choices than just the U.S. or the Taliban.

These posters contest the Bush administration's military response to 9/11 and express their dissatisfaction with the American government and foreign policy. In this way, the *NY Times*' forum develops its own faction of posters who adopt a critical stance towards the United States.

In contrast, the pro-Americans adopt a Bush-inspired stance, quoting the President: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." These pro-Americans vigorously defend the United States, the President, the Department of Defense and the military. When the American equivalent of the anti-Americans criticizes these views or questions the United States' military, the pro-Americans interpret these critiques as anti-American discourse. They frame it as not only anti-American but pro-terrorist. For pro-Americans, rejecting official statements from the United States government and accepting "propaganda" from the enemy is siding with the Taliban:

Hmmm, who to believe, the United States government or the Taliban - Bin Laden accomplices who believe in amputating hands and feet of alleged thieves...when there is clear, intentional denial of the United States' policy to avoid and minimize collateral damage to civilians by carefully targeting Taliban military and command structures, or of flat out preferring the completely unsubstantiated Taliban claim regarding damage to U.S. assets, then one has crossed over to supporting the Taliban propaganda effort...

Pro-American posters resist supporting the "Taliban propaganda effort" as the "preferred interpretation on the Board." They are quick to define the battle lines in dichotomous terms, "Sorry, but it is the Taliban vs. the U.S..." The more ardent of the pro-American posters refer to the "Blame America First Club;" some refer to the "Leftist-Taliban Coalition" as do pro-American French posters.

However, unlike the French and Brazilian posters, even critical American posters do not wish to identify as "anti-American." Rather, they frame themselves as anti-policy or anti-Bush administration. Some critical posters maintain that they support the United States or the American people but not its current government. This is especially true with posters who critique the Bush administration's military response to 9/11 but maintain their support of the United States. As we have seen, pro-Americans interpret this stance as support for the Taliban. In response to the pro-Americans, a poster who favors a non-military response to 9/11 denies the charge that he supports the Taliban:

There may be sentiments that bombing Afghanistan is an unwise solution at the moment, but barring the rare "*hit and run*" posters who pop in to spew their propaganda, I do not take anyone's desire here for a non-military course of action to be automatically associated with a pro-Taliban stance. They are two different positions. While we all have very different views on what courses of action to take and what might have caused Sept 11th, as well as not giving a hoot about any causes, I have seen no regular poster here going: "*Yeah, Taliban!*" That's just not the case. Believe me, if we suspect someone here is pro-Taliban and anti-USA, our feelings towards that poster will be made loud and clear across the board.

Unlike Brazilian and French anti-American posters, even this critical poster does not give a "hoot" about the causes of 9/11 as justifying the attacks. These posters are quick to define themselves as *not* anti-USA." As one of them explains, "...such questioning of the veracity of DOD statements is more than justified and certainly not anti-American and most defiantly NOT "pro" Taliban as you so carelessly assert." Another demands, "Who's pro-Taliban here? For those who might argue against how the United States is responding to Sept 11th, I certainly wouldn't categorize them as being pro-Taliban."

In contrast, pro-American posters who are staunch supporters of a military response reject peaceful or non-military responses as ineffective. As one explains, "It's amazing to me the number of pacifists who would want the United States to only chant peace songs, light candles and

hold hands. (Barrrrrrrrrr!!!)...We are at war. And it's time to rid our planet of terrorists like the Taliban." These pro-Americans frame legal or non-military responses as inadequate because they cannot protect the United States against future attacks:

Yes, maybe if we say pretty please they will abandon their lone mission in life to kill innocent Americans inspired by what they believe is a calling from the Almighty. They sound like rational, reasonable people to me. The only way to appease them is for America to cease to exist and live as they do. Maybe you don't value your freedom and believe that dying to keep it is worthy, but I do. Tell ya what, if I give you the papers will you go "serve" Bin Laden? Go talk with him, and convince him that his view of the Koran is wrong. I'm sure he'll listen.

Almost universally, they support vigorous action on the part of the United States government both at home and abroad because the "issue is self defense." For this reason, they believe that Americans should rally behind a military response that will destroy what they consider to be a common threat: "The issue is simple. Regardless of religious beliefs, whether you are a hawk or a dove, right wing or left wing, when a mad dog comes into your neighborhood and attacks people, you shoot it...".

It must be noted that, while many are angry, the majority of pro-American posters firmly reject massive violence as ignoble. Rather, they advocate an "appropriate" response that will keep the United States safe from terrorists:

Killing them all is neither necessary nor possible. And why would we want to do that? After soundly defeating two atrocious enemies in WWII we find that today, Germany and Japan are amongst our staunchest allies. While we don't agree on every point with them, at least we can be reasonably secure in the thought that we won't be fighting them again any time soon. Victory for the U.S.? Absolutely. Annihilation of an entire culture? Not my idea of a noble goal. Fight and defeat the enemy using all necessary force. While he may never be your truest friend, if defeated soundly enough, maybe he can be crossed off the dangerous enemy list.

For this pro-American, it is the United States' duty to use "all necessary force" to make the United States and the world safe from terrorists. Like the Brazilian and French fora, the divide between those who affirm and those who critique the United States becomes the most salient issue defining the discourse. It is the primary lens through which many regular posters view each other and the issues they discuss.

### **The New York Times: 10/23/01-10/29/01**

By the end of October, however, there is ideological division in all three fora driven by anti-Americans and their opponents. This shift on the *NY Times'* forum from unity to division is crystal clear. By the last week of October, only 32.7% of posters express non-ideological sentiments regarding the two stances compared to 92% in September. Anti-American comments climb from 4% to 34.6%, while pro-American posts also climb to 32.7% of all posts. These percentages indicate the dramatic shift in the forum's solidarity during the first week (Table 6B). Discourse of critical evaluation now more closely resembles the French and Brazilian fora.

In addition, pop-in posters have become a small minority by the end of October, contributing only 12% of posts. Unlike *Le Monde's* forum, this shift is reflected in the total number of posts that has decreased to 1,848 for the week (Table 2B, Figure 2B). Regular forum members generate 88% of posts and are highly interactive. Whether through affirmation or sanction, posters address another participant 96% on the *NY Times*, an increase from 41% in the week following 9/11.

However, while posters on all three fora are likely to be critical of one another, American posters' interactions are likely to be negative to a lesser degree (44%) than either Brazilian or French posters, at 69.3% and 80%, respectively. Only 36% of posts on the *NY Times'* forum are neutral, and 20% are supportive in character (Table 7B, Figure 7). Unlike French interactive posts that become more critical and less affirming with time, American interactive posts resemble their Brazilian counterparts. At the end of October, they are significantly less likely to be critical and slightly more likely to be supportive in nature.

Although international posters come to *NY Times* following 9/11 (8%), by the end of October they no longer represent an important presence (1%) (Table 7B, Figure 7). Finally, like the French, Americans experience a lightened cognitive burden evidenced by the average number of words per post. At the end of October, posts on the American forum are 32.94% shorter, on average 114 words in length, a shift from 170 words the week of 9/11 (Table 7, Figure 7).

### **The New York Times: Interactional Strategies**

As the American forum coalesces into a group of regular posters, interaction becomes more intimate. In contrast to the Brazilians' use of formality as a strategy, Americans resemble their French counterparts in that they employ humor. This both encourages interaction and mitigates the horror of 9/11. Americans poke fun at themselves and others to lighten their ideological clashes with one another as they continue to debate:

FParker: I nominate John276 as the leader of the "democratic crusades" in all third world countries...\*wink\* Good luck and god-speed!! May you establish PepsiCo wherever injustice prevails!

John276: FParker, I accept your nomination. However, I'll have a Coke and a smile. One question. Did you have any substantive response to my post?

In this same spirit, posters employ wit to make ideological assertions such as this poster who combines condemnation of the terrorists with criticism of American foreign policy:

I would pay anything to see Osama's execution on pay-per-view. It would probably be more cruel to him and annoying to his followers if we kept him in prison for 40 years. The sight of Osama eating oatmeal in a cafeteria wearing an orange jumpsuit would be a good message to send to the world. He could share a cell with Noriega. They could compare their previous CIA paychecks.

Americans also use humor as affirmation for another poster or to support their own political positions. Given the events of the day, it usually takes the form of black humor:

BobJones: My proposal: Drop copies of Playboy, etc. sprinkled with radioactive dust in the area of the terrorist camps. Not enough to hurt them, but enough that they will glow in the dark when seen through special glasses. This should help our special forces considerably! We need to implement creative ideas, as creativity and flexibility are our best weapons. How about some more ideas?

Like the French, American posters from both camps are particularly adept at employing humor in short, pithy posts that serves a two-fold purpose. By using this technique they bolster their own camp's arguments and simultaneously lighten the weighty nature of the issues under discussion.

## Commonalities

### Regular Posters and Interactive Posts

There are a number of parallels between the longitudinal trajectories of all three fora with respect to levels of interactivity and the closure characteristics of the user population. This is readily apparent when we juxtapose the type of users participating in the three fora during the week following September 11th with the user composition of the fora during the final week of October. In all of the fora, regular posters dominate forum posting by the close of October. Brazilian regular posters produce 76% of posts, French regular posters 90% of posts, and American regular posters 88% of posts compared to 25%, 60% and 63% of posts immediately following 9/11.

Further, with fewer pop-in posters, the remaining core users engage each other in more intensive and interactive exchanges in October than in September. This trend is the most pronounced in *Le Monde's* site, which starts off with a low percentage (24%) of interactive posts. At the end of the time span in question, the proportion of interactive posts on the site approaches 90% of total posts. Posters to *O Estado* and the *NY Times* are not far behind, however. By the last week of October, only a vanishing minority of posts on the *NY Times'* forum (4%) are non-interactive posts addressed to some undefined audience or to the forum at large. Such posts are not quite as rare on *O Estado's* site, comprising some 21% of all comments posted from 10/23/01 to 10/29/01.

### Ideological Frames

Given that a far greater percentage of the total posts in each site is direct responses to another poster, it is not surprising that the frequencies of ideological posts also increase over time. All three fora are characterized by the development of a distinctive anti-anti-American standpoint, albeit articulated with varying levels of commitment and emotional intensity. The percentage of anti-anti-American and pro-American posts is also higher in all three fora at the end of October than in September. Correspondingly, the percentage of non-ideological posts is reduced to a minority.

There are similarities in the frames deployed in these ideological posts. Immediately following 9/11, a significant number of posters from all ideological stances employ expansive frames, which encompass entities such as "capitalism" and "humanity," as well as ideals such as "liberty" and "democracy." Anti-American Brazilian and French posters frame the terrorists' target as the "imperialism" and "capitalism" represented by the United States. Anti-anti-American Brazilians frame the attacks as a threat to "world peace" and "human liberty." Anti-anti-American and pro-American French posters characterize the victims as "civilization" and "the West." The week after 9/11, American posters on the *NY Times* frame the attacks as an assault on "democracy" and the "free world." Each group includes an important contingent of posters that employ expansive frames such that Americans and the United States become synonymous with larger abstractions.

Yet as the initial shock subsides, expansive frames give way to more constrained constructions. By the end of October, posters in all three fora are more likely to employ constrained frames that target specific people, administrations, or regimes. For example, when anti-American posters condemn specific policies, decisions, and governmental entities in *O Estado's* site, they refer to events such as the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima or the use of Napalm in Vietnam. They frame their criticism of current American militarism led by the Bush cabinet through extended reference to specific decisions made in the past by other American administrations. In like manner, anti-anti-Americans and pro-Americans on the French forum also draw on historical references to frame those who criticize the American-British military intervention in Afghanistan as "collabos" and "pétainistes." Pro-Americans on the *NY Times'* site speak in parallel of Pearl Harbor and 9/11. Such framing symbolically links current events with concrete historical references. In so doing it fuses present ideological struggles with larger ideological alliances, while maintaining specific frames of reference.

## Differences

### Identity and Group Membership Patterns

Although posters may use similar framing strategies, there are critical differences in the identity and group membership patterns of users in the three fora. Brazilian anti-anti-Americanism differs from American or French anti-anti-Americanism because in the Brazilian forum, the anti-anti- and pro-American stances are identified with a non-national expatriate clique of posters who are characterized as "traitors" who have "fled Brazil." *O Estado's* forum is unique inasmuch as it has a clearly defined "outcast" faction. The members of this faction are not simply proponents of pro-American and anti-anti-American stances; they reside in the United States and are therefore suspect in the eyes of many of the other Brazilian posters. The two most vocal Brazilian expatriates living in the United States endure sometimes vicious personal attacks. Fernando is taunted as "Mr. Evil," and one of Victoria's antagonists writes to her, "Too bad, you're weren't on the top story of one of the towers going down." Relatively few Brazilians in Brazil, or anywhere besides the United States, come to the aid of this embattled minority. For this reason, *O Estado's* site, where the ideological divides are aligned with faction-based identities, becomes less and less hospitable for users who are not invested in this conflict.

In contrast, in *Le Monde's* forum, the anti-anti-Americans have more credibility than those on *O Estado's* forum because they are French nationals entitled to speak as legitimate members of the forum. On *Le Monde's* site we find a diversity of users formulating anti-American and anti-anti-American positions, neither of which are identified with a small and "foreign" clique of users as they are in *O Estado's* forum. Thus the likelihood of a poster making an anti-American statement on *Le Monde's* site actually decreases slightly from the week following

9/11 to the last week of October. A persistent and tenacious minority of avowedly French posters sustain their defense of the American people or American ideals, even if they themselves level criticisms at specific American policies.

In the American and French fora, anti-anti- and pro-Americanism is associated with French and American posters who live in their own nations and therefore have recognized authority to speak for and to the nationals to which their fora are predominantly oriented. For this reason, American posters on the *NY Times*' forum repeatedly state that they have every right to criticize the United States or the Bush administration without being considered "anti-American" or "pro-Taliban." In short, nationals of each country have greater authority to speak against the dominant viewpoint, a practice that is not extended to those perceived as foreigners.

### Affirmation and Sanctioning

There are also differences between the way in which posters sanction and affirm others on the three sites. It is immediately clear from the data that *O Estado's* posts resemble the posts to the *NY Times* with respect to the valence of the contributions. Both witness a decrease of sanctioning and an increase in affirmation between September and October. Of all the interactive comments posted to *O Estado's* forum during the week following September 11th, 80% are critical, and 13.3% are affirmative. By the last week of October, the number of critical interactive posts falls to just over 69%, while the proportion of interactive posts that incorporates language meant to affirm or support another user almost doubles to 25.6%. In particular, Fernando, the Brazilian expatriate, affirms his detractors' arguments or logic even while disagreeing with them.

In like manner, on the *NY Times*' site immediately following 9/11, 63% of the interactive posts are critical of another user's posts, and 17% are supportive in their responses. By the end of October, however, the percentage of critical posts drops to 44%, although the affirmative percentage rises only very slightly. During this time period, we see that some critical posters couch their comments in formulations with an affirmative component, such as, "Bob, you make a good point about Osama and the CIA, but I have to disagree with your logic on the outcome." Here we see how Americans value consensus and try to infuse their comments with the spirit of conciliation even when they stand on the other side of an ideological dividing line, in the online world as well as the offline world (Carroll, 1987; Eliasoph, 1998).

In contrast, *Le Monde's* participants feel no such need to create social cohesion. As a percentage of interactive posts, critical posts rise from 50% in September to 80% in October, while affirmative posts drop from 16.7% to 6.7% and neutral posts diminish from 33.3% to 13.3%. The ability to critique behavior has long been a hallmark of French culture; the French understand it as the intellectual ability to make distinctions. Thus, the French are more likely than their American counterparts both to criticize and to value criticism—even to the point of first valuing the potentially negative aspects or risks of any situation presented (Baudry, 2003).

### Interactional Strategies and Styles

*O Estado's* site also stands alone with respect to the length and style of the posts. If one tracks the cognitive burden represented by contributions as measured by the average length of posts, one sees that participants in *O Estado's* site, unlike the contributors to either of the other fora, must cope with posts that impose greater and greater demands on their attention and intellectual faculties. The average length of posts during the last week of *O Estado's* site exceeds the length of posts during the week following 9/11 by 319%. This phenomenal growth is all the more surprising when one compares the trends in the French and American sites, where posts decrease on average by almost 56% and 33%, respectively.

The later contributions in *O Estado's* site also differ from their counterparts on the other two sites because of their formal epistolary style. Brazilian posters hoping to maintain a civil environment for discussion adopt highly formal interactional styles. The formality of their modes of address (de Oliveira, 2003), in particular, sets their posts apart from the more casual posts in the *NY Times*' forum and the repartees in *Le Monde's* forum. It is rare for one of the posters in these fora to address their interlocutors as "sir," even when they are engaged in especially vituperative exchanges. Many French and American posters respond to the statements of their ideological adversaries, comments which they typically perceive as naive at best and treacherous at worst, in an informal manner befitting conversation. Indeed, there is often a playful element in the oneupmanship and *ad hominem* barbs characteristic of many posts in the sites hosted by *Le Monde* and the *NY Times*, which is not present in posts to *O Estado's* forum.

### Synthesis

This analysis demonstrates that a common dynamic can operate in online settings with different user populations located in different countries. In all three fora, we see an increase in the social closure of the user population, as pop-in users are displaced by regular users who monopolize the forum. As the regular users take on a more dominant role, the overall level of interactivity increases, as measured by the prevalence of direct-address posts. This in turn creates the preconditions for the ideological polarization of the fora, in which fixed sets of posters engage each other in reasoned argumentation and *ad hominem* attacks.

This common participation dynamic can play out in different ways, depending on the composition of the user base and the interactional tools deployed by the participants. In *O Estado's* forum, a small group of posters employs distancing strategies in an attempt to manage the conflict. In the sites hosted by *Le Monde* and the *NY Times*, however, the ideological conflict is more impersonal and implicates a larger group of users. Moreover, the American and French posters who represent the minority viewpoint are regarded as legitimate participants in the exchanges because they neither foreigners nor expatriates.

### Conclusion

The study's inductive and synthetic approach yields insights into the commonalities and differences between the three fora on several analytical dimensions: the interactional, social-behavioral, and semantic. The commonalities are most pronounced with regard to the dimensions of participation and interaction, while the differences are more prominent with respect to group membership, the ideological framings of posts, and the posts' tone and style. A minority faction in each of the three fora espouses positions sympathetic to the United States, whether broadly or narrowly construed. However, each of these factions finds itself involved in a different type of discursive

confrontation with their majority anti-American antagonists.

The findings from the study suggest that, whatever the cultural environment, social closure, high levels of interactivity, and constrained framings are associated with more ideological divisiveness. But the study's conclusions also intimate that cultural differences do matter, particularly where interactional strategies are concerned. The "intimacy" strategies of the Americans and the French, for example, were not shared by the Brazilians, who relied upon "distancing" strategies that exacerbated the preexisting ideological antagonisms. While the study cannot assert with confidence that these differences are due to cultural differences *per se*, it does make it clear that interactional strategies from the offline world can carry over into online environments.

These findings point to the strengths and limitations of comparative work. A particular strength of comparative work is that it can reveal unexpected commonalities in disparate settings or contexts. Previous research shows that factions developed in an Estonian forum discussing September 11th (Vengerfeldt, 2003). Just as in the Brazilian and French fora, some participants defined the United States as the aggressor on the world stage and were therefore apathetic towards the victims. In response, other posters criticized them for their lack of sympathy. Also reminiscent of the French and American fora, participants in the Estonian forum employed humor to come to terms with the tragedy. These similarities across disparate case studies are suggestive; future work is needed to ascertain the generalizability of these findings.


Other topics of interest for future research include the effect of moderation styles, shifts between ideological positions during the course of an exchange, and the polarization of user factions. Researchers interested in these topics could take up the challenge of identifying causal linkages between various factors and forum outcomes such as divisiveness or factionalization.

Finally, the richness of the study's findings makes the importance of integrative research fully apparent. As the research shows, it is essential to understand the dynamics operating at the interactional and social-behavioral levels if one is to grasp the dynamics operating at the ideological and semantic levels. The interplay between the ideological level and the social-interactional levels is particularly ripe for further study and analysis. In this respect, the research should be seen as the first exploratory step in a much larger project.

#### Notes

- 1 According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, immediately following 9/11 only 5% of American Internet users who visited an online venue actually posted, with 27% lurking. Further, men were more likely to post than women, and young Internet users (18-29) were more likely to read posts (Jones & Rainie, 2002).
- 2 Unlike certain commercial spaces that attracted only those individuals who already subscribed, the newspaper-sponsored fora were open to anyone and free of charge. While it was necessary to register, participation was free and did not require subscription to the newspaper. Although it is still free to read posts, *Le Monde* now charges a nominal monthly fee to participate.
- 3 Although some argue that computer-mediated communication allows "community building during disaster" to a greater extent than less interactive media (Goldsborough, 2001), others examine the difficulty of defining the concept of "online community" (Herring, 2004). Herring provides an overview of the abundant literature on this debate (see Herring, 2004 for Baym, 1995; Cherny, 1999; Fernback, 1995; Jones, 1995; Werry & Mobray, 2001). These studies indicate the difficulty of defining the concept of online community.
- 4 This count includes posts from the forum "L'Amérique" during the days immediately following 9/11.
- 5 Forum participants were all registered and had unique user IDs. These aliases were specific to each site; thus they could not be used to identify participants or provide contact information. At the time of data collection the fora were either archived or removed from the web; it was therefore impossible to contact participants through an open posting.
- 6 I define a "regular" poster as any participant who contributes at least two posts in a twenty-four hour period on at least two different days during the same week. "Pop-in" posters fall outside of this cutoff. However, it should be noted that most regular posters participate to a much greater degree and most pop-in posters only post once. Some *NY Times* participants employ the term "hit and run" for "pop-in" posters.
- 7 I use the term "expatriate" and "international" for posters who self-identify as such. Self-identified international posters post with phrases such as, "As an Australian...". Expatriate posters are posters who self-identify with phrases such as, "As an American living in France...".
- 8 In theory, this forum is concerned with all "American" subjects, including Canada and Latin America. In practice, however, participants often discuss and critique the United States.
- 9 I define an "interactive" post as a post that addresses another user by name, quotation, or other specific reference on the Brazilian and American fora. On the French forum, I define "interactive" posts as those posted in response in a thread rather than beginning a new thread.
- 10 All names, handles, and pseudonyms have been changed. Typographical errors have not been reproduced for the sake of clarity.

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