

Are Political Weblogs Public Spheres or Partisan Spheres?

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Abstract. In this paper we argue that political weblogs can be theoretically construed and empirically evaluated as public spheres, albeit with some technological and sociological limitations. Rethinking participation in a public sphere to include "emotional achievement" as a key aspect, we posit that political weblogs can function as public spheres for creating, structuring, and influencing political discourse. Interpretations from a virtual ethnographic field study of online participations in a political weblog community are presented as evidence for considering emotional achievement and online identity politics as important aspects of online public spheres such as political blogs. However, there is a danger of political blogs functioning as partisan spheres instead of as true public spheres that imbue the notion of critical rationality and the principle of equality of communicative action. Situating political blogs within the literature on virtual publics, we present "voter centered design" of electronic voting portals as a viable alternative to political blogs. Based on the findings of the virtual ethnographic study, we draw several implications for civic participation and democratic deliberation in the present Internet age. We discuss briefly how the emergence of *technological intersubjectivity* as a mode of human social relations, *digital positivism* as a mode of human epistemic relations with external reality are resulting not only in new discursive formations but also leading to a *civic panopticon*, or the civic surveillance of people and places of power.

1 Introduction

Operating from within the intertwined information ecologies (Nardi & O'Day, 1999) of the Internet; print media; network television; and cable television, political blogs are having a non-trivial impact on public discourses and politics (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). Notably, in the United States of America, the use of Internet for political news and purposes has been in ascendancy (Raine, Horrigan, & Cornfield, 2005). A longitudinal study conducted by the Center for the Digital Future¹, USC Annenberg School, on public opinion about the importance of Internet for political campaigning found steady and significant agreement since 2005. Figure 1 presents the longitudinal comparison results from 2005, 2006, and 2007 to the survey question of: “Do you think the Internet has become important for political campaigning process?”

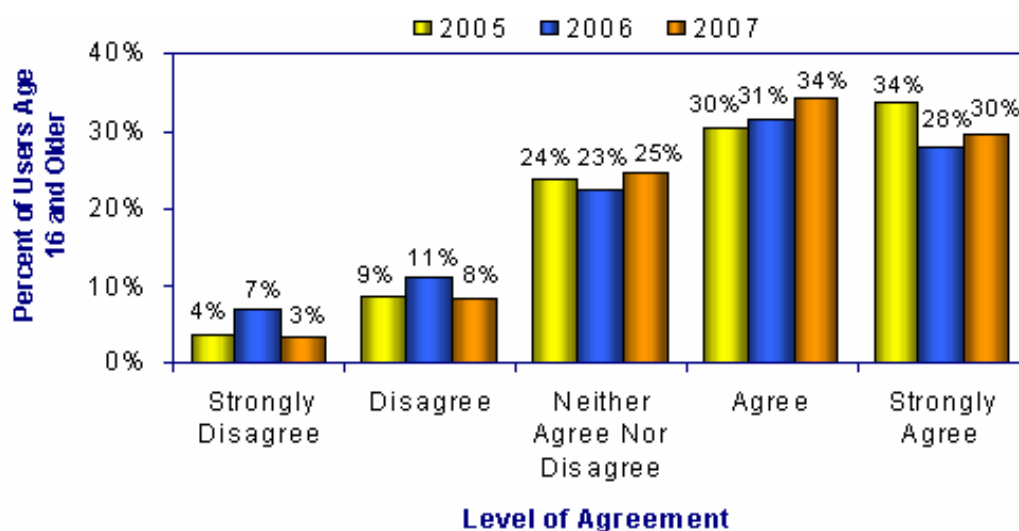


Figure 1: Longitudinal Comparison of the Importance of Internet for Political Campaigning².

The picture that emerges from the several surveys of Internet usage for political news and purposes is that the phenomenon is significant, stable, and here to stay. The objective of the research project reported here is to study the political blogging aspect of this phenomenon. We are particularly interested in investigating the sociological functions, technological features, and civic democratic characteristics of political blogs. Such an investigation should allow us to understand political blogs' functions as well as their broader societal impact. Towards this end, we have conducted a virtual ethnographic study of the political

¹ <http://www.digitalcenter.org/>

² It is interesting to note that survey perceptions of Internet importance for political campaigning is lower in the election year of 2006 compared to 2005 and 2007.

(Source: http://www.digitalcenter.org/media/upload//q190e_m3_small.gif)

blogosphere in the United States with an analytical focus on the un-moderated user comments of one particular blog posting of a popular political blog.

This introductory section is organized into four parts. First, we will offer a brief overview of weblogs and political weblogs. Second, we will analyze Habermas' (1991a, 1991b) original conception of "public sphere" by engaging Fraser's (1992) critical review. Third, we will offer Yang's {, 2000 #135} conceptualization of "emotional achievement" as a crucial addition to Habermasian prerequisites of a critical rationality and equality of communicative action for civic participation in the public sphere. Fourth, we will discuss the concept of online identity and the resulting online identity politics.

1.1 Weblogs

A "blog" is a portmanteau of "web" and "log". A blog¹ is basically a journal that is available on the Internet. The activity of maintaining a blog is "blogging" and someone who maintains a blog by posting blog entries is a "blogger". Blogs are typically updated using computer software. Blogging allows people with little or no technical background to update and maintain a web journal of their activities and interests. Postings on a blog are almost always arranged in reverse chronological order with the most recent additions featured most prominently. Blogs typically incorporate web syndication² and as such their content is available for subscription and aggregation. Blogs range from individual diaries to collective presence of political campaigns, media programs and corporations, and from single author to having a large community of writers. The totality of weblogs or blog-related webs is usually called the blogosphere³. A blog can be accessed through a regular web browser or an email client or by software applications such as newsreaders or feed aggregators.

1.2 Political Weblogs

A political blog consists of an individual or a small group of individuals posting views and commentary on political news, events, and media narratives. Political bloggers sometimes use their blogs to make calls for donations to political causes and campaigns. Political bloggers usually identify with a political ideology. Many political blogs allow public participation through the reader comments section. Like other kinds of blogs, many political blogs also include a "blog roll" which is a listing of links to other blogs and bloggers.

1 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_syndication

3 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere>

1.3 Public Sphere

Habermas (1991a) defines ‘public sphere’ as “a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed” (p.398). Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a mediating space between the state and the civil society. A public sphere is a democratic space where public interests, opinions, agendas and problems are formed, transformed, and exchanged by citizens’ proactive participation. The relationship between citizens engaged in public discourse and communication is the critical feature of a public sphere. Critical rationality, equality, freedom of expression, and dissemination are the necessary conditions for the proper structuring and functioning of a Habermasian public sphere. Figure 2 presents a schematic of Habermas’ Public Sphere.

| | | |
|---------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Private Realm | Public Sphere in the Political Realm | Sphere of Public Authority |
| Civil Society | | State |

Figure 2: Schematic of Habermas’ Public Sphere

Habermas derived the notion of public spheres from a study of English salons, French cafes, and German table corners in Western Europe and with an explicit focus on print media. Fraser (1992) pointed out the actual limitations in realistic practices of the public sphere compared to the normative features outlined by Habermas. Fraser contends that democracy itself has limitations in terms of institutions, mechanisms, and representations and conceptualizes public sphere as conditions and practices of social life world, rather than an essential condition in a democratic life world. In a Habermasian public sphere, communicative action based on equality in communication process is a prerequisite. According to Fraser, this prerequisite of equality is not a given. Instead, the prerequisite of equality depends on the participation and representation of multiple interests and perspectives in public discourses in egalitarian and multicultural societies. This point comes into sharp relief when we consider civic participation and democratic deliberation in the Internet age. Digital divide and digital literacy are significant factors in determining access to and engagement in online public spheres and discussion forums. Next, we discuss emotional achievement as a crucial catalyst

for and product of civic participation in public sphere in addition to the critical-rationality and equality of communicative action norms of a public sphere.

1.4 Emotional Achievement

Traditionally, individuals' participation in public spheres has been explained by intrinsic motivational factors of personal responsibility and extrinsic motivational factors of community interests and benefits. Affective factors of interacting with social others in a public sphere have been largely neglected. According to Whittier (2001), a social movement setting provides emotional opportunities. Applying Hochschild's (1979) concept of management of emotional labor to social movement settings, Whittier (2001) argues that emotional labor constitutes processes by which individuals manage their own emotions with the aim of promoting particular affective responses in those involved and influenced by the social movement. Emotional display by the activists is a result of this interaction between emotional opportunities and emotional labor. Yang (2000) defines emotion as situational, interactional, and temporal self-feelings. Yang (2000) conceptualizes emotional achievement as "the attainment of self-validating emotional experiences and expressions through active and creative pursuit." Yang's theoretical conceptualization of emotions includes self-feelings, and the emotional achievement of activists reflects and contributes to the achievement of individual and collective identity. As liminal phenomena social movements provide situations which allow individuals to achieve emotions and the self-realizations otherwise denied in ordinary social settings. Yang argues that the relationships between the processes of the emotion achievement and the identity achievement are useful to understand mobilization in social movements. We think that emotional achievement can serve as an additional explanatory concept for the activity of political blogging and user participation in blog comment sections. The efficacy and effectiveness of a public sphere depend not only on the critical rational persuasive discursive enunciations of the participants but also on their critical emotional enunciations. Persuasive speech can incorporate both rationality and emotionality of actors, particularly in public discourses on politics in public spheres. This brings us to a key factor in online discourse analysis of political blogs, online identity politics.

1.5 Online Identity Politics

Miller (1995) citing Goffman (1959) observes that "an interpretation of Goffman's work, and that of the Symbolic Interactionist school in sociology, is that self is developed and maintained, as well as presented, in interaction." Miller poses the critical question of whether there are different kinds and categories of electronic self-identities which can be presented and maintained online in the so-called cyberspace, apart from the corporeal self-identities rooted in the physical

world. According to Miller, there are no qualitative differences in the identity mechanisms and processes between the physical and online realms. This has direct relevance and implication for analyzing individuals' participation in public spheres when those public spheres are no longer conventional physical world "brick and mortar" spaces (such as table corners, cafes, and salons analyzed by Habermas, or the Italian public squares) but are online spaces for interaction and engagement. The empirical study presented in this paper investigated one such online space for interaction and engagement: a political weblog.

2 Methodology

Based on the above theoretical framework, the first author conducted a virtual ethnographic study of the political blog Eschaton¹. Eschaton is a highly popular political blog maintained by Dr. Duncan Black under the pseudonym of "Atrios". The blog postings are often critical of the traditional print and television media reporting of the political news and events. Hine (2000) advocates the use of virtual ethnography as a device to render the use of the Internet as problematic in itself. Hine argues that rather than being inherently sensible, the Internet acquires its sensibility in use. Below, we will provide a brief exposition of Hine's ten principles of virtual ethnography in the context of research study presented in this paper.

2.1 The Principles of Virtual Ethnography (VE) (Hine, 2000)

1. *Sustained interaction to "reduce the puzzlement"*: The first author spent a substantial amount of time on the political weblog Eschaton and became well-acquainted with the practices of this community.
2. *Interactive media like the Internet should be understood both as a culture and as a cultural artifact*: Particular attention was paid to the notion of the site of interaction; the user comments forum in relation to the blog culture and the totality of "blogosphere".
3. *VE can be usefully thought of as a mobile than multisided*: Adhering to this principle, we excluded the political economy of the weblogs and the audience research measures from our analytical focus.
4. *Object of VE can usefully be shaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle*: Political Blogs in most cases add another layer of interpretation to traditional political discourse and news. Political blogs are self-referential to the extent that their postings refer to earlier posts by the same blogger as well as the postings of other bloggers.
5. *Boundaries must be discovered. They are not to be assumed a priori but explored through the course of VE. Online and Offline boundaries must be formulated and then VE could be stopped*: In this virtual ethnographic

¹ <http://atrios.blogspot.com>

study of Eschaton, online boundaries were discovered *a posteriori*. The online boundary was one blog entry and the related user comments for that particular entry.

6. *VE is interstitial, in that it fits into the other activities of both ethnographer and subjects. Immersion in the setting is only intermittently achieved:* The first author did not forgo his “normal life” to conduct this virtual ethnography. His immersion in the “field site” was indeed intermittent.
7. *VE is necessarily partial. VE accounts are based on strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities:* The choice of the particular blog and the particular blog entry were based on this principle.
8. *VE can use the ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension. VE integrates all interactions with technology:* In accordance with this principle, we offer a reflexive interpretive account of the Eschaton blog readers’ comments.
9. *VE is ethnography in, of and through the virtual. All interactions are valid not just face-to-face:* This addresses the lack of face-to-face interviews and audience research measures of the Eschaton blog community.
10. *VE is adaptive ethnography and yet not methodologically pure:* We make no methodological claims for the sanctity or purity of this virtual ethnographic observation beyond closely adhering to these principles.

2.2 Orienting Questions

The following three orienting questions were used to inform the virtual ethnographic study.

1. To what extent are political weblogs public spheres?
2. How do online identity politics play out in the participants' comments?
3. How do online identities structure the discourse? Or conversely, how do online discourses structure identities?

3 Results

In the next three sections, we address each of the above orienting questions by analyzing the user comments. In particular, we relate reader comments to their explicitly created online identities. As mentioned before, our analytical focus is on users responding to one particular blog posting on Eschaton.

1. To what extent are political weblogs public spheres?

Most political blogs include an open door feature for blog readers to post their comments. Some political activist blogs require that users register (registration is usually free). Mandatory registration requires every user to create an online

identity (also known as username/userid/handle/virtual identity) and sometimes also to password protect the online identity. On such blogs, only registered users are able to post their comments to a particular blog entry and comments can be moderated. The posting of reader comments, on such closely moderated political blogs, is at the sole discretion of the blog owner(s). A user's online identity earns reputation, respect and trust based on the perceived quality of postings and feedback ratings from other readers. Another comment posting policy is implemented by the "free for all" or "open to all" political blogs like Eschaton. Anybody can post comments on the blog postings at Eschaton. Comments are not moderated. Comments can be related to the blog entry or take off at a tangent to seemingly unrelated items. A reader *needs to create an identity every time* a comment is posted. Frequent posters can make their online identities persist between sessions by using one particular online identity across comment postings.

In inquiring to what extent political blogging and political blog post commenting constitute a new kind of public sphere participation we need to discuss the notion of modernity imbued in the technological infrastructure of blogs. Modernity for Habermas was characterized by rationality and reason (Seidman, 1989) whereas for Bourdieu, it was the differentiated and autonomous field called habitus (Lash, 1993). Agents act uncoercively in Bourdieu's habitus (1977a, 1977b) and the reflexivity of agents characterizes modernity in contrast to the rationality of citizens and their communicative actions in Habermas' public sphere. Bourdieu claims that the economic and cultural spheres are increasingly becoming to resemble each other in the material economy of modernity (Lash, 1993). We argue that political blogs incorporate the reflexive aspect of a habitus while also displaying the public sphere characterizations of Habermas.

Political blogs like Eschaton enable a variety of sociological functions. They disseminate private opinion and through its distribution and consumption lead to participation and interaction. Through deliberation with other bloggers and blog readers they allow the formation of public opinion (or in the least a partisan community opinion) about issues and topics of common interest to the blogging community. Bloggers, through their blog postings call for activism and advocate for issues. Of course, given the nature of political blogs, these sociological functions are always already political functions. The political economy of the political blogs can be carefully controlled by the bloggers. If they choose to do so, bloggers can exercise control over the economic aspects of their blogs such as advertisements and endorsements¹. If the public sphere provides an intermediate space between the state and civil society for the dissemination, discussion, and deliberation of issues and enables communicative action grounded in equality and rationality, then with the qualifying caveats of digital divide and digital literacy, political blogs indeed provide such an intermediary space. However, whether political blogs can be complete and true public spheres where diversities of

¹ For example, see Advertise Liberally (http://web.blogads.com/advertise/liberal_blog_advertising_network)

opinion, ideological affiliation, and interests are heard and tolerated remains to be empirically documented and shown. At their best, political blogs are virtual public spheres. At their worst, political blogs can evolve into partisan community spheres instead of public spheres. We will have more to say on the danger of political blogs turning to partisan spheres later in the discussion section. Derived from our empirically analysis, Table I lists the public sphere characteristics of political weblogs.

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Sociological Functions | Dissemination Opinion Activism Advocacy |
| Technological Features | User Comments Trackback Blog roll Unmoderated vs. Moderated Open Door vs. Registration |
| Public Sphere Characteristics | Freedom of Expression Participation Interaction Rationality Emotionality Authority |

Table I: Public Sphere Characteristics of Political Weblogs (derived from the empirical study)

3.1 Emotional Achievement in Virtual Public Spheres

Yang's (2000) conceptualization of "emotional achievement" can help us better understand public participation in these political weblogs. Conceptualizing emotional achievement as a catalyst for and a product of online interactions in political blogs and its application to virtual public spheres adds to the traditional accounts of public sphere participations in terms of individuals' communicative actions and intentions. Castells (1996) pointed out that in the developed economies of the industrialized nations, traditional manufacturing jobs have given way to information production concentrated on an educated section of the population aged between 25 and 40. He predicted that the individualization of labor will lead to a highly segmented social structure. It is in this politically divisive and socially segmented United States of America that political blogs operate. We agree with Kurt Reymers (1998) that:

Since emotion, identity and meaning are so closely tied, a relationship clearly exists between emotion and self. Whereas reason is an internalization or self-justification for an event or circumstance that is created by the subject/object condition of agreement or understanding, emotion is often the outlet for a dearth in the subject/object condition (the lack of an understanding of a situation or circumstance one is confronted with; the lack of a socially constructed meaning). The subject/object condition is ultimately an attempt at learning and understanding. When we lack understanding, we must engage this circumstance of the subject/object condition and attempt to gain an understanding of our situation. Sometimes this is quite impossible. (...) Our identities are created not only by our understandings of the world that we perceive through communication with others, but equally (if not more so) by our inability to understand the world around us, and the communications we exchange with others in order to facilitate the impression of taking an epistemological stance. (Reymers, 1998)

Political blogs serve as a meeting point for people of similar and dissimilar political leanings to be informed of and to interact with political events and news, articulate their reactions, and to let out their feelings and emotions to feel validated, satisfied, and informed besides fulfilling civic responsibilities. Political blogs enable virtual “water cooler” conversations where individuals whether they are political activists or not can stay informed of and connected to the political talking points and people. Of course, political blogs can develop a cult following and associations in the current emotively charged US political arena. Group identities on political blogs are constructed, negotiated, and articulated in blog postings and reader participations. Within political blog communities such as Eschaton, one finds the sociological processes of group identity formation, social construction and negotiation of the in-group/out-group identities, associated boundaries, accepted norms, rules, and chores.

2. How does online identity politics play out in the participants' comments?

The ability to create a new identity for each posting gives the political blog readers the capability to create multiple identities to not only post their views but also to let that identity subvert, oppose, and/or resist the reading of the posting itself. For example, a reader reacting to the news that the attorney general John Ashcroft has tendered his resignation playfully assumed the identity of “**John Ashcroft**” and posted the following comment:

“Whew! Now I can FINALLY get back to the business of being a hardcore alky!
Let my resignation SOAR...!”

The above comment can be read as an act of subversion of Ashcroft’s real identity and authority. It can also be read as an attempt at humor masking the deep contempt for Ashcroft’s power and authority. Comment threads of political blog postings serve as performance sites for the identity politics of the political blog

readers. Reader constructed identities create and add to the meanings of their comments. Other readers might read a particular reader's comment(s) complying with the preferred dominant reading of popular discourse on the blog entry or negotiate meanings or construct oppositional meanings (Hall, 1980, 1997). Online identity can play a crucial role in signifying the received meaning. Readers realize that their online identity matters and it is based on that recognition that they create identities to supplement as well as complement their comments. When a reader posts a comment by identifying as **"No More Mr. Nice Guy!"** the self-declared identity influences possible readings to the actual posting. It is not always entirely the substantive content of the comments that signifies the comment poster's intentions or reactions; online identities can successfully do that too. Kaplan (1993) says *"such a challenge to dominant constructs is basic to the politics of the signifier."* When readers post as **"foilhatgrrl"** or **"chicago dyke"**, the politics of the signifier in their online identities comes to the foreground.

"Good going A. Only sane place for the reality based community to turn to these days."

foilhatgrrl

" (...)it's not foil, it's reality: all the bush administration has done in four years is lie, cheat and steal from others. why would voting be any difference?(...) there were reasons people believed that slogan, and no amount of 'faith' in the SoS in OH is going to change that."

chicago dyke

On political blogs, readers articulate their understandings or lack of understandings of the subject/object world and perceived reality by creating reflective identities like **"numbby"**, **"Pass the Foil"**, **"jiggy wid it"**, **"SPIN BUSTER"**, **"Straw Man"** and **"Semiconscious"**. The fluidity, the flexibility, and the technology supported capability to create online identities allow the readers to closely bind emotion and meaning with their online comments. Johnston (2003) states that:

The Internet offers many opportunities for people to take on roles and attributes other than those they have in real life. These opportunities have always been there. Any form of social interaction at a distance –whether it is by letter, telephone or mailing list – is open to this kind of development. Real life however gives us an easy way of establishing credentials. (Johnston, 2003)

Some readers create, claim, and maintain their credentials by assuming the identities of the authority figures they quote or cite. Readers sometimes create identities like **"Morpheus"** and **"Spinoza"**. Since the social interaction on the political blogs occurs at a distance in physical reality but in proximity in online reality, credentials and trust are sometimes built by playfully assuming the identity of the immediate authority.

3. How does online identity structure the discourse? Or conversely, how does discourse structure online identities?

Readers sometimes create identities that are grounded in their actual physical location on the planet by including a reference to the space they are located in or space(s) they identify with or space(s) they presently occupy; for example “*Cary in Tn*”, “*NYMary*”, “*Brooklyn Rob*”, “*chris/tx*”, “*David in NY*”, “*Elaine in NY*” and “*NMRed*”. Political blogs are not usually primary sites for the discussions on popular culture but readers do occasionally bring in popular culture references. Readers created identities such as “*HAL9000*” (reference to the infamous self-conscious computer in Stanley Kubrick’s movie 2001: A Space Odyssey), “*mdhatter*” (possibly a contraction of madhatter, a reference to a character in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland), “*Morpheus*” (possibly a reference to the visionary rebel leader of free humans in the The Matrix movie trilogy). In doing so, they assume a popular culture common ground with other readers. If some readers miss the reference to the popular culture icon, then meanings are interactionally negotiated and arrived at. Although the identities created and presented by political blog readers might not be fundamentally different from the identities created and presented in other online mediums, the global and local contexts of the political blogs differ significantly to other online and real life communication situations. Online identities function as corrugated props to the articulation of the meanings of the readers’ comments. All in all, participation in political blogs is a creative interactional accomplishment by the readers of the political blogs and they are shaping public discourse to a non-trivial extent in the USA (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). Some cable news organizations such as CNN¹ feature a blog section in their telecasts and blogs are also displacing the role of newspaper headlines with respect to early morning news shows in the USA.

4 Discussion

The public sphere, as we have pointed out, is an extremely useful concept that enables us to understand the dynamics of modern society. So far this concept has been theorized largely in terms of the nation-state. Congruence among the nation state, national citizenry and the public sphere has been repeatedly pointed out. This becomes evident in the writings of theorists of the public sphere such as Jurgen Habermas (1991a, 1991b), Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993), and Miriam Hansen (1993). In a rapidly globalizing world, what is needed is to locate the public sphere within a transnational frame. Manuel Castells (2001) talks about new information and communication technologies restructuring the world into a new informational global economy. We, in this paper, have sought to underline the importance of the interconnections between the internet and the

¹ <http://edition.cnn.com/>

public sphere, thereby enabling the public sphere to be understood productively within a transnational frame. This, we believe is a vital exegetical move in relation to current scholarship on the public sphere. Within the context of political blogging in the USA and based on our virtual ethnographic study, we will now discuss the questions posed by the DEMO-net research group on e-participation¹.

4.1 What new forms of political action are emerging? What old forms are evolving?

We are observing an emergence of a technology supported political action. Old forms of advocacy, activism, lobbying, and voting are evolving to incorporate the new civic participation and engagement possibilities enabled by the emerging technologies. However, as we mentioned already, there is a danger that online communities in general and political blogs in particular might develop into partisan community spheres instead of true public spheres based on equality and rationality of communicative action. Further, sustained involvement in the various political blog communities requires a significant amount of interactional labor and many civil society actors might be concerned with the interactional costs that ensue. Political blogs and other civic participation technologies do not offer integrated solutions to the processes of political information gathering, evaluating and decision-making. In our opinion, political information and communication technologies and e-voting portals can provide a valuable political decision making and voting service to the general public. Further, they can also provide exciting digital deliberation and democracy alternatives to existing new media forms like blogs. Towards this end, Scott Robertson has proposed a research program towards “Voter-Centered Design” (Robertson, 2005, 2006; Robertson, Wania, Abraham, & Park, 2008).

5 An Alternative to Political Blogs: Voter-Centered Design of Electronic Voting Portals

While political discourse has increased exponentially on the Internet, it remains partitioned into realms of discourse rather than integrated into a coherent public sphere. Political blogs are famously limited to individuals who agree with their particular point of view, and the blogosphere requires liaisons to bring people across political divides (Adamic & Glance, 2005). In this way, the blogosphere reflects our contemporary polarized political culture and works against a shared dialogue necessary in a pluralistic society (Barber, 2004; Pocock, 1973).

In addition to partisan segregation of blogs, political discourse on the Internet remains separated from political action such as candidate comparison or voting.

¹ http://www.electronicgovernment.se/demo_net_ws_2008/

Figure 3 below shows how a voting decision is embedded in increasingly social spheres involving decision making, information gathering, attitude formation, and cultural influence.



Figure 3. Socio-technical applications used by voters are located in increasingly social realms of discourse but seldom span multiple levels.

Socio-technical applications are located at different places in these discourse spheres, however they seldom cross over. For example, at present, an electronic voting machine is a tool only for presenting choices to a voter and allowing the voter to make selections. It cannot be used for information gathering or as an aid to decision making. Similarly, at present, a video sharing environment like YouTube can be used to gather information about candidates and issues, but not for voting. A blog can be used to support attitude formation and encourage cultural cohesion, but does not usually support information gathering. Social networking sites such as Facebook¹ have begun to integrate some socio-technical applications from different spheres by mashing up comments from friends, the pages of politicians, and some news, however it remains difficult to use multiple applications in an integrated way, especially for non-expert or non-technical computer users. For example, it is difficult for someone to examine a candidate comparison sheet from an online voter guide while at the same time discussing the candidates with others using a social networking tool. Similarly, it would be unlikely that a search tool would return a “crossover sample” of items related to a political topic – for example a blog, a video, a voter guide, some media items, a

¹ <http://www.facebook.com>

Myspace¹ account, and a candidate website – as top items in response to a single query.

From a *design* standpoint, we might ask whether it is possible to create an environment that supports broad civic participation using multiple integrated socio-technical applications instead of allowing only evolutionary development of the public discourse environment. Evolutionary development is more likely to result in a myriad of isolated technologies that reflect both the partisan environment and the commercial application development environment. A recent study of a combined voting/browsing portal (Robertson et al., 2005) suggests that designing an integrated environment will not be straightforward in part because it is difficult for voters to maintain multiple simultaneous goals related to different decision-making tasks. However, this type of resource allocation difficulty is exactly what a well-designed integration environment might be useful for. Other studies by the same group (Robertson et al., 2008) show that various forms of portal and ballot integration have tremendous influence both on the information those voters receive in search results and also on their search and decision-making strategies. For example, when voters use a traditional search tool such as Google to learn about candidates, they quickly find candidate websites, spend about half of their time exclusively looking at candidate websites, and are guided to other Internet resources by the links within candidate websites (Robertson, Wania, & Park, 2007). However, changing the interface to the search tool so that it helps voters to remember all of the candidates and presents multiple issues for their consideration results in considerably less influence of the candidates' websites (Robertson et al., 2008). Considerable research remains to be done on how different online tools influence voters and how the design of political information tools might influence voters' strategies and decisions.

Blogs and social spaces that allow users to interlink with other Internet resources are a step towards spanning levels of decision making. Facebook's different Wall applications allow users to post a video from a video sharing site, or an image from a photo sharing site, or a news story from a media site, along with a comment which is then broadcast to the "Newsfeed" sections of all of their friends. This can result in cycles of information sharing that pull from multiple sources and that are developed jointly by a group of friends. This activity spans some of the outer spheres in Figure 3. An interesting design challenge would be to incorporate some aspects of each user's local ballot into a social networking environment so that information sharing cycles can lead directly to decision making and ballot actions.

¹ <http://www.myspace.com>

5.1 How are civil society actors using the Internet for political communication? What democratic changes, if any, is this leading to?

From our own observations, we can say that civil society actors are increasingly and successfully using Internet blogs for political communication, coordination, advocacy, activism, and campaign financing. Many political campaigns and political parties in the USA now maintain blogs and political bloggers are increasingly influential on both the campaign trail and as well as for voter mobilization on the voting day. Daily Kos¹, an influential political blog associated with progressive politics and the Democratic Party in the USA has page visits in the order of millions on some prominent news event days. In the United States, information and communication technologies (ICT) usage and particularly blogging has led to an the emergence of a new kind of political collectivity known as the “net roots” similar to “grass roots” of the traditional politics (Dalton, 2007). We analogize that just as “grass roots” participated in and contributed to physical public spheres; “net roots” participate in and contribute to online public spheres such as political blogs.

5.1.1 Digital Positivism

Civil society actors are increasingly using the Internet to document and share reality. The documentation and dissemination of events and intersubjective perspectives on objective events was once the sole province of professional journalism which controlled access to the mass media publication avenues of print media, public television and radio, network television, broadcast radio, and cable television. The rapid diffusion of relatively cheap (in the Western socio-economic context) audio-video recording devices such as mobile phones, camcorders, webcams, digital voice recorders, computers, and the availability of free or low-cost Internet hosting and sharing services have empowered civil actors with the capabilities to record and share their lives as well as their realities. This capability has also been extended to record and share and thereby document the lives of social others. We term this emerging new human relationship with external reality “digital positivism”. In this emerging era of digital positivism, the objective reality of an event is intersubjectively established through the warrants of digital artifacts that are themselves based on technological grounds. The degree of the objective reality of an event in the intersubjective public discursive realm, under digital positivism, depends therefore on the positive ontological existence of a digital artifact².

¹ <http://www.dailykos.com>

² As a participant at the demo-NET workshop (http://www.electronicgovernment.se/demo_net_ws_2008/), put it: “If a tree falls in a forest and there is no YouTube video of it, then did the tree really fall?”

5.1.2 Civic Panopticon¹

We think that the emergence of a “show me the digital artifact” in public deliberation and argumentation will lead to a profound shift in how politicians go about campaigning and interacting with the general public. This has the potential for an inverted “panopticon” where civic actors utilize opportunities to monitor those in power or those that seek power and document their practices. Foucault (1977) invoked Bentham’s notion of panopticon in the penitentiary institutions as a way to discursively constitute the subject and to “discipline and punish” the socially deviant and ethically errant subject with technological means. We posit here the emergence of a “civic panopticon”. Utilizing the increasing ubiquity and affordability of information and communication technologies and reality documenting gadgets and devices, civil society actors are able, to a certain extent, to return the gaze of the state apparatus and agents of the state apparatus. An example of this state of affairs is the “macaca comment”² in the 2006 Senate race in Virginia, USA. Another example is the Bosnia sniper³ fire claim incident during Hillary Rodham Clinton’s 2008 US Democratic party presidential nomination campaign. Yet another example of the digital positivism and civic panopticon is the role of actors and digital artifacts in the Abu-Ghraib⁴ prison scandal.

5.2 Do e-participation developments affect civil society by providing new platforms for debate and engagement? How?

Recent developments in the United States presidential primary election campaigning indicate that e-participation is indeed providing new platforms for debate and engagement. Social sharing sites such as YouTube and social networking sites such as Facebook have emerged as online platforms for debate and engagement. For example, political campaigns are starting to use online social sharing platforms such as YouTube to disseminate candidate speeches and other campaign material (Walters, 2007). Also, some followers of political candidates are posting “viral videos” in support of their candidates or deriding the opponents. For the first time in US political campaigning history, the news organization CNN hosted a debate in conjunction with YouTube. Candidates responded to citizen questions posted on the YouTube website as videos. The creators of the selected videos were invited to attend the debate in person⁵. For the 2006 US mid-term

1 Related to Jamais Cascio’s notion of Participatory Panopticon <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/002651.html>

2 <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/08/24/politics/main1931999.shtml>

3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BfNqhV5hg4>

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_prisoner_abuse

5 <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/youtubedebates/index.html>

elections, Facebook created an account and Facebook entry for each of the Democratic and Republican candidates and encouraged candidates, their campaigns, and Facebook users to engage in debate and discourse (Williams & Gulati, 2007). The Internet is currently undergoing a paradigm shift towards a participatory mode of interaction and we expect this to impact civic democratic practices profoundly. However, there is a need for rigorous empirical work to document and explicate this emerging and promising phenomenon.

5.3 Will the Internet revitalize or erode offline associations and community life? How are online communities similar or different from offline ones?

Theoretically, e-participation leads to the formation and sustainment of technological intersubjectivity (Vatrapu, 2007).

Technological intersubjectivity (TI) refers to an interactional social relationship between two or more participants. This interactional social relationship emerges from a dynamic interplay between the functional association of the participants as communicators and the empathetic association of the participants as actors in a technology supported self-other relationship.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have changed the social fabric of our relations with others and object in fundamental ways. Our interactions with others and objects are increasingly shaped by the logic of technology, hence the construct of technological intersubjectivity. In technological intersubjectivity, computational support can enhance the communicative possibilities and the experiential potentials of two or more individuals. Socio-technical environments have potentials for both psychological and phenomenological intersubjective experiences without the requirement that interacting persons be co-present in the same place and interact at the same time. Individuals can appropriate the affordances of socio-technical system not only maintain a functional communicative relationship with other individuals but also to build an empathetic social relationship. However, interacting through technology isn't fully satisfying and creates a desire for the social phenomenological richness of the face-to-face meetings. In our view, e-participation is no exception to this tendency to seek richer face-to-face meetings and not be limited to just online social ties. It is increasingly the case that online social ties will lead to the creation of offline real-world social bonds.

In the context of political blogging in the USA, based on our observations, we can say that the Internet is actually revitalizing offline associations and community life. For example, the Daily Kos blog community consists of bloggers, diarists, commentators, and lurkers. For the past few years, the Daily Kos blog community along with other progressive blogging communities has organized

offline conferences called “Netroots Nation”¹ (formerly called “YearlyKos”) to meet face-to-face. Similarly, the Eschaton blog community which was the analytical focus of the virtual ethnographic study presented in this paper, meets offline at a conference called “Eschacon”². Further, members of the liberal blogging community can meet offline at one of the “Drinking Liberally”³ local chapters. Drinking Liberally self-describes itself, somewhat tongue-in cheek, as “promoting democracy one pint at a time” and self-reports “40 chapters in 45 states.” This is an interesting analogue to Habermas’ “structural transformation of the public sphere” which first describes the emergence of the public sphere from English salons, German table corners, and French cafes. It is too early to add American bars to the list of physical spaces above. However, emerging empirical research does indicate that Internet-based forms of participation and engagement in the USA are creating offline face-to-face bonds. It was the print media that was the technological bedrock for the emergence of Habermasian public sphere. Early indications point to the Internet media as providing the technological capabilities for the emergence of a mixed reality public sphere. Fluid identities between online and offline worlds are leading to a hybrid identity which when taken together with a mixed reality public sphere holds exciting action possibilities. However, this is admittedly a very early period in the evolution of these mixed-reality places and systematic empirical studies are needed to ascertain the civic benefits of these developments.

5.4 When, where and why is internet activity in civil society having an impact on public policies?

Our virtual ethnographic study doesn’t directly address this issue. However, in our observations, we do see political blogs operating as activists and advocates for issues of concern. In other words, political blogs do act and function as political agents. Many political blogs seek to empower the “net roots” and issue calls for campaign funding contributions, voter registration, and voter mobilization. On the key legislative issues, political blogs like Daily Kos and Eschaton encourage their community members to contact their representatives on issues of concern. However, we do not yet know empirically how effective these activities are in impacting actual public policies.

1 <http://www.netrootsnation.org/>

2 <http://eschacon08.blogspot.com/>

3 <http://drinkingliberally.org/>

5.5 How do trends at different levels (local, national, European and international) compare? Is civil society's use of e-participation a homogeneous trend or is it a politically localized phenomenon?

Speaking from the USA standpoint, political blogging is infused with a productive dialectic of the local and the global. The formation of new public imaginaries and virtual publics is a case in point (Gaonkar, 2002; Rodman, 2003; Saco, 2002; Taylor, 2002; Warner, 2002). However, given the digital divide and differential gaps in digital literacy, we must critically investigate the societal implications of the e-participation possibilities engendered by the Internet. To paraphrase what Seymour Papert (1987) has said in the context of educational technology, we should engage in “technology criticism” and not be limited by “techno centric thinking” in studying these emergent trends. In the case of political blogs, as we said earlier, there is a danger they can evolve into partisan community spheres that perpetuate a particular political ideology instead of providing places for critical civic engagement. It might be the case that e-democracy, e-governance, and e-participation are incompatible discursive modes of enunciation. In our opinion, this is an open empirical question that needs to be systematically studied.

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