

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The Definition And The Negotiation Of The Norms Of Discussion In Newsgroups: Which Communication Ideal?



1. Introduction

Norms are at the core of research on argumentative discussion (Doury, 2003). There are two kinds of approaches to argumentation: descriptive and prescriptive approaches.

In a descriptive approach of argumentation, argumentative norms are built up by the speakers in their interactions (according to Plantin, 2002). It is noted that speakers have an argumentative/normative competence in daily life conversations. They can indeed:

- categorize the arguments they are faced with (this is an example, an analogy, an argument of authority, etc.),
- evaluate these arguments according to generally implicit criteria (this is a good example, a good analogy, an acceptable argument of authority),
- accept or reject arguments following this evaluation.

In a prescriptive approach to argumentative norms (Danblon, 2005): the aim is to distinguish a bad argumentation from a good one by trying to find pre-established rules: a rational, ethical, democratic argumentation versus manipulation and fallacies.

For example: in the pragma-dialectics model of van Eemren and Grootendorst (1996), we can notice the will to establish a “normative pragmatic” for “argumentative speech”.

Indeed, pragma-dialectics takes up Plato’s dialectics, Aristotle’s *Sophistical Refutations*, and Hamblin’s *Fallacies* (1970). So, the transgression of rules of logical and argumentative validity, the use of fallacies, belong to “evil” (Danblon, 2005).

This question is also of importance when we approach specificities of mediated

communication by communication and information technologies (Marcoccia, 1998). It is indeed likely that Net users will take up to themselves a system of rules or refer to a set of external norms, in order to facilitate a good course of the dialogue in the newsgroups.

These rules are defined in two types of texts:

- the Netiquette, which is a set of communicative rules, with prescriptive and global aim. Communication rules, as defined by the Netiquette, are meant to be respected in any device of on-line discussions.
- charters of newsgroups, with rules limited to a local range, will be specific or not as far as the Netiquette is concerned.

In addition, Net users are often involved in conversational negotiations (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1984) during their discussions. We can indeed observe meta-communicative sequences relating to the rules of discussion: Net users themselves do propose how to express oneself, how to behave in a newsgroup, and what must be done or not. These sequences are generally warnings addressed to Net users having transgressed a rule.

To start with, this work will consist in clarifying the norms of discussion defined by the Netiquette and the newsgroup charter we have decided to study more particularly: *fr.soc.politique*. This is a political discussion newsgroup, non-moderate, that can be, at a first analysis, considered as an electronic form of public sphere. The observation of the messages posted in this newsgroup allows us to rank them as a hybrid kind: the ordinary political discussion (Marcoccia, 2003a).

During each phase of this analysis, we shall try to link the norms previously identified to four models of communication, which we shall regard as “normative”. These models are indeed regarded as major since they are at the root of a new reflexion on the rational norms at work in linguistic interactions:

- The Grice cooperation principle (1979), the rules of which aim at optimizing the intelligibility, the “interpretability” of messages.
- The politeness system elaborated by Brown & Levinson (1978), the purpose of which is to clarify the various means implemented by interacting people to spare their interlocutors’ faces.
- Habermas’ s ethics of discussion (1987) the normative purpose of which aims at making it possible to have a fully democratic and egalitarian communication.

- Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's pragma-dialectics model (1996) the prescriptive position of which leads to a set of discussion norms guaranteeing its rational character.

Confrontation between these models and the norms extracted from the analyzed corpora (Netiquette, charter and newsgroups) will enable us to know if Net users have a real concern for the norms of discussion within newsgroups, and to specify the communication ideal defended by these norms. While respecting, violating, or defining norms, are the Net users animated by an ideal of comprehension and clarity, courtesy, equity or even rationality of the discussion?

2. Problematic and methodology

The characteristics of discussions in newsgroups can hinder the good course of interactions. According to Marcoccia (1998), four characteristics of discussions in newsgroups distinguish them from face to face conversations and are consequently likely to impede the success of the communication. We can indeed observe that Computer Mediated Communication causes problems for mutual comprehension and courtesy due to factors including:

- The absence of face to face. The lack of physical perception can be an obstacle to the intelligibility of the messages (absence of paraverbal and nonverbal elements).
- The anonymity - "pseudonymity" - of the users: the lack of clues of contextualisation makes it possible to hide one's identity, and to say anything with total impunity.
- The complexity of the participative framework, of the production and reception formats, is mainly due to the fact that in a newsgroup, any message is addressed to anyone.
- The C.M.C. (computer mediated communication) is a written communication. The statements constitutive of a dissension are written, fixed, and can contribute to maintain the oppositions.

The characteristics of the C.M.C. thus obstruct communication on the level of mutual comprehension and courtesy. In order to try to solve these problems, the discussion in newsgroups is supposed to be governed by rules which constitute a contract of communication. The contract of communication (Charaudeau, 2002) allows minimal mutual comprehension between interacting people. To enable the communication to succeed, the contract settles beforehand some important parameters of the interaction: identity of the net users, goal, matter and

circumstances of the interaction. This concept of contract is then ideal for the analysis of global prescriptive texts (Netiquette) and local rules (charters). But is this theoretical frame of the contract appropriate to the analysis of the real interaction?

According to Goffman's perspective, the norms defined by this contract can be modified by the interacting people during the exchanges (1987). It is this theoretical framing that is necessary for the analysis of interaction norms in a newsgroup because, in opposition to the prescriptive norms of the Netiquette or of a charter, the consensus on the rules of the interaction is not a priori established, the latter being the subject of a negotiation within the dialogue (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1984). One can thus be interested in two types of rules able to define a "contract of communication" for newsgroups of discussion: norms set a priori in the total prescriptive texts (Netiquette) and local rules (charters); norms really being at work during exchanges between Net users. These norms are all negotiable in the exchanges between Net users: the language, interaction kind, participative framework, turn to speak, script, exchange topic, statement interpretation, opinions, activities, identities, interpersonal relationship. Once these elements of the contract, these norms, are defined, we may ponder over the communication ideal they defend.

3. Presentation of the models

To answer this question, we shall compare these rules with four models of discussion. Danblon (2005, p. 104-105), and Sarfati (2002, p. 27 and 45) refer to models to indicate the approaches which consist in seeking a communication ideal. The use of the term "model" to designate these theories is justified by the fact that the function of a model is to describe reality but also to prescribe the ideal "norms" to be applied. Reciprocally, "norm" not only reflects a "descriptive model" of reality but also the idea of moral criteria, of a "model of conduct" to adopt (Morfaux 1980, p. 220 and 242; Morin 2004, p. 144). These models result indeed from the pragmatic linguistic which consists in extracting the regulating norms from the language in use, with a prescriptive aim in this case: the feedback on the course of an ordinary communication makes it possible *a posteriori* to extract the ideal norms from it (Danblon, 2005). Such an approach allows us to articulate the descriptive and prescriptive theories in the four following normative models:

3.1 Grice's Conversational maxims (1979):

For Grice, during the interaction, everyone follows the regulating “maxims” or “norms” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2002a, p. 368) which describe the interlocutors’ cognitive operations needed for the understanding of the messages. Moreover, they have also a prescriptive value because they imply that each person’s intention to communicate is admitted by all the others. These “norms” constitute the “principle of cooperation”: Rules of quality: “Your contribution must be veracious” (or: “Do not assert what you think is false. Do not assert anything without sufficient evidence”). Rules of quantity: “Your contribution must contain as much information as it is necessary” (as far as *in situ* exchanges are concerned). “Your contribution should not contain more information than necessary”. Relation rule (or relevance): “To keep to the point” (“Be relevant”). Manner rule: “Be clear” (either: “Avoid being obscure or ambiguous; be concise; be methodical”).

3.2 *Habermas’ normative theory of public sphere:*

According to Habermas’ philosophy (1987, p. 330), which is inspired by Grice, the nature of communication norms is both descriptive and prescriptive. That implies a normative theory of the communicational reason the receptacle of which is a democratic “public sphere”. For an act of speech to be valid, the speaker must:

1. express himself in an understandable way (claim to intelligibility);
2. offer something to listen; (claim to truth: here, one only considers “serious” sentences, i.e. really aiming at the phenomena, and thus requiring the truth, or at least tending towards it);
3. be understandable; (Claim to sincerity: to make himself understood, within the framework of the consensus, which means saying the truth about himself, being sincere);
4. aim at an agreement with his interlocutors (claim to the research of the consensus);
5. seek universal truths, i.e. to be trustworthy for the largest number of the human community;
6. argue, justify his claims to validity through solid reasons, and be prone to accept the best argument.
7. All the participants have the same democratic access to the discussion, to the public sphere of interlocution: a criterion of symmetry, equality between the interacting people.
8. All the people concerned can see their position defended and honestly criticized: autonomy, freedom of the interlocutors who must be able to speak

without restraint, without being put any pressure on from whatever authority.

9. Reflexivity: speakers must admit that the other people s' speeches can challenge their own speeches.

3.3 The pragma-dialectics model:

This model falls under the theoretical filiation halfway between description and regulation: a link between of a requirement for rationality of arguments and a pragmatic based on the observation of the language in use. "The ten Rules of critical discussion " are thus of "normative pragmatic" nature (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1996):

Rule 1: Partners must not make obstacle to the expression or the questioning of the points of view.

Rule 2: The party that has put forward a point of view must defend it if the other part is asking for it.

Rule 3: The attack must be relevant to the point of view such as it has been presented by the other party.

Rule 4: A party can only defend its point of view by suggesting an argumentation about this very point of view.

Rule 5: A party must not wrongfully ascribe implicit premises to an adversary. It must not reject a premise which it, itself, has left implied.

Rule 6: A party must not present a premise as an accepted starting point when it is not the case. It should not refuse a premise if it constitutes an accepted starting point.

Rule 7: A party must not consider that a point of view has been defended in a conclusive way if this defence has not been carried out according to an adequate argumentative scheme and correctly applied.

Rule 8: A party must only use logically valid arguments, or likely to be validated through the explanation of one or more premises.

Rule 9: If a point of view has not been defended in a conclusive way, then the person who proposes it must withdraw it. If a point of view has been defended in a conclusive way, the opponent should not therefore question it any more.

Rule 10: The parts must not use formulations which are not clear enough or too vague and so likely to generate confusion; each one of them must interpret the expressions of the other party in the most careful way and the most relevant possible way.

3.4 Norms of politeness according to Brown & Levinson's model:

A descriptive prospect of the norms built by interacting people (Plantin, 1998; Doury, 2003) is applied to the rules of politeness, identified by conversational analysis: the aim is to describe, in interactions, “the set of processes put forth to preserve the harmonious aspect of the interpersonal relation” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2002b, p. 439). According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992), five processes extracted from Brown and Levinson’s model, make up a coherent system of rules. Here are the five normative strategies of politeness listed in order of increasing politeness (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992, p. 174):

1. to openly achieve the FTA, without repairing action;
2. to openly achieve the FTA, with a redressive repairing action – positive politeness, compensation, which consists, in fact, in producing FFAs or anti-FTAs which will compensate for the FTA;
3. to openly achieve the FTA with a redressive repairing action – negative politeness which primarily consists in toning down, in softening FTAs, in particular by “softeners”, apology;
4. to not openly achieve the FTA consists in using the in-thread;
5. not to achieve the FTA.

4. *Corpora analysis: the newsgroup fr.soc.politique*

4.1 *Analysis of the Netiquette and charter*

The purpose of our work will be first of all to clarify the norms of discussion defined by the Netiquette and the *fr.soc.politique* newsgroup charter by identifying the rules defined by these prescriptive texts and the categories which they belong to.

Confrontation between the models of the communication mentioned and the norms extracted from the analyzed corpus (Netiquette, charter and newsgroups) will enable us know to which system of rules the Net users refer to when they interact within the newsgroups.

- *Principle of adaptation to the group norms*

In the Netiquette as well as in the charter, the “metanorm”, which consists in familiarizing oneself with the newsgroup norms before joining in, is required: this means reading the newsgroups in order to be impregnated with their state of mind before intervening. It is thus logical for the Netiquette to promote the use of group norms, in particular to respect the cultural variables of the groups. One can then undoubtedly add here a rule from the charter which relates to the code, even if it does not directly refer to any other norm from any model: the *fr.soc.politique*

charter charges Net users to adapt to the language used in the newsgroup: in fact it requires of Net users that they post their messages in French.

- *“Technical” rules*

The Netiquette just like the charter contains technical rules due to the communication device used: it is in particular about being careful with the format of the messages sent, so that they are in a readable format at the time of their reception by a recipient. We can then undoubtedly add a rule from the charter relating to the writing technique, even if it does not directly refer to any other norm of any model: the *fr.soc.politique* Charter presses Net users not to use capital letters, because that is akin to shouting and therefore to attacking the interlocutors.

- *Participative framework*

The participative framework raises the question of knowing whom exactly we are addressing. In a newsgroup, we do not address a single person but a large audience, this is why the Netiquette invites us to pay attention to what we write: to take into account that the messages are public, recalling moreover that posted messages can be filed for a very long time. We can hereby mention two charter rules which relate also to the participative framework, even if they do not directly refer to any other norm of any other model: we must not diffuse messages from other authors without their agreement, and limit cross posting.

- *Script and structuring of the exchanges*

The Netiquette induces us to preserve the dynamics of exchanges, to avoid, for example, sending messages or posting articles which are only useless answers to answers: in particular messages which express only an agreement with previous interventions without being able to make the debate progress by giving an opposite opinion. This norm can seem contradictory with the communication ideal of Habermas for whom consensus is the ultimate aim of the dialogue.

- *Identity*

According to the Netiquette, messages must be considered as the expression of personal points of view. Net users are thus responsible for their messages and must not thus mask their identities (by presenting a false identity). To these three norms corresponds the condition of sincerity in Habermas' theory of the public sphere: one must be sincere about what one is and one's personal intentions during the discussion. However, the Habermas's system seems to be

contradictory, since the norm of sincerity which requires that one reveals one's personal intentions, cannot always coexist with the rule of the general interest, or with the aim of the consensus, criteria equally existing in habermassian communication ideal. It can then contradict the rules of the Netiquette which prohibit sexist and racist messages, and the one that prompts to respect the legislation of the real world, also existing in the charter. The norm of sincerity can therefore be in opposition simultaneously with all the rules of courtesy of Brown and Levinson's system which seeks to avoid conflict.

- Rules relating to the manner of expressing oneself

The Netiquette like the charter imposes a norm the purpose of which is to preserve the thematic relevance of the newsgroup and of the discussions which occur there: it is necessary to avoid posting messages not related to the topic. A specific rule to the charter, because specific to the communication device , requires thence that the title of the posted message correspond to its contents. This type of norm corresponds to the maxim of relation (or relevance) contained in the Grice "principle of cooperation", and which consists in speaking *à propos*.

The norms of the Netiquette echo here the principle of intelligibility in Grice, which is divided in maxims of quantity and method: for, according to the Netiquette, when we answer a message, we must summarize the preceding message at the beginning of our answer, or include enough of the text of this message to inform about the context. In order to make it possible to the readers to understand what our answer is about. But we must not include the whole preceding message, because it could cause interference on the clarity of our response to the message. And it is for this same reason that the charter prohibits the use of too long a signature. This type of norm corresponds thus in Grice to the rule of manner which consists in expressing oneself clearly, itself completed by the rule of quantity which consists in delivering a message containing neither too much nor too little information but just what is necessary to its understanding.

This principle of concision in Grice has its specific equivalent in the Netiquette which requires precisely that posted messages and articles must be short and accurate to the point. These norms of the Netiquette and the charter are also present in two models of communication which take as a starting point the principle of cooperation in Grice: the dialogue within public space for Habermas, which also takes as a condition the intelligibility of speech acts , as well as the pragma-dialectics that also requires in rule n°10 of the critical discussion to

express these arguments clearly and to interpret the most carefully possible those of the others.

- Rules relating to the contents/the opinions

The Netiquette prohibits sexual harassment and racist messages, in particular because they can have legal implications. This justifies another norm of the Netiquette, also presents in the charter, which reminds Net users not to forget the laws, the legislation of the real world in a newsgroup.

- Interpersonal relationship

The Netiquette advocates, just like the charter, to avoid conflicts. This rule is equivalent to the fifth strategy of courtesy of the Brown & Levinson model which consists in not producing a FTA, i.e. a threatening act for the faces.

That implies to explicitly find in the Netiquette the rule concerning the taking care of the faces of the interlocutors (and of those of the manager of the newsgroup), a necessary behaviour for the good progress of any discussion on newsgroup. This essential criterion is at the root of the system of politeness for Brown & Levinson, and is stated in the theory of Grice in the form of a general social rule which however does not have the stature of “maxim”: “be polite”.

In someways, the charter prolongs these norms concerning the taking care of the faces and the avoidance of conflicts, by another criterion of argumentative nature which prohibits any attack against a person, i.e. the ad hominem argumentation: similarly, Habermas ethics of discussion and rules n°2 from pragma-dialectics requires to produce well argued messages, valid for the reason. This requirement of rationality in dialogue is indeed correlated to the avoidance of conflict, the aim of consensus inherent to any attempt at communication, according to the “metanorm” which underlies the Habermas and the pragma-dialectics theory.

One also finds in the Netiquette the equivalent of the third rule of courtesy in Brown & Levinson’s system, which consists in “repairing by attenuation”; what the Netiquette translates by the requirement to apologize when an error is made: one must apologize oneself when one sends by error a personal message to a list or a group. This criterion of avoidance of the conflict contradicts other communication norms: sincerity for Habermas (how to keep honest while avoiding a conflict?); clarity and concision in Grice, which can sometimes appear brutal with the interlocutor; the necessary contradiction to the dynamics of exchanges,

according to the norms of the Netiquette; the requirement not to let pass to an adversary an incorrect argumentation, according to rule n° 7 of the pragma-dialectics.

4.2 Corpora Analysis: newsgroup analysis

The analysis of the corpora is composed of five threads of discussion extracted from *fr.soc.politique* newsgroup. Each one of these threads corresponds to a particular set of themes more, especially, to a type of more or less specific discussions. A sample of these threads answers to the will to constitute a corpus rather representative of the diversity of observable exchanges in this newsgroup. This representativeness is not grounded on statistics but is founded on a persistent observation of the newsgroup, a method close to that proposed by Herring (2004). The corpora is thus composed of messages extracted from five threads of discussion:

- thread 1 *"Let's imitate the Corsicans, everywhere in France"*: 10 posted messages on December 29, 2004. It is about a thread of discussion opened by a message inviting the French with "send away foreigners, as the Corsicans do". This thread is characteristic of some threads of the newsgroup *fr.soc.politique*, which are violent and polemic exchanges, including messages with xenophobe contents here.
- thread 2 *"Why does BUSH want war so much ?!"*: 6 messages constituting the totality of the thread, posted on December 29, 2004 to January 2, 2005. This thread is characteristic of the discussions which essentially have an explanatory style, for which argumentation consists in an opposition of explanations.
- thread 3 *"Venezuela chooses Linux and free software"*: 10 posted messages on December 29, 2004 to February 1, 2005. This thread is interesting in so far as it has a loose focus on a set of themes (here, between policy and data processing).
- thread 4 *"Debate: for or against child adoption by gay and lesbian parents?"*: 10 posted messages on May 10, 2002. It is based on an argumentative question (Plantin, 1998) whose formulation is very precise and explicit.
- thread 5 *"Must we reduce inequalities to fight against poverty?"*: 10 posted messages 27 and October 28, 2004. It starts with a "technical", serious problem, and tackles ethical and social questions.

The diversity of the messages of our corpora expresses a tension between various models of discussion in this newsgroup. Besides, this tension is clarified in a message extracted from the thread on the adoption by gays, in which a Net user

disparages “chatterings” to defend the model of the “constructive debate”. If we observe the way in which the messages posted in these various threads express either respect, or violation or clarification of the rules extracted from the Netiquette, charter or models, we get the following results.

The rule of sincerity (present in the model of Habermas and taken up in the Netiquette) recommends to express one’s intentions clearly and to reveal one’s identity. For threads 1, 2 and 3, the aim of the messages are not always expressed in a very clear way but that does not seem to be a problem for the participants (no warning is made). In threads of discussion resting on an explicit question (threads 4 and 5), the aim of the messages is expressed clearly, maybe because it constitutes a positioning related to the question that is structuring the debate. In a general way, the rule of sincerity concerning the expression of identity is largely violated. The almost systematic use of pseudonyms is manifest and violates even a rule of the Netiquette (“do not mask your identity”). However, no warning and any negotiation relates to this norm. Similarly, the invitation to express personal points of view (present in the Netiquette) is not always respected. From a formal point of view, the messages are rather stated in a constative form, without any mark of very much supported subjectivity (no “I”, for example). This principle is however more often respected in thread 5, where arguments are often founded on real life-experience.

The principle of relevance, central in Grice and quoted in the Netiquette and the charter, is generally respected in thread 1 and 5, in a total or more local way. Thus, some digressions are to be observed but, in this case, the messages which follow the one which introduced a thematic realignment are at least relevant with regard to this progression. In all cases, it is not possible to find messages which would not have any thematic relevance with regard to the threads or other messages. Moreover, the violation of the rule of relevance can give rise to warning (as in thread 2: *“what is the relationship between the title of your article and its contents?”* and in thread 4: *“Beside the point. The subject is adoption and not alternative methods of adoption”*). On the other hand, as soon as a thread of discussion is devoted to a topic which is at the intersection of politics and another subject, the rule of relevance seems to be suspended. Thus, the discussions on adoption of the free software by Venezuela are transformed into exchanges on the free software, without tending to rise any warnings. The relevance of the arguments, which is one of the rules guaranteeing the rationality of the exchanges in the pragma-dialectics model, is really respected by Net users only in

thread 5. In the other threads, it is possible to observe forms of argumentative digression insofar as the arguments presented in the messages have sometimes a very indirect relationship with the conclusion at stake. According to the charter of the newsgroup, the rule of relevance also appears in the adequacy between the title and the contents of the messages. Except for messages of thread 4, this rule is largely violated insofar as Net users introducing a digression by their message generally do not take the trouble to modify its title, but keep the title of the thread.

If we remain on the principles in Grice, we can observe that the principle of clarity (one is also to be found at Habermas, in the pragma-dialectical model and the Netiquette) does not always seem to determine the production of messages. Thus, for threads 1, 2 and 3, the clarity of the contents of the messages and the arguments is not obvious. For example, the arguments are generally implicit, the messages sometimes allusive, ironic, etc. On the other hand, for threads 4 and 5, structured around a very clear argumentative question, the participants in discussions generally respect this principle of clarity.

The principle of quantity (limited to a principle of concision in the Netiquette) is quite often violated. Many messages are not very clear because elliptic. More seldom, the messages are very long, when they are cut-paste texts. On the other hand, in threads 4, it is not possible to find an example of violation of this rule.

Politeness is often presented like a set of rules structuring enough for discussion in newsgroups (Marcoccia, 2003b). For our corpus, this observation must be qualified. Indeed, in thread 1, the majority of messages violate the rule recommending to avoid being aggressive. The polemical dimension of this thread (racist messages, etc.) appears to found a local framework which implies that aggressiveness is authorized, even waited for and, in any cases, a warning would not be accepted. Nevertheless, in certain messages, Net users repair the violation of this norm by expressing apology. Thus, if the norm is violated in the main, it is not necessarily unknown to some Net users.

For the other threads, as far as this rule is concerned, behaviours are rather variable. One can note however that the thread on Venezuela and the free software, turning mainly into discussion on data processing, respects a principle of courtesy. Thread 5 seems to respect this principle insofar as refutations are generally polite: their aggressive character is generally toned down (for example, the refutations are expressed in the form of questions: *"You're sure of that?"*).

The quality and rationality of argumentation are supposed to be ensured by the application of the rules of critical discussion of pragma-dialectics and part of the model worked out by Habermas. These rules in fact are almost always violated in our corpus. For example, thread 1 contains many messages in which argumentation is *ad hominem* (a participant is called a "*sore gauchist*"); it is also possible to find many arguments based on threat and fear or abusive interpretations of the adversaries' positions. Thread 2 and 4 contain also messages violating these rules of rationality, but also messages in which it is possible to find evaluations of the adversaries' arguments (as "*against-nature is not an acceptable argument*"). Thread 3 contains more observative than really argumentative messages, which seems to suspend rules of rationality. Only thread 5 globally complies with the rules of critical discussion. Thus, Net users prohibit the use of argumentation against a person.

On the one hand, the rule aiming at guaranteeing in the acceptability of speeches by the greatest number and their general interest (essential in Habermas) seems violated in the main in threads 1, 2 and 3 and, on the other hand, is fairly respected in threads 4 and 5, which answer mostly an argumentative model.

To guarantee the truth of its messages (principle that is to be found at the same time in Grice and Habermas) is not either at stake in this newsgroup, except for thread 5, in which it is possible to find warnings concerning this point: "*do you have the slightest statistics?*". The access to public sphere and the capacity to speak freely seem recognized in the newsgroup, except when it is a question of blaming a Net user whose message is racist. In this case, the law will be called upon to justify this sanction.

Two rules of the Netiquette are devoted to the good management of the exchanges but are actually not always respected in the newsgroup. Net users do not necessary take into account the public nature of their messages and can make asides. Similarly, all messages don't support the dynamics of exchanges, in particular and often because of their monologic nature.

Lastly, the rule recommending to write French messages is mostly respected, as well as the technical rules and the prohibition of cross-postings (except in thread 5).

5. Conclusions

The comparison between prescriptive texts, including the Netiquette and charter, with the preceding models of communication shows us that the communication ideal prevailing here is intelligibility and courtesy. The rationality of discussions

and their democratic character are not evoked in these prescriptive texts except when these qualities cover courtesy (for example, not to use an argument against a person). One can assume that these rules are supposed to solve important problems for computer mediated communications by: how can we understand ourselves mutually and how can we resist the temptation to be discourteous? Objectives of argumentative rationality and democracy seem secondary.

When we observe the way in which Net users using this newsgroup adapt or not these rules, we note that the newsgroup as a whole does not constitute obviously a normative framework. Each thread has indeed its own specific norms, related to the topics dealt with. Thus, no model and no rule can be applied to entire newsgroup, but no model and no rule are totally absent from this newsgroup. For example, thread 5 seems to be a of discussion sphere regulated by a certain requirement of rationality. The intelligibility of the messages seems assured in threads 4 and 5. Thread 3 complies globally with the rules of politeness which seem suspended in thread 1.

So far this is an exploratory work with a restricted corpora. It shows however that newsgroups are composed of different sub-conversations with specific styles and specific norms from polemic to critical discussion. It shows also the possible limit of the preceding theories in understanding the specificity of computer mediated communication: in particular, can we consider a newsgroup as a public sphere?

This work opens out several prospects: but it requires more data to identify the most determining ideals in newsgroups and to use other models.

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