Changing the Nature of Online Conversation:
An Evaluation of *RealityCheck.com*

Note: Following are excerpts from the full 65 page report. They include

the Executive Summary, Introduction, a statistical profile of participants,

and the closing section summarizing the impact of Web Lab actions on the

dialogues.

Changing the Nature of Online Conversation: An Evaluation of *RealityCheck.com*

Executive Summary

Reality Check billed itself as a "new model for dialogue on public issues." It was a web-based, computer-mediated asynchronous dialogue forum, featuring small groups of participants who committed themselves to engaging in a dialogue for at least 4 weeks. Fifteen dialogue groups were launched and conducted between November, 1998 and March, 1999. These groups involved about 750 different registrants, who contributed a total of nearly 13,000 separate messages during the project's existence.

Web Lab (the organizers of Reality Check) sought to create an online space in which a diverse group of citizens could construct meaningful conversations about the impeachment controversy and other political issues in an atmosphere of mutual respect and shared commitment. Through a series of seemingly small but potentially important adjustments to the technical and social structure of the familiar online dialogue, Web Lab hoped to change the dynamic of Internet conversation about politics. We believe that, to a significant extent, they succeeded. The technical and social changes implemented in this project created an atmosphere of respect, learning, community, and positive relationships unusual (to say the least) in the online world.

Participants were highly committed contributors and readers – nearly 80% of the registrants responding to our survey said they were motivated to either read or write messages by a sense of responsibility to the group. Two thirds of the respondents believed their discussions to be higher quality than other online dialogues in which they've participated, and almost as many reported that they developed respect for other participants. Substantial proportions of the participants in the dialogue groups invested considerable conversational resources in community building and developing positive relationships. Personal attacks, common in other online forums, were virtually non-existent. Nearly 70% of the registrants responding to our survey said they learned something about the impeachment from Reality Check – a phenomenal figure given the saturation coverage in traditional media, and the high level of news reportedly consumed by the registrants. Perhaps more importantly, most registrants interviewed indicated that they were better able to understand others, especially those with whom they disagreed, as a result of their participation in Reality Check. A majority of the respondents reported caring a lot about their dialogue groups while they were active. They indicated their level of caring by investing significant time and effort in the groups. Over half reported reading more than three-quarters of the messages posted, spending more than one hour per week reading and writing messages. 30% spent two hours or more reading messages.

We believe that the model demonstrated by the Reality Check experiment offers exciting possibilities for the future of Internet-based conversation. We encourage those interested in expanding opportunities for democratic discussion online to pay close attention to the technical and social features associated with the Reality Check dialogue groups.

Introduction

Talking about politics with other citizens is the cornerstone of democracy. Yet despite the proliferation of political talk – dispensed from millions of web sites, tens of thousands of chat rooms and newsgroups, hundreds of cable televisions channels and dozens of nationally syndicated talk radio shows – there are still too few opportunities for individuals to converse with each other in the rational, deliberative and friendly environment that a flourishing democracy demands.

Even (and perhaps especially) the Internet disappoints. The Internet surely represents the most promising media-based opportunity to create arenas for public conversation. It is seemingly perfectly adapted to a world in which communities of interest are as likely to be formed across oceans as they are across streets. The costs of engagement, in terms of time, money and effort, are significantly reduced, and the limitations of shared physical and shared temporal space are greatly eased. But it is with considerable disappointment that we must view the

> "Democracy begins in conversation."
> *-John Dewey, The Public and its Problems*
> ♦
> "The simplest, least threatening investment any citizen may make in democratic renewal is to begin talking with other people."
> *-William Greider, Who Will Tell the People*
> ♦
> "Dialogue is the first obligation of citizenship."
> *-Bruce Ackerman, "Why Dialogue?'*

first decade of easily accessible online political conversation. Many online dialogue groups are plagued with shrillness, negativity, and polarization; dominated by the few who speak very often, and abandoned by the many who speak very little (if at all). An apt metaphor for political conversation on the Internet is the Tower of Babel: constructed with good intentions, cursed with a thousand dialects of extremism.

Reality Check wanted to do things differently. The project billed itself as a "new model for dialogue on public issues." It was a web-based, computer-mediated asynchronous dialogue forum. The project invited relatively small groups of 50-60 registrants to participate in a dialogue for an initial 4 week period, on the assumption that between a third and a half would become active contributors. The web site was developed by Web Lab, a non-profit organization dedicated to exploring new ways to use the World Wide Web. Fifteen dialogue groups were launched and conducted between November, 1998 and March, 1999. The groups ostensibly focused on the impeachment controversy surrounding President Clinton, Monica Lewinsky, Kenneth Starr and the United States Congress. These groups involved about 750 different registrants, who contributed a total of nearly 13,000 separate messages during the project's existence.

The organizers of this experimental web site sought to create an online space in which a diverse group of citizens could construct meaningful conversations about the

impeachment controversy and other political issues in an atmosphere of mutual respect and shared commitment. This has been a difficult task to accomplish in the online world, especially in dialogues created for the sole purpose of conversation. Through a series of seemingly small but potentially important adjustments to the technical and social structure of the familiar online dialogue, Reality Check hoped to change the dynamic of Internet conversation about politics.

Here's what they did:

❖ Limited Entry: Most online dialogue groups feature continuous and unlimited entry of participants, creating an ever-changing, dynamic but inherently amorphous group membership. Reality Check assigned a fixed number of individuals to participate in each dialogue group, started all members on the same day, and didn't allow new members to join established groups.

❖ Fixed Exit: Most groups are allowed to linger on indefinitely; brain-dead but technically still alive. Reality Check invited members to join in a discussion that would last for a one-month period, after which the conversation would end.

❖ Commitment: In the world of online discussion, participants are rarely asked to commit themselves to anything. Commitment develops organically; it is rarely planted intentionally. Reality Check asked members to agree to participate during the one-month life of the dialogue group.

❖ Introductions: The grand entrance, complete with trumpeted announcement of one's presence, is unusual in online dialogue groups. Etiquette demands a period of silent observation while the nature of the group is learned and the context of the conversation

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Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: Definition and Description

It may be helpful to briefly describe asynchronous computer-mediated communication. A non-computer-based analogy can be drawn with a physical bulletin board in a common area. An individual happening by the bulletin board might decide one day to "post" a message, addressed to no one in particular, about a specific subject. Another individual happening by might read the posting, and decide to post a reply to the original message, and/or to post a message of their own. A third individual happening by might read all the postings, and reply as desired. The first individual might happen by a few days later, and respond to the responders, and add a new posting on a different subject. And so it goes: individuals can enter or leave the "discussion" at any time, responding to both recent and not-so-recent messages, and starting new threads in the discussion. It is important to note that the contributors in the discussion were not necessarily acting at the same time. In this example, the size of the discussion would be limited by the physical dimensions of the bulletin board and the contributors would be limited to those who physically happened by the board.

The computerized version is very similar, with the "physical" location of the board replaced by one or many physical locations in a network of computers that are connected to each other, and the "physical" location of the contributors replaced by their presence on a computer that can access the network. The size of the discussion is limited by the much-less constraining limitations of the network, and the contributors are limited to the much-less constraining limitations of the number of network users.

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becomes clear. Reality Check asked all registrants to introduce themselves as a way to get the conversation started.

❖ Benign Monitoring: Online dialogue groups are usually either moderated or unmoderated. In moderated groups all messages require approval; in unmoderated groups, no such structure exists. Reality Check made clear to its registrants that "someone" was watching and reading, but rarely intervened directly in the conversations.

❖ External Prodding: It is unusual, especially in dialogue groups which have no external purpose or task, for the sponsoring institution to take an active interest in the content and progress of the group without directly intervening. Reality Check used several techniques – including newsletters and a featured posts section on the website – to both prod members into participation, and to model exemplary contributions.

We believe that these techniques, involving both structural adjustments to the operation of the dialogue groups as well as attempts at changing the culture of the group experience, had a positive effect on the nature of the political conversation that was created. We believe that the structure of the Reality Check dialogue groups contributed significantly to four primary accomplishments:

❖ Commitment: Participants in the Reality Check dialogue groups were committed contributors and readers. Nearly 80% of the registrants responding to our survey said they were motivated to either read or write

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REALITY CHECK on Reality Check:
From the web site describing the project

Reality Check is implementing a unique experimental technique in on-line dialogue and community building. Although Web-based discussions offer users the ability to connect with each other – one of the most powerful things any technology can do -- they often create a collection of people making drive-by postings, rather than a community. Most on-line discussions are based on several unwritten rules, which tend to hinder the development of conversations:

1. There is no limit to the number of contributors.
2. There is no set starting or end point for the conversation, and members can join or leave at any time.
3. A participant can remain completely anonymous.
4. A participant need have no responsibility for the discussion nor his/her contribution to it.

As a result, on-line users are often put in a difficult spot. H.G. Wells wrote in his story "The Invisible Man" about a man who had to negotiate on a daily basis how much of himself would be visible and how much to hide. The Internet puts its users in a similar situation: the more they show, the greater the risk, and the less they show, the shallower the connection. What often results is a community of people who want to see but not be seen, ultimately permitting most of us to see nothing. We refer to this as the dilemma of the Invisible Man culture.

A New Model for Web-based discussion

Reality Check's Dialogue Groups were developed to challenge the assumptions generated by this culture and its structures -- to experiment with an alternative model. Each group is a forum in which there is a small, set number of conversants, who agree to participate for a defined period of time.

A member can decide how anonymous he or she wants to be, deciding for example whether to use his/her real name or a screen name, and deciding how much to disclose when writing a short bio and participating in the discussions. But, on the theory that our perspectives are shaped by our background, contributors are encouraged to ground their discussion in what they've learned through personal experience.

When a group gets under way, all of the members are introduced to one another, and throughout the discussions, members hold each other accountable for their comments and interactions with others. While the dialogues are available to the public for reading, only members can initiate new topics of conversation or post messages in their group.

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messages by a sense of responsibility to the group.

❖ Respect and Quality: Contributors to the dialogue groups developed respect for each other, and their views, over time, and came to think of their discussions as being of high quality. Sixty percent of the survey respondents said their respect for other members increased over time, four times the proportion that said respect decreased. Two thirds of the survey respondents thought the discussion was higher quality than other online discussions in which they'd participated.

❖ Community Building and Positive Relationships: Though most contributions were categorized as persuasive communications, a substantial minority sought to build common ground and community with other members. In addition, positive comments toward other contributors were three times more common than negative comments, and harsh, negative, personal attacks were virtually non-existent.

❖ Learning and Understanding: Nearly 70% of the registrants responding to our survey said they learned something about the impeachment from Reality Check – a phenomenal figure given the saturation coverage in traditional media, and the high level of news reportedly consumed by the registrants. Perhaps more importantly, most registrants interviewed indicated that they were better able to understand others, especially those with whom they disagreed, as a result of their participation in Reality Check.

❑ Overview of Evaluation

We were asked by Web Lab to evaluate the Reality Check project. The research team was directed by Steven M. Schneider, a political science professor at the State University of New York Institute of Technology at Utica/Rome. Assistance was provided by Rebecca Beckingham, a PhD candidate in sociology at the New School for Social Research, as well as several other research assistants. We had three primary goals for the evaluation:

❖ To understand what Web Lab sought to accomplish when they created Reality Check, and what steps were taken in pursuit of these goals.

❖ To measure the extent to which the goals for Reality Check were accomplished, and the relationship between the design of the project and the accomplishment of the goals.

❖ To develop measurements and indicators that could be used by other organizations and researchers interested in analyzing the nature of online dialogue groups.

Our evaluation involved a series of data gathering and analysis exercises. First, we reviewed basic documents describing the origins and structure of Reality Check, and had extensive conversations with the project organizers and developers. Second, we developed, implemented and analyzed a survey of the Reality Check registrants, and combined that data with information provided by the registrants upon registration. Third, we examined the patterns of posting messages to the dialogue groups by the contributors. Fourth, we selected four dialogue groups, based on the variance in their structural characteristics, and systematically analyzed the contributions for evidence related to the goals of the Reality Check project. Finally, we conducted telephone interviews with a small sample of contributors to verify our quantitative findings, and to gather anecdotal evidence related to our research questions.

The next section of this report presents a statistical portrait of the registrants who participated in the Reality Check dialogue groups, and a detailed analysis of the behaviors of contributors within the groups. We then present an overview of the 15 Reality Check dialogue groups, and descriptions of their conversational structure. A more extensive description is provided of the four dialogue groups selected for content analysis. We conclude our analysis with an assessment of the degree to which the conversation in the Reality Check dialogue groups satisfied the goals of the project, and the relationship between the accomplishment of these goals and the various steps taken by Web Lab. In addition, two appendices are included with the report. The first appendix includes full results of the participant survey, as well as the quantitative data supporting the analysis in the evaluation. The second appendix provides a detailed methodological description of the survey and content analysis.

The Reality Check Participants

This section examines the characteristics and behaviors of those registering for and contributing to the Reality Check project. We begin with a statistical portrait of the registrants, and then turn to an analysis of the posting and reading behaviors of the contributors. We conclude this section with a review of the content of messages contributed to the dialogue groups.

It may be helpful to define several terms that will be used in this and subsequent sections of the report. We define a *registrant* as any individual who filled out a registration form on the site, and was assigned to a dialogue group. We define a *contributor* as any individual who posted at least one message to his or her Reality Check dialogue group.

❑ Registrant Characteristics

Reality Check was, first and foremost, a collection of individuals. These individuals decided, for a variety of reasons, to participate in dialogue groups on the Reality Check web site, and each brought with them a lifetime of experiences and backgrounds. At the same time, we can get an overview of what kinds of individuals participated in Reality Check by examining the distribution of registrants on several types of characteristics. We examine the Reality Check registrants in terms of their background demographics, computer and online usage, political activism, news attentiveness, interest in the impeachment controversy, and interest in building online communities. We then compare the statistical portrait of the Reality Check registrants with a recent national survey of Internet users.[1]

A total of 765 user accounts were created for Reality Check registrants. Registrants were asked to complete an online survey; about half did so. Additional data was collected from registrants approximately five months after their Reality Check experience; about one-quarter of the registrants responded. All descriptions of Reality Check registrants in this section refer to those who registered to participate in the dialogue groups. It should be noted that one-third of the registrants contributed no messages, though they may have read messages in the dialogue groups.

We offer, in summary form, four principle findings from our analysis of registrants' characteristics:

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[1] Pew Center for People and the Press, Technology 1998 Survey. Questionnaire and results available at http://www.people-press.org/tech98que.htm.

❖ Reality Check registrants, compared to American Internet users generally, are somewhat more likely to be male, somewhat older, and have considerably higher levels of education.

❖ Reality Check registrants, compared to other Americans online, are much heavier users of the Internet, and much more likely to engage in a wide range of online activities.

❖ Reality Check registrants, compared to Americans generally, are much more politically active, and are very heavy consumers of news media.

❖ Reality Check registrants were more likely to be motivated to join the project by their interest in building online communities than they were by their interest in the impeachment controversy.

The data reported below make clear that the Reality Check registrants are not representative of either American adults, or even American Internet users. This knowledge should temper any conclusions drawn from our analyses. We should remember that the Reality Check registrants were a self-selected group of very heavy Internet users who were extraordinarily politically active, very interested in the impeachment controversy, and unusually attentive to the news media.

Demographics

We begin our analysis of Reality Check registrants with an examination of basic demographic information, including age, education, income, race, gender, sexual preference and nation of residence. We then compare the Reality Check registrants to results from a national survey of Internet users in an attempt to detect differences between the two populations. Most of this data about Reality Check registrants was obtained from on-line questionnaires completed by those registering to participate in Reality Check. Completing the survey was voluntary; about half of those

Demographic Characteristics of Reality Check Registrants and American Internet Users	Reality Check Registrants	National Sample of Internet Users
Age		
<30	24%	30%
30-50	51%	50%
50+	25%	20%
Total	100%	100%
Gender		
Female	30%	48%
Male	70%	52%
Total	100%	100%
Education		
H.S. Grad or less	7%	29%
Some College	29%	31%
College Grad+	64%	40%
Total	100%	100%
Income		
<$35,000	25%	24%
$35,000 - $75,000	47%	31%
$75,000+	28%	45%
Total	100%	100%
Race		
White	89%	
Nonwhite	11%	
Total	100%	
Nation of Residence		
United States	92%	
Other Nation	8%	
Total	100%	

Source: Reality Check Registration Data & Pew Center Survey

registering did so. The nation-of-residence data was obtained from the database records associated with each registrant. The national survey was completed by the Pew Center for People and the Press in late 1998, about the same time as Reality Check was active.

Compared to the national sample of Internet users, the Reality Check registrants were somewhat less likely to be under 30 years old and more likely to be over 50 years old; much more likely to be male; considerably more educated, and somewhat lower income. In terms of basic demographics, the Reality Check registrants were not representative of Internet users generally. Though this may not be surprising, given the specific nature of registrant that we would expect to be attracted to Reality Check, we should keep in mind that we are not able to generalize our findings to the entire Internet population.

It is instructive to examine the demographics of the Reality Check registrants to get a feel for the type of people interested in these kinds of activities. Most obviously, we see that the Reality Check registrants were very highly educated – nearly two-thirds of those participating had graduated college, and more than 90% had attended college. Interestingly, the gender distribution of Reality Check registrants is overwhelmingly male. This could be a reflection of the distribution of Internet *usage* (rather than *users*). At any rate, it is consistent with other research suggesting a significant gender gap in online communications.

Finally, it is worth noting the international character of the Reality Check registrants. A total of 60 individuals, representing nearly 8% of the accounts created for individuals interested in participating in Reality Check, were from countries other than the United States. Nearly half of those from countries other than the U.S. were from European nations. Fourteen international registrants were from Canada, and 12 from Asian countries. There were between one and three registrants from South America, other North American nations, and the Middle East.

Internet Usage

We now turn to an analysis of the level of Internet usage by Reality Check registrants, and compare this data to American Internet users generally. The Reality Check registrants were, not surprisingly, very heavy Internet users. Explicit comparisons to a nationwide sample of Internet users suggest that in every respect, those responding to our survey were much more likely to use the Internet than American Internet users generally.

Reality Check registrants were three times more likely to say they go online everyday than Internet users nationwide. Over 90 percent of the Reality Check registrants said they read and responded to their email at least once a day – compared to 59% of email users nationwide. Nearly seven times as many Reality Check registrants as Internet users nationwide said they used the Internet every day to communicate with other people through online forums, discussion lists, or chat groups. Nearly nine times as many reported using the Internet to do research or look for information for school or work.

Internet Usage by Reality Check Registrants
and American Internet Users

| | How often did respondent… | | | | | | | | | |
| | go online? | | read & respond to email? | | communicate with other people online? | | do research & look up information online? | | get news online? | |
	RC	US	RC	US	RC	US	RC	US	RC	US
Several times each day	68%	N/A	57%	N/A	13%	N/A	25%	N/A	28%	N/A
About once everyday	24%	30%	35%	33%	22%	5%	18%	15%	30%	9%
3-5 days per week	8%	29%	6%	22%	13%	8%	20%	16%	10%	12%
1 or 2 days per week	0%	22%	1%	17%	16%	9%	15%	16%	15%	17%
Once every few weeks	0%	12%	1%	9%	10%	9%	9%	13%	7%	14%
Less often	0%	0%	1%	4%	27%	14%	13%	9%	10%	14%
Never	N/A	0%	N/A	4%	N/A	55%	N/A	30%	N/A	34%

Source: Reality Check Participant Survey (N=225) and Pew Center data.
Note: The Reality Check participant survey did not offer a "never" response category. The Pew Center survey did not offer a "several times each day" response category.

Almost 60 percent of the Reality Check registrants reported going online daily to get news and information on current events, public issues or politics – compared to 25% among Internet users nationwide.

There are two conclusions to be drawn from this data. First, it is clear that Reality Check registrants were drawn from the most frequent users of the Internet. Most registrants report using the Internet regularly to communicate with others, either through email or alternative mechanisms. We can safely conclude that relatively few Reality Check registrants were likely to have been subject to "novelty" effects associated with inexperienced users of the Internet. At the same time, we should note that a substantial minority of the Reality Check registrants were infrequent users of non-email mechanisms for Internet communication. Thirty-seven percent of the registrants reported they used chat or bulletin boards less than once a week. This group of registrants clearly had a different level of experience than those who used such technologies more frequently.

Political Activism

We were also interested in comparing the level of political activism of Reality Check registrants to American adults generally. The Reality Check registrants were extremely politically active, and were much more likely to participate in every political activity examined than American adults generally. Reality Check registrants who responded to our survey are

Political Activism of Reality Check Registrants
and American Adults

| Political Activity | % of Respondents | |
	RC	US
Voted in recent election	88%	45%
Contacted elected official	73%	30%
Contributed money to candidate or interest group	52%	7%
Attended meeting, rally or demonstration	50%	6%
Worked on political campaign	16%	1%

Source: Reality Check Participant Survey (N=225)
American National Election Study, 1996.

considerably more likely to vote (88% to 45%) than Americans generally. Further, the differences in political activism are much more pronounced when less common political activities are examined. Reality Check registrants are seven to eight times more likely to contribute money to candidates or interest groups, and to attend political meetings, than Americans generally. Additionally, 16% of the Reality Check registrants reported working on a political campaign, dramatically more than the national average of less than one percent.

News Consumption

Another characteristic of Reality Check registrants that we were interested in examining concerns the frequency of consuming news across various media. A news consumption index was created by summing the number of times per week respondents reported reading newspapers, watching television news, listening to radio news and talk radio, reading magazines, and going online to obtain news. Nearly half of the Reality Check registrants report three or more exposures per day to news media. Close to one-fifth of the registrants said they read, watched or listened to news four or more times per day.

Level of News Consumption by Reality Check Registrants

Frequency of news consumption	% of Contributors
Low	19%
Moderate	33%
High	30%
Very High	19%

Source: Reality Check Registration Data (N=353)

This level of news consumption suggests that Reality Check registrants can be expected to be relatively well informed about news and current events. This could have an effect on the amount of learning about the impeachment that took place within the dialogue groups. It would be reasonable to suggest that learning about the impeachment is less likely among those who pay a lot of attention to the news media.

Motivations for Joining Reality Check

The final set of characteristics of Reality Check registrants we will examine concerns their motivations for registering with Reality Check. Two indicators are available from the preliminary survey of registrants. The first measures the level of interest in the impeachment controversy, while the second assesses the level of interest in online dialogue and in building online communities. The registrants were especially interested in online dialogues and community building: nearly 70 percent indicated a high level of interest. Thirty-six percent of the survey respondents were highly interested in the impeachment, and 42 percent indicated a moderate amount of interest. It is clear that the registrants were

Motivations for Joining Reality Check

% of Registrants		Interest in Online Communities			
		Low	Moderate	High	Total
Interest in the impeachment	Low	1%	6%	15%	22%
	Moderate	1%	13%	27%	42%
	High	0%	10%	26%	36%

more interested in online communities than they were in the impeachment. Forty-eight percent of the respondents indicated a higher level of interest in the former than the latter; the reverse was true of just 11 percent of the registrants.

[Note: This document is excerpted from a longer report. We have omitted detailed sections describing registrant attitudes and behavior as well as descriptions of 15 dialogue groups. The excerpts continue on page 54.]

The Impact of Web Lab Actions on the Nature of the Conversations

This section discusses the primary accomplishments of the Reality Check project. As summarized in the introduction, we believe that the efforts of the Reality Check organizers to change the nature of online dialogue groups contributed significantly to four primary accomplishments:

❖ <u>Commitment</u>: Contributors in the dialogue groups were extraordinarily committed to both the process and other contributors. Contributors reported both reading and writing messages out of a sense of responsibility to other group members, and returned to the site frequently to check for additions to the conversation.

❖ <u>Respect and Quality</u>: A very high level of respect among the contributors in the groups developed over time. Many contributors explicitly acknowledged their respect for each other, especially when disagreements on points of view emerged. High proportions of contributors believed their discussions were of higher quality than other online conversations.

❖ <u>Community Building and Positive Relationships</u>: Dialogue group contributors invested considerable resources in developing positive relationships with other contributors, and in seeking common ground among contributors with different viewpoints. The harsh, negative and personal attacks characteristic of much Internet conversation was non-existent in Reality Check. Many dialogue group members reported that a sense of community developed during the course of their conversations.

❖ <u>Learning and Understanding</u>: A very high proportion of contributors said they had learned something about the impeachment from Reality Check – despite the saturation coverage present in traditional media. Perhaps more importantly, most contributors indicated that they were better able to understand others, especially those with whom they disagreed, as a result of their participation in Reality Check. Additionally, contributors reported learning about online communities and online dialogues.

We believe these accomplishments are, to a significant degree, the result of intentional and purposive changes made to the technical and social structure of online dialogue groups. By changing the nature of online conversation, the Reality Check organizers significantly enhanced the possibilities of creating dialogue groups featuring committed contributors who would learn about political issues and expand their understanding of politics in a respectful atmosphere conducive to community building and creating positive relationships. The analysis in this section examines the degree to which these

accomplishments were achieved, and analyzes the impact of the Reality Check organizers' actions.

For our analysis, we created a series of indexes measuring commitment, respect, quality, community building, establishment of relationships, and learning. We describe the distribution of contributors on these indexes, and analyze the relationship of these indexes to contributor behavior, contributor characteristics, and group characteristics. We believe that the constructed indexes are better than individual measures because they tap multiple dimensions of a single construct. We try to avoid taking a single survey measure out of context and using the results to suggest an underlying behavior or attitude. In this analysis, we report the distribution of the indexes only; those interested in the distribution of individual items are invited to examine Appendix I, which provides a full report of the survey and content analysis results.

Our analysis and discussion was informed by a series of telephone interviews conducted with dialogue group contributors. We found the contributors' descriptions of Reality Check, and their commentaries on various aspects of the project, sufficiently compelling that we included lengthy excerpts of the interviews in the shaded boxes across the bottom of the pages in this section. We chose not to include identifying information with the selected quotations, both to maintain the privacy of the contributors, and to avoid the suggestion that an individual contributor was somehow representative of others with similar characteristics. We recognize that, given our very small sample of contributors, we were unable to draw such generalizations. Our transcripts are edited slightly for grammar and readability. Where necessary, we insert words in brackets to make the meaning clear.

Commitment

♦

It kept me going online because I had said that I would commit to four weeks. So I don't necessarily [feel I] had a commitment to the group. I had a commitment to the cause. The people in the group for me were secondary. I said I would be part of this experiment.

♦

I don't know whether it was a commitment to the group or I agreed to participate [that kept me active in the group]. … I was just more or less fulfilling my share of the agreement. …too many people don't honor commitments these days.

♦

I tried to log on at least once every other day, if not daily. At times, like when I posted something and I wanted to see the reaction from the group, I would check in a couple of times a day. Or if someone had posted something that I was particularly interested in and I wanted to see what the other group members felt about what was going on. I guess I was pretty much a daily participant.

♦

[Sometimes I had to] just sit down for a few hours and just go through everything before I could type something. … I didn't want to write down something and repeat something that some else had already said. … I felt I had to read it all before I wrote something else down.

❑ **Evaluation Indexes**

Establishing Commitment to the Dialogue Group

Two measures are used to measure the amount of commitment the contributor had toward their dialogue group. A survey based measure tallied responses across six questions. These questions asked respondents how much they cared about what was happening in their group, what proportion of messages they read, how much time they spent reading messages per week, how much time they spent writing messages per week, how often they read messages out of a sense of responsibility, and how often they wrote messages out of a sense of responsibility. The regularity of posting was used as a behavioral measure. The two measures yield somewhat different estimates, with the survey-based measure suggesting that 37% of the contributors were highly committed, and the behavioral measure indicating that 24% of the contributors were highly committed. The two measures are strongly though not perfectly correlated (r=.37, p < .01), suggesting the two measures may be tapping different types of commitment.

Level of Contributor Commitment to Reality Check		
Level	Survey-based	Behavioral [Regularity of Contributing]
Low	11%	24%
Medium	52%	51%
High	37%	24%
	Source: Participant Survey (N=171)	*Source: Structural Analysis (N=504 Contributors)*

Our analysis indicates the more regular and frequent contributors, as well as those who report reading more within their dialogue groups, are much more likely to be highly committed than those who write and read less. We find that the level of contribution is a more important predictor of commitment than the level of reading: among those whose writing outpaced reading (for example, those who were frequent contributors but light readers), commitment was higher than among those whose reading outpaced writing. However, we find no other consistent differences between those who are highly committed to their group, and those who are not. Neither the demographic and attitudinal measures nor the group characteristic measures are related to the commitment measures. This suggests the difficulty of predicting level of commitment based on demographic or contributor characteristics.

At the same time, as is strongly indicated by comments of the contributors in the telephone interviews, as represented by the selected quotes reprinted across the bottom of this section's pages, the Reality Check contributors thought it very important that they were asked to make a commitment, and they took that commitment seriously. It is our view that much of the seriousness with which the contributors obviously treated their experience in Reality Check stems from the fact that they were asked to make a commitment to the project.

Creating an Atmosphere of Respect and Quality

We developed two indexes to measure respect and quality. The first index draws on two survey measures to estimate the amount of respect contributors had for other contributors. The questions asked respondents whether their respect for those in the group with whom they disagreed grew over time, and whether they believed that group contributors were interested in understanding the views of other contributors. Over 60% of respondents to the survey indicated that their respect increased "somewhat" or "a lot."

Growth in Respect for Other Contributors and Evaluation of Quality of Discussion among Reality Check Contributors		
Level	Growth in Respect for Other Contributors	Evaluation of Quality of Discussion
Higher	62%	66%
Same	18%	14%
Lower	15%	14%
Source: Participant Survey (N=171)		

Our quality index measures whether contributors believed the discussion on Reality Check was higher quality compared to other conversations. Two survey measures were combined to yield this index. The questions asked respondents to compare the level of quality of discussion on Reality Check to other online forums, and to face-to-face conversations they had during the time of Reality Check. Nearly 50% of survey respondents reported that the quality was "much higher" than other online forums in which they'd participated, with another 23% saying "somewhat higher." And compared to face-to-face discussions, 29% of survey respondents felt that Reality Check was "much higher" quality, and another 34% thought it was "somewhat higher."

Our analysis suggests that more frequent contributors and readers of Reality Check dialogue groups were more likely to develop respect for other contributors, and more likely to believe that the discussion was of high quality, than those who wrote and read

---

The Quality of Discussion

♦

I think that there was some excellent people posting and excellent commentary. And I think a lot of people were just posting to make noise so it was interesting and if you were a serious poster and you have people posting simply to see their name in print or to put their name out there, after a while it becomes tedious trying to pour through all the different threads.

♦

The points were so well considered and backed up with sound thought. For the most part, there weren't the passionate feelings...that doesn't mean that people weren't passionate about their feelings and their opinions, but it was a different, more studied kind of comment. I enjoyed it a lot. I thought the discussion was very high quality.

♦

The thing I noticed about Reality Check was that it was kind of on topics that were interesting to people who paid attention to current events and so forth. I guess the thing that amazed me was the level of consciousness that some people had about these issues. And the time that they would take -- they were writing some very good short essays is what they were doing. You know I was really impressed in most cases with the quality of what people were putting out there. Certainly exceeds what I did. Because I would get out there and I would see something that to me was a fairly long essay [in response to] something that you'd just post and people really were thinking about it. And to be able to read that and read where people were coming from was it was enlightening. I didn't always agree but it was certainly enlightening.

Impact of Contributor and Group Behaviors and Characteristics

	Likelihood of Being Highly Committed [Survey]	Likelihood of Being Highly Committed [Behavioral]	Likelihood of Highly Respecting Other Contributors	Likelihood of Believing discussion to be high quality	Likelihood of Building Community and Relationships [Survey]	Likelihood of Building Community and Relationships [Content]	Likelihood of Learning About the Impeachment
Contributor Behavior							
More regular contributors	Much higher*	Much higher*	Higher*	Much higher*	Much higher*	Much higher*	Higher*
More frequent contributors	Much higher*	Much higher*	Higher*	Somewhat higher	Somewhat higher*	Much higher*	Higher*
Higher Level of Reading	Much higher*	Much higher*	Higher*	Higher*	Much higher	No difference	Higher*
Contributor Characteristics							
Older contributors	No difference	Somewhat higher	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	Lower*
More educated contributors	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	Lower*
Income of Contributor	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	Lower*
Being female	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	Much lower*	No difference
More interest in impeachment	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	Lower	Higher*
More interest in online communities	No difference	Somewhat higher	Somewhat higher*	No difference	Higher*	No difference	No difference
Higher level of internet usage	No difference	No difference	Much higher	No difference	Higher	Higher*	Lower*
Higher level of news consumption	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference

Impact of Contributor and Group Behaviors and Characteristics

	Likelihood of Being Highly Committed [Survey]	*Likelihood of Being Highly Committed [Behavioral]*	*Likelihood of Highly Respecting Other Contributors*	*Likelihood of Believing discussion to be high quality*	*Likelihood of Building Community and Relationships [Survey]*	*Likelihood of Building Community and Relationships [Content]*	*Likelihood of Learning About the Impeachment*
Group Characteristics							
Contributor in group with more messages	Somewhat higher	No difference	No difference	No difference	No difference	Higher*	No difference
Contributor in group with more older contributors	Higher*	No difference	Somewhat higher*	No difference	Somewhat higher*	Lower*	Higher*

Source: Reality Check Participant Survey (N=171) and Structural Analysis (N=504 Contributors). Note: All relationships reported are statistically significant (p < .05), except those marked with an *, which indicates data supporting trend but lacking statistical significance.

less frequently. We find that the level of contribution is a more important predictor of respect than the level of reading: among those whose writing outpaced reading, respect was higher than among those whose reading outpaced writing. There may be a bit of immodesty involved: those who invested much time and energy writing and reading messages may be unlikely to suggest they wasted their time with a poor-quality discussion, or that they engaged in extended discussions with contributors whom they didn't respect. But the core finding, reinforced by our conversations with contributors, is important: respect for other contributors develops over time, and the more time contributors spend with the dialogue group, the more likely they are to develop that respect. As with our analysis of commitment, we find no consistent pattern between either contributor or group characteristics and level of respect for other contributors, nor evaluations of the quality of the dialogue groups.

Building Community and Developing Positive Relationships

Level of Community and Relationship Building in Reality Check			
Survey-based Measure		Content-based Measure	
Level	%	Level	%
Low	19%	Low	34%
Medium	24%	Medium	48%
High	57%	High	18%
Source Participant Survey (N=171).		*Source Content Analysis (N=152 Contributors)*	

Two indexes were developed to measure the degree to which contributors developed positive personal relationships with others, and worked toward building common ground and a sense of community. Six survey measures were combined to yield the first index. These questions asked respondents to indicate how many of the people in their group seemed to care about what they thought; how many seemed interested in understanding those with different viewpoints; how often wanting to know if someone had responded to one of their

Community Building and Creating Positive Relationships

♦

We would talk, and I would always feel that we would sort of almost know each other. After we started talking for a while we got to where we would actually like to joke around with each other and stuff and we … just seemed like more of a bunch of friends as it went along so I think everyone got along nicely. I felt welcomed I guess.

♦

We got to know each other rather quickly. But then I think that is one of the interesting points of the Internet is that you get to know people in a very different way. And I appreciate that aspect of being online. I thought that there was quite a bit of community building and there were stated efforts to do that.

♦

A lot of [the conversation] seemed really personal. … which was intriguing to me: how people could feel so intimate? And I can understand it because I think at first it felt intimate because you were told on this computer screen that you were in a select group and that you were being monitored and that there was this larger institution that was watching. …

♦

What I got a sense of was that you were a member. And you were one side or the other side. So I saw a kind of cohesiveness to which side you were on and then I kind of saw jabs across the wall. And then I also noticed in some cases it just kind of broke down to a couple people who had the time to really get in and exchange ideas. It became kind of a view just of a very few people exchanging ideas and kind of going deeper in [on] what the other one came back with.

posts lead them to read messages; how often wanting to post a new thought or feeling lead them to write messages; and whether they believed that group members were capable of policing their own community. A second measure, based on several dimensions from the content analysis, measured the proportion of messages written in which the poster (1) sought to build common ground with other members of the group; (2) used the dialogue group as a personal support system; (3) made positive comments about other members; and (4) acknowledged differences of opinion. The two measures of building relationships do not yield similar results. The survey-based measure categorized 57% of the contributors as believing that they had achieved a high level of community building and had developed positive relationships. Only 18% of the contributors were so categorized on the content-based measure. This suggests two possibilities: either the level of community and sense of positive relationships felt among the contributors was not accurately captured by the content analysis, or the contributors' feelings of community and beliefs about the strength of relationships established was considerably greater than was reflected in the content.

More frequent contributors and readers of Reality Check dialogue groups were more likely to describe their relationships with other contributors positively, and to contribute messages that seemed likely to play a role in the development of personal relationships and community, than were less frequent or regular contributors or readers. As in the other dimensions, we find that frequent and sustained attention to the dialogue group leads to the desired outcome. Similarly, we find that the frequency of contribution is a more important predictor of building community and establishing positive relationships than the level of reading: among those whose writing outpaced reading community building and establishing positive relationships was higher than among those whose reading outpaced

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Community Building and Creating Positive Relationships

♦

Initially I was really intrigued by the idea, … by the collaborativeness, that this was a group and that everyone was kind of putting in some kind of commitment to post and have a discussion. … I was really gung-ho about getting involved in reading what people had to say, and I think I realized that I came in with a lot of assumptions about what everyone else was coming in with. … It just kind of felt interesting because you felt like you had to check...I felt like I had to check it often. Like there was a constant group discussion, like you always had to kind of open the door to see what was going on and listening and by the end … I got more and more a sense of alienation than actual groupness, because it seemed as though people were more interested in just posting their opinions than actual dialog.

♦

Creating communities was good, rather than allowing people to create their own community and thus form a clique. I liked the idea that we were selected from what I believe to be fairly randomly [lists] and thrown together to see if we could build a community and in my instance we did to some degree.

♦

I don't think community was built. I think the medium is not conducive to that in the final analysis. … People when they get into groups will to a certain extent jockey for position. Will try and A) either try to out post other people or B) constantly have the "Ah ha" post, as I call it. Which is what I have a problem with in this medium. People didn't necessarily come to hear other people's points of view. But they do come to spout their own points of view. Which I think is fine and I think that is one way to use the forum. The other way is to actually listen to what the other person is saying. As an ex-Vista [volunteer], I can tell you that it is not community building that is the issue. It is overcoming our differences. And people do not want to overcome their differences, and they do not necessarily want to see the other person's point of view. They only want to have their own and their own is right. And that by and large came through [in Reality Check].

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writing. Again, we conclude that building community, and establishing positive relationships with others, takes time -- and the more time contributors spend with the dialogue group, the more likely they are to accomplish those objectives. We do note that those who were more interested in online communities were more likely to describe their relationships with other contributors as positive; however, they were not more likely to contribute messages that established positive relationships or built community. We find no other consistent patterns between either contributor or group characteristics and the likelihood of developing positive relationships, or of writing messages that would tend to further the development of relationships and the building of community.

Learning And Understanding

Amount of Learning About Impeachment	
Level	% of Contributors
Low	33%
Medium	59%
High	9%
Source: Participant Survey (N=171).	

Our analysis of learning and understanding proceeds somewhat differently. We first discuss learning about the impeachment, which we measured using a single survey item. We then turn to a discussion about understanding and personal transformation. Finally, we conclude our analysis of learning by examining learning about online communities.

Our impeachment learning index measures the amount of learning about the impeachment reported by contributors. A

Learning about the Impeachment

♦

There was an awful lot of information out there about impeachment obviously in the media. But it was interesting to come into Reality Check and see where this group of maybe sixteen or seventeen eighteen people that we had, where they were coming down on things you know. Because you have your own point of view, and you are hearing these polls, and the polls may or may not agree with what you are thinking, so Reality Check was just that -- a reality check and you got out there and you got all kinds of points of view. And you know some folks would point out some things that you hadn't heard. But sometimes they were so off the wall that you kind of took them with a grain of salt.

♦

It gave me a whole bunch of different perspectives on some of the issues of the day. I mean I am a registered Republican and not a Bill Clinton supporter. But I came to be a little more even handed in my appraisal of Clinton and some of the things that were associated with the whole soap opera that was going on.

♦

I didn't read anything [about the impeachment] that I wasn't already hearing the experts say on CNN. I remember [because] I became really obsessed with this impeachment thing; I listened to CNN or I watched CNN non-stop and [heard] all the experts and I read everything I could read, and of course the experts are all postulating about what is going to happen and everyone is analyzing the action and the maneuver of the government. I remember that as far as the impeachment dialog no one came up with an original perspective that wasn't already on the media. I was kind of disappointed in that. I thought perhaps we would have a more grass-roots perspective because we were just having [a discussion]. I remember thinking, 'This is the same dialog I am hearing on Crossfire, so what?'

♦

What I found was a limited conversation which that would give the semblance of looking at social change with the idea of questioning it but actually would not really change the conversation at all. It sort of like degenerated into attacks and stuff like that. Where you know, I felt like I was being off the wall by talking about some of the things that I was talking about, and not really getting in that way. And the interesting thing for me is that there are places on the Web where I have those conversations. And not only are they not considered off the wall but people are willing to take the line of questions that I propose and go further. In other words, be more real than Reality Check.

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single survey measure was used to construct this measure. The question asked respondents to indicate how much they learned about the impeachment from their Reality Check dialogue group that they had **not** learned elsewhere. About 9% of the contributors reported learning a lot about the impeachment. A majority – close to 60% - said they learned something about the impeachment. One-third reported learning a little or nothing about the impeachment. We are encouraged that two-thirds of the contributors – most of whom are highly informed and active citizens – nevertheless report learning something about the impeachment from Reality Check. Learning about the impeachment was positively related with frequency and regularity of contributing, as well as frequency and regularity of reading. As with other dimensions, writing was a more important factor in explaining learning than reading: contributors whose writing outpaced reading reported learning more than contributors whose reading outpaced writing. Interestingly, those who were more interested in online communities were more likely to have reported learning, but those more interested in the impeachment did not.

Two other aspects of learning and transformation require some additional explanation. First, we discuss personal transformation. We did not have a specific measure of personal transformation, either in the survey or the content analysis. However, it is clear to us, from having read and analyzed four of the 15 groups that a substantial minority of the contributors showed some indication that they had changed. For most, it was a subtle change discernible in the tone or tenor of their messages. For others, the change was about increasing their level of tolerance. Several of the contributors described themselves as having changed in this way in our telephone interviews. Unfortunately, we do not have a quantitative estimate of the percentage of contributors who underwent some level of personal transformation, nor are we able to estimate the relationships between this development and contributor or group characteristics. However, the clarity of the

---

On Personal Transformation

♦

I guess the biggest thing I learned is how many people out there look at things differently than I do.

♦

It has affected my everyday dealings with people. I was intolerant of anything that I felt was wrong. And now I at least take the time to look and see if it really is wrong, or if it is just my opinion that it is wrong. As far as actions, people in particular, certain individuals, people's opinions, everything, I have just learned not to take everything at face value and formulate an opinion in the first 15 seconds. I at least let people finish talking to me for one thing, whereas there were times when I wouldn't. I cut them off and tell them why they were wrong. I don't do that any more. Helps me deal with my customers. I just have the patience and the tolerance to hear people out. And try to see their side of what they are looking at. And it wasn't really the subject matter that did that, it was the time I took to actually read people's comments and even though I didn't agree with it, I could respect what they were trying to say and how they felt. They were just as passionate as I was. I think that's what was the big thing that was missing in me as I didn't realize everybody else was just as passionate as I was about what they felt.

♦

I used to be one of those people who just [didn't have] patience with opinions that I felt were way out in left field. And by taking the time to read, and when I didn't agree with something reread it, and then taking the time to formulate a response instead of just whatever came off my tongue at the moment, it kind of taught me to step on the other side and look through their [eyes]. It taught me tolerance of other people's opinions and whereas before I didn't have any.

♦

It has made me understand or accept the fact that my views were not necessarily the [only] views. [The impeachment] certainly didn't turn out the way I would have had it turn out, and I can understand why when so many people don't look at it the way I do.

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contributors' voices on this point suggest it may not have been that uncommon. We have excerpted several of the comments from the telephone interviews below.

Second, we examine the extent to which contributors reported learning about online communities. Again, we did not have a specific measure of online community learning in the survey. Like personal transformation, this aspect of learning and understanding became clear in the telephone interviews. Generally unprompted, or sometimes in response to a general question about learning, several contributors reported that they had learned more about the Internet and online communication than they had about politics or the impeachment. We believe this is a positive though secondary accomplishment. Certainly, anyone participating in discussion groups or chat rooms will learn about online dialogues. We take comfort in the knowledge that there are now over 500 individuals who may have learned through personal experience that online dialogues can exist in an atmosphere of respect and community. We have excerpted comments about learning about online community below.

Learning About Online Communities
♦
I took out a better understanding of the computer community, the internet community. I found a lot of the discussion and conversations on the impeachment aspect, which is what started it, very interesting and it was really interesting to see the diversity in the opinions associated with the way that it speared into other issues. I thought [it was] very interesting [how] some of the issues got followed up on and some didn't. And then I felt kind of bad for the people who [contributed] those [messages] because I sympathized with them a bit -- when they would put an issue out there and no one would respond to the post. So I guess in that sense I learned about that internet community.
♦
I really learned more about posting and that experience and how people create identities or impressions about themselves through their written word than I did about the impeachment.

Limited Entry of Contributors into Dialogue Groups
♦
I thought it was an excellent way to do it. I mean you begin where you begin and ... people weren't missing anything by joining in the group. That is perhaps one of the weaknesses of online chat is that you happen in at that point in time and you miss what went on before. And so you are constantly trying to pick up the threads of conversation. But [in Reality Check] everyone started at the same time.
♦
Entering an on-going conversation, I would have been lost and I wouldn't have participated even to the small amount that I did. Jumping in the middle of anyone's conversation is not only rude but you are uninformed.
♦
Having everyone start on the same day in my opinion was an equalizing factor. We all came in equal the same way. We all came in cold the same day.
♦
I think if it had been sort of a rolling kind of thing where new members could have come in, it might have brought a life and a vibrancy to it that otherwise wasn't there.
♦
You pretty much all just start out with a clean slate and [there is] nothing that anyone has maybe mentioned like a couple years ago that someone there still remembers.
♦
I thought that was a really good tactic for helping promote a sense of community and commitment.
♦
I think it helped create the illusion that we were already a community.

❑❑ Contributor Response to Reality Check Features

In this final section of the analysis, we examine the contributors' response to the three structural features of Reality Check. These features operated in combination with the commitment registrants made to participate in the dialogue groups to create an environment unique in the online dialogue world. As we have no direct measures of response to these structural features, our comments are primarily informed by our observations of the groups through content analysis, and through our telephone interviews with a limited sample of contributors. From both sources, several points are clear with respect to these features.

❖ <u>Limited entry</u> is the technique of assigning a fixed number of registrants to a dialogue group, starting all registrants in the dialogue group at the same time, and not allowing new registrants to join an existing group. Contributors were nearly unanimous in endorsing this concept. Especially in the telephone interviews, contributors emphasized how starting out together gave them a sense of equality and group cohesion. Several of the more illustrative comments are excerpted below. We believe this is the primary feature that distinguishes the structure of Reality Check from other online dialogues, and is an essential ingredient to its success.

❖ <u>Fixed exit</u> refers to the notion of defining and publicizing a closing date for a dialogue group when individuals request participation. Certainly, as is evident in the number of groups that requested extensions of their closing dates, a small core of contributors were uninterested in seeing their groups close on the assigned date. More interesting are some of the comments of the contributors, excerpted above, suggesting that the looming presence of a closing date hindered their engagement and involvement with the group. Given the review of the groups presented above, with particular attention on the steep declines in participation rates found in most groups, we believe that a 30-day closing date is essential to the creation of strong and vibrant dialogue communities created outside of task-oriented contexts. We would encourage systematic experimentation with the number of days – some contributors voiced interest in dialogue groups as brief as three or five days – but strongly endorse the concept of fixed exit.

❖ <u>Limited group size</u> concerns the number of registrants that are assigned to a dialogue group. The Reality Check groups averaged 51 registrants and 33 contributors. Many of the frequent and regular contributors voiced frustration, both in their dialogue groups and in telephone interviews, with the small number of contributors available for conversation for the entire four-week period. Several suggested merging groups after a few weeks in an attempt to capture the energy of frequent contributors; however, Reality Check's one experiment with this method (Group 6) did not produce a group with participation rates that clearly and significantly distinguished it from others. Based on current evidence, we believe that 60 registrants and 35 contributors is the maximum that a dialogue group can sustain and still create the desired level of commitment, community and respect for others.

❖ <u>No direct intervention in dialogues</u>: Instead of dialogues with moderators or facilitators driving the dialogue and defining what's appropriate for discussion, Reality Check essentially put each group in charge of itself. As a result, most groups developed a strong sense of group identity, with many members taking an active role in shaping the discussion and mediating conflicts.

Starting the Dialogue Groups with a fixed end date

♦

Well I think that the [only] impact [of having an end date] was the fact that, 'Don't put it off, don't put it off you have to do it now.' That kind of thing, like 'Hey its going to end in two days,' or 'It's going to end next week, so get all your comments in there now.' [And] every now and then I thought, 'Why should I comment on this? It doesn't make sense,' [and it's going to end soon] anyway.

♦

It depends on what your ultimate objective is. I mean if you have a specific place that you are going and an objective and you say that we have to do it within this particular constraint it makes sense [to end the discussion, because] otherwise these things can go on forever. … Some usenet newsgroups] have been ongoing for years. And you have a regular group of people and they are the core of that community and they built that community over years. … When you have a limited time factor, I don't think that you have the ability to build a community that is going to be fully honest. … That is why I think [a fixed end date] is a very negative thing.

♦

The ending date was a good idea. Unfortunately it snuck up on me. Having something open-ended … would have defeated the purpose of it.

♦

I kind of hated to see it end and I was hoping it wasn't ending. In the sense that you felt that you had a window to discuss something, and that it was going to go away, kind of encouraged you to get in there and participate while you had the opportunity. When the end came and you still wanted to say something or hear what other people where saying .. I didn't like it.

♦

I was grateful that there was a natural closure to the process. It gave me the sense that we should get something accomplished. Since there is an end date there should be a wrap up and so therefore there should be some sense of accomplishment. Look at what we were able to get through or whatever.

♦

Giving an ending date is a real good way of getting some people to get right to the core of the issue instead of spending years and years in talk therapy and avoiding it. And perhaps that kind of helps catalyze some people into a real [discussion].

♦

I felt very constricted. And I think probably because I came in with the knowledge that it had a limited time span. I knew it would end at a certain point. So in a way you become involved but at some point you maintain some reserve that keeps you from becoming completely involved. …So when you know in advance that something is limited I think that you limit yourself.