

Maria Sivenkova

On metacommunicative coordination in British, German and Russian political blogs and webchats

Abstract: As a vital technique in preparing for effective communication, in correcting ongoing communication glitches, and in remedying problems encountered by the participants in previous interactions, metacommunication has been intensively investigated in various types of discourse. However, there is still a dearth of research on metacommunication in computer-mediated genres of political discussion; and the potential for enhancing online political deliberation remains largely untapped by political agents in many countries.

The article deals with several types of metacommunicative remarks employed to facilitate communication exchanges in political weblogs and webchats. These metacommunicative comments are generated by political agents who blog / take part in live chat sessions and by members of the public who post comments on the politicians' blogs or participate in online discussions with the politicians. Three categories of the metacommunicative comments are analysed: (i) those performing prospective metacommunicative coordination, (ii) metacommunicative comments that regulate ongoing interactions and (iii) metacommunicative remarks that serve to expose and correct previous discursive organisational issues.

In addition, some parallels are drawn between metacommunicative comments employed in online genres of political communication and those generated by political agents in such traditional offline genres as parliamentary question-answer sessions and political interviews. Besides, a few cross-cultural observations in the application of metacommunicative remarks online are discussed.

Keywords: metacommunication, metacommunicative comments, metacommunicative coordination, political blogs and webchats, British, German and Russian computer-mediated political discourse.

1. Introduction: metacommunication in computer-mediated political discourse

It is common knowledge that the Internet age had brought communicators a number of opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, computer-mediated communication empowers individuals by transcending borders and

providing platforms for captivating hybrid forms of interaction. But on the other, “technological seduction” often entails a degree of frustration, inefficiency or even danger (as anyone who has had a problem with a broken link, a lost blog post or a hacker attack would probably confirm).

In view of these apparently controversial aspects of computer-mediated environment, one question arises: How do participants of blogs and webchats feel about the benefits and challenges of using the Internet channel to voice their thoughts and advance their arguments?

In search for an answer, I am going to analyse some metacommunicative remarks appearing in two different genres: blogs written by politicians and in webchats between members of the audience and politicians. Since metacommunicative remarks often give us a valuable glimpse of others’ introspection, they become instrumental in uncovering job-related challenges and attitudes on the part of politicians. Besides, at least some comments posted in politicians’ blogs can be regarded as instances of valuable feedback to the politicians’ (meta)communicative behaviour. Thus, by analysing metacommunicative comments made by individual commentators and those appearing in co-participant interaction, all stakeholders can easily evaluate the impact of a politician’s meta-talk on online audiences.

Similar to the developments in other fields, the application of new technologies to political communication has a range of advantages and disadvantages. In particular, computer-mediated forms of interaction allow politicians to quickly and inexpensively reach diverse target audiences and receive feedback from their supporters and opponents. Already a glimpse at headlines such as *Versprechen werden gehalten* – ‘Promises are kept’ or *Politfrühstück ein voller Erfolg* – ‘Political breakfast: a complete success’, appearing in politicians’ blogs, illustrates this point nicely, say nothing of numerous internet-related metacommunicative posts, a genre especially favoured by those politicians who enjoy a prominent online presence.

In such comments, political agents provide their lists of advantages and disadvantages of keeping a blog or having a Facebook/Twitter account and often make insightful comparisons of these communication platforms. To illustrate, in one of his metacommunicative posts, Daniel Mouratidis, a successful green politician and blogger from Germany, compared comments made by users on Facebook with opinions expressed during a pub conversation with friends, based on ease of expression and feedback. At the same time, this politician likened writing a blog entry to constructing a booth for pre-election campaigning in the city center, for it takes considerable time to set the booth up, and then the political agent waits in vain for hours for

visitors to interact with (Von Social Media, Blog und Backnang 21; 15.02.2011; <http://www.mouratidis.de>).

Likewise, participating in live webchats often presents a challenge by demanding technical skills not all politicians might be equipped with. For instance, political agents are expected to quickly adapt to a new studio computer to be able to type fast and efficiently solve computer glitches along the way.

In addition, political blogs often contain aggressive exchanges, whose participants seek to offend politicians and derail constructive discussion. Dealing with such commentators, who neither read the postings nor analyse them carefully, demands thick skin and/or special communicative tactics on the part of the politicians who blog (e.g. pre-moderating the comments before their appearance on the blog). The following excerpt from the weaving comments in the blog of the British politician Lord Tebbit illustrates the problem of lack of understanding between the author and his/her commentators and provides one useful tactic of dealing with abuse:

(1) Despite the headline over my blog of last Tuesday, I was not asking anyone to define multiculturalism for me. My views on that were expressed in my blogs of January 9 and of February 7, both of which attracted similar abuse from many of the same people who are incapable of or unwilling to read what I wrote. As ever, **I will ignore the foul mouths who cannot cope with either reading or the self-discipline needed in a civilised society.**

(25.10.2011; <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/author/normantebbit>)

Consequently, both positive and negative aspects of computer-mediated interaction are reflected in metadiscursive comments issued by participants of computer-mediated political discussions – political agents and members of their audience.

To put the study reported in this article in perspective, in my previous work on negative metacommunicative remarks made in parliamentary dialogue and political interviews, I found metacommunication occurring in political interaction to be ubiquitous and versatile. In particular, three classes of metacommunicative comments with further subdivisions were analysed elsewhere. In the study reported here, the same broad classes of meta-talk are observed, with some variations, to be a standard feature of online political deliberation. These are metacommunicative remarks that refer to the (i) quality and (ii) quantity of transmitted information and to the (iii) speech behaviour characteristics of participants.

To illustrate just two metacommunication subclasses belonging to class (i), relevance and temporal appropriateness are two important qualities of information that are often made explicit in online political discussions. In most of the blogs I have studied, there are at least several instances of user-generated negative evaluative remarks exposing the blogger for uselessness and irrelevance (e.g. *A comical post that may appeal to many of your supporters but in truth a post that holds no great value other than I am sure you feel a little better for having put fingers to keys ;o*); from the former blog of Tom Harris; 30.09.2010; <http://www.tomharris.org.uk>).

As for temporal aspects, they are especially important in webchat interaction, whose participants are used to getting prompt answers and usually tolerate no delays from the chatting guests. For example, several participants of a Mumsnet webchat with David Cameron, the then Leader of the Opposition, voiced their discontent over the politician's delayed answers to their questions, as Example (2) illustrates:

(2) Participant 1: What are you doing there David? Picking bits of oatcake out of your teeth? Making up your policies as you type? Gordon Brown had answered 10 questions in the first 15 minutes (and that's with a visual impairment) Haven't you done any prep for this interview??

Participant 2: It is disappointing how little they seem to prepare for these interviews (given that so many of the questions have been freely available online for days). [...]

Participant 3: I can't believe it takes him at least 7 minutes to type the sort of soundbite he spouts on a daily basis. Bring in the butler and let him do it.

(www.mumsnet.com, 19.11.2009)

However, apart from the three classes mentioned above, there is another type of meta-talk that is notable in online political interaction in blogs and webchats – namely, coordinating, or organisational metacommunication. This type of metacommunication plays a major role in

- enabling a smooth beginning, unfolding or ending of an interaction;
- sharing with participants the rules and conventions of a forthcoming discussion and exposing instances of breach of the rules;
- reporting organisational glitches and suggesting ways to correct them;

- warning participants about forthcoming changes of format;
- providing users with sources of information and information on other possibilities to interact with politicians beyond blogs or webchats.

In what follows, I will focus on several types of organisational metacommunicative remarks made in British, German and Russian blogs led by politicians, as well as on such comments issued by the participants of live webchats with political agents. The purpose of this contribution is to show how metacommunicative coordination is performed in online political deliberation.

2. Data and research questions

Using the methods of observation and qualitative content analysis, I have analysed 10 British, 10 German and 10 Russian blogs maintained by senior politicians, members of parliaments (further referred to as MPs), and public servants. Some of the blogs were selected based on reports of blogging contests (e.g. *Total Politics Blog Awards 2011* in the UK, <http://www.totalpolitics.com>), news or analytical publications related to political blogs (*Bloggende Politiker: Blogschau* in Germany, politik.de). Others were randomly selected from the blog rolls of politicians or based on the analysis of political agents' websites.

The majority of postings included in this study were created in 2009–2011, although several bloggers have stopped being active contributors in 2011, closed their blogs altogether or moved to a different platform (Facebook or Twitter).

The main criteria for selection were (1) the topic of blog entry (only political content was included in the subsets of data), (2) the number of comments made by participants and the presence of co-participant interaction, and (3) a reasonable balance of A-level blogs and ordinary blogs. Thus, blogs with active public participation were given a preference over those containing only one to two comments or no comments at all. Furthermore, blogs of less well-known politicians were included alongside with those of celebrities.

Metacommunicative remarks coming from the blogs of the following politicians are included in my British subset of data:

- Norman Tebbit, a member of the House of Lords and a successful Telegraph blogger (<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/author/normantebbit>);
- Daniel Hannan, a Conservative member of European Parliament and an influential Telegraph blogger (<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/author/danielhannan>);
- Mary Honeyball, a Labour member of the European Parliament for London (<http://thehoneyballbuzz.com>);
- Tom Watson, a Labour MP (<http://www.tom-watson.co.uk>);
- John Redwood, a Conservative MP (<http://www.johnredwoodsdiary.com>);
- Douglas Carswell, a Conservative MP (<http://www.talkcarswell.com/default.aspx>);
- Kerry McCarthy, a Labour MP (<http://kerrymccarthy.wordpress.com>);
- Lynne Featherstone, a Liberal Democrat MP (<http://www.lynnfeatherstone.org/category/> blog);
- Steve Webb, a Liberal Democrat MP and Minister of State for Pensions (<http://webbsteve.blogspot.com>);
- Steve Tierney, a Cambridgeshire County Councillor (<http://www.stevetierney.org/blog>).

As we can see, two Telegraph blogs – Lord Tebbit’s and D.Hannan’s – were included in the British subset of data, despite the somewhat unequal conditions the celebrities enjoy over individual local politicians with no journalistic background or institutional Telegraph support. One positive outcome of merging such heterogeneous data was a greater variety of metacommunicative remarks collected and analysed. To list just one example, weaving comments, that is, remarks that sum up previous discussion and provide the author’s evaluation of other participants’ communicative behaviour, were discovered in Lord Tebbit’s blog. They contain a great deal of interesting meta-talk and would have been disregarded otherwise due to their relative scarcity in political blogs.

As for the German politicians who blog, in my study they are:

- Peter Tauber, a Bundestag member from the Christian Democratic Union, (“Schwartzter Peter”, <http://petertauber.wordpress.com>);
- Aydan Özogus, a Bundestag member from the Social Democratic Party of Germany (<http://oezoguz.de>);
- Lars Klingbeil, a Bundestag member from the Social Democratic Party of Germany (“Zwischen Munster und Berlin”, <http://www.munsterberlin.de>);

- Jörg Tauss, a former member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany and of the Pirate Party Germany (<http://tauss-gezwitscher.de>);
- Klaus Lübke, a Social Democratic official from Hamburg (<http://www.veddel.net/wordpress>);
- Carola Veit, a Social Democratic member of the Hamburg Parliament (<http://carola-veit.de/kategorie/blog>);
- Hansjörg Schmidt, a Social Democratic member of the Hamburg Parliament (<http://www.hansjoerg-schmidt.de/mywp>);
- Thomas Albrecht, a Christian Democratic member of the Trier city council (<http://albrecht-thomas.blog.volksfreund.de>);
- Daniel Mouratidis, a Green member of the Backnang city council (<http://www.mouratidis.de>);
- Rainer Stinner, a foreign policy speaker of the Free Democratic Party in the Bundestag (<http://www.stinner-bloggt.de>).

Unlike the British subset of data, with bloggers relatively evenly representing the major parties across the UK political spectrum, the majority of German bloggers included in the data belong to the Social Democratic Party of Germany. To my mind, it was easier to find SDP blogs with active co-participant interaction because the party enjoys the support of a larger number of Internet activists, which reflects the SDP's web-savvy image well. The Green Party, also very active online, is often represented by collective blogs led by several activists, the format excluded from the current study.

The majority of Russian politicians in my data keep their blogs on LiveJournal, the most popular blogging platform in the Russian blogosphere, which combines features of blogging platforms with those of social network sites. These are officials from Russia's two regions that have exhibited high levels of digital political activity:

- Oleg Chirkunov, the governor of the Perm region (<http://chirkunov.livejournal.com>);
- Nikita Belykh, the governor of the Kirov region (<http://belyh.livejournal.com>);
- Elena Gilyazova, a deputy chairman of the government of the Perm region (<http://elenagilyazova.livejournal.com>);
- Boris Milgram, a deputy chairman of the government of the Perm region (<http://borismilgram.livejournal.com/18181.html>);
- Maria Gaidar, a deputy chairman of the government of the Kirov region (<http://m-gaidar.livejournal.com>).

Besides, I have analysed the blogs of four Russian parliamentarians: Oleg Morozov, a Duma deputy speaker (<http://morozovoleg.livejournal.com>), Ilya Ponomarev (<http://ilya-ponomarev.livejournal.com/>) and Maxim Mischenko (<http://tagan.livejournal.com>), who are the State Duma deputies. The blog of Deputy Gennady Gudkov uses the blogging platform of Exo Moskvyy, an influential Russian radio station based in Moscow (<http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/gudkov>).

Another notable exception from the LifeJournal subset of my Russian data is the blog of Vladimir Zhirinovskyy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party and one of Russia's most successful senior blogging politicians, located at <http://blogs.mail.ru/mail/zhirinovskyyv>.

It should be noted that, although LiveJournal remains a popular platform, several of the politicians have recently started exploring other platforms, such as WordPress, or have other blogs elsewhere (e.g. Nikita Belykh's blogs at <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/belyh>; <http://www.goslyudi.ru/blog/nbelyh>). Those blogs are excluded from the current study.

I selected 100 excerpts containing instances of organisational metacommunication in each of the three subsets of blog data.

As for live webchats, the British material originates from Mumsnet – an influential website for parents (www.mumsnet.com), whose organisers hold live webchat sessions with prominent personalities on a regular basis. These webchat sessions enjoy considerable media attention, gave the name to the 2010 British election campaign (the “Mumsnet election”) and even produced a few local scandals (e.g. ‘biscuit-gate’).

My German and Russian webchat data, in contrast, are less systematic, since this format seems to be much less popular with web-savvy political agents in these two countries.

My German webchat material comes from Blogsprechstunde (the chat of politik-digital.de in cooperation with Blogpiloten) and tagesschau-Chat (<http://www.tagesschau.de>). The chats with the following politicians were analysed: two politicians from the Social Democratic Party Prof. Gesine Schwan and Heiko Maas, and Silvana Koch-Mehrin, a member of the European parliament for the Free Democratic Party.

As for my Russian webchat material, it was obtained from several local internet sites and editions, such as:

- the Novosibirsk press club (<http://www.politsib.ru>; an online chat with Duma Deputy Sergey Glazyev);

- Zhivoj Angarsk (<http://liveangarsk.ru>; an online chat with the then Mayor of Angarsk Andrey Kozlov);
- Russkij Obozrevatel (<http://www.rus-obr.ru>; an online chat with Egor Kholmogorov, a nationalist editor, blogger and politician).

It should be noted that the metacommunicative remarks analysed in the study are diverse in their length and syntactic complexity, ranging from one-word insertions or short phrases embedded in the main text of a blog entry or a discussant's comment (see Example 3 below) to posts completely metacommunicative in their nature, e.g. blog entries reporting a hacker attack and measures taken to restore smooth communication with the audience (see Example 17 in Section 4.3.2).

- (3) Why do you think there is the perception amongst both the membership and the public in general that you are <**coughs**> a bit of a bully? I've talked to lots of people about you and I'm afraid it comes up a lot. Though to be fair they often can't say why. <**RUNS AWAY**>
(Labour leadership contenders webchat, Mumsnet, 6 Sept. 2010)

The metacommunicative remarks in my data occur either in politician-generated texts or in user-generated content. The former are the metacommunicative comments mostly referring to other political agents' verbal behaviour that are embedded in the politicians' blog entries as separate evaluative phrases, sentences or paragraphs. Besides, politician-generated meta-talk sometimes appears in politicians' reactive comments to user-generated content (e.g. the weaving comments in Lord Tebbit's blog).

User-generated content is either reactive metacommunication referring to politicians' texts and their communicative behaviour elsewhere (e.g. interviews, parliamentary debates) or co-participant meta-talk coming from threaded online discussions with extended conversations or debates.

3. Current research on political blogs and webchats

After a decade of intensive research, the body of literature on Internet communication is impressively versatile. Scholars have been researching the functions of social media [1; 2; 3], the peculiarities of various subgenres of computer-mediated communication [4], as well as some practical

experiences with e-democracy initiatives and online networking between politicians and the general public in various countries [5; 6; 7].

Blogs led by political actors, in particular, enjoy research attention due to their potential to boost civic engagement – an important goal for most countries in view of low election turnouts and other instances of political disengagement. Although some evidence suggests that political blogs frequently disappoint their readers [8], nevertheless, by merging the public and the personal in their blog posts, some politicians succeed in more effectively communicating their messages to their constituencies [9].

Political webchats and forums have also been in the spotlight of linguists, sociologists, politologists, IT-technologists and other scholars and practitioners. Of particular interest for my study, online and offline deliberative processes have been compared [10; 11], various online groups’ potential for successful political deliberation has been investigated [12], and some practical implications of cross-community/cross-border multi-language online deliberations have been addressed [13].

However, while *discussants’* verbal behaviour has been analysed, no studies (to the best of my knowledge) have examined the metacommunicative behaviour of *politicians*, when they are invited to take part in online chat rooms as special guests. One possible reason for that might be the relative novelty of this format in many countries, as well as the competition with other offline and online forms of interaction between politicians and their audiences.

In addition, present studies have neither investigated all metacommunicative remarks appearing in political blogs and chats, nor compared instances of online meta-talk with some typical offline genres of political deliberation.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, research on metacommunication in computer-mediated environment has been fuelled by practical considerations. Scholars and practitioners have addressed such tasks as teaching educators to effectively metacommunicate when facilitating online discussions in “virtual classrooms” [14], and the task of finding metacommunicative patterns and genres that have a potential to improve the quality of communication in online communities (and thus can bring the craft of designing online communities to a new level) [15].

However, studies in this field remain scarce despite the acknowledged potential for understanding internet-powered discursive practices (for a useful review of existing literature, see [15]). To illustrate, having studied metacommunication patterns in two online Finnish communities, A.Lanamäki and T.Päivärinta come to the conclusion that metacommunication “provides

a basis for user-initiated community development” [15]. The researchers distinguish six types of metacommunication patterns in online communities referring to:

1. “user relationships and roles at the level of the whole community,
2. the information structure, communication practices and other issues at the level of the whole community,
3. (other) metacommunication genres and patterns,
4. (other) individual metacommunication utterances,
5. genres to organize the primary communication, and
6. individual utterances of primary communication.” [15]

The types of metacommunication I shall discuss in this article mostly belong to types 2, 5 and 6 of this classification.

In what follows, several types of metacommunication in blogs and chats are analysed and compared with metacommunicative remarks that are produced by politicians in two offline political genres, such as parliamentary question-answer sessions and political interviews.

4. Metacommunicative comments that serve to facilitate interaction

As is well known, metacommunicative resources are deployed to facilitate and regulate interaction [16]. Nowhere is this function as efficiently fulfilled as in computer-mediated genres of political communication, giving a whole range of additional opportunities to both senders and receivers of political messages.

Firstly, with the help of organisational metacommunicative remarks, information flows transmitted through blogs and, to some extent, webchats can easily be quantified to accommodate political messages to diverse audience segments. For instance, a participant can either read a complete report on a public-opinion poll by following a specific link, or choose to look through a summary of that report. Some orientational meta-talk, that is, meta-talk that helps the reader find the required information in a suitable format, is usually incorporated in blog entries to facilitate the process, as Example (4) shows.

- (4) Вчера на правительстве рассматривали отчет об исполнении бюджета области - 2010. Поскольку бюджет - один из наших основных документов, по которому можно судить и о состоянии экономики, и о приоритетах в работе правительства, **выкладываю ключевые слайды. Вот здесь - полная версия**

(блог Н.Белых, губернатора Кировской области, 22.03.11);

'There was a hearing in the government about the 2010 budget implementation yesterday. Since budget is one of our most important documents that allows one to make a judgement about the state of the economy and about the priorities in the government's work, I am posting the key slides. Here is the complete version.

(blog of N.Belykh, Governor of the Kirov Region, 22.03.11)'

Secondly, the Internet channel allows participants to select convenient time and mode of interaction. To illustrate, a user who has missed a communicative event has a chance to make up for it by watching a video recording of that event, by reading the transcript or by getting to know the opinions of other commentators of the blog. For this, some preparatory metacommunication is instrumental, as the following excerpt from Mary Honeyball's blog shows:

- (5) I was struck by how comfortable Johnson seemed talking about the deficit and he did so with such conviction. If you didn't catch the interview you can watch it here. The interview with Alan Johnson is about 30.18 seconds into the show and you can watch it here. (17.10.2010)

It should be noted that such metacommunicative remarks, especially those of them providing no active hyperlinks to the relevant content, may be dangerous for the politician's public image, as they often irritate – at least Russian, in my data – members of the online audience. In many cases such metacommunicative promises are seen as a sign of laziness, a question evasion tactic, or as a manifestation of the arrogance of power. The following evaluative comment, posted after the webchat with Andrey Kozlov ended, proves the point (see Example 6):

- (6) [...] Просмотрел запись и четко видно: когда вопрос касается личной жизни (коктейли и т. п.) отвечает без запинки, но как неудобный вопрос, так старается обойти, а если уж совсем тяжелый - то "читайте в моей пресс-конференции". Удобная политика. [...] (27.08.10)

‘[...] I have looked through the chat transcript, and one thing is obvious: when the question is about his private life (cocktails and so on) he answers [them] without hesitation, but when an uncomfortable question is asked he tries to avoid it, and when it gets really tough – then we have “read in my press-conference”. It’s a convenient policy. [...]’

Interestingly, metacommunicative remarks introducing hyperlinks to some relevant content differ in the degree of explicitness in the three languages under study. In fact, hyperlinks in British and German blogs are usually preceded by a metacommunicative remark that details, characterises or explains the hyperlink content (*A fuller account is provided here, Further proof is sitting right here for you to peruse; Habe eben was nettes gefunde – ‘I have just found something nice’, u.a. nachzulesen hier – ‘among other things, to read here’*).

As for Russian hyperlinks in blog comments, they can either be similarly prepared by way of a metacommunicative move or they can occur without any metacommunicative preparation. This is often confusing, especially on blogs with a large number of comments, as it might be unclear whose opinion this hyperlink is expected to support or contradict, as the following case of misunderstanding between a politician and a commentator demonstrates (see Example 7):

- (7)  **piplanin:** <http://veselova102.livejournal.com/>

 **m_gaidar:** Это к чему? – ‘What is it related to?’ (M.Gaidar’s blog; 9.06.2011).

As for having a possibility to choose a suitable mode of interaction, a blog reader may become an active participant of political discussions or he/she may rather join the ranks of passive observers (*I’ll probably remain a ‘lurker’ but am looking forward to your future contributions*).

As for politicians, they also enjoy some freedom of choice when communicating with their audiences via their blogs. For instance, political agents can decide whether to write a post with a response to reader

criticism, to record a video with a statement addressing the issue, or to simply ignore the criticism. Example (8) demonstrates how metacommunicative remarks make such decisions explicit.

(8) Читатель моего блога с ником Compositing спросил, всерьез ли мы заявляем о политике ЛДПР под лозунгом «За русских!». И каковы будут наши конкретные шаги. Ответ я записал на видео (блог В.В.Жириновского, 19.09.2011);

'The reader of my blog with the nick Compositing asked if we were serious about the Liberal Democratic Party's politics under the "For Russians!" slogan. And what would be our concrete steps. I have recorded a video answer (Vladimir Zhirinovsky's blog, 19.09.2011)'

As we can see, organisational metacommunication is instrumental in providing knowledge on and access to versatile political content available both on- and offline. Apart from providing links to various resources to share information with their diverse audiences, political agents can urge their supporters to perform various communicative actions: to take part in an e-poll, sign an e-petition, attend an event, etc.

It can be argued that to facilitate communicative exchanges in these ways is not nearly as easy in offline political genres. Indeed, segmenting audiences is not possible during question-answer sessions in parliaments, where the same relatively stable audience hears all the items on the agenda, with no opportunity to select a 'light' version. The same conclusion stands for political interviews, with the exception of those newspapers and magazines that publish several versions online – an abridged edited text of the interview and a complete verbatim transcript.

Likewise, politicians who take part in question-answer sessions in parliaments or do interviews are generally much more restricted in choosing an appropriate channel or format of response, with anything but an immediate reply often treated as a question evasion tactic. Compare the following humorous reaction to a metacommunicative promise made in the House of Commons, which was probably caused by the audience's disbelief – a reaction that would not have occurred in an internet deliberation, where similar cases would have been supported by some hyperlinked evidence:

(9) Mr. Clappison (Con): In that case, will the Minister simply tell us whether national insurance numbers have been issued to illegal migrants? A yes or no answer will do at this point.

Caroline Flint (Lab): **I will come to that point. [Laughter.] No, seriously.** I will come to that point, but I just want to preface it by explaining what a national insurance number is not (Hansard Records, 10 January 2008).

To return to the advantages provided by the Internet channel and reflected through various metacommunicative remarks, one should mention the participants' ability to use "the wisdom of the crowd" to facilitate their interactions. Since discussants who take part in online political deliberations are usually of diverse backgrounds and possess different skills and knowledge sets, they can often help each other resolve various communication issues much faster than the politician who leads the blog can.

For instance, when one of the commentators in Rainer Stinner's blog asked the host to post one particular speech in the blog, the commentator got a prompt response from another discussant just 12 minutes later, despite the later hour (00.18 a.m.). Thus, the first commentator learnt that the speech he had requested was available on YouTube, and his problem of embedding it in his own blog was thereby solved.

What is more, apart from advising each other, some discussants offer their metacommunicative advice to politicians who blog. A case in point is a user comment dated March 27, 2011 from the blog of deputy governor of the Kirov region Maria Gaidar, in which the politician is reminded to include a repost button to easier promote one of her initiatives to collect books for local libraries.

In structuring the data presented below, I shall follow the approach to metacommunication advocated by several researchers, based on the observation that reflections on communicative actions occur prior to, during, or after the action itself [17]. Thus, F.Yetim distinguishes between *ex ante*, in-action, and *ex post* metacommunication used to legitimate genres. Likewise, S.-K.Tanscanen singles out asynchronous textual utterances that refer to themselves retrospectively, in the middle of the message, or prospectively [18].

Hence, I shall consider three types of meta-talk employed by bloggers and participants of chats to coordinate communicative interaction: (1) prospective, i.e. future-oriented metacomments designed to make the forthcoming interaction smooth and efficient, (2) ongoing, that is, metacommunicative remarks that provide an appraisal or details of the current interaction, often with a view to improve it, and (3) retrospective,

i.e. trouble-talk referring to various coordination problems that have occurred in a previous interaction.

4.1. Prospective metacommunicative coordination

Contrary to a widespread belief in the spontaneity of Internet communication, taking part in the genres of online interactions studied in the article does require some preparation: the hard- and software needs to be tested by the future chat participants, and rules need to be introduced to the would-be discussants. Almost inevitably, these processes are realised by means of prospective metacommunicative remarks.

Both politicians and webchat moderators need to work hard to prepare fruitful computer-mediated interactions. For example, politicians sometimes need to test the studio computer that will be used for chatting with the audience. Thus, preparatory phatic moves such as *testing, testing, 123* are typically used by political agents as the first move in a webchat (e.g. webchat with Yvette Cooper, Mumsnet, 27.04.10). Obviously, they are analogous to the phrases pronounced by musicians or technicians testing microphones or other equipment.

Moderators often collect questions from internet users in advance, process them and then forward them to the political agents to help everybody get tuned into the discussion and save time on repeated questions. In addition, webchat moderators are expected to post rules of the future chat.

Hence, regulatory metacommunicative moves serve to explain the dos and don'ts of a future interaction, and are normally much more complex than preparatory phatic moves, as the following introduction to a Mumsnet webchat proves (see Example 10):

- (10) If you'd like to comment or come back on their responses then please do so on this thread or better still log on to the live discussion later today (monday) between 12-1. We've got all five candidates coming into Mumsnet Towers to discuss their answers. (Best get some industrial size biscuit tins in). Please remember normal rules apply - one question each, don't harass for an answer and keep it civil please.
(Labour leadership contenders webchat, Mumsnet, 6 Sept. 2010)

As for blogs, another type of phatic organisational move can be found there. First, these are metacommunicative remarks in which reasons for

commenting in the blog are stated (*ich besuchte Ihre Page, um Ihre Erklärung auf Ihr trauriges Auftreten im besagten Interview zu erfahren – ‘I am visiting you page to get to know your explanation of your sad performance in the about mentioned interview’*). Besides, some contextual data can be provided by the discussant as to when and how the commentator discovered the blog (*habe gerade etwas auf Ihrer Website gestöbert – ‘I’ve just stumbled on your blog’; I found you from a link relating to total political blog awards and am glad I did*), how the act of commenting is a unique experience for him/her (*Never commented on a bloggy thing before. I hope I have done this right*), and how he/she feels about it (*ich bin mal so frei und melde mich in diesem Post gerne noch einmal zu Wort – ‘I happen to be free now and I am glad to take the floor in this post’*).

Such phatic moves are especially favoured by German blog commentators in my material; their sequential pattern is also different from my Russian and British examples. Indeed, phatic organisational moves typically occur at the beginning of my German blog comments, whereas their British and Russian counterparts are mostly located after the main thought in the middle or at the end of respective blog comments.

In offline genres of political deliberations, such metacommunicative coordination is mostly based on a strict set of rules and traditions and is most exclusively performed by the chair (the Speaker or his/her deputies) or by interviewers, with politicians frequently having no impact on discourse-organising processes. Whereas in computer-mediated interactions the task of such coordination is shared between bloggers and commentators, and between chat organisers, chat guests (politicians) and discussants, with the balance of power being relatively unstable and at times unclear. In other words, the potential for self-regulation is much higher for both main sides of the participants of online deliberative processes, namely, politicians and their audiences.

To illustrate, two participants of the webchat with Andrey Kozlov initiated a metacommunicative discussion about having a contest to select the most interesting, uncomfortable, and the most stupid question, and about possible criteria.

In sum, a certain amount of pre-interaction meta-talk plays a vital role in paving the way for smooth and efficient communication. But are there other categories of metacommunicative comments that support the interaction itself?

4.2. Ongoing metacommunicative coordination

As is well known, the absence of contextualisation cues available in face-to-face interaction brings to life a number of compensatory devices in computer-mediated communication, such as emoticons (😊 , 😂 , 🤔), metacommunicative acronyms (*ROFL* – ‘rolling on the floor laughing’), action ascriptions (*Hello candidates <waves>*; *Am I allowed a follow up question? <ducks from Justine’s steely gaze>*, Labour leadership contenders webchat, Mumsnet, 6 Sept. 2010) and other means and their combinations [19].

Besides these metacommunicative devices, another type of metadiscursive commentary is employed in webchats, in which the details invisible for online discussants are verbalised, the context of the ongoing interaction is explained to all the participants, and their attention is drawn to important details of the online interaction.

Such metacommunicative remarks differ from traditional action ascriptions in their perspective: while action ascriptions make explicit the addressor’s verbal and non-verbal actions, many compensatory metacommunicative comments in my webchat data are other-oriented. The author of such comments performs the role of a narrator who depicts various off-stage aspects of the communicative events as they unfold for the audience to visualise them.

To illustrate, when Mumsnet organised a live webchat with all the five candidates for the post of the leader of the Labour party, Justine, one of Mumsnet’s founders and chat organisers, announced the arrival of each guest, not unlike a playwright who introduces his/her characters to the audience in stage directions (see Example 11):

- (11) We have Milibands in the building [very prompt emoticon]. Still waiting on the others; <...> We're going to get going despite the Ed Balls still to arrive. He's doing the BBC downstairs (Labour leadership contenders webchat, Mumsnet, 6 Sept. 2010).

It should be noted that the complexity of format has an impact on the number and variety of metacommunicative remarks employed in Internet discussions. For instance, in the above mentioned Mumsnet webchat, the simultaneous presence of five guests instead of one required a special measure to enable better visual attribution of the guests’ answers. For this, the candidates’ responses were colour-coded, which generated a number of metacommunicative remarks.

Firstly, David Miliband, one of the candidates, commented on this at the beginning of the chat session to alert the participants about this feature of web-design (*We all seem to have different colours. I am green - not a political statement. Apparently this was all designed to make it easy on the eye*). Secondly, one of the Mumsnet discussants complained about confusing the answers from two politicians due to the similarity of colours assigned to them (*MmeLindt: Oh, I have been confusing the answers are Ed Miliband and Andy Burnham have the same colours. I was wondering at how fast Ed could type*).

By way of response to the differentiation problem, Ed Miliband, one of the discussants whose answers were confused with those of his rival, started introducing himself for identification reasons in each answer he posted (e.g. [**It's ed m**] *I think the phone hacking scandal is very serious...; (from ed m) We must use all the talents from across our party*), and one of his rivals used the same kind of identification remark, probably just to be on the safe side (*I am a fast typer (this is Ed Balls) but my typing is erratic and we didn't have time to work out the spell checker*).

Another subtype of ongoing metacommunicative coordination in webchats is related to managing the communicative initiative of the discussants. To avoid question overload typical of most chats with one politician taking questions from dozens or even hundreds of discussants, special tactics are needed to facilitate such interactions. For instance, in the two-hour chat with Andrey Kozlov the moderator suspended the discussion four times by using the phrase *Пока не задавайте вопросы, дайте ответить на текущие* – ‘Don’t ask questions for a while, give [the guest] an opportunity to respond to the current ones.’

Like prospective coordination, ongoing meta-talk can be performed by discussants themselves. To illustrate, in the chat with Andrey Kozlov, one participant, confused by politicians’ answers, first attempted to change the situation by appealing to the moderator (*хотелось бы чтобы делали ссылку на тот вопрос, на который отвечают. Время указывали* – ‘I’d rather see a reference to the question being answered. The time should be indicated’). When that did not work she offered her metacommunicative advice to the politician directly approximately one hour later (*указывайте время вопроса, пожалуйста* – ‘Indicate the time of question, please’). Incidentally, her advice was heeded by the politician, and his further responses included time references to make the reading of questions and answers easier.

In contrast, metacommunicative advice that comes from a parliamentarian is frequently rejected by the Speaker, who asserts his/her right to conduct the session in a metacommunicative utterance of the type: *I require no assistance from the hon. Gentleman; May I say to the hon.*

Gentleman that I require no assistance from him?; I do not require any guidance. The same is true about interviewers who usually defy the politicians' attempts to ask questions or to suggest their own topics for discussion, as the following excerpt from a Paxman-Blair interview demonstrates:

- (12) [Jeremy Paxman, a British news anchor known for his aggressive questioning tactics, had pressed the then Prime Minister Tony Blair for an answer to a sensitive question for many times, after which the following exchange occurred]:

BLAIR: Why don't we talk about the poorest of society and what we are doing for them.

PAXMAN: I assume you want to be Prime Minister. I just want to be an interviewer. Can we stick to that arrangement? (The BBC, Newsnight, 5.06.2001).

To draw an interim conclusion, although online political discussions are usually moderated and are expected to follow a set of predefined rules, it is sometimes significantly easier for discussants to control interactions online, in comparison with such highly codified genres of deliberation as parliamentary question-answer sessions and political interviews.

As we can see, generating and responding to metacommunicative remarks in computer-mediated discussions belongs to vital linguistic processes that facilitate and coordinate interaction on the Internet. Two questions arise, however: What happens if no adequate coordination has occurred in an Internet discussion and What about the impact of unforeseen circumstances on computer-mediated interaction?

4.3. Retrospective metacommunication

Many instances of meta-talk in the data refer to various interactional glitches that occurred in previous discourse and are retrospectively thematised by political agents or members of their audience. Such metadiscursive remarks seem to present the reverse side of metacommunicative coordination efforts, that is, cases when there was lack of preparation or the attempts at coordination failed for some reason. In addition, there are cases of trouble talk related to unforeseen

communication glitches that no prospective coordination can prevent from happening.

4.3.1. Metacommunicative criticisms and complaints

When Governor Oleg Chirkunov decided to discontinue his LiveJournal blog and move to WordPress in October 2011 it provoked uproar from his audience. The majority of commentators criticised the politician for this decision itself (*Отрубить себя от самого популярного в русскоязычной среде ресурса (для блогов) - более чем странно. - 'To cut oneself from the most popular resource in the Russian environment (for blogs) is more than strange'; 17.10.2011*) and for not making an effort to transfer the blog content from the new platform to the old one. Whereas others tried to persuade the governor to revisit his old blog at least occasionally, recollected that it was not the first time the politician changed his virtual address, and threatened not to move with him to the new platform again.

Although the governor's latest LiveJournal post, dated October 16, generated 298 comments with an impressive amount of user-initiated metacommunicative criticism and advice, the blogger retained his stance. At the same time, a number of commentators used the post as an opportunity to provide their appraisal of the governor's blogging efforts, as Example 13 demonstrates.

- (13) где бы Вы ни писали, если сообщения губернатора о мышках да о ложках, то формат не поможет, сколько ни меняй. Вы нам интересны именно как губернатор. и мы ждем Ваше мнение о проблемах региона, которых очень много, а не о мышах. Вы были в одноклассниках, потом ЖЖ, сейчас вордпресс. а что меняется со сменой? в Вашем возрасте обычно люди приходят к пониманию, что главное не форма, а содержание.
лучше бы отреагировали на захват Верхнекурьянского леса (16.10.2011).

'Wherever you write, if the governor's posts are about mice and spoons, the format won't help, however often you may change it. You interest us as governor. And we are looking forward to hearing your opinion about the region's problems, which are numerous, and not about mice. You used to be on Odnoklassniki ['Classmates', a popular social network in the Russian-speaking Internet], then on LJ, now you are on WordPress. And what do

these changes give you? At your age, people usually begin to understand that the content is more important than the form.

I wish you reacted to the seizure of the Verhnekurinsky forest.'

As we can see, apart from metacommunicatively criticising the governor's organisational decision (platform jumping), the discussant exposes the inappropriateness of themes in the governor's blog, along with his silence on important issues. Arguably, the influx of such and similar metacommunicative remarks could have been curbed, and more members of his audience would have migrated to the new platform to follow the governor, if the blogger had done some more elaborate preparatory meta-talk, explaining the reasons behind his decision in greater detail, heeding the numerous instances of advice on comment transfer, and helping those users who were unable to easily adjust to the change of format.

Other instances of retrospective organisational metacommunicative criticism include: complaints about the absence of hyperlinks when the blogger refers to some websites and encourages the audience to visit them, about using trackbacks without links, about the data representation format in a webchat, etc. Besides, blog entries are occasionally used by commentators to share their criticism of politicians' incorrect behaviour in other genres of political communication. To illustrate, a German politician was criticised in her blog for forgetting to use her Twitter account to immediately answer several questions she had just failed to answer in a spontaneous TV interview. Another German politician exposed a case of unfair treatment of Twitter commentators by his opponents who appeared to have filtered unwanted messages on Twitter. Compare an excerpt from the blog entry by Daniel Mouratidis:

- (14) Peinlich, liebe SPD: Erst ruft ihr auf per Twitter auf, Kommentare zu schreiben, dann lehnt ihr einen Kommentar von Reinhard Bütikofer dann doch ab. Der war wohl nicht auf der Jubelwelle, die gewünscht war (6.08.2009).

'Painful, dear SDP: first you call to write comments via Twitter, but then you reject a comment by Reinhard Bütikofer. Apparently, it was not riding the jubilation wave you wished to have.

As for similar instances of retrospective metacommunication in offline political discussions – also diverse and at times interdiscursive / intertextual

–, it is worth mentioning that there is a special metacommunicative genre of parliamentary interaction employed by parliamentarians to report on others' organisational mistakes. It is called 'point of order' in the House of Commons and 'по ведению' (on the conduction) in the State Duma of the Russian Federation. For example, British parliamentarians sometimes complain to the Speaker about cases of clauses left undebated in a parliamentary committee or about the breach of the convention of notification, as the following excerpt shows:

- (15) Mr. Greg Hands (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families visited a school in my constituency yesterday without informing me. I went anyway and was met by an abusive and unprofessional civil servant called Belshan Izzet, who told me that the constituency Member of Parliament had been informed of the visit—that was a lie—and that neither I nor the leader of the council nor one of the governors were allowed in during the prime ministerial visit. That is disgraceful behaviour by a civil servant. How can we ensure that it is not repeated and that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families abide by the conventions and courtesies of the House, which you set? (Hansard Records, 1.07.2009)

Apparently both offline and online metacommunicative criticisms and complaints of this type are easily avoidable through some prospective coordination. However, there seem to be cases that are significantly more difficult or even impossible to avoid.

4.3.2. Errare humanum est? Metacommunicative trouble talk

The benefits resulting from the use of Internet technologies are naturally offset by a range of disadvantages, many of which are reflected in the ever-present instances of trouble talk. In my data, there are two categories of metacommunicative trouble talk referring to (i) interactants' mistakes and (ii) technical problems encountered before, during or after the interaction but reported retrospectively (along with several ambiguous cases when the boundary between (i) and (ii) is blurred).

Metacommunicative remarks of the first type often relate to the politicians' inept actions while dealing with the keyboard, such as hitting the wrong button, forgetting to indicate the addressee in a polilogue or sending an incomplete message (*sorry, last answer was to Ottavia on Ed's worst habit; Sorry, meant to add, and we're paying for it by some reforms to the benefit system...*, Webchat with Yvette Cooper, Mumsnet, 27.04.10).

Metacommunicative comments of the second type refer to some technologically induced glitches of computer-mediated communication: inactive links, difficulties when uploading or downloading media files, failures to access certain internet resources (e.g. due to hacker attacks). These are largely considered to be beyond the blog authors' power to correct. See Example (16) below, in which Lord Tebbit complains about the software problems affecting the way the comments in his blog are displayed:

- (16) I am afraid that I have found it impossible to work out how Disqus arranges, then rearranges, then seems to throw your comments up in the air and list them in random order. It is enough of a task to read 800 comments, but when some are duplicated and others seem to disappear, it is just about impossible to follow and respond to many of the points you have raised (4.10.2001).

It should be noted that serious Internet-related problems often become the topic of a complete metacommunicative posting on the politician's blog (and subsequent discussion, if available), as the following entry from John Redwood's blog demonstrates:

- (17) I hear yesterday the site was hijacked by a pharmaceutical offer. This was reported and corrected. It has happened again today. The site provider tells me he will try to put in a permanent answer this week-end. Rest assured the hijacker has nothing to do with me (15 October 2010).

There is one intriguing aspect to metacommunicative comments such as the one cited above: why do blog authors resort to apologetic rhetoric in situations in which their innocence seems to be beyond doubt?

In effect, as we can see, Excerpt (17) is a clear example of image repair discourse in which the blogger applies two reputation repair strategies: he denies responsibility for the technical problem and lists corrective actions (see [20] on five broad types of image repair strategies:

denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification).

An analysis of several webchat interactions gives us a hint as to some possible reasons. Due to much larger amounts of comments in the webchat polilogues I have studied, it is significantly easier to trace the audience's attitude to technical glitches there.

A case in point is an excerpt from the Labour leadership contenders webchat held by Mumsnet on 6 Sept. 2010. During the one-hour live session, Andy Burnham, one of the five invited politicians, had a computer glitch that prevented him from posting messages for a while. Because of the predominantly mistrustful reactions of Mumsnet's members, webchat organisers and another politician had to defend Andy Burnham from the discussants' negative comments, as Example (18) demonstrates:

(18) Participant 1: Is Andy Burnham OK? (Not in a general sense, it's just that he hasn't posted anything for about 20 minutes.)

Webchat organizers: Bit of a computer hitch for Andy (our fault not his) - we'll give him extra 10 mins at the end to catch up.

Ed Balls: Andy is sitting next to me. I can confirm he is fine and typing away madly. <...>

Participant 2: Andy is claiming that old chestnut of 'computer hitch'.

(Labour leadership contenders webchat, Mumsnet, 6 Sept. 2010)

A similar case occurred in a Mumsnet webchat with Harriet Harman, who was accused of inefficiency due to slow typing by a number of Mumsnet users and had to defend herself energetically, as Excerpt (19) illustrates:

(19) Participant 1: MsHarman appears to either be a very slow typer and is sat saying 'ummm' 🤔 They need me in charge 😊 <...>

Participant 2: how come i can type, read and see to my son and reply quicker than you Harriet?

Participant 3: Harriet, as Minister for women why can't you spend more than one hour on such a huge forum? And why can't MN find any guests without a claimed typing speed of below 2 wpm? <...>

Participant 1: she's a bit faster than David Cameron. Man, was he slow 🤔

Participant 4: Must be that age old trick of MP's. Dodge any questions that they do not want to answer, because they basically don't have a clue about the real issues that people face in their day to day lives.

Participant 5: She is so slow ecaus she is sifting through to find the easy questions to answer! Harriet Tell us about Iraq. Come on this is our chance to find thigs out. I am feeling a bit short changed to be honest.

Participant 2: <...> do you think you may be able to answer? youve only got 15 mins left 🙄e but really you should have read through in advance! <...>

HarrietHarman (to sunshineakindat, Participant 2): **Older people type slower than younger people.....please don't indulge in age discrimination! And i'm thinking about my replies which takes time. So give me a break sister!**

(Webchat with Harriet Harman, Mumsnet, 25.11.08)

As we can see, the chain of metacommunicative accusations, understandably, causes a metadiscursive counter-attack on the part of the politician. Noteworthy also is the fact that a significant stretch of the webchat interaction between Mumsnetters and Harriet Harman is counterproductive: the participants' time is wasted on the rather offensive meta-talk, instead of being used for questioning the politician. Another consequence is, naturally, the antagonistic atmosphere such verbal exchanges generally create.

Interestingly, when one of the guests invited an advisor to help him with typing to handle more questions during the live session (as had been previously suggested by some Mumsnetters), it caused several surprised reactions and a joke about chauvinists. As a consequence, both the politician and his advisor had to offer metacommunicative explanations to justify their approach (see Example 20).

(20) Ed Balls: [...] Having done these Mumsnet Q&As before I know that it's the best way to answer lots of questions;

Ed Balls' advisor: this is Ellie typing and I can confirm I am much better at it than Ed!

(Labour leadership contenders webchat, Mumsnet, 6 Sept. 2010)

It should be noted that such hostile metacommunicative webchat exchanges demonstrating a definite lack of tolerance of technological glitches are found exclusively in my Mumsnet webchats data. As for the German and Russian online chats I have studied, the number of metacommunicative criticisms generated by their discussants is significantly smaller and the tone of interaction is generally much friendlier. However, the

heterogeneity of the three subsets of webchat data (a community of mothers with babies vs. a community of journalists and/or politically active citizens) does not allow of specific cross-cultural conclusions in the present study. Thus, more research is needed to determine if this finding is related to cross-cultural or cross-community differences in webchat interactions.

Similar instances of lack of tolerance to technologically induced glitches are occasionally found, however, in my data derived from Russian blogs. To illustrate, when the United Russia’s web site <http://er.ru> experienced temporary problems on February 25, 2011, with access to the web page denied, commentators received error messages of the type *Connection to server er.ru failed. The server is not responding; The page you are looking for is temporarily unavailable*. This incident was immediately interpreted as an act of censorship by some commentators (*Почему нельзя зайти и задать вопрос? Цензура?* – ‘Why is it impossible to enter and ask a question? Censorship?’) and the party’s unwillingness to address topical subjects (*ЕР уже не знает как спрятаться от вопросов на злобу дня. полная деградация- разговаривать они могут только сами с собой* – ‘United Russia doesn’t know where to hide from topical issues. It’s complete degradation – they can only talk to each other.’). These complaints were posted on the blog of Maxim Mischenko, one of the members of the party, by one frustrated commentator – and probably the party’s opponent – and later deleted.

In sum, although the borderline between the metacommunicative remarks related to the human factor and those linked to technology glitches seems to be relatively transparent, technical difficulties are often seen by the audience as a pretext used by politicians not to engage in interaction with other internet users (e.g. to avoid a sensitive issue). As we have seen, metacommunicative trouble talk in which politicians complain about computer-related problems may not be taken by the audience at face value, but perceived as a sign of politicians’ disingenuous communicative behaviour (e.g. concealment of the truth).

As far as offline political deliberation is concerned, technologically induced glitches occur there too, although on a relatively rare basis. Most typically, the electronic voting system or microphones do not function, which causes respective meta-talk and corrective action.

5. Conclusion

This article has covered some key intuitions related to a set of metacommunicative remarks that serve to facilitate online deliberative

processes. Organisational (coordination) metacommunication was found to perform several useful functions in webchats and blog discussion threads.

Firstly, such metacommunication performs the phatic function by enabling a smooth beginning, unfolding, and ending of an interaction.

Secondly, it carries out the regulatory function by providing participants with the rules and conventions of a forthcoming discussion and by exposing instances of breach of the rules. In addition, this function is made manifest when various communication glitches are reported and ways of correcting them are discussed.

Thirdly, the informative function of organisational metacommunication is realised through metacommunicative comments that provide users with sources of political content relevant for the ongoing discussion, with information on other possibilities to interact with politicians beyond blogs or webchats, and the comments that warn participants about forthcoming changes of format.

Three categories and several subtypes of metacommunicative comments were analysed in the study: (i) those performing prospective metacommunicative coordination (orientational meta-talk, preparatory phatic metacommunication, and regulatory moves), (ii) metacommunicative comments that clarify and regulate ongoing interactions (compensatory metacommunicative remarks and those managing the communicative initiative) and (iii) retrospective metacommunicative comments that serve to expose and correct previous discourse-organisational issues (metacommunicative criticisms and complaints, and metacommunicative trouble talk related to human factor and/or technology).

For prospective and ongoing metacommunication, it was found that mutual moderation and appraisal by the discussants occurs more freely in a less regulated environment, that is, in online webchats and blogs. In blogs with lively co-participant interaction, communication issues arising between politicians and commentators are generally resolved much faster and easier.

In offline genres of political discussion, such as parliamentary question-answer sessions and political interviews, metacommunicative activity is largely constrained by predefined rules and is the privilege of the chair/interviewer. Consequently, the metacommunicative advice of the described type that comes from a political agent – a parliamentarian or an interviewee – is frequently neglected by the Speaker / interviewer.

In computer-mediated interactions the task of metacommunicative coordination is shared between politicians and their audiences, with politicians often following the metacommunicative advice of their commentators.

As for retrospective metacommunication, it was found that parliamentary deliberation as a highly codified form possesses a specialised metacommunicative genre to allow parliamentarians to voice concerns about previous communicative exchanges (point of order, по ведению). Metacommunicative trouble talk produced in online political deliberation was found to be more versatile than the offline counterpart.

In sum, although the borderline between the metacommunicative remarks related to the human factor and those linked to technology glitches seems to be relatively transparent, technical difficulties are often seen by the audience as a pretext used by politicians not to engage in interaction with other internet users. Thus, metacommunicative trouble talk in which politicians complaint about various computer glitches may not be accepted by the audience as justified, but rather taken as a sign of politicians’ disingenuous communicative behaviour (e.g. question evasion).

As it stands, metacommunicative comments used for coordination purposes must be further investigated as a vital species of “linguistic processes that are involved in the production of political meaning” [21].

6. Literature Cited or Referred to

- [1] Мавродиева, И. (2010). Виртуална реторика: от дневниците до социалните мрежи, София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски”.
- [2] Павлов, П. (2010). Online журналистика, София: ИК „Ваньо Недков”.
- [3] Ward, S. and Vedel, Th. (2006). Introduction: The Potential of the Internet Revisited. *In Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 59 (2): 210-225.
- [4] Мавродиева, И. (2010). (съст.) Комуникации във виртуална среда, София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски”.
- [5] Wright, S. (2006). Electrifying Democracy? 10 Years of Policy and Practice. *In Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 59 (2): 236-249.
- [6] *The Russian Cyberspace journal* (2008). – Issue 1.
<<http://www.russian-cyberspace.com>>, date of access: 3.11.2011.
- [7] Staeuber, R. and Gasser, U. (2009). Three case studies from Switzerland: Politicians’ personal communication on the Internet.
<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Staeuber-Gasser_SwissCases_PolCommunication.pdf>, date of access: 3.11.2011.

- [8] Ferguson, R. and Griffiths, B. (2006). Thin Democracy? Parliamentarians, Citizens and the Influence of Blogging on Political Engagement, In *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 59 (2). P. 366-374.
- [9] Park, HW and Kluver, R. (2009). Trends in online networking among South Korean politicians – A mixed-method approach. In *Government Information Quarterly*, Vol. 26 (3), P. 505-515.
- [10] Freiermuth, M.R. (2011). Debating in an online world: a comparative analysis of speaking, writing, and online chat. In *Text & Talk*, Vol. 31 (2), P. 127–151.
- [11] Baekm Y.M., Wojcieszak, M. and Delli Carpini, M.X. (2011). Online versus face-to-face deliberation: Who? Why? What? With what effects? In *New Media & Society* September. Published online before print September 19, 2011.
- [12] Wojcieszak, M.E. and Mutz, D.C. (2009). Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do Online Discussion Spaces Facilitate Exposure to Political Disagreement? In *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 59 (1), P. 40–56.
- [13] Velikanov, C. (2010). Procedures and Methods for Cross-community Online Deliberation. In *JeDEM*, Vol. 2 (2), P. 170–183.
- [14] Feenberg, A. and Xin. M. C. (2002). A teacher’s guide to moderating online discussion forums: From theory to practice. <<http://www.textweaver.org/pedagogy.htm>>, date of access: 7.11.2011.
- [15] Lanamäki, A. and Päivärinta, T. (2009). Metacommunication Patterns in Online Communities. In *Online Communities and Social Computing*, Third International Conference, OCSC 2009, Held as Part of HCI International 2009, San Diego, CA, USA, July 2009, Proceedings, ed. by A. Ant Ozok and P. Zaphiris. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, P. 236–245. p. 236, 239.
- [16] Hyland, K. (2005). *Metadiscourse: exploring interaction in writing*. London: Continuum. P. 5.
- [17] Yetim, F. (2006). Acting with genres: discursive-ethical concepts for reflecting on and legitimating genres. In *European Journal of Information Systems*. Vol. 15, P. 54–69.
- [18] Tanscanen, S.-K. (2007). Metapragmatic Utterances in Computer-Mediated Interaction. In *Metapragmatics in Use*, ed. by W.Bublitz and A.Hübler, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, P. 87–106.

[19] Gruber, H. (2008). Specific genre features of new mass media. In *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere*, ed. by R.Wodak and V.Koller, Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, P. 363–381. <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/65993529/15/Helmut-Gruber>>, date of access: 7.11.2011. P. 372.

[20] Benoit, W.L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. In *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 23 (2), P. 177–186.

[21] Chilton, P. A. (2008). Political terminology. In *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere*, ed. by R.Wodak and V.Koller, Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, P. 225–242. P. 225.