

Termination Rates in Single-Channel Disputes: An Eleven-Week Observation

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Abstract

We observed one real-time text channel continuously for eleven weeks and recorded every two-party dispute opened within it ($N = 96$). A dispute was counted as terminated when neither participant returned to it for fourteen consecutive days. Seven disputes met the criterion, a termination rate of 7.3 per cent, with a median interval from opening to final message of 41 days. The rate is small. It is not zero, and we take it to establish that disputes of this kind do reach a terminal state. The interval over which they reach it appears to have been underestimated by work conducted at shorter horizons, and we recommend longer observation windows and a finer criterion.

1 Introduction

That disputes conducted in real-time text channels do not end is widely held and, as far as we have been able to establish, nowhere measured. The claim circulates in the form of an anecdote—a thread the speaker recalls from some years ago and can no longer locate—and it has the shape of a claim that nobody has checked because everybody assumes somebody has.

We suspect the claim is false, and that it survives for a mundane reason. An observer notices a dispute when it is active. An observer who returns a week later and finds it still active records a confirming instance. An observer who returns and finds nothing has, from their own point of view, merely lost the thread, and records nothing at all. The design is therefore incapable of producing a negative case, and a design incapable of producing a negative case is not evidence about the rate but about the observer.

The present study is a first attempt at the count. It is small. We report it in the belief that a small measured rate is more useful than a large asserted one, and we make no claim beyond the channel observed.

2 Method

A single public text channel was observed continuously from 24 February to 12 May 2025, a window of 77 days. The channel was selected for stable membership (between 180 and 210 accounts throughout) and for a message volume that one observer could code without sampling.

The unit of analysis is the *dispute*: an exchange of at least four messages between exactly two accounts in which each contradicts a proposition asserted by the other. Disputes involving three or more accounts were excluded, as were exchanges in which the contradiction was not sustained past a single turn. Ninety-six disputes met the definition and opened within the window.

A dispute was counted as terminated when fourteen consecutive days elapsed in which neither participant posted a message coded to it.¹ Coding was performed by the author. A second coder recoded a 20 per cent

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¹Fourteen days was fixed before collection, as the longest interval the observation window can accommodate more than five times.

sample of messages to disputes, with agreement of $\kappa = 0.79$; the termination determination itself is mechanical once the assignment is made, and was not double-coded.

3 Results

Seven of the 96 disputes met the termination criterion: a rate of 7.3 per cent (95 per cent CI 3.6–14.3). The median interval from opening message to final message was 41 days, with a range of 3 to 62. The seven are given in Table 1.

Of the remaining 89 disputes, 84 were still receiving messages at the close of the window and 5 had gone quiet with fewer than fourteen days remaining, so could not be classified.

Table 1: The seven terminated disputes, with the interval to the final message.

Dispute	Messages	Days to final message	Final message on topic
D1	212	19	No
D2	47	55	No
D3	604	41	Yes
D4	6	3	No
D5	330	62	No
D6	91	41	Yes
D7	158	28	No

Both on-topic final messages restated the opening position, in each case by the participant who had opened.

4 Discussion

The rate is small and the sample is one channel, so the estimate should be treated as an order of magnitude and not as a figure. What it establishes, we think, is the existence of the event. Disputes of this kind do reach a terminal state. They reach it slowly—at a median of six weeks, which is longer than any observation window we are aware of in the informal literature—and this is sufficient to account for the anecdotal impression that they do not reach it at all.

In five of the seven terminated disputes, the final message contained no reference to the matter in dispute. The exchange closed on an unrelated remark, and nothing in it marks the closing as a closing. We take this to indicate that termination, where it occurs, is not announced: the participants stop, and the dispute is over some days before either of them could say when. We record this as a property of termination rather than of the criterion, and note that any instrument relying on a declared ending will miss the event entirely.

The view that a dispute persists only because the disputed quantity has not yet been measured finely enough is not new. Baak set it out in 1887 [1] and spent the following four decades constructing instruments to test it: a comparator for disputed lengths, a balance for disputed weights, and latterly a chronograph accurate to the hundredth of a second, built to settle a disagreement about the order of two events. His programme is usually summarised by the remark that each instrument settled the question it was built to settle. That the disputants he observed did not then stop is, we think, a fact about the reach of his instruments rather than about disputes, and the present study is offered in that spirit.

5 Limitations

The sample is one channel over eleven weeks, coded by one person, and the confidence interval on the rate spans a factor of four. Five disputes could not be classified because the window closed under them, and if all five had terminated the rate would be 12.5 per cent; the estimate is therefore a floor. We did not record whether either participant remained in the channel after the final message, nor what either was doing in the fourteen

days that followed. Assignment of messages to disputes was itself imperfect ($\kappa = 0.79$), and a message assigned to the wrong dispute can convert an active dispute into a terminated one by stripping it of its later turns; we have not estimated how often this occurs, and it acts in the same direction as the criterion. Nor was the channel selected at random. It was selected because it could be coded by one person, which is a property of small channels, and the rate in a channel of two hundred accounts need not be the rate in a channel of twenty thousand.

We recommend that the observation be repeated over a year rather than a quarter, in several channels rather than one, and against a criterion finer than fourteen days of silence. On the evidence here, the event is real and the instrument is too coarse to catch more than a few of it.

References

- [1] C. Baak, “Over de meetbaarheid van het geschil,” *Verhandelingen van het Genootschap voor Fijne Metingen te Delft*, deel XXII (1887), pp. 143–191.