ISSA Proceedings 2010 – Polemical Discourse On The Net: "Flames" In Argumentation

Studies in CMC have investigated the phenomenon of *"flame"* and *"flaming"*, understood as aggressive and hostile interactions via email and online discussions. While borrowed from popular discourse, the notion has been the object of various inquiries in communication studies and social psychology, raising questions such as its exact definition, its exclusive or non-exclusive belonging to online communication, its socio-psychological sources and its functions in virtual interactions. In this paper, unlike most of the scientific literature rooted in the social sciences, I will adopt a broad argumentative approach to flaming, analyzing it as a discursive and argumentative phenomenon pertaining to polemical discourse. I will borrow my case study from a specific online genre: talkbacks and, more specifically, ordinary citizens' debates concerning public affairs in electronic newspapers.

I will first devote a short section to the notion of flaming in the social sciences in order to see how it can be translated into the field of argumentation. I will then try to integrate it into a coherent theory of polemical discourse in general, and of online controversy in particular.

1. The contribution of the social sciences

Flaming has generally been viewed as an uninhibited and deregulated verbal behavior including swearing, insults and profanity, which would tend to appear more often electronically than in FTF (face-to-face) interactions. Studies on CMC have been mostly preoccupied by the damage caused to human relations by interactions on the Net. The causes of flaming have been attributed either to lack of social cues supposed to favor disregard of accepted norms of behavior; or to a specific computing subculture allowing for unconventional and irreverent verbal behavior. The persistent assumption that flames are specific to online communication has been severely challenged by later research. Lea et al. (1992, pp. 108-9), among others, argue on an experimental basis that "the putative association between flaming, uninhibited behavior and CMC is unproven". O'Sullivan & Flanagin (2003, p. 71) "situate flaming within the context of

problematic interactions online and offline", rather than seeing it as a characteristic of virtual space. Thus research in the social sciences does not confirm that inflammatory remarks in verbal interaction are either exclusive to, or even more frequent on, the Net. The phenomenon in virtual interactions does however have features to be explored in their specificity.

Let us start with a question of definition. It has frequently been remarked upon that flaming is a rather vague notion that needs further specification. While "uninhibited behavior" remains a general phrase, it does, however, point to lack of restraint and to the transgression of social norms of interaction. But in order to better circumscribe the notion, it seems necessary to relate this lack of restraint to hostility. In Kayany's view (1998, pp. 1137-8), "flame can be defined as an uninhibited expression of hostility, such as swearing, calling names, ridiculing, and hurling insults towards another person, his/her character, religion, race, intelligence, and physical or mental ability".

Does it mean that any outburst of verbal violence online constitutes in itself a flame? It is important, in this domain, to distinguish between mere use of profanity, and hostile reactions stemming out of a conflict and contributing to its escalation. Indeed, uninhibited behavior, namely, breaking ordinary norms of verbal conduct, can result in uncontrolled and purposeless verbal violence; it can thus be viewed as a mere transgression of norms pointing to a problematic interaction (O'Sullivan & Flanagin 2003, p. 85). However, a phrasing such as "the tendency to react more critically and with greater hostility over this medium leading to an escalation of conflict" (Rice & Steinfeld 1990) has the advantage of emphasizing hostility as expressed in an agonic discussion where dissent prevails. It allows for distinguishing between gratuitous use of profanity, or verbal violence per se, and the frequent use of flaming in a situation of agonistic exchange.

The intrinsic polemical nature of flaming is supported by the results of an experimental research conducted by Thompsen & Foulger (1996), where the nature of flame has been determined through a five-stage model consisting of (1) Divergence of opinions (2) Disagreement (direct reference to opposing positions and discussion) (3) Tension (attacks and counter-arguments) (4) Antagonism (attacks upon the opposing participant and ad hominem to undermine his credibility) (5) Profane antagonism (engaging in overtly hostile, belligerent behavior "while often ignoring the original issue of divergence" (pp. 228-9). In an experiment led along these lines on the perception of flaming, it turned out that

the latter occurs only at stage 4, in messages showing antagonism, with a small but substantial effect of profanity (stage 5). "Based on these results", the authors conclude, "we suggest that a message is perceived as a flame when it expresses antagonism toward another participant" (p. 238).

Now, in a debate on a public issue, venting emotions and expressing aggressiveness are part of conflict management. In other words, flaming participates in the violent confrontations of antagonistic views that build up political controversy. In opposition to the theories that exclusively attribute flaming to the nature of the medium, Kayany (1998, p. 1137) attributes flaming in Newsgroups, defined as a "meeting place for people who share similar cultures and geographic origins, but are scattered in different parts of the world", to a political, cultural and religious context. It entails that flaming appears as the expression of social and political conflicts exterior to the Net, and is not a direct result of the medium. The cultural, socio-economical, and political tensions that characterize a given society account for the passionate expressions of dissent to be found in the virtual space. In this perspective, online debates have much to tell about the divisions and antagonisms that make up our democratic societies. At the same time, these conflicts are dealt with in a particular way in the semi-public space of the talkbacks, and it is important to analyze the modalities of their management in the framework of virtual communities in order to better understand the specificity of the latter and the function of online interactions.

This leads us to the question of normative behavior in the psycho-sociological perspective. According to Thompsen, "a 'true flame' is a message in which the creator/sender intentionally violates interactional norms and is perceived as violating those norms by the receiver as well as by a third-party observer" (Thompsen 1993, p. 85). The speaker has to intentionally and consciously break the rules; the receiver (and the observer) has to interpret her verbal behavior as a deliberate violation. The main point here is that aggressiveness, attacks on the addressee, and verbal violence are perceived as behaviors breaking the rules of civility. The idea that flaming is a non-normative and harmful behavior is rejected by other scholars such as Lea et al.; they propose "an alternative explanation that views instances of flaming as normative behavior that takes place within a social context that is pre-defined or communicated via the medium" (Lea et al. 1992, p. 109). In other words, flaming occurs when "a social group becomes salient that includes uninhibited behavior among its norms" (p. 107). Even if the explanation in terms of wishful belonging to a group favoring uninhibited behavior may look

somewhat unsatisfactory, it sheds light on the possibility that flames could result from a use of verbal violence fulfilling social functions. In this perspective, they are not mere transgressions but part of interactional routines (be it unconventional and irreverent routines) in given groups.

2. Flaming in a discursive and argumentative perspective

How can we make sense of the insights developed by the social sciences in argumentation theory? One possible move would be to examine flaming in terms of fallacies. It is obvious that outbursts of feelings like anger or indignation, and contemptuous dismissal of the other's point of view, cannot but distort rational arguments leading from premises to a conclusion, and break the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion[i]. The analyst would thus be committed to condemning the phenomenon or to finding ways of avoiding it. We rather suggest to analyze the occurrences of flaming in talkbacks and to investigate how it actually works in online political discussions. Suspension of judgment, and effort at accurate description of the data in terms of discourse, will precede any critical consideration.

As a starting point, and drawing on the elements provided by our short review of the literature in the social sciences, we will link flaming in electronic discussions on public affairs to controversy, and view it in an argumentative perspective. Instead of seeing it as an uninhibited behavior, thus emphasizing socio-psychological and behavioral aspects, we will define flaming in socio-discursive terms by relating it to polemical discourse. As an integral part of polemics, it is understood as a discourse – in this case, an online interaction – consisting in a strong confrontation of antagonistic stances, where each speaker aims at discrediting her opponent in the eyes of a third party and often uses various forms of verbal violence in her attacks (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980). It refers to a peculiar way of conflict management in the framework of online controversies, where it appears as discrete verbal outbursts in the unfolding of an otherwise non-violent discussion. Thus redefined in the framework of polemical discourse, flames will be spotted and analyzed in two French newspapers' talkbacks, the electronic version of the leftist Libération, on the one hand, and of Le Figaro, a right-wing paper, on the other hand. They present many heated debates on the government bill concerning the reform of the legal retirement age and the huge demonstrations organized by the unions on June 24, 2010.

In these talkbacks, flames seem quite normative: they are frequent, predictable

(they follow tacit rules) and do not disrupt the flow of the online exchange. It is important to emphasize the conditions of these electronic interactions: the participants freely elect a particular website, choose the topic and the specific article they want to react to, and can withdraw at any moment. It follows that recurrent engagement in passionate and violent controversy is not only the effect of a free choice; it also looks like one of the benefits offered by talkbacks on public issues. No doubt, flaming is, by definition, a transgression of politeness rules – there is no flaming if the post is not intended and received as an aggressive attack on an adversary, thus violating the norms of polite interaction and the ethics of discussion, or the rules of rational debate. However, it appears that this practice does not make it deviant and unbearable in CMC, nor does it seem to undermine the willingness of the participants to engage in online debate. It rather appears as a routine partaking in the talkback's agonistic exchange of views.

Let us first emphasize that the discursive elements of this routine are related to argumentation in two different ways.

– They use arguments**[ii]**

– They rely upon arguments circulating in the global social discourse (or interdiscourse) without reformulating them

At the same time, they make use of insults or profanity and punctuate exchanges of antagonistic views with verbal violence.

2.1. The use of arguments

(a) the rule of justice

The attack upon the demonstrators, often turning into an attack upon civil servants (the "fonctionnaires"), is based on the rule of justice (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969): the same privileges should be granted to all French citizens, who are equal by definition – namely, to the public and the private sector:

please explain to me why state employees, secretaries, office clerks, administrative directors, demonstrate against retirement at age 62, whereas a worker in the assembly line, a metalworker, a worker building houses or roads, all suffering from atmospheric conditions, or the awful heat caused by combustion of materials, furnaces, exposure to chemical substances, cannot retire at 55? Militaries and policemen are entitled to retire after 15 years of activity!!!! Where is justice? Some retire as fresh as a daisy, while others have no time to take any advantage of it [...]

Le 24/06/2010 à 23:10 (Figaro)

(b) the ethotic argument
Concerning the much criticized approval of the government bill on the legal retirement age by Rocard, the elderly former PS Prime Minister, we find ironic refutations of his incompetence based on his prior ethos and reputation:
msoke (21)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
Freedom of expression on the left wing is great
Yes, you are absolutely right, having been deputy, Minister of Economy gives him no legitimacy whatsoever to talk about public finances
Thursday June 24, 12h42[…]
[…]
Jeudi 24 juin à 12h42
Signaler au modérateurRépondre

globule007 (244)

BA in the Humanities, Political Sciences, ENA, inspector of Finances, deputy, Minister, Prime Minister …
Indeed, he is a beginner but he learns fast doesn't he?

(c) Use of dichotomies
mailimailo (2121) (reacting to Prime Minister Fillon's discourse on June 25, on the government's determination to pursue the reform made indispensable by demographic problems)
Démographi-cons!
I can't believe my ears! […]
Who are they laughing at?
When we know that the financing of retirement is a matter of political choice!
Actually, it is quite simple.
Who is paying?????
Kapital and/or work!!!
Friday, June 25, 16h40

2.2. Flames based on argumentation circulating in the interdiscourse
As a rule, the protest relies upon shared arguments that are widely circulated in the current social discourse. Repeated again and again in the public sphere, a

given reasoning becomes self-evident: it underlies the discourse even when erased from the actual utterance. Sometimes, it is formulated by some of the internet users in the debate, while the same arguments remain implicit in other posts. This is the case in these two examples of criticism on Rocard's position, relying on the idea that postponing the legal retirement age severely affects the workers' rights and welfare while sparing the riches, thus contradicting the Socialist Party's ideology and mission:

tothony (65)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
ATTENTION
I think that even the socialists who are in favor of postponing the legal retirement age cannot support the government's bill. Because the reform is based only on that, without any other resources... People on wages are the only ones to suffer. To put taxes on bonuses, stock options, banks, is no utopia. It is practical. In this case, to put finance at the service of our pensions. But the government does not demand anything of the rich anymore... Thus it is the government that mistakes its enemy. This postponing of the legal age cannot be supported today by a leftist, since everything relies on that.
Thursday, June 24 juin, 11h47

marsouin55 (512)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
Two-faced bastard
Rocard what a hazard
What's it got to do with him this sir let him go back to his kitchen garden and leave ideas to those still able to think... not like him who is seriously going astray by supporting a right wing politics: everything for the rich, nothing for the poor!

The argument developed by participants such as Tothony provides Marsouin with a basis on which his vehement protest is built. He hints at it without caring to repeat it. Since the argumentative schemes that justify the outcry widely circulate, the indignation and the outrage expressed by posts that do not develop arguments appear to be grounded in a tacit rather than absent rationale.

2.3. Forms of electronic flames in the argument-based posts
Whether built on explicit arguments or grounded in an implicit, underlying reasoning formulated elsewhere, the posts that emphasize common emotions give way to flames. They consist of blunt attacks expressed by various means:

arguments ad hominem, insults, irony and sarcasm, use of profanity, etc. In certain contexts, some of them are quite predictable. Thus, Thomine (1087) notices about Rocard on Libé:

Without reading the comments
From the honorable libé internet users, I can bet we will find the following qualifiers:
Sold out, senile, traitor, how much did you get,
In short, nothing but vehement commentaries

Indeed, internet users make sarcastic remarks about Rocard's being senile and thus demonstrating by his own example the necessity of early retirement. Arguments ad hominem describe him as a "raving" old man (il "déraille," meaning both that he has left the right track, namely, the way of the left, and lost his reason). Rocard is also presented as a disguised right-wing politician:

(6) gasgas (275)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
Well done Rocard !!!
The very day of the big demonstration against the bill on retirement, Rocard gets out of the woods saying that the Socialist party makes a mistake on this file. In other words: Sakozy and his Minister Woerth are right. We are waiting for Rocard to join the present government. It would be logical
[...] Thursday June 24, 11h53

In their attacks ad hominem, the posts are insulting in tone:

roger34 (2210)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
Rocard
A guy that never had any use whatsoever! To the scrap yard, fatty!!
Thursday, June 24, 16h02

The following exchange shows not only the use of profanity, but also its acceptance as a rule of the game:
dupognon (224)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
rocard connard (Rocard idiot)

Really he makes me sick this agonizing disgustingly servile guy already with the carbone tax then he says amen to all that Sarkozy wants. Is true than when you are gaga the soup is easier to swallow. He is the traitor
Thursday June 24, 20h30
Signaler au modérateurRépondre

sherazad (2950)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
dupognon
Nice rhymes, it's true what you say
Thursday June 24, 20h27

Inflammatory remarks are also directed against groups, such as civil servants (in Le Figaro's posts):
dany HL Le Figaro Thursday June 24, 11h57
The civil servants' unions are ready to block the whole economy of France by going on strike, thus sacrificing the livelihood of millions of their fellow citizens to force them into further supporting their pensions. They want, by their egoism and lack of civic responsibility, to go on benefiting from the privileges they have obtained during decades. They have in the same way blocked the whole country by national strikes at the end of 1995 in October 2007. And none of the governments had the guts to set up the rest of the Frenchmen, namely the majority of the population, against these egoistic civil servants belonging to the trade unions and their ideology of depending on the State and exploiting it, those civil servants who live at our expenses for decades.
25/06/2010, 01h49

3. The roles of flaming in the making of a virtual community
It thus appears that flames are not only attacks upon the addressee: on the Net, they are often aimed at a third person or a group that becomes a privileged target. Such a practice of acerb and aggressive criticism greatly contributes to consolidate the virtual community by uniting it against a common enemy. It reinforces the internet users in their convictions and integrates them in a group where they join forces to attack a common target, but also to share hopes and instigate collective action. The discredited opponent (the Sarkozy government, state employees, Rocard, etc.) is completely evicted from the dialogue, so that no negotiation with him is possible. In the talkbacks examined in online papers such as Libération and Le Figaro, we find a strong tendency on the part of the internet

users to create and support a community of protest.

A second form of flaming consists in interactions between internet users. I have shown elsewhere (Amossy 2010b) that the framework of the medium and the genre (talkbacks) encourages a blend of political debate pertaining to the public sphere, and of personal quarrel resulting from the Net's "conversationalisation" (Fairclough's notion [1992] pointing to the tendency of dealing with public affairs like in a private conversation). Some interactions sound like uninhibited exchanges between people familiar with each other (which is also made possible by the fact that the internet users have an interactional history on the Net):

sterne (5831)

Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil

rocard

Hey look a socialist who is less an a...hole than the others... to be noticed ... it's getting more and more rare...

Thursday June 24, 12h03

vaderetro (479)

Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil

Sterne

Hey, look, the house reactionary is still there... ?

Good luck for the future, because it will get harder and harder for people like you

Thursday June 24, 12h09

darkside92 (121)

Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil

Is this all you've got to answer? To call people reactionary? You don't have anything better? It shows the depth of your analysis as well as the tolerance you exhibit!!!

Thursday June 24, 12h13

vaderetro (479)

Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil

darkside...

Aie aie

Be careful you are going to cause an explosion!

Between us to say that those who call all the socialists idiots are assholes does not seem excessive...

Have a good day!

Thursday June 24, 12h24

The metadiscourse points to the nature and relevance of flames. Whereas Darkside blames the lack of argumentation inherent to the use of insults (a refusal to bring a valid refutation) and the lack of openness to dialogue (a refusal to take into account the opinion of others), vaderetro justifies the violence of the expression both because it is a reaction to a shameful insult directed at a respectable political party, and because it addresses an internet user who is herself recurring to flaming. But the main point here is that when participants direct flames at each other, they create an atmosphere of mutual hostility where everyone is invited to fight the addressee and (verbally) knock her out. Instead of a reinforcement of friendly relationships, we find a deepening of tensions and an escalation of conflicts rooted in the previous socio-political positions of the internet users. It thus appears that rude and unpleasant confrontation is part of the talkback routine and paradoxically contributes to the making of the virtual community.

In this respect, two elements have to be here emphasized. The first is that the exacerbation of agonistic confrontation between internet users plays a role in the construction of a united group whose members can find comfort in their common fight and encourage each other. This is what happens in the following posts of internet users who attack an attempt at justifying Rocard, and unite in a common fight:

urion (255)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil

AT LAST a true socialist!!
Rocard shows once more the road to what should be a modern Socialist party. Thanks Mister Rocard and bravo. The simpletons who are of course going to throw their stupid posts will scream but as they are uneducated idiots it does not matter. Other PS personalities who do not dare yet talk like Mr Rocard will do it and it is a chance for our country. Once again bravo and thanks Mr. Rocard
Thursday June 24, 11h50

zythum (6657)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
urion

Well at last a true socialist ... of the right wing

Greetings from the simpletons ☐
Thursday June 24, 11h50

vaderetro (479)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil
urion
At last a true socialist who defends the rights of 10% of the French who are in possession of 50% of the financial patrimony… (Thursday, June 24, 11h59)

chat_roux (260)
Inscrit Libé +Suivre cet internaute | Profil

Don't agree!
A modern Socialist Party should demand for a retirement at age 95, a cancellation of paid holidays, 95 hours a week paid as 25, death penalty for the unemployed and the return of slavery. All the rest is but an old-fashioned stand
Thursday June 24, 12h19

This brings us to the second point. It appears that the virtual community is by no means homogenous (even though the internet users are readers of papers known as "left wing" and "right wing"). It is composed of citizens who share the same national space but sometimes deeply disagree on fundamental issues. Talkbacks in the electronic press give them the possibility to "meet" opponents with whom they might not have the opportunity to freely discuss in real life. In the virtual space, they can confront people who represent other stances and defend other interests. It provides them with an imaginary agora – though of a very special kind. Stripped of their social authority by the use of pseudonyms, the participants are like masks voicing free and discordant opinions in a carnivalesque forum, in Bakhtin's sense: in a space devoid of consecrated truth, ideas are endlessly tested and contested in an irreverent form. In this public place where the virtual forum both duplicates and modifies the real ones, arguments pro and contra are voiced, conflicts are expressed through both rational and highly emotional channels, divisions between social and political groups are made conspicuous to all the parties involved. Talkbacks thus allow for the constitution of virtual communities that are dominated by the tensions and conflicts tearing apart society as a whole. The choice to belong to such a virtual community, and the desire to remain part of it despite its brutal verbal confrontations, demonstrate the importance of a space where polemical exchanges can thrive. Although, but perhaps also because, they

circulate well-known arguments and repetitive oppositions, the posts participate in the dynamics of the democratic sphere where political issues are part of the citizen's life. As an engaged citizen, the internet user needs to find a locus for discussion, confirmation, examination of other points of views, but also confrontation with those who do not think like her and which whom she has, however, to co-exist. She can, with them, react on the spot to current affairs, listening to the others' claims, discussing with them and fighting them without having to care for hierarchies or politeness rules. This could be one of the functions of flaming in particular, and of polemical discourse in general – meaning we have to understand polemics as one of argumentation's poles (Amossy 2010a) in a broad definition of argumentation as a continuum going from co-construction of common answers to the violent confrontation of antagonistic theses.

NOTES
[i] For an essay of Internet Political discussion from a pragma-dialectical point of view, see Lewinski 2010.
[ii] On the use of arguments in talkbacks, see Chaput 2006. On political talkbacks in French newspapers, see Marcoccia 2003.

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