

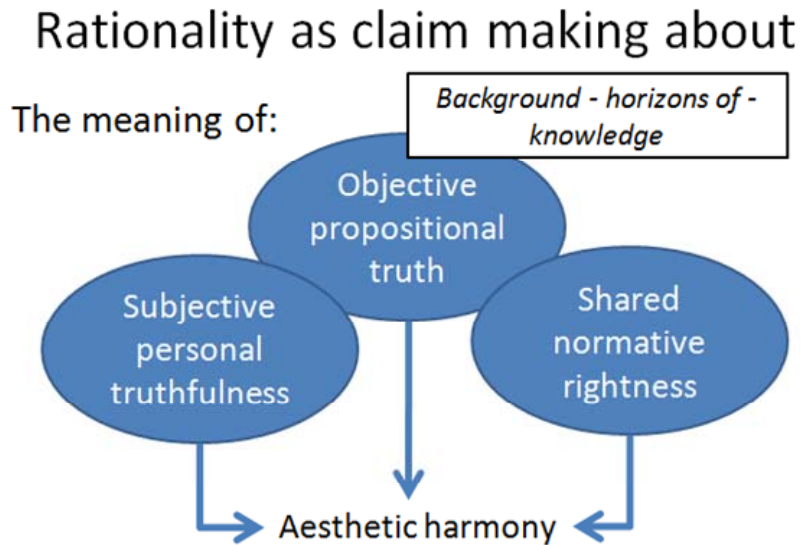
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Presentation by Yuri Misnikov, PhD Candidate  
Institute of Communications Studies, Centre for Digital Citizenship (CdC)  
University of Leeds, <csym@leeds.ac.uk>

**Dialogically-argumentative qualities of political discussion on the Internet in  
Russia: Testing the Habermasian conception of communicative action  
empirically**

With this presentation, I would like to share some initial results of my research into online deliberative practices in Russia, using one of the examples of political discussion as a case study. But first I want to explain the underlying theoretical assumptions that have guided this research.

The theoretical core of the research methodology is the Habermasian conceptions of discourse ethics, communicative action and pragmatic meaning. Of course, it is natural that when it comes to Jurgen Habermas, his theory of the public sphere takes centre stage. However, within this grand theory, Habermas' so-called basic validity claims have been largely overlooked, or at least not tested empirically. Validity claims are made by discourse participants in their effort to present and seek truth, justify actions and positions from a certain social standpoint, and prove that they are decent discussants disclosing themselves sincerely towards others. Making validity claims means claiming (a) propositional truth, (b) normative rightness, and (c) subjective truthfulness.



The first category is about claiming truths regarding the objective, common for all us world, which in communicative terms can be imagined as a background information about facts, events, processes, actors, institutions, etc.

The second category addresses those particular claims that concern the inter-subjectively constructed social worlds that are shared by certain social groups, which claim their preferred ethical and moral values or norms.

And the third category is the personal world of subjective individuals who claim their decency and civility in communication with others.

Making claims means offering certain meaning that is expected to be validated by others so as the discourse would be considered successful. In effect, for Habermas, this is the very essence of communicative action, which through the process of claim validation becomes a discursively constructed social rationality.

This is how Habermas links the communicative meaning of speech acts directly with the world of social practices.

SLIDE 2

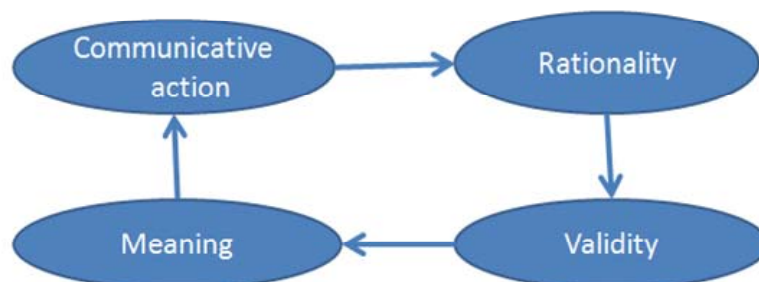
‘The meaning of the individual speech act cannot be detached from the life-world’s complex horizon of meaning; it remains entwined with the intuitively present background knowledge of interacting participants’ (Jurgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourses of Modernity*, p. 350)

On my view, validity claims are not only important to underpin the social meaning of communicative actions, but they also help to draw a line between a rationality defined as a collectively shaped discursive phenomenon and the individualised behavioural rationality. Discursive rationality goes beyond individually justified argumentation.

The latter is individual-centred and self-sufficient, it needs only language, personal knowledge and the medium to manifest itself, whereas the former is more complex and, in addition, requires a hearer to succeed, for the logic of the argument does not have any value unless it is heard and more importantly recognised – validated, not necessarily agreed upon by others.

SLIDE 3

Habermasian inter-subjective,  
discursively constructed rationality  
as ‘meaning relations’



For Habermas, rationality is in validity, whereas validity is in meaning, conveyed and understood via speech acts. Thus rationality and communication are intrinsically intertwined via claim making and validation. Rationality in this light is more a means for knowledge acquisition than a tool of knowledge possession, and, as far as human discourses are concerned, it is 'meaning relations' between speaking and acting subjects.

To summarise, I have elaborated a matrix that combines together the notions of communicative worlds, validity claims, meaning, and eventually rationality as the research analytical framework.

**SLIDE 4**

**Habermasian communicative claim-making worlds**

Fact-based OBJECTIVE LIFE-WORLD for all	Value-based SHARED SOCIAL WORLDS for groups	Sincerity-based PERSONAL WORLDS for individuals
Claimed propositional truth about the objective world	Claimed normative rightness of certain groups	Claimed subjective truthfulness about personal intentions
Interpretation of objective life-world's background knowledge & facts as a basis for making group-neutral propositions	Construction of inter-subjective social solidarities/relations based on shared values as a basis for claiming group-specific interests	Internalisation of objective & shared worlds via acquiring knowledge, competences and values as a basis for claiming personal sincerity
<b><i>Reproduction of cultural traditions &amp; norm formation</i></b>	<b><i>Social integration, inter-personal relations via shared values</i></b>	<b><i>Personal development, affiliation &amp; socialisation</i></b>

Viewed from the Habermasian 'world relations' perspective, validity claims can cover a wide range 'discursive intelligibility'. Speakers in these interlinked worlds are engaged in telling someone about something and must be consciously cooperative in their mutual reciprocity, if they want their speech acts to succeed and lead to desired effect on hearers.

Let's see now how discursive rationality can be applied empirically via validity claims and respective speech acts, which understanding I borrow from the Austian/Searlean tradition of illocutionary logic.

I chose to use a non-Western case so as to check, among other issues, the universality of discursive reasoning in politics, even if it occurs not in a fully democratic society in the western sense, such as Russia. Many studies about Russia and its media suffer from an one-sided, ideologically-geopolitical bias concerned mostly with media structures, ownership, freedom and how political elite use or abuse media. Citizens are often simply missing from this picture.

Meanwhile, the Internet has become a truly new medium, not just a new media, in contemporary Russia. Over the past several years, Russia has witnessed one of the world's fastest Internet growth rates. The Internet in Russia is content rich, aesthetically attractive and technologically advanced, providing endless opportunities for commenting, debating or voting on numerous topics through the ubiquitous user-generated content and interactive services.

The proposed case study is a real online discussion that occurred in October-November 2007 in the political context when the United Russia (*Yedinaya Rossiya*) party was emerging as a ruling pro-power political force supported by President Putin. The party put together President's addresses to the Russian Parliament (*Duma*), named it the 'Putin's Plan' and presented as its political manifesto for the upcoming elections on 2 December 2007 according to the new electoral law, which removed non-partisan candidates from the ballot list and asked citizens to chose between party candidates only.

The discussion was initiated by one of the regular discussants on the political forum of the *Izvestia* newspaper (one of the oldest and most popular in Russia), following the publication of a news piece entitled "Only the United Russia Party Can Implement Putin's Plan". The article reflected on the meeting of experts that gathered in the party headquarters to discuss how to implement this Plan. As the article did not specify what the actual plan was, the forum participants joined the discussion initiated by the seed post asking '*What is this plan?*' The discussion started on the

day of the news publication and ended on 1 December 2007 after the exchange of 65 posts authored by 23 unique individuals.

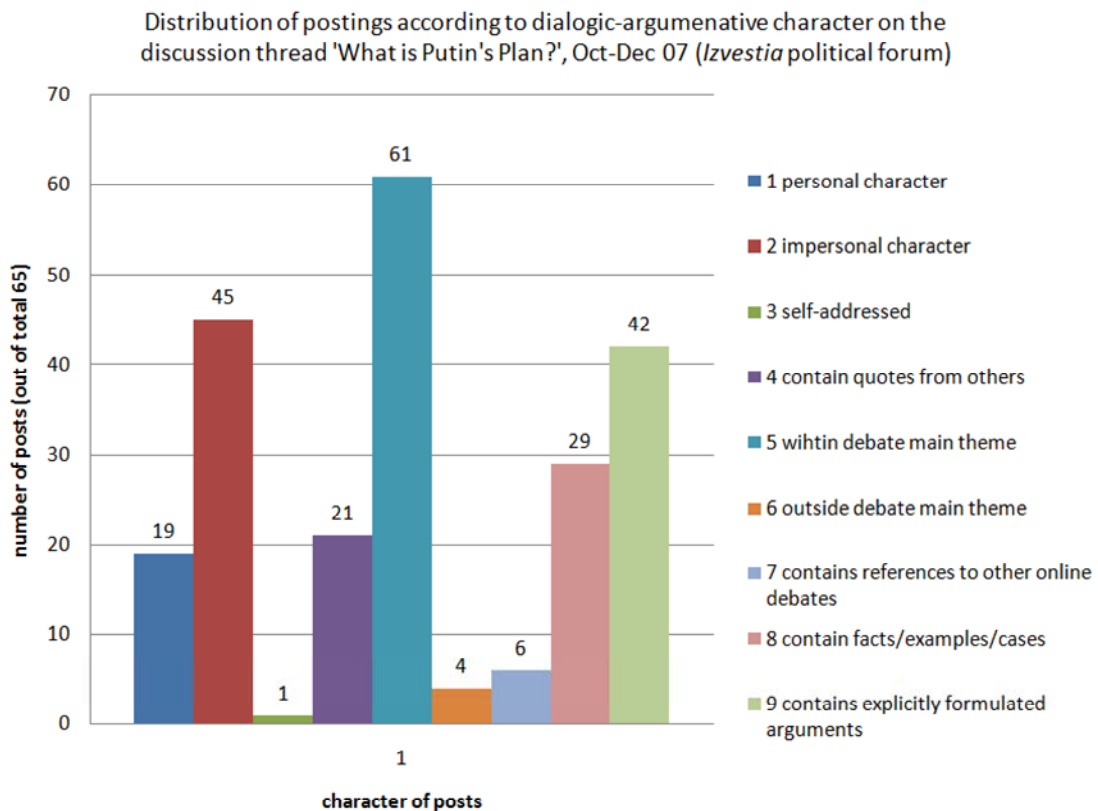
The analysis of this discussion thread was guided by the following three main questions:

1. "To which extent the debate is discursively and dialogically rational?"
2. "How the discussion can be described in the Habermasian 'worlds relations' terms and types of validity claims dominate its course?"
3. "What is the prevalent meaning of the discussion viewed as speech acts?"

The following slides present some initial summarising result.

First, how discussion can be characterised in more traditional terms of dialogical reciprocity and argumentative rationality?

### SLIDE 5



The majority of the posts are impersonal - 45 out of 65. That might be interpreted as a sign that the discussion is not hijacked by few participants engaged in a small circle debate and is quite participatory.

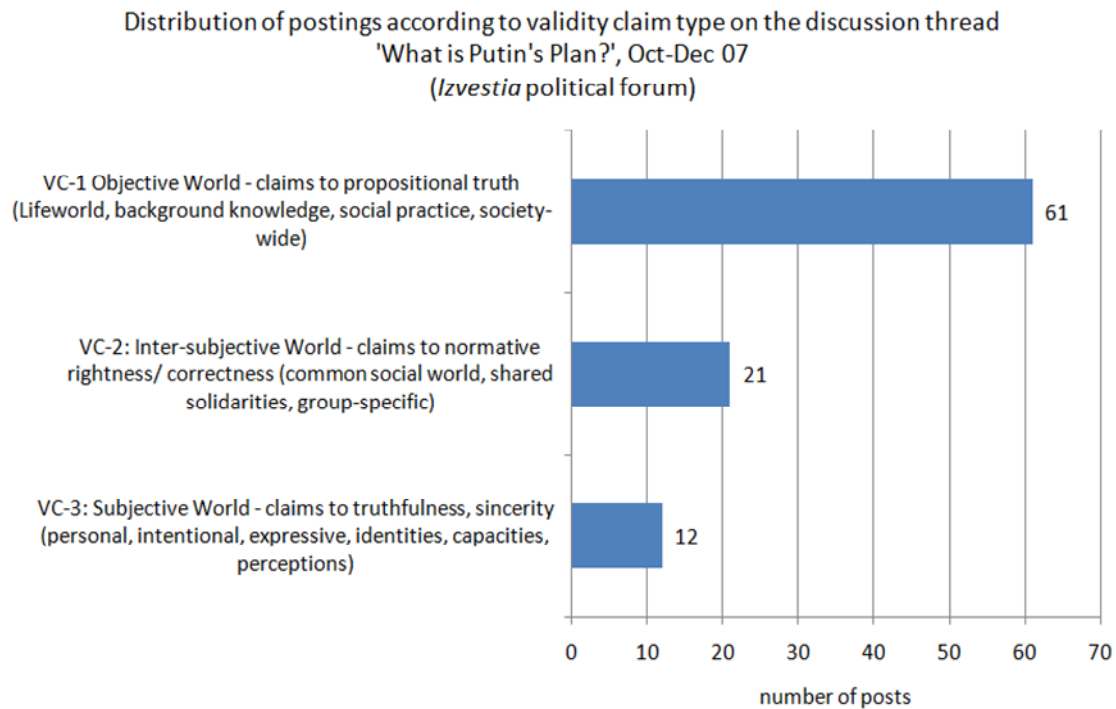
This observation is supported by the fact that no more than one-tenth of all the participants (just 2 of 23) posted over 10 messages each, which together do not exceed one-third of all posts (22 of 65). Yet more important is that greater number of participants - (over 40% - posted between 2 to 6 messages each, which is a good measure of participation equality for a small-size discussion.

One-third of all posts contain quotes from other participants showing thereby a significant degree of both dialogical and argumentative reciprocity. A clear majority of all posts (42 against 65)– contain explicit argumentation in the form of conclusions, statements, inferences, and quite many of these – 29 of 42 or 70% – are supported by some concrete evidence such as facts, figures, examples, and so on.

The debate also shows a high level of thematic consistency, with the overwhelming majority of posts sticking to the main thread theme. 61 out of 65 postings are still about the Putin's Plan, although adding many new sub-themes and macro topics to the initial seemingly simple question.

Here is how what validity claims were made during the discussion to demonstrate its relation to social reality.

## SLIDE 6



The distribution of posts by the character of validity claims has a clear pattern of the dominance of utterances claiming propositional truths – 61 of 65 posts belong to that claim reflecting upon the objective world of facts, practices, ideas, actors, institutions (realised mainly through assertives/constatives – a type of speech acts in Searlean categorisation).

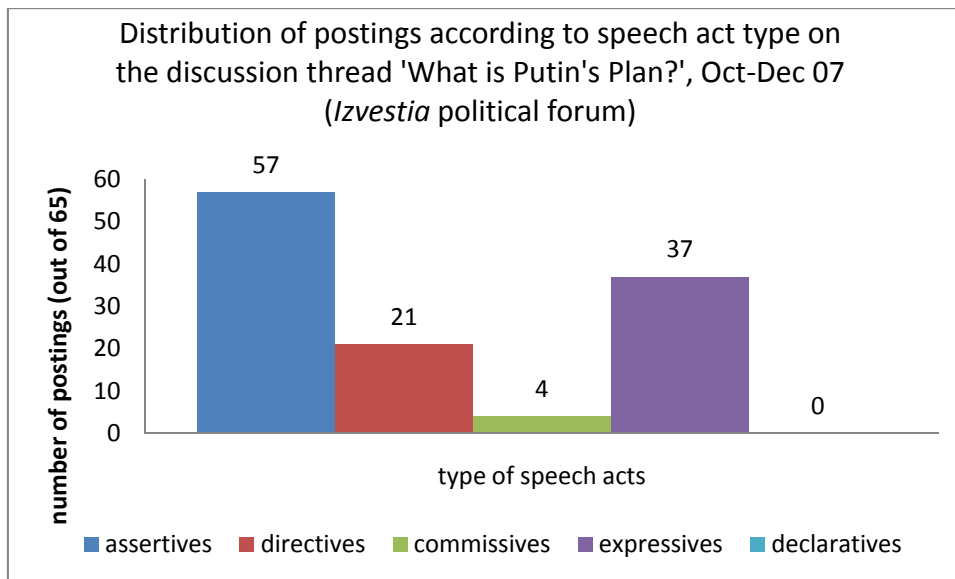
A far smaller number of posts – about one-third – are those that claim normative rightness of certain moral or ethical values that, in turn, reflect upon common social worlds shared by some group of discussants.

And about one-fifth of all posts belong to personal worlds under the subjective truthfulness validity claim, through which participants claim sincerity and authenticity about themselves and their attitudes towards other worlds. It is important to note here that each posting can contain more than one claim category.

Finally, this is how the postings were distributed according to their illocutionary logic as speech acts.



## SLIDE 7



The overwhelming majority – 57 out of 65 – are assertives (or constatives) that reflect the so-called objective world and propose to consider some propositional truth about it, for example, to reflect on the Putin plan and its qualities.

Many posted messages supplied facts and background information about the Plan's desired contents and commented on the overall political and economic context. Nearly half of all posts took the form of questions, with about half of the questions being rhetorical, without expecting any answer. Quite a lot of the posts display emotion, but not very strong and few are really offensive. Some degree of emotion is normal here and serves to strengthen the intended meaning of the text.

Directives constitute about one-third of all utterances; this type of speech act intends to prompt certain action on the addressee's part. This is quite a large number of such pro-active posts, even though many of them take shape of rhetorical questions, which still serves the purpose to invite a reaction, without being necessarily or implicitly interrogative.

Interestingly, the number of commissives is small in this rather abstract debate – just 4 messages out of 65. That means that very few (less than one-tenths of all participants) express their commitment to undertake an action in the real world or behave in a certain way, for example, promising to vote or not to vote for the party. Perhaps, for a social mobilisation type of discussion this figure would be higher. A desire to commit others to do something and make them believe in something seems to be far stronger in this debate.

Declaratives, which intend to change the status quo in the real world by declaring something – are absent, which is understandable, given that the nature of the debate is about rather abstract political events.

In conclusion, I would like only to say that this case demonstrates a principle applicability of the analytical framework based on the Habermasian validity claim approach for studying deliberative quality of online discourses, in combination with the Searlean illocutionary logic.

It also reveals a universal merit of using such approach to study deliberation outside the western democratic context. Yet, I don't want to generalise too much this initial impression; only a larger scale analysis can prove or disprove these first findings.