Fighting on Facebook: Political Conversations Between Strong and Weak Ties

Most Facebook users have observed a heated disagreement on the site, or been involved in such a disagreement themselves. Why do we get into these disagreements and who are we fighting with? Are we learning anything from the disagreements we have online? In this research, we interviewed eighteen regular Facebook users about their experiences with conflict on the site. We found that people get into disagreements online because their *expectations* about how the people in their network will react were violated. Conflict was often a result not of disagreement, but of breach of expectations. When conflict ensued, participants sometimes dissolved their relationship with their argument counterpart, and sometimes did not. We review strategies used for relationship maintenance. Weak-tie relationships were more susceptible to being dissolved, and strong-tie relationships were often salvaged by "agreeing to disagree" or ceasing political discussion. Participants report sometimes learning from these hard conversations, but not often. We follow-up with design recommendations for social media platforms that could help mitigate disagreements or give people access to tools that help them have productive, hard conversations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a conversation about a controversial topic with a family member, friend, or acquaintance online? What happened as a result? The question is interesting for two reasons. First, discussions of controversial issues can sometimes lead to tension or even the dissolution of relationships. While it is sometimes advisable to cut off contact with a "toxic" tie [13], typically this is not a desirable outcome. Second, one might hope that discussing important issues of the day with both our strong and weak ties might lead to deeper understanding of issues. Does it?

Consider these two incidents:

(1) "There is someone I know who's part of the local community of performers and he tends to be more right-leaning. And we had some differences of opinion on something he'd posted on his page, which he then took to messenger to let me know that he was not impressed with my expressing myself the way that I did.... He said, 'You know, I know we had some tension in the past.' And I said, 'Yeah, I know we did too. But I figure people just sometimes have strong opinions and feelings, but we still know each other and care about each other.' And he said, 'I'm so glad you said that because yes, I love you as a friend and I feel exactly the same way. So we can totally just go past that.' And I said, 'Yeah, I think we can.' So that had a happy ending."

(2) "This person was a very close friend of mine, we were nearly best friends, spent a lot of time together, talked a lot together, both through texting and seeing each other regularly. I felt

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that we were very much aligned in leftist ideologies and a lot of political viewpoints. And then when COVID came up, she took a very hard turn and I didn't understand it....[She said] that knowing me was now negatively impacting her mental health and she couldn't be my friend anymore."

These two quotes are from the same person (P2). Why was one conflict resolved and the other not? What sparks this kind of conflict in the first place? Did either conversation lead to greater understanding of issues? In this research, we ask:

- Why do people get into online disagreements on Facebook?
- What factors influence whether a disagreement gets resolved?
- Is conflict different among strong versus weak ties?
- Is it common for conversations about difficult issues to lead to deeper understanding, and what factors support or impede that growth?

2 BACKGROUND

How can we have hard conversations in online spaces? This problem has four parts: 1) how relationship strength shapes online arguments, 2) the differences in online versus face-to-face arguments, 3) whether or not people are willing to learn from each other when it comes to disagreeing online, and finally 4) how current designs can support civilized, online arguments.

2.1 Strong and Weak Ties Online

The internet plays an important role in maintaining our social networks. Strong tie relationships are characterized by "intimacy, trust, respect, access, and mutual regard" while weak-tie relationships don't have the same level of shared intimacy [6], [10]. On the other hand, weak ties help to provide information and resources that individuals do not find in their immediate environment [7]. Strong and weak ties can be formed and maintained both face-to-face and online[14]. However, even strong ties are vulnerable to disruption by online disagreement [1] which we will begin to explore in more detail.

In regards to weak ties online, Zúñiga and Valenzuela found that weak tie discussion networks were positively related with civic participation, showcasing that conversing with weak ties is a strong predictor of being exposed to diversity of thoughts [6]. However, weak ties are most at risk for being broken by differences in opinion. McPherson, et. al. explored the idea of homophily on social networking sites (SNSs) and found that participants who perceived more differences with their friends engaged less on Facebook than those who perceived more homogeneity [12]. Further exploration of this finding led the researchers to conclude that weak ties are "particularly brittle to political disagreements, despite being the ties most likely to offer diversity in thought." Because there is no strong need to maintain a relationship with a weak tie, many people remove weak ties from their network, either by blocking or unfriending them when a difference in opinion arises. N. John and S. Dvir-Gvirsman call this "politically motivated unfriending," which is defined as a new political gesture in which people unfriend their Facebook connections who have differing opinions [9]. Unfriending impedes the ability for users to engage with others who have diversity in thought, leading to an echo chamber effect.

2.2 Online vs Face-to-Face Communication

Weak ties are already more delicate than strong ties and often not having the ability to talk with our weak ties face-to-face exacerbates issues and widens the political divide. In their research, Grevet, et. al. found that many weak ties primarily kept up with one another and communicated via social media, meaning that people could only really gather impressions of their weak ties

based on their online behavior [8]. Would having the ability to discuss issues face-to-face fix that? Researchers Lipinski-Harten and Tafarodi compared online chat and face-to-face communication on their ability to neutralize peoples' attitudes by exposing two people to opposing perspectives. They found that the medium in which people argue played a significant role in attitude moderation and whether or not participants would change their view, come to an understanding with their argument counterpart, or possess greater attitude moderation [11]. As expected, they found that people who had the ability to communicate face-to-face were able to move toward their partner's position on a divisive issue more readily. Since strong ties have this affordance more than weak ties, they are better able to settle their differences more easily than those who only have access to online moderation techniques.

2.3 Promoting Civilized Debate with System Design

Amanda Baughan, et. al. argue that the problem with having uncomfortable conversations online is partly due to the design of the platform in which these conversations are being conducted [1]. There are several features of online platforms that don't promote civilized debate, which we'll explore. The first is the public nature of conflict. Fox and Moreland found that relational turbulence that occurred was due to the public nature of conflict on Facebook [5].

Another problem is the ease with which echo chambers are created. Leticia Bode found that people with strong political ideologies have strong preferences with regard to political information, and therefore tend to prune their news feed more often when the type of political information they see from others doesn't align with their own ideologies [2]. However, Porismita Borah found that incivility often caused more willingness to participate in online conversation and that even though incivility can have negative effects, it can also have positive effects on democratic outcomes [3]. She found that framing was one of the main reasons incivility in online conversations had positive effects because by framing an issue along others values, you are able to resonate with their preexisting notions and help reinforce their existing values.

The design of online systems can be detrimental to sustaining relationships. To combat this, Amanda Baughan, et. al. says we must design systems that promote "interpersonal design," which centers around relationships in the design process, an essential step in supporting users in the challenging task of arguing well [1].

3 METHODS

We recruited participants through several politically oriented Facebook groups as well as one Facebook group for people who wish to be paid to do studies. Our goal was to uncover the effects of differing political opinion on Facebook and how those opinions affect peoples' relationships with friends, family, and acquaintances both on and offline. We conducted semi-structured interviews with regular Facebook users in an effort to uncover rich, in-depth information and narratives.

3.1 Participants and Recruitment

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we recruited participants by messaging people in Facebook groups. The recruitment message read as follows: "Do your Facebook friends ever post things you'd rather not see? Do friends post political content you disagree with? We are researchers at Georgia Tech, and are interviewing regular Facebook users about how they communicate about difficult topics on Facebook. Interviews will last around an hour (90 minutes max), and we will compensate you $20 for your time."

First, we began recruiting from the Facebook group "Paid studies, study swap, participant recruitment." We received hundreds of responses and vetted participants with a few basic questions about Facebook use to identify those who intended to participate in the study in good faith, rather

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
P1	31	Male	White
P2	48	Female	White
P3	32	Female	White
P4	37	Female	Middle Eastern
P5	20	Male	South Asian
P6	27	Non-binary	White
P7	25	Male	White
P8	26	Female	White
P9	48	Female	White
P10	21	Male	White
P11	23	Female	White
P12	64	Male	White
P13	48	Female	White
P14	19	Female	White
P15	20	Female	Asian
P16	71	Female	White
P17	24	Male	African-American
P18	32	Male	White

than simply wanting a gift card. After ten interviews, we recruited eight more participants from more politically oriented groups, to gain deeper insights into political communication on Facebook. We received responses from people in the groups: "International Affairs, History, and Politics", "PCRW Political discussions", "Georgia Politics Unfiltered", and "A Group Where We Post Funny Political Memes And Hold Logical Debate." All together, the participants were 18 Facebook users (10 women, 7 men, 1 non-binary). The mean age was 34.2 years, with a range of ages between 19 and 71. Participants were offered a $20 Amazon gift card for their participation in the study. All participants reported regularly using Facebook. Table 1 summarizes their ages, genders, races/ethnicities, and occupations.

3.2 Data Collection

The interviews were conducted by the first and third authors. All participants were interviewed using video conferencing software. The audio was recorded after obtaining informed consent and later transcribed using Rev.com. Each interview was semi-structured and lasted no more than 90 minutes. The interviews were then analyzed by the first and second authors using MAXQDA software to reveal key themes discussed in the findings.

3.3 Analysis

We used Braun & Clarke's theoretical thematic approach to surface specific themes within the data. The themes of interest, to answer our research questions, related to disagreements on Facebook, events following those disagreements, and relationships between the two parties in disagreement. The first and second authors collaboratively discussed and derived a code tree based on those themes extracted from the data. Within the coding tree, each overarching category as well as

Table 2

Participant	Argument Topic	Counterpart in Argument	Outcome of Argument
P1	Second Amendment Legislation	Strangers in a political Facebook group	Stopped talking
	BLM Movement	An old friend	Agreed to disagree and remained friends
	2020 Election	Strangers in the comments section of a post	Stopped talking
P2	2020 Election	First cousin	Blocked one another
	COVID-19 Vaccines	Best friend	Friendship ended
	Difference in political opinion	Community acquaintance	Resolved their differences in person
P3	Various differences in political opinion	Mother	Tries not to talk about politics anymore
	State vaccination lottery	Strangers in a political Facebook group	Stopped participating in the group
P4	2016 Election	First cousin	Tries not to talk about politics anymore
	Anti-Semitic Comments	College friend	Blocked one another
P5	COVID-19 Vaccine	2020 College friend	Other party admitted they were wrong
	Canadian Environmental Policies	Father	Increased understanding from both sides
	COVID-19 Misinformation	Distant friend	Blocked one another
P6	Various differences in political opinion	Various family members	No intervention in order to protect relationships
P7	Transgender rights	Stranger in the comments section of a post	Blocked one another
P8	Husband posted about unemployment	Strangers in the comments section of a post	Blocked one another
P9	Environmental policies	Distant friend	Friendship ended
	2021 Capitol attack	Distant friend	Still friends, but frustrated by lack of understanding
P10	Validity of a political video	Strangers in a political Facebook group	Agreed to disagree and remained civil
	Various differences in political opinion	Various close friends	Agree to disagree and remain friends
P11	LGBTQ+ rights	Aunt	Tries not to talk about politics anymore
	COVID-19 Misinformation	Distant friend	Still friends, but frustrated by lack of understanding
P12	Various differences in political opinion	Various close friends	Agree to disagree and remain friends
	Various differences in political opinion	Various strangers in a political Facebook group	Increased understanding from participant
P13	Various differences in political opinion	College friend	Tries not to talk about politics anymore
P14	Inner-city America	Stranger in the comments section of a post	Blocked one another
P15	Political turmoil in the Philippines	Classmate	Friendship ended
	Various differences in political opinion	Various close friends	Agreed to disagree and remain friends
P16	2020 Election	Various strangers in a political Facebook group	Blocked one another
P17	Differences in political opinion	Co-worker	Resolved their differences in person
P18	Differences in political opinion	Wife with his family	Tries not to talk about politics anymore

subcategories were clearly defined with examples from the data. They proceeded to code one transcript together using the coding tree as a template to see if the same ideas were identified based on the definitions from the tree. Then, they coded another transcript separately and compared to see if they had identified similar passages, quotes, and themes. The transcripts that were coded separately by the researchers were similar. After verifying that coding was generally consistent, the researchers proceeded to individually code transcripts and identified common themes that are outlined in the findings.

4 FINDINGS

We interviewed 18 people to find out who they fight with on Facebook and what they fight about. Table 2 summarizes each argument participants reported, who that argument was with, and the outcome of each argument.

To summarize,

- 6 participants reported instances of fighting with strangers in political Facebook groups or in the comments section of a post and either stopped participating in the group, stopped talking to their argument counterpart, or blocked their argument counterpart
- 4 participants reported instances where an argument with a family member led to the topic of politics being off limits
- 2 participants who fought with weak ties were able to resolve their differences when they had a conversation about their differences in person
- 3 participants had friendships end, on and offline, because of a difference in political opinion

In digging deeper, we found that people have *expectations* about the political beliefs of the people they converse with on Facebook, whether that be a stranger from a Facebook group or their best

friend. We found that when these expectations about peoples' political beliefs were broken, it often led to conflict or the dissolution of a relationship, depending on the tie to a person. Additionally, we wanted to find out whether these disagreements led to a deeper understanding of issues by our participants. In the following sections, we will describe the differences in conflict between strong and weak ties, when relationships are maintained or dissolved, and whether or not conflict led to increased understanding of issues.

4.1 Forming Expectations

When we converse with people, we usually have an idea or an expectation as to their views on particular subjects. These expectations can be formed in a number of ways, whether it be sharing the same cultural background, belonging to the same career field, or sharing familial ties. More simply, based on shared history or group membership, we form assumptions about the political beliefs of those we interact with. We define expected reactions to be the political opinion a participant anticipates their ties will hold, whether or not that view aligns with the participants'. Expected reactions can be one of three distinct forms:

(1) You expect your weak ties to share your opinion because you are part of a shared group or don't know each other well enough for you to believe any differently. For example, some participants were members of Facebook groups that emphasized a certain view. Therefore, regardless of whether or not they knew the people in the group, they expected other members to align with their views. For example, P16, who was the moderator of a Biden support group, stated, *"This is a support group for Joe, not for somebody to come in here and run him down. If you're going to do that, I don't want you in the group."* Similarly, when asked if the political content they see on their feed tends to align with or oppose their own views, P6 stated *"I think a lot of it tends to align, mostly because most of the people I'm still interacting with on my feed are people I have been in groups with for awhile where we already had something in common to join that."*

(2) You expect your strong ties to share your opinion because you know them well. For example, when asked the same question of whether or not the political content on their feed tends to align with or oppose their views, P11 stated *"I'd say a lot of the political content I see friends and family sharing usually is kind of at least relatively aligns with my views."* Similarly, P3 stated *"Well, if it is a friend of mine, I would say that I probably agree."*

(3) You expect your strong ties to have a different opinion because you know them well. For example, you may have friends or family you know you don't agree with on particular issues. P6 noted that their distant relatives will often post things they do not agree with. In those situations, they said that they *"honestly usually don't engage even though I probably should because they're my family."*

Because these reactions were expected, these reported instances did not result in rising tensions among our participants because there was no element of surprise in their interactions. The catalyst for short-term conflict is not disagreement, but surprise.

4.2 Breaking Expectations

What happens when previously held expectations are violated? We found that when an expectation is broken, conflict ensues. However, the outcome of broken expectations among strong and weak ties is different. Here, we will describe the differences in those outcomes.

4.2.1 Unexpected Reactions among Weak Ties. With weak ties, there was less of an expectation that the participant would share the same opinion as their counterpart. Because of this, participants

often did not feel as much of a need to maintain a relationship with weak ties when an unexpected reaction arose. Here, P3 states:

> *"Ultimately I think that if I know somebody as an acquaintance, maybe through work or something, and I friend them on Facebook and I see that they're posting malicious content, I will actually make the decision to stay away from them. I don't want to be their friend in real life. I don't want to be their friend on Facebook if that's the behavior that they are going to have."*

P7 shared a similar sentiment, stating *"if somebody [that I don't know very well] posts something that I don't like, I just immediately block them."*

4.2.2 Unexpected Reactions among Strong Ties. When an unexpected opinion emerges among strong ties, the situation is more fraught. Because of the shared history between the participant and their tie, there is more of an expectation as to what views each will hold on particular issues. In this case, there are different approaches that participants take when handling a difference in opinion with their strong ties.

(1) Agreeing to disagree: Some participants agree to disagree, as they want to maintain the relationship. P14 says, *"[a]t the end of the day, when I get into an argument with somebody, I end up texting them and being like, 'look, we were both heated.' I always end up texting things, especially if it's somebody I know."*

(2) Stopping political discussions: Other participants decided to stop talking about political issues with their strong ties in order to maintain a relationship. P11 recalls an argument they had with a relative, in which they decided to stop responding in order to preserve the peace. Her initial reaction to the difference in opinion was as follows: *"I was a bit surprised actually that she held these views because she's, it's not like she's not an intelligent woman."*

(3) Blocking each other: Finally, some participants terminated their online relationships with their strong ties due to a difference in opinion. P2 speaks of an experience that caused their cousin to block her because of a difference in opinion. She states:

> *"One cousin several years ago now during, I think Trump's early years, blocked me all together because she didn't want to continue any of the discourse anymore. Although, she freely posted a lot of things which seems to invite discourse, but she didn't really care for it if it didn't align with what she wanted to feel about it."*

4.3 Maintaining Relationships/ Strategies for Coexistence

We found that our participants held expectations about the people they interact with on Facebook. Sometimes, those expectations are broken and conflict followed. How did some participants manage to bounce back from these conflicts and carry on with their relationships and some did not?

As we said before, in the case of weak ties, participants often chose not to mend relationships with people they didn't know. When talking about whether or not to engage with strangers, P5 states, *"Why would I go about debating with a person I don't know?"* Similarly, P6 says, *"If you don't agree with me on this, just unfriend me now or unfollow me".*

However, participants expressed different sentiments when it came to conflict with their stronger ties. While there were still reports of breaking relationships with friends and family over arguments about politics, there were more times when participants employed strategies for coexistence. We found that those strategies were different depending on the character of the relationship between strong ties. All four of the reported arguments where the outcome was "agreeing to disagree" happened among participants and their friends. P10 says *"A lot of my friends, they disagree with a lot of the stuff that I post on Facebook, but they just accept it as my opinion, and accept that I have the right to an opinion, and equally that they have their right to an opinion."* P12 says he doesn't let

politics get in the way of his friendships, even when he disagrees with his friends opinions. *"The primary reason that we are friends is not going to jeopardize that for the secondary reason that I might not agree with their politics."* P1 shares a similar story,

> *"[We] kind of went back and forth for quite a while. The conversation, at first, was a little bit more aggressive towards me. And then after the conversation, and some back and forth, I think we just kind of respectfully agree to disagree. I told him I respected him and I thanked him for his service as I always have, but I'm throwing my support behind this group for my reasons. And he doesn't agree with their leaders and what they stand for his reasons and that's his right."*

In contrast, in six reported arguments where the outcome was ceasing talk about politics, five were reported among participants and their family members. When it comes to talking about politics with her Mother, P3 stated, *"She would really try to get into things with me...she would hint at it and try to get me to talk about it and basically try to start an argument with me for whatever reason. I don't know why, but I guess I just started making it more private as I got older."*

One key factor that helped lead to the repair of relationships was face-to-face resolution. In several instances, when participants were able to have conversations in person with their argument counterparts, they were able to resolve their differences. P17 speaks of a situation with his co-worker that started on Facebook and how they were able to settle their differences when speaking at the office:

> *"[He] posted something on Facebook that I don't like. I just commented. We were laughing and it was no big deal to me until the next day when I arrived at work and the guy was literally avoiding me. It became something [as long] as two days...[he] was still avoiding me in the corridors and everything. I realized the real cause of that was my comment on Facebook. On the third day, I walked up, gave [him] some coffee and told him we need to talk. He opened up and told me, 'I didn't like the way you commented on Facebook. I felt [like] you're attacking me and stuff'. We talked about it and it was all over. It was down in the past."*

Another sentiment participants expressed had to do with the idea of knowing they would have to see someone in person again. Because of this, people often felt that it was easier to brush issues under the rug or agree to disagree, as they would have to face people face to face and did not want to deal with lasting awkwardness or tension from disagreements started online. P11's aunt posted something on her page with an anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment. Although she disagreed she said,

> *"I can't even remember what it was about, but I was just like...I think maybe actually my aunt kind of went well, I've had enough of talking about this. I was kind of like, 'oh God is it going to be really awkward the next time we see each other?' But I would have assumed they'd forgotten by then, because obviously with COVID people aren't seeing each other that much."*

Similarly, P4 got into an argument with her cousin over the results of the 2016 election. The entire family got involved in an online argument. She says, *"We didn't see each other for years afterwards. It was that bad, and our parents are siblings. So this was not a good situation. We've patched things up now, but it took us years, and we don't talk about politics or religion with them."* The second reason we found for participants being able to resolve conflict was the idea of mutual respect from both parties and making peace with the idea of agreeing to disagree with someone. P1 recalls a disagreement he had with an old friend, noting: "And then after the conversation, and some back and forth, I think we just kind of respectfully agree to disagree. I told him I respected him and I thanked him

for his service as I always have, but I'm throwing my support behind this group for my reasons. And he doesn't agree with their leaders and what they stand for his reasons and that's his right."

4.4 How Disagreements Shape Understanding

What impact does disagreement on Facebook have on our understanding? When people disagree, do they leave an argument saying they learned something about another person's point of view? Unfortunately, this outcome was not common in our sample.

   Of the 19 participants interviewed, only 3 reported learning something as a result of an argument. When asked if they've ever thought more about a controversial issue based on a discussion from Facebook and what it is like to learn from someone else, P2 stated:

> *"At first I didn't realize I was someone who knew less. And I think that's probably a common situation because we don't know what we don't know. But when then someone comes in and says, "No, look, there's a whole lot more to this. Let me show you." And then they lay it out. I find it very eyeopening to realize there's a whole world going on here that I didn't realize, that I didn't see, that I had no idea about"*

P5 shares a similar story about the ways in which we can learn from one another through a political debate they engaged in with their father:

> *"I guess the outcome of this did come through was that I got to learn a lot more about how the economy of a country needs to run through, and it was something which was knowledgeable for me. But at the same time my dad also learned how to outweigh benefits versus risks of something....So it was a good debate....We both got to learn a lot from each other."*

In both these instances, the participants speak about how the argument took place. There was no hostility and both parties on each side of the argument were willing to learn from one another and exchange ideas in a well thought out manner which was appreciated by the participants.

   When describing approaches unfavorable to learning from their counterpart in an argument, P2 and P5 both agreed that combativeness, unwillingness to listen, and involving the individual rather than focusing on the subject matter, played a considerable part. P2 states,

> *"I tend to get edgy when someone just says, 'You're wrong.' I would like to... I don't want to talk about me. I'm not the topic. Let's talk about the topic. So once the topic is gone into and more information is presented, and then I can go, 'Oh, I see now. I understand. I didn't see before. Thank you for showing me.'"*

P5 similarly says,

> *"If there's a person who were willing to listen and wants to actually share the other person's standpoint of view, then for sure it'd be productive and it would actually lead towards both parties getting knowledge. But if a person is more like, 'You know what? Whatever I say is right. I don't care whatever you think,' those conversations are not productive at all. In that point it's either going to escalate the situation, or it's also going to lead towards a detrimental effect on both of their friendship or both of their acquaintances, whatever it is."*

   We also wondered if there were instances in which people changed their views completely based on a conversation they had on Facebook. Of the 3 participants who had learned something from arguments, 2 reported changing being able to change their argument counterpart's view as the result of a disagreement. P5 recalls a recent incident where they were trying to convince a friend to take down a post about COVID vaccine misinformation. At the end of the argument he stated, *"Three months ago, they didn't believe a pandemic existed. Today they believe a pandemic exists, but*

vaccinations don't work...Providing an outcome where they at least acknowledge that a pandemic exists and we should do something about that, I thought that was a huge first success." He adds that he believes he was able to accomplish this outcome because he remained composed and provided factual information. Additionally, he adds the following: *"In terms of political debate, the best thing to do is never say, "No, you're wrong." Try to agree with them on one point, but also point out your points at the same time as well."* Finally, P11 recalls a time when they were able to resolve an issue in a meme group they're a member of. The conversation played out as follows: "Someone said something, and I went, well actually I'm not a hundred percent that's right. And they went, oh no, it's not, good point. Thanks for telling me that. And I was like, no worries." However, she does note that this was a rare interaction to have on Facebook.

We note, first, that few instances of people's opinions changing were reported and participants stated that good conflict where parties walked away having learned something and not ruined a relationship were rare. Second, the ways in which people react to misalignment is important. Being open to having different opinions and wanting to learn is an important piece to figuring out how we can have hard conversations that we can take things away from.

4.5 Participant Design Suggestions

Following questions about their personal experiences, we asked participants how Facebook could support more productive conversations between people. P3 offered an intriguing suggestion: *"If I could turn [politics] off of my wall from showing up just when regularly scrolling, I would do that in a heartbeat because that's not really why I go to Facebook at all."* While a current feature of Facebook allows temporarily filtering content from a particular user, our participants preferred to temporarily filter a topic from all users. Other users were opposed to this feature. P1 and P16 feel it is important to be constantly informed on the latest news and other users' reactions to them.

Second, some participants suggested that if conversations get uncomfortable online, perhaps participants should move to face-to-face communication to resolve them. P1 states, *"I know friendships that have broken because of disagreements on Facebook. I often wonder if that same conversation didn't happen on Facebook and if it were at a restaurant or a bar, I feel like people maybe would be less aggressive towards one another and you could actually have a civil conversation."* Moving a tense conversation to a higher bandwidth medium is generally wise advice, and this raises the question of whether an online system could nudge participants to do so.

We discuss the implications of these suggestions in the next section.

5 DISCUSSION

We propose two design recommendations to help people communicate across difference and resolve arguments that broke out on Facebook.

5.1 "Snoozing Politics"

As we discussed above, the most common request from users is the ability to snooze political content on a person's feed. While Facebook already allows the user to snooze all content from a particular person for thirty days, our participants wanted to snooze just political content from that person or from everyone.

While this seems like a promising way to let people enjoy the platform rather than constantly argue, we know that this design recommendation could prove to be problematic. For example, having the ability not to see political content on your feed could cause you to miss out on important current events and news going on in your community and in the world. Further, how we define "politics" is problematic both theoretically (how do we decide what we want to include) and operationally (how we use a combination of machine and human labor to implement that filter).

We see three general ways this could be implemented:

(1) For a certain amount of time: Snoozing all politics for a certain amount of time would give people the option to take a break from politics and be able to come back to their feed after a certain amount of time with new perspectives. The problem with this is that people could keep hitting snooze, inadvertently shutting them off from seeing politics forever.

(2) For certain people on your feed: Sometimes, we need a break from certain people's political opinions. Facebook currently allows you to snooze all content from a particular person; however, being able to snooze just political content for a time might help maintain the relationship. However, this may lead to participants experiencing more unexpected reactions then they did before. As we've seen, experiencing unexpected reactions often led to participants completely cutting ties with their argument counterparts without the chance to try and bridge the divide.

(3) For certain topics: Finally, you could snooze politics surrounding certain topics. For example, at the height of COVID, people expressed that Facebook was leading to increased anxiety and depression and they didn't want to see news surrounding the virus constantly on their feed. Being able to filter out things you don't want to see could allow you to use the platform for social and familial interaction.

Of course if snoozing politics is possible, many may hit the snooze button over and over. Further, some users may ask for a permanent politics filter. This raises complicated questions about broader implications for an informed citizenry and the possibility of civic understanding. People may reasonably choose to use Facebook for light topics like keeping in touch with family, and use other media platforms to stay informed as citizens. It is possible, however, that allowing the filtering of political and controversial content would defacto lead to people being less well informed. Civic goals arguably need to be balanced with giving individuals agency to choose what content they see.

A second tension raised by the idea of "snoozing politics" is that it may be nonstrategic with respect to the corporation's goal of maximizing time on the site and advertising revenues. Conflict drives engagement. We see here an example where the business model of the site is arguably in tension with the needs of individuals and communities [4].

5.2 Increasing Conversation Bandwidth

Our participants emphasized the importance of moving a conversation to higher bandwidth when things get tense. This raises the intriguing idea that the system could possibly nudge people to do so. Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology could possibly detect when a conversation is becoming strained, and offer a suggestion to move to a higher-bandwidth medium. Research by Catherine Grevet watched as Facebook users typed, and suggested more civil phrasing [8]. The same approach could suggest moving out of text altogether.

Many people don't realize that Facebook has built-in support for video and audio communication, and of course other platforms are available including ones that strong ties already use and are comfortable with. Regardless, people don't always think to move to a richer communication mode when discussions get heated. The platform could nudge participants to consider higher-bandwidth communication when it detects that tensions are rising. In some cases, it might make sense to encourage not just video but in-person interaction when possible.

5.3 Breaking Ties

Our discussion up until now has the unstated assumption that maintaining ties is desirable. It's important to note that sometimes breaking a tie is preferable, particularly if a relationship has persistent abusive or manipulative elements. In such a situation, a feature that encourages resolving conflict through higher-bandwidth communication might do harm. Perhaps users experiencing

escalating conflict could be provided with supportive information on how to know when someone is being abusive and how to decide whether to break a tie. Empirical data is needed to determine whether encouraging higher-bandwidth communication helps, and whether it ever has a downside.

6 LIMITATIONS

There are many kinds of ties–between friends, relatives, colleagues, acquaintances, and many other categories. Our findings suggest that the kind of tie changes what happens when conflict occurs. One limitation to our recruiting methods is that we did not receive answers about all the different types of ties. For example, none of our interview subjects talked about conflict with co-workers. Conflict with a regular collaborator is likely different from conflict with a work acquaintance in a large organization. In future studies we would like specifically to explore how work friends and colleagues talk about politics with one another. More generally, there is more research needed to fully understand conflict in the context of all the different kinds of ties.

7 CONCLUSION

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