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## DISRESPECT IN ONLINE DELIBERATION: INDUCING FACTORS AND DEMOCRATIC POTENTIALS\*

*Falta de respeto en la deliberación en línea: factores inductores  
y potenciales democráticos*

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### ABSTRACT

Scholars of deliberation conceive of respect as a key component of reasoned democratic exchange. However, disrespect abounds in public debates, especially in contemporary online discussions. This article investigates the factors that foster disrespect in online debates. It also considers whether the existence of some disrespectful utterances may actually contribute to deliberation. After all, in certain situations, some types of disrespect may be useful to public debate to the extent that they may induce reciprocity and engender discursive mobilization. To that end, the article analyzes 1,281 comments about same-sex marriage in Brazil, which were posted on YouTube and other news websites. The analysis points to: (1) a relationship between disrespect and one specific type of reciprocity; (2) an association between disrespect and anonymity; and (3) a correlation between disrespect and the use of religious frames. These results suggest: (1) the importance of disaggregating variables usually associated with “good deliberation”; (2) the relationship between reciprocity and respect; (3) the protection offered by digital anonymity with respect to angry expression; and (4) the tension, first noted by Papacharissi (2004), between politeness and incivility.

**Key words:** respect, online deliberation, LGBT rights

### RESUMEN

*Los investigadores en el campo de la deliberación conciben el respeto como un componente clave de intercambio democrático de razones. Sin embargo, en los debates públicos prolifera el irrespeto, especialmente cuando son observadas las discusiones online contemporáneas. El presente artículo pretende investigar los factores que promueven el irrespeto en debates online. También tiene como objetivo analizar si la existencia de algunas declaraciones irrespetuosas pueden contribuir a la deliberación. Finalmente, algunos tipos de irrespeto*

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*pueden ser útiles para el debate público, en ciertas ocasiones, en la medida en que pueden inducir reciprocidad y generar movilización discursiva. Por ende, este estudio analiza 1.281 comentarios sobre el matrimonio gay en Brasil, que fueron publicados en YouTube y en páginas web de noticias. El análisis revela: (1) la relación entre la falta de respeto es un tipo específico de reciprocidad; (2) una asociación entre el irrespeto y el anonimato; (3) una correlación entre el irrespeto y la utilización de marcos religiosos. Estos resultados sugieren: (1) la importancia de disgregar las variables normalmente asociadas a una "buena deliberación"; (2) la relación entre reciprocidad y respeto; (3) la protección ofrecida por el anonimato para expresiones de ira; y (4) la tensión, propuesta primero por Papacharissi (2004), entre la cortesía y la incivilidad.*

**Palabras clave:** *respeto, deliberación online, derechos LGBT*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Respect has always been an essential component of deliberative democracy. Despite the variety of approaches within the deliberative family, the idea that good deliberation depends on a respectful exchange of discourses has remained relatively unchallenged. This broad agreement is evident, for instance, in the literature on the design of deliberative *minipublics*.

The progressive attention to a wide range of forms of communication has, nonetheless, compelled scholars to reconsider certain assumptions of deliberative theory. Grounded by the notion of *deliberative systems*, researchers have occasionally struggled to comprehend discursive interactions that do not always seem entirely deliberative. Some of these interactions cannot even be considered respectful. The Internet has brought new question marks to the field. Several scholars have wondered whether new forms of deliberation have emerged, or if the digital arena is merely characterized by disrespectful cheap talk among disengaged individuals. Moving beyond this superficial dichotomy described by early investigations, more recent work has considered the deliberative potential of online conversations, despite their shortcomings (or, perhaps, because of them). After all, it would be very difficult to study online deliberation without encountering name calling and uncivil stereotyping.

In that sense, this paper is part of a broader agenda. Instead of debating whether online deliberation is possible despite disrespect, it aims to comprehend the factors that foster disrespect in online debates. In doing so, the article also seeks to analyze whether or not the existence of some types of disrespectful utterances can contribute to deliberation. It argues that some forms of disrespect may be useful contributions to public debate in certain situations, to the extent that they may induce reciprocity and engender discursive mobilization. In order to discuss these questions, the article analyzes 1,281 online comments about LGBT rights in Brazil, which were published in two digital locations particularly marked by disrespectful comments: news websites and YouTube.

The article is structured in three parts. First, we briefly discuss the importance of respect in deliberative theory and studies of Internet politics. Second, we present the case study, including a discussion of our methodological approach. Lastly, we present the analysis. The findings suggest reciprocity is correlated with different types of disrespect in different ways, showing the importance of a nuanced approach. We also find strong correlations between disrespect and the mobilization of religious frames, and between disrespect and anonymity.

## II. DELIBERATION, DISRESPECT AND THE INTERNET

Deliberative democrats advocate the public exchange of justifications as the best way to reach solutions for collective problems, thus challenging aggregative conceptions of democracy (Bohman 1996; Habermas 1996; Dryzek, 2000;

Chamber 2003; Steiner 2012). It is through a public and coercion-free give-and-take of arguments that better and more complex reasons can be built and social reflexivity fostered. Intersubjectively woven preferences, opinions and interests must endure public scrutiny in order to justify democratic decisions (Habermas 1996).

From this perspective, *mutual respect* is considered a key value by scholars in this field. Most supporters of deliberation conceive of *respect* as one of the defining principles of the model of democracy they propose (Benhabib 1996; Bohman 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Habermas 1996; Dryzek 2000 Chambers 2003). According to Steiner (2012: 104), “there is agreement in the normative literature that mutual respect [...] is a key element of good deliberation.” In this sense, mutual respect is perceived to be, simultaneously, (1) a requirement for deliberation and (2) one of its main consequences.

First, respect is a requirement because deliberation depends on “serious listening” (Steenbergen et al. 2003: 26). Participants in an ongoing public debate must heed each other’s right to speak in order to deliberate. Respect, therefore, is strongly related to reciprocity and equality; because one assumes one has the right to speak and to influence a collective decision, one should recognize that other participants possess the same rights and therefore treat them with the same degree of respect to which one feels entitled oneself. In this way, mutual respect may “help to fulfill other deliberative ideals such as inclusion” (Mansbridge et al. 2010). As Black et al. (2009: 3) summarize, among the basic norms of deliberation, respectful consideration of diversity is essential if an actual exchange of reasons is to take place. In a plural world, citizens must know that their contributions will be respected in order to grant legitimacy to decisions, and to the procedures that have led to them (Bohman 1996). Mutual respect “demands reasonable citizens not impose their doctrines on others” (Bohman 1998: 409).

Since mutual respect and civility are seen as prerequisites for deliberation (Peters et al. 2008: 136), deliberative scholars have been critical of several practices that are considered disrespectful. It is undemocratic, for instance, to avoid the participation of certain actors who are affected by a decision, or to diminish the relevance of some views and modes of speaking, because these practices disregard the moral equality in which democracy must be grounded. Young (2000) describes these forms of disrespect, distinguishing between external and internal forms of exclusion. The former leaves some potential participants of a debate out of the process, whilst the latter happens when “claims are not taken seriously and [...] treated with equal respect” (Young 2000: 55).

Second, respect is seen not only as a requirement for deliberation, but also as one of its outcomes. In Mansbridge and contributors’ (2012: 11) words, a “primary *ethical* function of the [deliberative] system is to promote mutual respect among citizens.” Chambers (2003) and Neblo (2005) also emphasize how mutual respect is one of the main goals of deliberation. Gutmann and Thompson (2004) further

develop this argument, explaining why the achievement of respect through the exchange of reasons is important in an economy of moral disagreement:

In the face of disagreement, deliberative democracy tells citizens and their representatives to continue to reason together. If the disagreement is resolvable on reciprocal terms, deliberation is more likely than aggregation to produce agreement. If it is not so resolvable, deliberation is more likely than aggregation to produce justifiable agreement in the future, and to promote mutual respect when no agreement is possible (Gutmann and Thompson 2004: 20).

From this perspective, mutual respect derives from the exchange of reasons, paving the way for more legitimate, although always revisable, solution. For Gutmann and Thompson (2004: 79), *mutual respect is a form of agreeing to disagree*; more than toleration, however, this form “requires a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with, the persons with whom one disagrees.” In this way, respect may promote other beneficial consequences for democracy, including individual virtues, such as the capacity to present one’s own positions in broader, more defensible term, and the capacity to perceive the moral complexities of other positions. Mutual respect, therefore, “orients the deliberations of citizens and public officials toward a view of the common good – a common good that is compatible with continuing moral disagreement” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004: 92).

Despite disagreeing with the equivalence between respect and a favorable attitude toward the other, Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006: 643) also claim that the meta-consensus generated through deliberation can promote not only “the ability of different groups in a plural society to coexist in civility and recognize their joint membership of a democratic polity, but also the likelihood that they will engage in a creative search for outcomes that respect the basic values of all parties”. In a plural world, respect and dialogue across difference are important implications of deliberation.

By now the centrality of mutual respect in deliberative theory and practice must be clear. Both as a requirement and a desirable outcome, respect lies in the heart of public deliberation. There is, nonetheless, extensive controversy about the definition of respect and its implications. Warren (2006) and Steiner (2012) discuss the tricky moral challenge of defining whether some disrespectful discourses are unacceptable in public debate. Steiner (2012) diverges from Habermas (1996), according to whom the deliberative procedure remains in charge of filtering unacceptable arguments. Steiner, however, claims that a number of discourses and ways of expression do not deserve deliberative engagement. For him, “some arguments are so distasteful that they should not be addressed at all” (Steiner 2012: 122).

In current research on deliberative democracy, some scholars have sought to further specify the meaning of respect by establishing some internal

distinctions. Gastil (2008), for instance, has tried to define what respect for other participants can mean when one looks at different venues or moments of discussion. In everyday conversations, respect demands the acknowledgement of others' experiences and perspectives. In the media, it requires giving sources the benefit of the doubt. In electoral campaigns, respect calls for reasonable and less antagonistic debate. In political institutions, it demands decorum and substantive (not personal) criticism, as well as a celebration of diversity. In groups, it depends on trust in fellow citizens.

Another important distinction concerns the dimensions (or objects) of respect/disrespect. Steenbergen et al. (2003: 26) argue that the respect advocated by deliberative democrats has several dimensions:

One of these dimensions is respect toward groups, which is a reflection of Habermas' emphasis on empathy and solidarity. Respect in this sense implies that participants, either implicitly or explicitly, acknowledge the needs and rights of different social groups. Another dimension is respect for the demands under discussion, at least as long as they can intersubjectively be seen as justified. A third dimension is respect toward counterarguments, that is, arguments raised by opponents that contradict one's own conclusion with regard to the demand.

These dimensions are operationalized in the DQI (*Discourse Quality Index*), which codes respect toward *groups*, toward *positions* and toward *counterarguments*, following a scale that ranges from no respect to explicit respect. In the revised version of the method (the DQI 2.0), Bächtiger (2009) and his contributors abandon the *group dimension* and focus exclusively on positions and counterarguments. Such refined and nuanced interpretations of the category of respect are particularly helpful when one investigates discursive arenas that are particularly marked by disrespect. This is the case, for instance, with some online environments traditionally characterized by low levels of respect, such as news comment sections and YouTube conversations, which are analyzed in this article.

Other studies also use disrespect as an important variable for the comprehension of discursive exchanges. Trénel (2004), for instance, codes messages as being degrading to other subjects or arguments, highlighting the fact that a message that degrades one group may also value other groups at the same time. In the cases investigated in this article, this type of situation is recurrent, as one can simultaneously mobilize religious membership, for instance, to attack LGBT groups.

It is also important to mention the existence of studies that seek to understand how personal narratives can mediate disrespectful discursive struggles. According to Black (2013), story telling contributes to shifts in discursive frames marked by misunderstandings.

Deliberative scholars who study online arenas have also sought to discuss the potential relationship between anonymity and disrespect. Janssen and Kies (2005) point out that while some scholars are enthusiastic about the effect of anonymity in freeing participants to express their unfettered views, other scholars fear the consequences that follow from the absence of responsibility and commitment that results from the lack of identification in online arenas. Similarly, Wilhelm (2000) diagnoses an ambivalence related to anonymity; although a debate can benefit from the anonymity of its participants, it can also be hindered by the uncertainty and disrespect that may be nurtured by participants' ability to hide behind fake façades.

Scholars working more generally in the field of online politics (as opposed to online deliberation) have also made a considerable effort to comprehend the presence of disrespect in conversations. Gervais' (2011) research focuses on the relationship between incivility in discursive exchanges and the media. Based on quantitative empirical work, the author claims that the exposition to uncivil media content fosters uncivil behavior in other discursive arenas. Papacharissi (2004) offers a very interesting contribution to this agenda, when she distinguishes impolite comments from uncivil ones. The former disregard rules of etiquette and courtesy, while the latter involve attacks on beliefs, rights and opinions, making them a greater danger to democratic life. Democracy is not possible without disagreement, and, according to Papacharissi (2004), rude comments cannot be considered to be inherently bad for discussion. For her, an uncivil but polite comment is much more dangerous than an impolite but civil one.

In the broader field of political communication, Schudson (1997) has a strong argument against idealized forms of conversation in democratic theory. He claims that political conversations are eminently conflictive and asymmetrical. Democratic conversation that aims at solving problems is characterized by its public nature, exposing citizens to different viewpoints. It is uncomfortable, often impolite and unfriendly. Yet according to him, it is important to acknowledge the tension between the many principles usually mobilized to define a democratic conversation.

Aligned with these concerns, we understand that rude sentences are not *a priori* damaging to democracy. In this sense, some forms of disrespect may even promote discussion, public reflection and the emergence of new and more complex solutions to collective problems. Obviously, this does not mean we are transforming disrespect into a democratic value. After all, Steiner (2012) is right in stating that some forms and levels of disrespect are antithetical deliberative democracy. As a matter of fact, the borders between civility and politeness do not seem so clear and definitive in democratic terms as Papacharissi (2004) seems to imply. Rudeness is not only a matter of etiquette, and may, in specific circumstances, hinder deliberation (Steiner 2012: 122). And, as Bohman and Richardson (2009: 271) realize "sometimes, indeed, the pursuit of justice requires engaging with others uncivilly." The point we are making is that "forms" and

“contexts” of disrespect must be analyzed and understood in relation to other variables in order to allow scholars to properly understand respect/disrespect from a deliberative perspective.

### III. RESEARCH STRATEGIES AND PROCEDURES: LGBT RIGHTS UNDER DEBATE

In order to investigate expressions of disrespect in online discussions, we selected a controversial issue in contemporary Brazil, namely LGBT rights. Heated debates have been triggered by a bill seeking to criminalize homophobia, and by a judicial decision prohibiting notary offices from refusing to marry gays and lesbians. In 2013, the discussions became particularly strong, when a Christian pastor named Marco Feliciano was elected to the presidency of the Human Rights Commission in the National Congress. His conservative positions incited a public response from LGBT activists, pervading the massive demonstrations in June 2013. As a result, Feliciano became a permanent target of LGBT activists, but also received strong support from some religious demonstrators.

Despite its current visibility, the struggle around LGBT rights is obviously not new in Brazil. The present movement first emerged toward the end of the 1970's, as part of an important cycle of protests in Brazil. According to Facchini (2009), several voices emerged in defense of civil rights amid the context of the country's re-democratization, including the “homosexual movement,” as it was then called.<sup>2</sup> It was only in the 1990s, however, that discussion about same-sex marriage began to appear on the legislative agenda. Recognition of marriage equality was achieved in 2011, when the Supreme Court recognized that same-sex are entitled to the same marriage rights extended to heterosexual couples.<sup>3</sup>

Discussions around this topic have been highly controversial and often disrespectful. For this reason, we selected the issue to conduct our analysis. The database is formed by comments published in news portals and YouTube videos. The reason for selecting these two platforms is that they are often seen as the most disrespectful ones. Comments in news portals and under YouTube videos are rarely considered as contributions to deliberative processes because these “wild arenas,” to use Davies and Gangadharan's (2009: 11) expression, lack important elements that are necessary in order to foster deliberative exchanges.

<sup>2</sup> According to Facchini (2009), until 1993 the movement was identified as the Brazilian Homosexual Movement. After that, it distinguished gays and lesbians more clearly, and, since 1995, it has claimed to speak on behalf of gays, lesbians and transsexuals (GLT). In 1999, the acronym GLBT (gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender) became more popular. In the 2000s, it was emphasized that the “T” stood for transsexuals, transgendered people and cross-dressers. The acronym is also frequently reordered with the “L” at the beginning: LGBT.

<sup>3</sup> According to Barroso (2007), 14 countries in the world already allow some form of civil union. Norway was the first country to authorize same sex marriage in 1989.

In the case of news websites, we initially examined comments from the five most accessed Brazilian news portals, according to Alexa's ranking<sup>4</sup>: uol.com, G1, IG, Terra and Folha online. We narrowed our focus to stories about LGBT rights that were published during the week of 12 to 18 May 2013, during which time the National Justice Council formally declared that public notaries could not deny the right of civil marriage to homosexuals. Our sample consists of the two articles that received the most comments: one published by G1, and another by Terra. We restricted our focus to the first 409<sup>5</sup> comments from each article, for a combined sample consisting of 818 comments from news websites. Following the same logic, we selected the three YouTube videos on the same subject that were among the most viewed (as measured by the built-in view counting tool): one favorable to LGBT rights, one opposed, and a third relatively neutral video. Chronologically, the first 200 comments responding to each video are included in the sample, for a total of 600 comments from the video-sharing platform.

After data collection, we coded each comment according to 41 variables, guided by deliberative ideals and strongly influenced by the procedures adopted by Wales et al. (2010). The coding scheme sought to assess several factors, including: inclusiveness, reason-giving, reciprocity, respect and orientation to the common good. Three trained coders worked under the close supervision of the research coordinator. After the initial coding, the entire database was revised and discussed by the two authors of this article and the three coders. All questions, doubts and ambiguities were discussed amongst the larger group, resulting in updates in the database.<sup>6</sup>

During the coding process, comments that had been repeated and those that were later deleted (probably by the users themselves) and were no longer accessible were removed from the sample. For this reason, the coded database contains 1,366 comments (instead of 1,418). A further filter was then applied to remove posts that were not related to the topic of interest (e.g. LGBT rights). Table 1 shows the distribution of relevant and off-topic comments in each of the discursive spheres investigated.

<sup>4</sup> Source: The Web Information Company. Accessed 17 May 2013, at: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/BR>.

<sup>5</sup> 409 being the total number of comments on the article that received fewer total comments.

<sup>6</sup> In order to ensure inter-coder reliability we promoted collective discussion involving the entire group about each post coded. Our database was thus built with the deliberative input of five persons working together. We believe this is the best way to proceed with research grounded in deliberative theory, despite the significant burden that this type of collaboration represents. Because we have not run a reliability test before the coding process, however, our results must be interpreted as provisional and hypothetical.

Table 1: Distribution of comments in the investigated discursive sphere per focus (on and off topic), 2013

Topic	News	YouTube	Total
On topic	749 91.79%	532 96.73%	1,281 93.78%
Off topic	67 8.21%	18 3.27%	85 6.22%
Total	816 100.00%	550 100.00%	1,366 100.00%

Source: Authors’ elaboration

We therefore worked with a sample of 1,281 comments in order to assess the presence of disrespect in online debates. For the assessment of this category, we have adopted a coding scheme that borrows elements from the DQI and from Papacharissi’s (2004) distinction, as well as from the procedures suggested by Wales and her contributors (2010). We focused on coding explicit manifestations of disrespect, instead of trying to measure implicit and explicit forms of respect (Wales et al. 2010). A distinction was made between (1) *disrespect toward groups* and (2) *disrespect toward arguments and participants of the forum*. The former involves several types of stigmatization, humiliation and exclusion, thus clustering most of the uncivil posts. The latter includes rude behavior against other participants and their arguments. We are also aware that disrespect is a contextual variable (Steiner 2012). We faced several dilemmas during the coding process. Our way to deal with these dilemmas was to discuss each doubt extensively in order to seek coherence. We also believe that, in acknowledging this, we are attempting to deal with the limits of our own analysis.

Based on our coding of disrespect, in this article, we sought to answer three main questions: (1) Might greater levels of reciprocity stimulate an increase in the levels of disrespect? (2) Can the anonymity granted by the internet affect the levels of disrespect expressed in online discussions? (3) Is there a correlation between disrespect and the interpretive frames mobilized in justifications? In order to address these questions we will first present some descriptive statistics and correlations between our categorical variables. We then estimate a multivariate logistic regression model.

IV. RESULTS

Analyzing 1,281 comments in two discursive arenas often seen as aggressive, we found out that 33.75% of these comments presented some form of disrespect. A comparison of frequencies shows that comments in YouTube (34.21%) are slightly more disrespectful than those in the news websites (33.11%).

Table 2: Frequency of disrespect in on topic comments in both arenas investigated, 2013.

		News			YouTube			Both Arenas		
Disrespect		Disrespect Total	Disrespect (1)*	Disrespect (2)**	Disrespect Total	Disrespect (1)*	Disrespect (2)**	Disrespect Total	Disrespect (1)*	Disrespect (2)**
Disrespectful		248	104	184	182	89	125	430	193	309
		33.11%	13.89%	24. 57%	34.21%	16.73%	23.50%	33.57%	15.07%	24.12%
Not disrespectful		501	645	565	350	443	407	851	1088	972
		66.89%	86.11%	75.43%	65.79%	83.27%	76.50%	66.43%	84. 93%	75.88%
Total		749	749	749	532	532	532	1281	1281	1281
		100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: Authors’ elaboration  
\* Disrespect (1) stands for *Disrespect toward other comments and participants of the forum*.  
\*\* Disrespect (2) stands for *Disrespect toward groups and toward persons who are not participants of the debate*.

The data reveals that disrespect toward groups and non-participants of the forum (24.12%) is greater than disrespect toward arguments and participants of the forum (15.07%). When the platforms are compared, it is possible to notice that disrespect against groups and non-participants is slightly higher in news websites (24.57%) than in YouTube (23.50%). (Table 2)

Using these two forms of disrespect as our dependent variables, we can now move to some correlations in the pursuit of answers to the three abovementioned questions.

Disrespect and reciprocity

In order to examine if reciprocity may fuel disrespect among participants, we tested the correlation between these two variables. It is important to explain here that reciprocity was coded in two main ways. First, explicit reciprocity was measured by overt reference to other participants of the forum or by the use of “comment reply” tools, that allowed direct responses within a platform. Second, we considered cases of clear reciprocity, through the use of specific words,

expressions and markers, without explicit reference to another participant. It is worth highlighting that we acknowledge this is a very restrictive way to measure reciprocity. In other works, we have advocated a *discursive conception of reciprocity* that focuses not in individualized posts but the broader clash of discourses, thus demanding a qualitative analysis (Mendonça and Santos 2009; Mendonça et al. 2014). For the type of analysis conducted in this article, however, we needed a more direct and straightforward category that could be quantitatively measured. When we discuss reciprocity in this article, therefore, we are talking about a restricted type of direct interaction that does not exhaust the notion advocated by several deliberative democrats.

Despite adopting this restrictive notion, we found 50.35% of comments that were reciprocal. Most of them (44.34% of the total) explicitly mentioned other participants or used direct mechanisms of response. YouTube presented the greatest frequency of comments coded as reciprocal (54.89%), when compared to news websites (47.13%).

We did not find a positive variation between the presence of reciprocity and disrespect in either of the analyzed spaces. There is no dependence between the two variables, when disrespect is analyzed in an aggregate way. However, when we split the types of disrespect, it is possible to glimpse some correlations. The Chi-square test suggests a relationship between Disrespect (1) (i.e. toward arguments and participants from the forum) and reciprocity, with 23.41% of the posts presenting both characteristics (Table 3). Such correlation also occurs in separate spaces, reaching 23.80% in comments within the news website and 22.95% in YouTube<sup>7</sup>.

Table 3: Distribution of Disrespect (1) and reciprocity in the debate in both arenas, 2013.

Disrespect (1)*	Reciprocity		
	With reciprocity	Without reciprocity	Total
Disrespectful	151 23.41%	42 6.60%	193 15.07%
Not disrespectful	494 76.59%	549 93.40%	1088 84.33%
Total	645 100.00%	636 100.00%	1281 100.00%
Pearson's Chi-square (1 degree of freedom)	70.6010 (p=0.000)		

Source: Authors' elaboration  
\* Disrespect (1) indicates disrespect toward other comments and participants of the forum.

<sup>7</sup> Following a suggestion made by an anonymous reviewer, we present only tables with both arenas.

This correlation also emerges once we split the manifestations of reciprocity and consider only the explicit type. Disrespect (1) varies in the same direction as explicit reciprocity (24.47%) when both arenas are analyzed together. When the arenas are considered separately, and operating with a confidence level of 95%, we noticed that 24.60% of explicitly reciprocal comments in the sample were disrespectful to other participants and arguments in news websites. That number was comparable for YouTube (24.31%).

Comments that show disrespect toward groups and toward non-participants present an interesting pattern. Although 18.45% of the comments present both features (Disrespect 2 and Reciprocity) when both arenas are analyzed together, the percentage of comments that are disrespectful but non-reciprocal is higher (29.87%)

Table 4: Distribution of Disrespect (2) and reciprocity in both arenas, 2013.

Disrespect (2)**	Reciprocity		Total
	With Reciprocity	Without reciprocity	
Disrespectful	119 18.45%	190 29.87%	309 24.12%
Not disrespectful	526 81.55%	446 70. 13%	972 75.88%
Total	645 100.00%	636% 100.00%	1,281 100.00%
Pearson’s Chi-square (1 degree of freedom)		22.8362 (p=0.000).	

Source: Authors’ elaboration  
\*\* Disrespect (2) indicates disrespect toward groups and toward persons who are not participants of the debate.

This pattern is also reproduced when we deal exclusively with explicit reciprocity. The percentage of posts that are disrespectful and reciprocal (17.61%) is smaller than the percentage of posts that are disrespectful and not reciprocal (29.31%).

The data is interesting because it suggests a positive relation between Disrespect (1) (toward arguments and participants from the forum) and reciprocity, and between Disrespect (2) and reciprocity. This suggests that rude comments tend to be more reciprocal than uncivil ones. As we noted however, the number of comments with Disrespect (2) was far greater than the number of comments with Disrespect (1), which sheds light on the lack of an observed positive variation between the presence of reciprocity and disrespect (as such) in either of the analyzed spaces.

Disrespect and anonymity

The second question raised by this paper regards the role of anonymity in fueling disrespect. Because we are investigating online interactions we could be certain whether participants were revealing their actual names or using pseudonyms and fake identities. As a way to deal with this problem, we considered that the participants who use pseudonyms that are not personal names, and whose gender cannot be inferred, are probably willing to hide marks of their identities. When someone identifies oneself as “V.Vendeta”, as “Hanavi Arjxxi” or as “Capivara arredia” for instance, they identify themselves with expressions that do not reveal a name. Despite being problematic, this way to deal with the issue at least allows us to glimpse the question of anonymity.

In our database, 86.88% of the comments were written by persons who identified themselves using proper names, whilst the remainder were written by persons using non-identifiable pseudonyms. There is weak correlation between disrespect and the absence of identification. In the 168 messages written by persons with pseudonyms, 41.07% had some form of disrespect.

Table 5: Distribution of disrespect per proxy of identification in both arenas, 2013.

Disrespect	Gender		Total
	Identifiable	Non-identifiable	
Disrespectful	361	69	430
	32.43%	41.07%	33.57%
Not disrespectful	752	99	851
	67.57%	58.93%	66.43%
Total	1,113	168	1,281
	100%	100.00%	100.00%
Pearson’s Chi-square (1 degree of freedom)		70.6010 (p=0.000).	

Source: Authors’ elaboration

The Chi-square test shows that persons with these pseudonyms tend to make disrespectful comments directed primarily at groups and non-participants (33.93%) (Table 6).

Table 6: Distribution of Disrespect (2) per gender in both arenas, 2013.

Disrespect (2)*	Gender		Total
	Identifiable	Non identifiable	
Disrespectful	252 22.64%	57 33.93%	309 24.12%
Not disrespectful	861 77.36%	111 66.07%	972 75.88%
Total	1,113 100%	168 100.00%	1,281 100.00%
Pearson's Chi-square (1 degree of freedom)	10.1599 (p=0.001).		

Source: Authors' elaboration  
\* Disrespect (2) indicates disrespect toward groups and toward persons who are not participants of the debate.

Commenters who present themselves in an anonymous fashion seem to take advantage of online interactions in order to express their anger and their insults, but incur none of the costs of being rude or uncivil identified by Papacharissi (2004).

Disrespect and framing

The third question examines possible correlations between disrespect and interpretive frames that ground justifications. Frames are understood here as “interpretive packages” (Gamson and Mondigliani 1989: 3), which ground human capacity to understand and act upon the world. First proposed by Bateson (2000 [1954]), and later developed by Goffman (1986), the notion has become widely employed in social sciences, with particular prominence in political communication studies.<sup>8</sup> It must be acknowledged that there are very different operationalizations of the concept.<sup>9</sup> Our conceptualization is strongly related to the works that emphasize the relational and cultural dimension of framing processes, challenging individualized, strategic conceptions of frame analysis.

In our empirical analysis, we found out 11 interpretive frames around the issue of LGBT rights: (1) child’s well-being; (2) human rights; (3) nature/biology; (4) family; (5) legitimacy; (6) historical/contemporary; (7) religion; (8) humor; (9) pedagogy; (10) financial costs; and (11) tolerance. As this article is not focused

<sup>8</sup> For some examples, see: Gitlin 1980; Entman 1993; McAdam 1996; Steinberg 1998; D’Angelo 2002; Ferree et al. 2002; Druckman 2004; Levin 2005; Van Gorp 2007; Chong and Druckman 2007; Reese 2007; Weaver 2007; Mendonça and Simões 2012.  
<sup>9</sup> On the different operationalizations of the concept, see: Mendonça and Simões (2012)

on the frame analysis, we will not fully explain each of these categories.<sup>10</sup> In order to test the correlation between disrespect and some interpretive frames, we focused on the most prominent frames found in our empirical data: human rights (23.26%) and religion (25.60%). The former describes posts that presented a defense of human rights (either broadly defined, or in reference to a single, specific rights) and of equality, employing appeals to dignity, civil liberties and freedom of speech, for example. The latter describes posts that argued either for or against secularism, as well debates about God’s purported opinions about sexual orientations that challenge heteronormativity (e.g. “God is love” versus “God sees homosexuality as a sin”).

The correlation between the religious frame and disrespect was significant, but not the correlation between disrespect and the rights frame. We found that 39.33% of the comments within the religious frame expressed some form of disrespect (Table 7). Once again, the correlation between disrespect (toward groups and non-participants) could be found in both arenas.

Table 7: Distribution of disrespect within comments coded in the religious frame in both arenas, 2013.

Disrespect	Religious Frame		
	Religious frame used	Religious frame not used	Total
Disrespectful	129 39.33%	301 31.58%	430 33.57%
Not disrespectful	199 60.67%	652 68.42%	851 66.43%
Total	328 100.00%	953 100.00%	1,281 100.00%
Pearson’s Chi-square (1 degree of freedom)*	6.5635 (p=0.010)		

Source: Authors’ elaboration / \*Assuming a confidence level of 90%.

Interestingly, within the religious debate, disrespect was directed toward both subjects of stigmatized sexuality and toward religious opponents of same-sex unions. This does not mean that religious individuals were more disrespectful *per se*. Rather, it indicates that when religious frames are employed, disrespect

<sup>10</sup> It is important, however, to explain how these frames were built. We have adopted an interpretive approach that started with coders summarizing the main arguments presented in each comment. These arguments were then grouped into broader interpretive frames. Coders then went back to the empirical corpus and coded the posts according to these initial frames. A new round of discussion among coders and coordinators led to the eleven abovementioned categories. Importantly, we did not limit the number of frames a post could contain.

emerges more often than when the discussion takes place on the grounds of rights.

\* \* \*

After the descriptive analysis, we attempted to estimate a logistic regression that could illuminate the relationship between disrespect in online debates and the other abovementioned variables. The results of these regressions, presented in Table 11, show the models' odds ratios (O.R.) and their statistical significance.

We have built three models analyzing distinct arenas, but we have not altered the variables considered. In the first model, analyzing news websites, three dependent variables (total disrespect, disrespect toward other participants and arguments and disrespect toward groups) were measured according to six independent variables (reciprocity, rights frame, religious frame, male gender, non-identifiable gender and female gender). In the second model, we have analyzed comments from YouTube, while the third includes both arenas.

Table 8: Odds Ratios (O.R.) estimated for logistic regressions of dependent variables ‘total disrespect’ and ‘disrespect toward groups’ and participants in comments taken from news websites (Model 1) and YouTube videos (Model 2) and both arenas (Model 3), according to independent variables, 2013.

Independent Variables	Model 1 Comments in news websites Dependent Variables			Model 2 Comments in YouTube Dependent variables			Model 3 Both Arenas Dependent variables		
	Total Disrespect	Disrespect (1)	Disrespect (2)	Total Disrespect	Disrespect (1)	Disrespect (2)	Total Disrespect	Disrespect (1)	Disrespect (2)
Reciprocity	0.701** (0.112)	5.593*** (1.470)	0.354*** (0.0670)	1.183 (0.220)	3.028*** (0.805)	0.764 (0.159)	0.882 (0.105)	4.298*** (0.796)	0.507*** (0.0688)
Rights frame	0.701* (0.151)	0.651 (0.218)	0.864 (0.205)	0.780 (0.159)	0.772 (0.207)	0.832 (0.192)	0.750** (0.109)	0.814 (0.155)	0.809 (0.131)
Religious frame	1.315 (0.262)	0.467** (0.166)	1.810*** (0.389)	1.464** (0.278)	1.048 (0.258)	1.917*** (0.402)	1.415*** (0.189)	0.746 (0.151)	1.836*** (0.266)
Non-identified	1.653** (0.395)	1.344 (0.418)	3.456*** (0.876)	1.387 (0.345)	1.746* (0.529)	1.084 (0.308)	1.497** (0.255)	1.598** (0.343)	1.919*** (0.350)
Degrees of Freedom	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Pseudo R2	0.0143	0,1093	0.0701	0.0116	0,0471	0.0205	0.0102	0,0757	0.0375
Number of observations	749	749	749	532	532	532	1281	1281	1281

Source: Authors’ elaboration  
Significant at the level 99% (\*\*\*), 95% (\*\*) and 90% (\*).  
Disrespect (1) indicates disrespect toward other comments and participants of the forum.  
Disrespect (2) indicates disrespect toward groups and toward persons who are not participants of the debate.

The models present interesting results. In Model 1, which analyses comments from news websites, the correlation between disrespect and reciprocity is statistically significant in several important ways. Reciprocal messages are 30%  $[(0.071 - 1) * 100]$  less likely to containing disrespect. However, we find a contradictory result when we split the dependent variable into its two components. On the one hand, the likelihood that reciprocal comments will present Disrespect (1) (toward other comments and participants of the forum) is 5.6 times greater than in non-reciprocal comments.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, reciprocal comments are 65% less likely to show Disrespect (2) (toward groups and toward persons who are not participants of the debate). We also observe that comments using the rights frame are not significantly more likely to be disrespectful than other comments. The religious frame, however, is significant in relation to the two types of disrespect in contradictory ways: the likelihood of a comment employing this frame being disrespectful toward other participants is 53% lower than comments that did not; however, at the same time, comments employing this frame were 80% more likely to be disrespectful toward groups and individuals not present than comments without this frame.

Model 1 also suggests that anonymous participants were more likely to write disrespectful comments. Keeping all the other variables constant, comments by anonymous users were 65% more likely to be disrespectful, in general, than comments written by identifiable users, and, in particular, 246% more likely to be disrespectful toward groups and non-participants.

In Model 2, which examined YouTube comments, there is a strong relationship between reciprocity and Disrespect (1): reciprocal comments are, 3.03 times more likely to be disrespectful toward other participants than non-reciprocal comments. We did not find significance in the relationship between the two types of disrespect and the rights frame. As in Model 1, the relation between disrespect and religion was also highly significant. The odds of a message grounded in this interpretative frame being disrespectful were almost 1.5 times greater than for messages not using this frame. Curiously, no statistically significant correlation was found in regards to Disrespect (1) (toward other participants and comments). Model 2 also shows a positive correlation between anonymity and Disrespect (1). Anonymous participants are 75% more likely to disrespect other participants than identifiable commenters.

In Model 3, which combines both types of comments, we note, once again, the opposite results for Disrespect (1) and Disrespect (2). Reciprocal comments are 330% more likely to be disrespectful toward participants and arguments, and 49% less likely to be disrespectful toward other groups. In regards to the use of frames, Model 3 shows that messages employing the rights frame being were 25% less likely to be disrespectful. When we look at the religious

<sup>11</sup> Despite the apparent strength of this result, it is important to consider the small N. Only 193 comments evince Disrespect 1, whilst 309 evince Disrespect 2.

frame, however, these comments were 42% more likely to be disrespectful, in general, and 84% more likely to being disrespectful toward groups. Comments from persons with non-identifiable pseudonyms were 90% more likely to be disrespectful toward other groups and 50% more likely to be disrespectful, broadly speaking. Lastly, Model 3 suggests that anonymous participants are more likely to be disrespectful both toward other participants (60%) and toward other groups (92%).

## V. DISCUSSION

Although the results of the statistical analysis should be treated as provisional and hypothesis-generating, they nevertheless shed light on the three questions raised earlier. Before we move to the discussion of the three questions, it is important to make an important remark regarding the type of disrespect observed. As shown in Table 2, the great majority of disrespectful comments were not rude toward other messages and participants. Disrespect toward other groups and non-participants was far greater. Disrespect, therefore, mostly served uncivil purposes of stigmatizing and humiliating groups. The hypothesis that disrespect may potentially trigger deliberation does not seem very likely in our case study.

We may now move to the three questions raised by this article:

*(1) Might greater levels of reciprocity stimulate an increase in the levels of disrespect?*

The data suggests a very interesting picture, as they show the importance of distinguishing different types of disrespect. While the logistic regression (Table 8, Model 3) does not suggest any statistically significant correlation between dialogic exchanges and disrespect, it does show a strong correlation between reciprocity and Disrespect (1) and a negative correlation between reciprocity and Disrespect (2). When participants talk to each other, they tend to be more rude and impolite, but they also tend not to disrespect and stereotype groups in an uncivil way. As Steiner (2009) argues, respect and reciprocity may be intertwined due to the need to hear and consider of the other in dialogues, but dialogue also seems possible in more impolite conversations. Reciprocity seems to constrain incivility, while still allowing rough forms of discussion. As we have argued, a nuanced notion of disrespect that is capable of grasping its forms and contexts is essential for the advancement of a deliberative perspective.

*(2) Does anonymity affect the levels of disrespect expressed in online discussions?* Our tentative answer is yes. Individuals who used pseudonyms and whose gender could not be inferred were more disrespectful than identifiable individuals. As we have already acknowledged, names can also be used in a deceitful way and are not a guarantee of actual identification. Despite this, it is clear that those who do not use names do not want to disclose their identities, this making it appropriate to use this as a proxy for anonymity. Our results show that anonymous participants are far more inclined toward disrespect discourse

(Table 8, especially in Models 1 and 3). This finding seems to corroborate the fear that the protection offered by the Internet may nurture disrespectful exchanges that do not contribute to the deepening of the debate. Model 3 suggests a correlation between all types of disrespect and anonymity. However, it should be remembered that, if anonymous participants were more disrespectful than the others, they were not always disrespectful. Actually, a majority (58.93%) of their comments were respectful (Table 7), and an even larger majority (66.07%) did not show any sign of disrespect toward groups and non-participants.

It should also be remembered that, if the overall rate of disrespect was noteworthy (33.57%), two thirds of the comments analyzed (66.43%) were respectful (Table 2). This is not irrelevant if we consider we were analyzing two arenas usually regarded as the most disrespectful when online debate is investigated. We are not, therefore, suggesting that the Internet is inimical to deliberation due to the possibility of anonymity. All we say is that the comments by anonymous participants in this sample were more disrespectful than those left by identifiable individuals.

(3) *Is there a correlation between disrespect and the interpretive frames mobilized in justifications?* We did find a strong correlation between disrespect and the use of the religious interpretive frame. Table 8 shows how religion was deeply related to disrespect in the three models analyzed, particularly if one considers Disrespect (2). Expressions of the religious frame often included forms of stigmatization and humiliation toward both LGBT advocates and religious groups. It must be clear that we do not mean that religious individuals are more disrespectful, as the frame describes a variety of arguments that made reference to religion—including disrespectful comments that were directed at religious individuals and groups. What our results indicate, however, is that the religious frame is somewhat antithetical to sustaining respectful democratic debate on this particular subject. When participants use the frame of rights, on the other hand, they seem to disagree in a more polite and civil way. This suggests that the religious frame nurtures a polarization between two communities and does not offer a bridge for a democratic debate, whilst the rights frame seem to do the contrary, working as a shared field where religious communities and LGBT advocates can discursively meet and discuss.

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article sought to illuminate the factors that generate disrespect in online debates. The investigation of 1,281 comments about same-sex marriage in two arenas often seen as disrespectful (YouTube and news websites) suggests that reciprocity is correlated with different types of disrespect in contradictory ways, evincing the importance of a nuanced and complex approach to the idea of disrespect. It also shows that disrespect was related to anonymity and to the use

of specific interpretive frames, especially religion. Based on these results, we would like to conclude with four remarks.

The first remark regards the importance of interpretive frameworks for the structure of the debate and for the features taken by comments. Obviously, it is not our intention to claim that religion is always an inducer of disrespect. Instead, the results suggest that the level of respect within a debate is not only a matter of individual politeness or civility, but mainly a matter of the collective keys adopted to make sense of the topic under discussion. Changing the frame under which a discussion happens may be more effective at fostering respect than simply insisting on some sort of individual education. In the specific case of same-sex marriage, the rights frame showed to be more capable of inducing respect than the religious one.

The second remark regards the consequence of anonymity in terms of disrespect. In fact, the possibility of hiding behind an unidentifiable persona may protect discourses from everyday constraints, thus allowing the expression of rude and uncivil utterances. In this case, we noted a prevalence of disrespect toward groups and non-participants, indicating that this freedom from identification may reveal crystallized stereotypes and forms of prejudice that are usually kept private. This incivility can be devastating to deliberation, as it erodes the possibility of mutual trust, but it can also have interesting consequences if deliberation is conceived through a more systemic approach. In shedding light on hidden forms of thinking, these uncivil comments may trigger deliberative processes.

The third remark derives from the previous one. We do not see disrespect as inimical to deliberation, because impoliteness and even incivility may play a role in generating a broader reflexive process driven by a give-and-take of discourses. It must be clear, then, that we do not think of respect as a *sine qua non* condition of deliberation. It can be an outcome of a discursive process, but deliberation may exist in hostile and rude communicative environments. Such hypothesis should be properly tested in a broader study that takes disrespect as an independent variable, assessing its impacts on reason-giving and reciprocity.

The fourth and final remark is related to the use of multivariate statistics for the analysis of deliberative categories. Besides being rare in the literature about online deliberation, this methodological step paves an interesting road for the deliberative agenda: what if the dimensions acknowledged as important for deliberation do not walk hand in hand? What if they contradict each other and work in different directions? We have attempted to test a hypothesis according to which reciprocity and respect can follow opposite routes. In this specific case, the results suggest the contrary: as predicted by deliberative theorists, these variables reinforced each other. The broader attempt to test this possibility of internal contradictions seems, however, fruitful for the comprehension of dilemmas within deliberative theory.

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