

THOUGHT-PROVOKING DISCUSSION

# Shifting debate from Facebook back to the dinner table

By Jo Fahy



Culture

REUSE ARTICLE | PRINT | SEND THIS ARTICLE |



JUN 10, 2014 - 11:00

**When controversial issues strike a nerve, people often take to Facebook to write a post and wait for others to respond. It's one of many ways to air opinions online, so how do public debates, set up for in-person discussion, still fit into the picture?**

Hands go up the room as people in the audience wait to put their question to the four neuroscience experts sitting at the front. Seated in a stylish function room above a restaurant in Zurich's old Niederdorf area, they're keen to get involved in the Zurich Salon, an event that aims to revive the spirit of well-informed discussions on pressing issues of the day.



The Zurich Salon wants to bring people together who can challenge each other's opinions

"Public debate now is very inward-looking and very narrow, what we're trying to do is open that up and find new ways of engaging in discussion," Paul Seaman, president of the Zurich Salon, told swissinfo.ch

He's helped organise this evening's speakers, who each gave a seven-minute talk on 'the limits and potential of neuroscience' and then answered numerous questions from the audience.

"I think about 130 people turning up on a Thursday night to discuss neuroscience, and our inability to hold people back from discussing that topic with the experts, shows that there is a real demand for this that's not being fulfilled elsewhere," he adds.

The Zurich Salon culture they're trying to emulate started in the 1850s, as German academics took refuge in the city, leaving behind the 1848 failed revolution in Germany. Francois Wille was a journalist who had left Germany a few years later to return to Switzerland, as political pressure mounted in the country that he had made his home.



(akg images)

He and his wife, Eliza Sloman Wille, ran two of the salons that famous figures such as the composer, Richard Wagner, and the writer, Gottfried Keller, attended in Zurich.

The idea even then, was to gather together people with a similar interest in the art of thought-provoking discussion.

## Connected and online

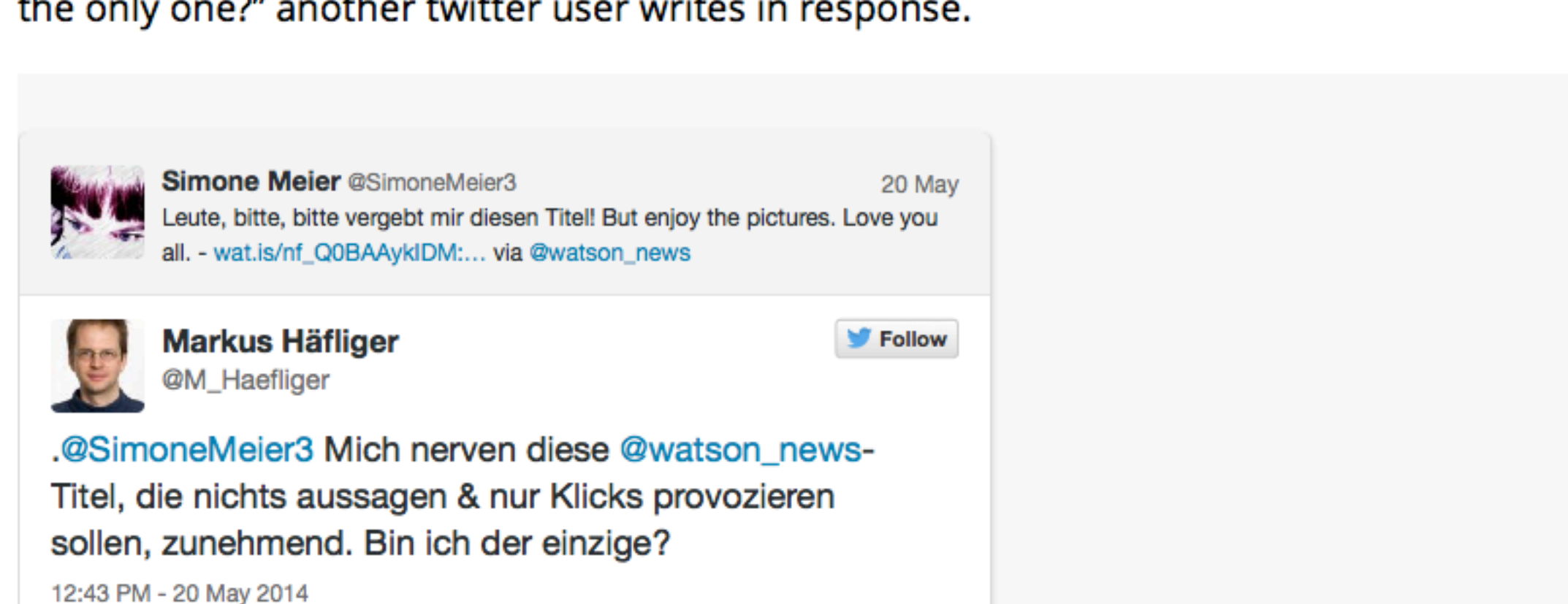
Nowadays, arguments between friends of friends, or even complete strangers, pan out on a daily basis on the pages of social media sites, web forums or the comments sections of newspaper websites. Others weigh in, sometimes linking to sources of information to back up their reasoning.

Take this chain of tweets, that started with someone posting a link to a photo album from the Cannes film festival, but with what they judged to be an annoying headline:

"People, please, please, excuse the title..."



"These titles that say nothing and just try to provoke clicks, increasingly annoy me. Am I the only one?" another twitter user writes in response.



At least ten people then replied, joining in a current debate on how accurate headlines on internet news sites should be, and to what extent they lure in readers to click on a link at any cost.

"We have more public debate today than we have ever had before," Paul Hayes, director of Debate at the George Washington University in the US capital, Washington DC, told swissinfo.ch

"The arguments that used to happen over the dinner table are now happening on Facebook and on other online platforms between people all over the world," he adds.

Hayes sees the active flow of opinions that are happening over the internet as something additional and not in direct competition with debates that take place in public, or at least, in person.

## Learning how to debate

Switzerland does not have a national network of debate associations. But the Stiftung Dialog started the project Jugend debattiert in 2005 aimed at young people. Debates are arranged between students in the first two secondary levels from different schools and cantons across Switzerland. Regional heats then lead to a national final.

For many teenagers these debates are their first real opportunities to formulate arguments on contemporary issues or current affairs and publically discuss them in a structured debate setting.

The project sees around 400 teachers trained every year to coach their students. Between 2006-2011 over 25,000 young people learnt how to debate.

The international English Speaking Union (ESU) runs a large, global network of debates and competitions for young people in 50 countries – however Switzerland is not a member.

Sources: Jugend debattiert, Tages-Anzeiger, ESU

But what makes someone turn off their computer and head down to their local village hall, or in Zurich's case, to the newly-revived Salon?

"Traditionally, this is driven by interest in [well known] participants or in the particular issue that is at stake."

Hayes comments that it takes something more than a general interest in debating to make someone embrace the "transaction costs" of getting up, and going out to join in.

At the Zurich Salon, Paul Seaman told swissinfo.ch that the point of the events was "to shake people out of their cosy complacency".

"We're not here to decide yay or nay, that's not what salons are about. It's to really debate issues in depth, so that you come away thinking: 'Ah! I now need to think more deeply about the issue.'"

## Hiding behind a username

The approach of participants to a debate can be one of the major problems with those that take place by means of web platforms, as Hayes explains.

"In many cases they're not exactly models for civil dialogue. It's really easy for these types of debates to turn into insults and slurs, as people can't see each other, they can't soften their words with a smile...there's a big difference in the interpersonal relationships."

He adds that there are however always merits to people "articulating their viewpoints".

Using the presidential debates in the US as an example of how these competitive discussions pan out differently on TV screens he said, "it's very rare to win a presidential debate on TV, but most people believe you can lose one. That's why you see a very conservative debating style during these events which are broadcast on TV."

Passive viewers who have tuned in to watch the drama unfold may then immediately carry on the debate online, sending tweets about what they have seen and heard, or posting on Facebook.

"People do get excited about arguments and ideas and that's what draws them to

## Links

- Zurich Salon
- Debating at the George Washington University
- Jugend debattiert (Young people debate)

Be the first to comment on this article.

You must be logged in to comment.