ISSA Proceedings 2010 – The Collective Antagonist: Multiple Criticism In Informal Online Deliberation

1. Introduction

Argumentative practices in various forums for computer-mediated, or online, communication have been an object of increasing interest among argumentation researchers (see, inter alia, Aakhus 2002a, 2002b, Amossy this volume, Chaput & Campos 2007, Doury 2005, Jackson 1998, Lewiński 2010, Weger & Aakhus 2003). In accordance with the descriptive and normative functions of argumentation theory, such studies combine, in a more or less balanced manner, analysis of some modes or patterns of argumentation characteristic of online formats for discussion with attempts at evaluating the patterns under study, or the format at large, against a certain idealised context for argumentative discussion (such as the pragma-dialectical model of a critical discussion). In this paper, I focus on one pattern of argumentation – the collective antagonist – that can be distinguished in discussions held in political Web-forums accessible through Google Groups. In the pattern of the collective antagonist groups of individual arguers jointly criticise argumentation advanced by other arguers. The goal of the paper is to give a pragma-dialectical account of this pattern in both descriptive and normative terms. Hence the main questions to be addressed are: How can pragma-dialectics contribute to a more subtle understanding of a pattern of collective criticism? Is collective criticism conducive or obstructive to realising reasonable forms of argumentation embodied in the ideal model of a critical discussion? Finally, what are the possible challenges that the analysis and evaluation of collective online criticism opens for argumentation theory?

In order to address these questions, I will proceed in four basic steps. First (section 2), I will describe these characteristics of online discussion forums that are directly relevant to the task of investigating and assessing collective criticism. Second, (section 3), I will analyse the pattern of the collective antagonist on the

basis of a fragment of an actual online discussion. Third (section 4), I will examine the potential of collective online criticism for supporting reasonable argumentative discussions. Finally (section 5), I will mention some methodological and theoretical challenges that the analysis and evaluation of online discussions can pose to argumentation theory, and pragma-dialectics in particular.

2. Online discussions as informal multi-party deliberations
Asynchronous online discussions, in which users "post" (i.e., send), read and reply to publicly available messages in a form similar to e-mail (i.e., without rigorous time and space constraints), belong to the oldest yet still very popular technologies of computer-mediated communication. Today, systems such as Google Groups (http://groups.google. com/) provide a unified Web-based design for accessing two important sub-types of online asynchronous discussions: Web-forums, which are hosted on Google servers, and the independent Usenet newsgroups, to which Google provides only a popular gateway. The range of topics discussed in such forums is virtually unlimited, and politics has a prominent place among them.**[i]** Online political discussions held via Google forums are informal, grassroots initiatives hosted and administrated by politically engaged Internet users which are in no explicit and direct way connected to any institutional decision-making processes. Because of that, such political discussions are a specimen of informal public deliberations, in which opinions are publicly expressed, challenged, defended and criticised, without the aim of arriving at some explicitly declared final outcomes.**[ii]**

Two interrelated characteristics of such argumentative forums for informal online deliberation are of special importance to analysing patterns of collective argumentation: first, online forums allow for participation of large groups of discussants and, second, this participation is predominantly unregulated.

Large-scale participation is afforded by the technological design of open online forums (or Usenet newsgroups): since any (registered) Internet user can join and leave discussion at any point, the pool of discussants may be quite considerable. Moreover, various (groups of) participants can be simultaneously developing several lines of discussion; in this way, the main topical thread of a discussion can fork out into many sub-threads. Taking such considerations into account, Marcoccia (2004) proposes that online discussions should be analysed as "on-line polylogues" with a complex "participation framework." As he notes, polylogues in

general are characterised, on the one hand, by the "lack of collective focusing," since there is often no one centre or main thrust of discussion, and, on the other hand, by "the existence of varied focuses," since discussants can focus on specific parts of interaction, for example by participating exclusively in selected sub-discussions (Marcoccia 2004, p. 118; see Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004).

What is unique to informal online polylogues is that compared to many institutionalised forms of multi-party deliberation they contain hardly any explicit procedural regulations. No clear "rules of order" – known in many highly formalised institutional polylogues, such as parliamentary debates – which discipline the exchange of arguments and criticisms are stated for online political discussions. Therefore, elements such as the order of speakers, the length and the shape of their contributions (type of allowed, or even required, arguments and criticisms), the possibilities to address criticisms and develop arguments, the overall length of discussion, etc., are not prescribed, but rather are left to be decided by the discussants themselves.**[iii]** Online discussions are thus open, emergent activities in which exchanges of arguments and critical reactions develop freely in accordance with the direction a discussion takes depending on the online arguers' ongoing participation (or lack thereof).**[iv]**

The combination of factors such as freedom of access and participation, opportunity to involve in many-to-many interactions and lack of strict regulation and moderation, make it possible for various lines of online discussions to overlap and affect one another in a somewhat disorganised manner. Therefore – especially when compared to tightly regulated one-on-one dialogic exchanges – computer-mediated polylogues have been considered as rather chaotic forums characterised by disrupted global topical relevance and local turn-to-turn adjacency (Herring 1999). Notably, the patterns of responding in multi-party asynchronous online discussions are quite peculiar:

…there is not a one-to-one correspondence between an initiation and its response. Multiple responses are often directed at a single initiating message, and single messages may respond to more than one initiating message, especially in asynchronous CMC [Computer-Mediated Communication – ML], where longer messages tend to contain multiple conversational moves […]. Moreover, many initiations receive no response. (Herring 1999, online)

Shortly, argumentative discussions in various Web-forums (or Usenet newsgroups) are online polylogues with fluid participation and convoluted

patterns of conversation (Herring 1999, Marcoccia 2004).

Still, there are other noticeable qualities of such online discussion forums that to a certain extent counterbalance the apparent chaos of unregulated polylogues. Notably, these forums support asynchronous rather than real-time communication, so there are no time (and space) constraints to reflect on and advance arguments and criticisms. Moreover, individual contributions to discussions ("posts"), are usually recorded, numbered, and organised in topical threads (or discussion trees). This is important since, as has been observed, "the record of exchanges often available to participants in online debate […] allows careful consideration of the development of ongoing arguments" (Dahlberg 2001, online).

Altogether, despite noticeable deviations from a neat dialogical structure consisting of dovetailed adjacency pairs (such as argument–critical reaction), online multi-party discussions can still be seen as organised and patterned around the vital characteristics described above. In the pragma-dialectical view, such characteristics are methodically grasped as restrictions and opportunities of an argumentative activity type of online discussion forums (Lewiński 2010).

3. The pattern of the collective antagonist
The goal of this section is to describe the pattern of the collective antagonist that can be identified in online political discussions on the basis of their close argumentative analysis. The analysis presented below follows methods of qualitative study of argumentative discourse developed within the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs 1993).

Discussion 1 took place in the last weeks of the 2008 presidential campaign in the United States on one of the discussion forums available through Google Groups: *PoliticalForum*. It was sparked by a campaign event in which Barack Obama, during a meeting with residents of a neighbourhood in Ohio on 12 October 2008 (only three days before the final presidential debate), was asked by "Joe the Plumber" about his tax plans as a future president. The "plumber" suggested that the new tax proposals would negatively affect his plans to expand the small plumbing business he was working in. In response, among other things, Obama explained that tax would only be levied on businesses bringing more than $250.000 a year in revenue and added: "I think when you spread the wealth

around, it's good for everybody."**[v]** The event quickly became a hot campaign topic, and was mentioned a number of times by Obama's Republican opponent John McCain during the last presidential debate.

(Discussion 1)**[vi]**
nobama thinks he is robin hood
http://groups.google.com/group/PoliticalForum/browse_frm/thread/e33251a56f53 930f/d7781d4f78961e69?tvc=1#d7781d4f78961e69

1. *mark* Oct 15 2008, 11:45 am
when asked by a plumber if his was going to raise his taxes, barry said he had no problem taking his money to spread the wealth.
socialism but we all know barry is indeed a socialist.

2. *Travis* Oct 15 2008, 12:48 pm
Heis. You just didn't spell it right. Robbing Hoodwinking

3. *jenius* Oct 15 2008, 1:47 pm
any one who knows anything know that Obama is only going to raise taxes on those who make more that$250,000 a year. to me thats a good
plan. I am disabled and living on a fixed income. I bet thats agreeable to most people too. that is why same old Mccain is not going
to win this election. vote for Obama,a vote to justice and equality for the poor and the middle class. Jenius

4. *Lone Wolf* Oct 15 2008, 2:29 pm
The multimillionaire, that supported the bailout of corporate crooks with the funds of those they ripped off, and who receives more
donations from Wall St than McCain. That Mr Equality. Wake up my friend, the Dems and the GOP are two sides of the same coin. Obama is
an unmittigated lying low life reprobate.

5. *mark* Oct 16 2008, 0:20 am
2/3 of those being taxed by barry are small businesses who will either be forced to reduce staff, or close their doors. since the small
business is the backbone of our economy, please tell me how this is a good thing.
oh yeah and let us not forget that he will repeal the Bush taxcuts, so he is raising everyones taxes.

6. *Gaar* Oct 16 2008, 0:22 am

On Oct 15, 4:20 pm, mark <marsupialm...@sbcglobal.net> wrote:

> oh yeah and let us not forget that he will repeal the Bush taxcuts, so
> he is raising everyones taxes.

Actually, he now claims he won't do that.

11. *Jenius* Oct 16 2008, 11:56 am

thats a complete falsehood, read the plan. anyway if your business is making that much you should be paying more taxes, and may not even
qualify as a small business anymore. Jenius

24. *Hollywood* Oct 16 2008, 3:42 pm

mark,

Are you a complete idiot? What percentage of "small businesses" have a profit of $250,000.oo after all deductible expenses? WTF are you
called "small business"?

29. *Lone Wolf* Oct 17 2008, 10:03 am

The backbone of the US was heavy industry, steel smelting and car manufacturing to earn export dollars, not small business that operates
within the domestic economy and does nothing to improve US trade deficit.

Why do you bother listening to what Obama says, he is making it up as he goes along? He is craven populist, what do you expect him to say?
BTW. The US is screwed

Discussion 1 is initiated by *mark's* comment regarding Obama's meeting with "Joe the Plumber." In this very context (the last days of the election campaign), a statement that 'barry [Barack Obama – ML] is a socialist" or, more precisely, that Obama endorses a "socialistic" tax plan to "spread the wealth," can be directly reconstructed as an argument for a standpoint "one should not vote for Obama." After *Travis'* affirmative remark in turn 2, the main difference of opinion in this discussion is made explicit in *Jenius'* turn 3. *Jenius* advances a standpoint opposite to *mark's*: one should "vote for Obama," because his policies promote "justice and equality for the poor and the middle class" and, in particular, his tax proposal is "a good plan." Following *Lone Wolf's* short and outspoken call for a third way in American politics (turn 4: one should vote for neither Obama nor McCain, because "the Dems and the GOP are two sides of the same coin"), *mark*

responds to *Jenius'* challenge in message 5 by advancing a complex of arguments that can be schematically pictured in the following way (see Figure 1).
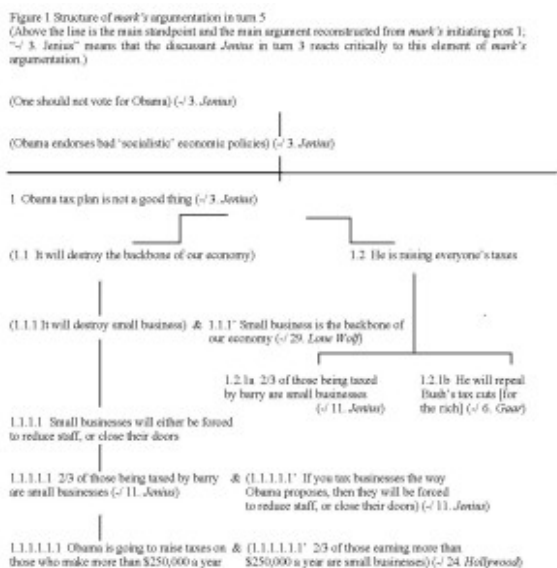
Figure 1 Structure of *mark's* argumentation in turn 5
(Above the line is the main standpoint and the main argument reconstructed from *mark's* initiating post 1;
"-/ 3. *Jenius*" means that the discussant *Jenius* in turn 3 reacts critically to this element of *mark's* argumentation.)

(One should not vote for Obama) (-/ 3. *Jenius*)

(Obama endorses bad "socialistic" economic policies) (-/ 3. *Jenius*)

1. Obama tax plan is not a good thing (-/ 3. *Jenius*)

(1.1 It will destroy the backbone of our economy)   1.2 He is raising *everyone's* taxes

(1.1.1 It will destroy small business) & 1.1.1' Small business is the backbone of our economy (-/ 29. *Lone Wolf*)

1.2.1a 2/3 of those being taxed by barry are small businesses (-/ 11. *Jenius*)   1.2.1b He will repeal Bush's tax cuts [for the rich] (-/ 6. *Gaar*)

1.1.1.1 Small businesses will either be forced to reduce staff, or close their doors

1.1.1.1.1 2/3 of those being taxed by barry are small businesses (-/ 11. *Jenius*)   & (1.1.1.1.1' If you tax businesses the way Obama proposes, then they will be forced to reduce staff, or close their doors) (-/ 11. *Jenius*)

1.1.1.1.1.1 Obama is going to raise taxes on those who make more than $250,000 a year   & (1.1.1.1.1.1' 2/3 of those earning more than $250,000 a year are small businesses) (-/ 24. *Hollywood*)

Figure 1 Structure of mark's argumentation in turn 5
(Above the line is the main standpoint and the main argument reconstructed from mark's initiating post 1; "-/ 3. Jenius" means that the discussant Jenius in turn 3 reacts critically to this element of mark's argumentation.)

As an analytic overview of mark's arguments in figure 1 shows, his short message contains a rather complex argumentation structure. The bone of contention here is the sub-standpoint (1) that Obama's tax plan is not good, expressed by means of a rhetorical question of sorts ("please tell me how this is a good thing"). This sub-standpoint is supported by a multiple structure consisting of two independent arguments: (1.1) Obama's plan will lead to a collapse of the American economy and, apart from that, (1.2) it leads to a universal tax rise (an unexpressed premise for both of these arguments is that none of these is a good thing). The former argument is further supported by a long subordinative structure, in which many premises are left unexpressed (but are reconstructible on the basis of the entire discussion or general background knowledge). The latter argument is supported by a fairly simple coordinative structure: Obama is planning to raise taxes for

both small businesses (1.2.1a) and rich people (1.2.1b), so "he is raising everyones taxes" (1.2).

Mark's post receives four direct responses, all of them critical: by Gaar (6), Jenius (11), Hollywood (24), and Lone Wolf (29). In this way, a collection of individual participants to an online polylogue criticises distinct parts of complex argumentation advanced by another arguer, thereby creating "the collective antagonist." Moreover, each of these reactions opens a new sub-discussion: this is how discussion 1 splits into four simultaneously held sub-disputes regarding four different elements of mark's argumentation put forward in turn 5.

Individual arguers' joining forces leading to a collective construction of argumentation is a well-known phenomenon in group discussion usually studied under the label of "tag-team argument" (Brashers & Meyers 1989, Canary, Brossmann, & Seibold 1987). However, whereas the study of tag-team argument was focused on a joint construction of complex argumentation structures in the context of face-to-face, small group decision-making, what is evident in discussion 1 is joint criticism of an argumentation structure in a pseudonymous and mediated context of large group discussion which is not (immediately) aimed at generating a decision to act in any particular way. Moreover, while tag-teams have been analysed as neatly delineated groups with consistent, opposing standpoints to defend, the collective criticism here is collective only in the sense of the object of criticism. Gaar (turn 6), Jenius (turn 11), Hollywood (turn 24), and Lone Wolf (turn 29) team up to criticise mark's argument advanced in turn 5, but otherwise they do not seem to be jointly defending any one consistent position. Gaar, in fact, similarly to Travis (turn 2) seems to be sympathetic with mark's anti-Obama opinions; his criticism against the content of facts adduced by mark is thus more of a correction of the position he otherwise agrees with. By contrast, both Jenius and Hollywood attack mark from a pro-Obama point of view; in this sense, they create a regular tag-team which jointly produces complex argumentation (next to complex criticism). Yet differently, Lone Wolf argues both against pro- and anti-Obama position, and thus stands alone, aligning with one of the main positions in the discussions only when criticisms are to be voiced against the other position.

Despite such differences with clearly defined tag-teams, there is some kind of regularity in this rather complicated web of critical reactions: different critical respondents precisely target different elements of the same piece of complex

argumentation. One can say that in this case arguers enact a *horizontal criticism*: even though the criticisms of *Gaar*, *Jenius*, *Hollywood*, and *Lone Wolf* are clearly voiced one after another, rather than simultaneously, they do not create a sequence of critical reactions in which one of the critics picks up where another left. In this way, every critical reaction seems independent from another, at least in terms of their argumentative import. As a result, online discussants create one line of comprehensive attack against another discussant's arguments expressed in one single message.**[viii]** Characteristically to online discussions, such multiplied criticism does not lead to a final resolution of the expressed differences of opinions: the separate sub-discussions that the criticisms of *Gaar*, *Jenius*, *Hollywood*, and *Lone Wolf* instigate are not concluded, but instead fade away when discussants stop contributing to them.

4. Evaluation of collective criticism

It has been stressed by pragma-dialecticians that smooth implementation of the ideal model of a critical discussion usually faces serious obstacles in actual circumstances (van Eemeren et al. 1993, pp. 30-34). One of such obstacles may result from a tension between the competing demands for open participation and reasonableness in public discourse.**[ix]** Jackson (1998), who analysed conditions for argumentation in Usenet discussions, grasped this tension by referring to two first rules of a critical discussion. On the one hand, in accordance with rule 1 ("Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question"; van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 190), arguers should be able to freely exercise their unconditional right to voice objections against others' position. On the other hand, following rule 2 ("Discussants who advance a standpoint may not refuse to defend this standpoint when requested to do so"; van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 191), arguers should meet their conditional obligation to defend one's own position when challenged. According to Jackson (1998, p. 189), meeting these two conditions simultaneously in open forums for online deliberation, such as Usenet groups, may be difficult due to the characteristics of their design. It is exactly because such forums are open for everyone to enter discussions by advancing and criticising opinions without restrictions rule 1 for a critical discussion can easily be followed. It is equally easy, however, to abandon or shift discussions and thus evade the burden of proof associated with one's challenged opinions, violating rule 2.

These general observations seem to apply well to the pattern of the collective antagonist. On the one hand, the pattern of the collective antagonist is conducive to realizing reasonable forms of argumentation, because multiple criticism enhances critical testing of public opinions. Standpoints and arguments expressed on Web-forums can be unlimitedly called into question, to the satisfaction of rule 1. This is the case even if some kind of disorderliness in online arguers' critical reactions can be noticed. As argued above, a collective of critics is not necessarily a tag-team acting consistently towards one common purpose, but rather a certain strategic alliance that comes into being in a particular dialectical situation. However, even if this alliance is purely opportunistic and temporary (or even coincidental), it plays an important dialectical role. From the perspective of a critical discussion, such joint production of criticisms allows for the collectively "optimal use of the right to attack" (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, pp. 151-152). Since online forums give abundant opportunities to react critically to argumentation in as many ways as possible by as many people as possible, factors such as lack of individual ingenuity in launching comprehensive criticism are of lesser importance. In effect, the potential for open public scrutiny of the opinions and arguments advanced increases.

Yet on the other hand, the pattern of collective criticism can be deemed obstructive to realizing reasonable forms of argumentation on a few weighty accounts. Most obviously, in order to be reasonable, individual objections adding up to one collective line of argumentative criticism should be good, relevant objections. This can be seen as a precondition for the potential for critical public scrutiny to be actually realized. This precondition is certainly not universally met. Analysts of online discussions noticed that the minimally designed, open and loosely regulated forums for multi-party discussion are susceptible to unqualified and irrelevant objections (Jackson 1998, pp. 190-193), and the resulting "micro-level digression" and "macro-level drift" of discussions away for the issues that are supposed to be discussed (Aakhus 2002a, p. 127). Critical reactions can also involve a straw man, that is, an illegitimate reformulation of the criticised opinions and arguments (Lewiński 2010, ch. 9). Moreover, as often pointed out, an opportunity for uninhibited critical uses of online technology is also an opportunity for getting away with rampant abuses of it, among which the use of derogatory, abusive language (so called *flaming*) seems to be the most notorious (see Amossy, this volume). Furthermore, multiple criticisms can be repetitive, which is the case when various individual antagonists propose no more than

stylistically different variants of basically the same objection. Shortly, individual critical reactions making up one collective antagonist can simply be fallacious.

The study of fallacious criticisms in online discussions is not, however, where the evaluation of multiplied criticism should end. That is because even if individual criticisms voiced by different arguers *are* reasonable in the sense of being relevant, relatively civil, and original (as is largely the case in discussion 1), the entire collective criticism can still be problematic in terms of its impact on the quality of public discussions that goes beyond fallaciousness of particular argumentative moves. The problem lies also in the design of open online forums for informal deliberation. In such forums, multiple criticisms can easily overwhelm defences that are in fact strong, or perhaps even conclusive. One way of grasping this problem is to analyse it as a difficulty that online discussions create for arguers willing to observe rule 2 of a critical discussion.

The point is, that for an arguer confronted with a collective antagonist on a Web-forum it may be very difficult, or indeed impossible, to satisfactorily discharge the burden of proof by consistently addressing all criticisms. This is partly due to the polylogical character of online discussions in which lines of attack and defence may become terribly convoluted. It is certainly much easier for an argumentation analyst, than it is for an actual arguer involved in an ongoing multi-party discussion, to reconstruct a consistent, ordered pattern in critical reactions. Moreover, the lack of any moderator who links all developing sub-threads back to the main standpoint discussed adds to the difficulty of tracing and addressing all criticisms as one coherent whole.

As mentioned in the previous section, one cannot assume that the collective antagonist is always concurrent with the existence of clearly delineated tag-teams that consistently support or oppose one explicitly formulated position. Instead, teams of arguers and critics can "gang up" for one specific round of collective criticisms, and then dissipate in the ensuing polylogue. Such lack of clearly defined, continuous argumentative roles throughout an entire online discussion is important from the perspective of weighting pros and cons in multi-party deliberation. That is because critical objections, even if they are not parts of one consistent position (as is the case in discussion 1) or even when they amount to a collection of fragmented "hit-and-run" strategies (see Aakhus 2002b, Weger & Aakhus 2003), can be still argumentatively forceful, since they multiply the defendant's burden of proof. By contrast, for positive positions to prevail over the

course of deliberation, they need to remain consistent (see Meyers, Brashers, & Hanner 2000).

To conclude – the pattern of the collective antagonist points to a certain imbalance in the opportunities for an advantageous management of the burden of proof. Arguers aiming at a strategic advantage in online deliberations can easily position themselves as parts of the collective antagonist, in which case they do not acquire heavy burden of proof. By contrast, arguers faced with such collective antagonist may find it exceedingly difficult to discharge their multiplied burden of proof: regardless of their individual willingness and ability to do so, in the context of open online forums for deliberation they may find it hard to fully comply with rule 2 for a critical discussion, i.e., to address all criticisms. Apart from the reasons just mentioned, that is the case because such forums provide no tools and regulations that would prevent the imbalance in managing the burden of proof from happening. One such regulation may be a requirement that additional criticisms are only allowed after the protagonist of a standpoint had been given proper chance to address the previously voiced objections. Another might be a requirement that every criticism has to be a "constructive criticism": one can attack a given position only if one is able to present and defend a relatively stronger position of one's own.

5. Analysis of online polylogues as a challenge to argumentation theory
In pragma-dialectics all argumentation is reconstructed from the perspective of a critical discussion: an ideal dialogue between the protagonist and the antagonist, who orderly take turns and thus move from a confrontation through opening and argumentation stages to a conclusion. That means that actual argumentation taking place in various communicative activity types (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2005, van Eemeren, Houtlosser, Ihnen, & Lewiński 2010) is always approached as a more or less imperfect instance of a critical discussion: whether actually occurring between interacting discussants or merely presupposed in one arguer's monological argumentation. An open problem to be discussed here is that when employed in the analysis and evaluation of fragmented online polylogues, an ideal critical discussion is a useful, but possibly simplified heuristics. It is useful in the process of analysis of discourse, for it provides a comprehensive overview of analytically relevant moves in online disputes. In particular, the model specifies various types of critical reactions that can be performed in argumentative discussions (see Lewiński 2010, ch. 7). Moreover, in the evaluative sense, it

allows to spot the departures from ideal forms of argumentation and thus to trace the limitations and imperfections of various actual contexts for (online) argumentation (Aakhus 2002a, 2002b, Jackson 1998, Weger & Aakhus 2003).

Despite a well-documented usefulness of a critical discussion in reconstructing and assessing any form of actual argumentation, including online discussions, its application (or, indeed, the application of any other dialogical model of argumentation, such as Walton's (1998) "dialogue types") in examining online polylogues may face serious challenges. That is primarily because for dialectical approaches argumentation is basically seen as an instance of a dyadic exchange.**[x]** In fact, however, actual argumentative dialogue may take many forms: from simple one-on-one interactions, to activities where a third party interferes to regulate discussions, to complex multi-party exchanges. Indeed, activity types in which third parties play a significant role (for instance mediation sessions and legal trials; see, e.g. van Eemeren et al. 1993, ch. 6) have been consistently and overall successfully studied from a pragma-dialectical perspective. In general, various kinds of multi-party discussions have been approached in pragma-dialectics as variations or collections of fundamentally two-party exchanges (van Rees, 2003). By contrast, the conversation structure of an online polylogue, as described above, may significantly exceed the limits of a dyadic structure.**[xi]** That implies, inter alia, that arguers can face different difficulties and make use of different affordances than in a dyadic exchange. For example, arguers can attempt to respond to a number of argumentative objections, possibly raised from a few distinct or even incommensurable positions, in one online post. In such a situation, what seems to be a rather sloppy defence when analysed and evaluated from the perspective of one singular discussion (say, A against B), can be the strongest possible argumentative move when taken in the entirety of the polylogue (e.g., A against B and C and D, where B, C, and D make up one collective antagonist of A's standpoint, but at the same time hold mutually conflicting positions).

More in particular, when it comes to the reconstruction of an online polylogue in pragma-dialectical terms, two options seem to be at an analyst's disposal, none of them fully satisfactory: The first is the reduction of a polylogue to two clearly delineated camps (one critical discussion between the collective protagonist and the collective antagonist). In this case, however, an analyst simplifies the disagreement space and reduces it to a dialectical pro and contra, while certain

"third way" may in fact be advocated by some arguers (see, e.g., contributions of *Lone Wolf* in discussion 1). The second is the reduction of a polylogue to many simultaneously held one-on-one critical discussions (see van Rees, 2003). In this case, an analyst abstracts from the net of often overlapping discussions that may affect each other in subtle yet important ways.

What follows from such possible complications in the pragma-dialectical reconstruction of online polylogues is that the very notion of strategic manoeuvring (in its strict sense defined by van Eemeren & Houtlosser 1999, pp. 485-486) is not as adequately applicable in the analysis of the polylogical practices as it may be in dialogues. If one gave up the idea that an online polylogue can be always justifiably reconstructed as a discussion between discrete and consistent collective parties (pro and con in case of two parties), then it would be difficult to speak of strategies in the sense of methodical and coordinated attempts at influencing the outcome of a discussion by one of the parties to a discussion. Global strategies (or simply strategies in the proper sense of the word) are not really possible in a chaotic, unpredictable environment in which clear notions of pro and con do not fully apply and argumentative roles constantly fluctuate. Rather – assuming that online arguers still act strategically despite such difficulties – one should speak of local strategies (or tactics) aimed at a rhetorical advantage, implemented in fragmented pieces of inconclusive argumentative exchanges. Further, if participation in a polylogue is reconstructed as participation in many simultaneously held dialogues, then strategic manoeuvring can be happening not only within these reconstructed dialogues, but also across the dialogues, since doing something in one discussion may be primarily directed toward gaining advantage in another discussion. This may happen, for example, when by arguing in one sub-discussion of a polylogue an arguer aims (primarily) at establishing starting points useful in another sub-discussion (with different participants). The idea of strategic maneuvering across discussions, however, stretches the meaning of the term beyond its grounding in one dialectical encounter.

I treat such complications in analysing and evaluating online polylogues as open questions for future consideration, questions to which here I can hardly give even a tentative answer. Still, hoping that analogies do make strong arguments now and then, I would point out that playing one game of chess for three is different than playing three simultaneous regular games of chess between two players.

Quite manifestly, the strategies utilised in such chess for three can be decidedly different from regular chess. One such prominent strategy – unavailable in one-on-one contests – is making alliances, i.e., teaming up against another player. However, also the very rules of the game require some modifications and additions. Therefore, if indeed accurate, this analogy points to a need for considering an ideal model of argumentation not limited to a dyadic view of argumentative interactions.

6. Conclusion
The goal of this exploratory paper was to give a pragma-dialectical account of the phenomenon of the collective antagonist observable in online political discussions. To this end, collective criticism has been analysed as a pattern of argumentation afforded by some crucial qualities of open online forums for informal large-scale deliberation, such as the possibility to involve in many-to-many interactions and lack of effective regulation. When assessed from the perspective of a critical discussion, multiplied, collective criticism seems to be good and bad at the same time. It is critical in the sense of the opportunities for comprehensive public scrutiny of political opinions that antagonists of these opinions have, but it is not quite critical in the sense of the opportunities for protagonists to positively discharge their burden of proof and thus conclude discussions with a critically applauded result. Moreover, multi-party online discussions pose some challenges to dialectical approaches to argumentation, according to which a paradigm for analysing and evaluating argumentation is a dyadic discussion between a pro and contra party. Such intricacies of argumentative analysis and evaluation, as well as challenges that may be difficult to overcome, make online political discussions a fascinating object of research for argumentation theorists.

NOTES
[i] Many political Usenet groups rank high among the 'Top 100 text newsgroups by postings' (see http://www.newsadmin.com/top100tmsgs.asp). Newsgroups explicitly labelled as political in top 20 include it.politica (Italian, #6), fr.soc.politique (French, #15), pl.soc.polityka (Polish, #17), and alt.politics (English, #18), (consulted 15-07-2010).
[ii] It is an established practice among political theorists to distinguish between two basic goals and, in effect, two general kinds of deliberation: decision-making and opinion-formation. Among others, Fraser contends that deliberation aimed

(solely) at opinion-formation amounts to political "discourse [that] does not eventuate in binding, sovereign decisions authorizing the use of state power; [but] on the contrary, […] eventuates in 'public opinion,' critical commentary on authorized decision-making that transpires elsewhere" (Fraser 1990, pp. 74-75).

[iii] Netiquette (see, e.g., http://www.dtcc.edu/cs/rfc1855.html), as well as charters of particular forums, do provide some basic guidelines meant to regulate online discussions, but, firstly, they are often not strictly enforced and, secondly, they exhibit a certain "bias towards particular, agonistic forms of discourse" (Dahlberg 2001, online).

[iv] Since the forums for informal online deliberation discussed in this paper belong to grassroots activities underlain by the ideas of free, and free-wheeling, Internet communication, they are, in principle, *not* moderated.

[v] See, e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_the_plumber.

[vi] Note that due to the topical rather than purely chronological structuring of the conversations even posts far removed in the numbered sequence can be direct responses to some previous posts. All the messages are quoted verbatim, without any editorial corrections.

[vii] Van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004, p. 4) and Snoeck Henkemans (1992), distinguish between three basic types of complex argumentation structures: multiple (convergent), coordinative (linked), and subordinative (chained).

[viii] Apart from the *horizontal* variant of collective criticism, one can also distinguish a *vertical* variant, in which a group of arguers acts in sequence by deepening the previously voiced criticisms against one element of their opponent's argumentation.

[ix] Jacobs (2003) refers to these two possibly conflicting demands as "two values of openness in argumentation theory": "freedom of participation" and "freedom of inquiry."

[x] Discourse analysts studying polylogues point out and criticise a general and "deep-rooted tendency to associate interaction with interaction between two people, considered as the prototype of all forms of interaction" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004: 2). Bonevac (2003) addresses specifically the problem of analysing multi-party discourses in "essentially dualistic" pragma-dialectical approach.

[xi] Conversely, some informal logicians such as Blair (1998), have seen "the limits of the dialogue model of argument" in "solo arguments" performed in contexts of monologues or "non-engaged dialogues."

REFERENCES

Aakhus, M. (2002a). Modeling reconstruction in groupware technology. In F. H. van Eemeren (Ed.), *Advances in pragma-dialectis* (pp. 121-136). Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Aakhus, M. (2002b). The design of forums for online public deliberation and the consequences for argumentation. *The Kentucky Journal of Communication*, *21*(2), 139-149.

Amossy, R. (this volume). Polemical discourse on the Net: "Flames" in argumentation.

Blair, J. A. (1998). The limits of the dialogue model of argument. *Argumentation, 12*(2), 325-339.

Bonevac, D. (2003). Pragma-dialectics and beyond. *Argumentation*, *17*(4), 451-459.

Brashers, D., & Meyers, R. A. (1989). Tag-team argument and group decision-making: A preliminary investigation. In B. E. Gronbeck (Ed.), *Spheres of argument: Proceedings of the Sixth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation* (pp. 542-550). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Canary, D. J., Brossmann, B. G., & Seibold, D. R. (1987). Argument structures in decision-making groups. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, *53*, 18-37.

Chaput, M., & Campos, M. (2007). A pragma-dialectical analysis of online political argumentation. In F. H. van Eemeren, J. A. Blair, C. A. Willard & B. Garssen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the sixth conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation* (pp. 235-240). Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Dahlberg, L. (2001). Computer-mediated communication and the public sphere: A critical analysis. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 7*(1), available online: http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/dahlberg.html

Doury, M. (2005). The accusation of *amalgame* as a meta-argumentative refutation. In F. H. van Eemeren & P. Houtlosser (Eds.), *Argumentation in practice* (pp. 145-161). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Eemeren, F. H. van, & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eemeren, F. H. van, Grootendorst, R., Jackson, S., & Jacobs, S. (1993). *Reconstructing argumentative discourse*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Eemeren, F. H. van, & Houtlosser, P. (1999). Strategic manoeuvring in argumentative discourse. *Discourse Studies*, *1*(4), 479-497.

Eemeren, F. H. van, & Houtlosser, P. (2005). Theoretical construction and argumentative reality: An analytic model of critical discussion and conventionalised types of argumentative activity. In D. Hitchcock (Ed.), *The uses of argument: Proceedings of a conference at McMaster University, 18-21 May 2005* (pp. 75-84). Hamilton.

Eemeren, F.H. van, Houtlosser, P., Ihnen, C., & Lewiński, M. (2010). Contextual considerations in the evaluation of argumentation. In C. Reed & C. Tindale (Eds.), *Dialectics, dialogue and argumentation: An examination of Douglas Walton's theories of reasoning and argument* (pp. 115-132). London: College Publications.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, *25/26*, 56-80.

Herring, S.C. (1999). Interactional coherence in CMC. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *4*(4), available online: http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol4/issue4/herring.html.

Jackson, S. (1998). Disputation by design. *Argumentation*, *12*(2), 183-198.

Jacobs, S. (2003). Two conceptions of openness in argumentation theory. In F.H. van Eemeren, J.A. Blair, Ch.A. Willard & A.F. Snoeck Henkemans (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation* (pp. 553-556). Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C. (2004). Introducing polylogue. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *36*(1), 1-24.

Lewiński, M. (2010). *Internet political discussion forums as an argumentative activity type: A pragma-dialectical analysis of online forms of strategic manoeuvring with critical reactions.* Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Marcoccia, M. (2004). On-line polylogues: conversation structure and participation framework in internet newsgroups. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *36*(1), 115–145.

Meyers, R. A., Brashers, D. E., & Hanner, J. (2000). Majority/minority influence: Identifying argumentative patterns and predicting argument-outcome links. *Journal of Communication, 50*(4), 3-30.

Rees, M.A. van. (2003). Within pragma-dialectics: Comments on Bonevac. *Argumentation*, *17*(4), 461-464.

Snoeck Henkemans, A. F. (1992). *Analysing complex argumentation: The reconstruction of multiple and coordinatively compound argumentation in a critical discussion.* Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Walton, D. N. (1998). *The new dialectic: Conversational contexts of argument.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Weger, Jr., H., & Aakhus, M. (2003). Arguing in Internet chat rooms: Argumentative adaptations to chat room design and some consequences for public deliberation at a distance. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 40*(1), 23-38.