

Blogs: Creating Democracy and Ensuring Access

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December 15, 2004

“My significant other works for Electronic Arts, and I'm what you might call a disgruntled spouse” (ea_spouse, 2004). On November 10th, 2004, a LiveJournal article began as such presumably written in the private comfort of the author's own home. The author, using only the LiveJournal handle ea_spouse, presented a touching and somewhat desperate description of the unmanageable hours that her significant other's employer, Electronic Arts, was demanding of him. Since he had accepted a position as a game developer, his hours had been steadily growing under the guise of unavoidable, industry standard, “crunch times.” His weeks had started at eight hours a day for six days a week, a commitment that is described as “not bad,” and had grown to twelve hours a day for seven days a week “with the occasional Saturday evening off for good behavior (at 6:30m).” Though his team was on schedule at the end of each of the “pre-crunch” deadlines, the crunch periods had not ended, but had only grown more intense. But “the kicker” in ea_spouse's mind was that the EA employees, who were salaried, received no overtime pay, no 'comp time' and no additional sick or vacation leave. In the past, there had been periods of 'comp time' at the end of projects, which is described as “a staple in this industry,” but employees had been told to no longer expect it. The article described a team suffering from fatigue and low morale and speculated that the overworked team would be introducing as many flaws as they were removing. EA's attitude to the abysmal work environment was summed up with, “if they don't like it, they can work someplace else.” The article also alludes to a California law that would seem to make such labor practices illegal and casts doubt on EA's repeated claim that salaried employees are exempt from the mandatory overtime pay.

While ea_spouse's posting may have served as some sort of catharsis, it is undeniably a call to action. The argument is persuasive and follows a reasoned logic that would seem unnecessary in a personal journal entry. There is also the reminder at the bottom of the page that the article is offered under the Creative Commons deed and is free for redistribution or linking. It is clear that ea_spouse had released the story into the public with the hope that it would stimulate a discourse in a way that would somehow put pressure on Electronic Arts.

In this case, the article did not sit in a hidden corner of the Blogosphere for long. According to Blogdex, the first set of linkers found the article the next day about the same time it was submitted to Slashdot (Zonk, 2004). The discussion on Slashdot was lively, with some responding in disgust and others questioning the truthfulness of the claims. Discovering the article on Slashdot, many bloggers then relinked the article in their own blog, with commentary or further questions. The online gaming news site, Gamespot, even began investigating the validity of some of the claims later finding that a law suit had already been filed earlier in the month, and that the process was underway to elevate the claims to class action (Feldman and Thorsen, 2004). As the discussion grew, other former and current EA employees raised their voices in agreement with ea_spouse. There was, of course, also talk of a boycott of EA games during the coming holiday shopping season, but no cohesive group formed to lead the charge. The voices in the widely dispersed dialog mostly either expressed sympathy or disbelief, offered up suggestions, or provided some sort of subjective insight. By November 13th, the story was one of the top memes on the Internet and the discussion had mostly moved away from forums like Slashdot, where it was no longer the top feature, and into individual blogs. While a few sided with Electronics Arts and dismissed the claims as being the voice of indolence, most expressed disgust or disappointment that a company considered highly successful would resort to unethical labor practices to further stuff their seemingly large coffers.

On November 21st, things got even worse for Electronic Arts when Randall Stross' article, "When a Video Game Stops Being Fun", ran in the Digital Domain section of the New York Times (2004). While EA has still not officially spoken publicly about the accusations, at least one gaming site has published a leaked internal memo that is supposedly from Rusty Rueff, EA's Senior Vice President of Human Resources (Kotaku, 2004). The memo begins,

The last few weeks of reading blogs and the media about EA culture and work practices have not been easy. I know personally how hard it is when so much of the news seems negative. We have purposefully not responded to web logs and the media because the best way to communicate is directly with you, our team members.

The memo ultimately admits to problems in their development processes that may be leading to "late in the process changes." They also claim to be "looking at reclassifying some jobs to overtime eligible in the new Fiscal Year." Overall, it is a memo intended to ensure employees that there are problems and that plans are underway to correct those problems. For the world of blogging it looks like another victory. While it is rare for a blog posting to climb out of obscurity so quickly, it does illustrate the power of weblogs to mediate a public debate that has the strength to challenge powerful organizations.

The ea_spouse posting is not the first illustration of the collective power wielded by the blogging communities. In late 2002, Mississippi Senator and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott was forced to resign after blogs like Joshua Marshall's "Talking Points Memo" published and stirred a subsequent debate about a comment Lott had made at the 100th birthday party for Senator J. Strom Thurman (Wikipedia contributors, 2004). The comment, which was largely ignored when it was broadcast on C-SPAN seemed to express nostalgia for a platform of racial segregation. Five days after Marshall's posting (Marshall, 2002), the story was being covered on all the major news networks. More evidence mounted against Lott as bloggers and mainstream journalists continued to uncover similar statements the Senator had made in the past.

Fifteen days after John Marshall's posting appeared in his blog, Trent Lott resigned as Senate Republican Leader (Wikipedia contributors, 2004).

Similarly, the Web Standards Project, which began in 1998, was able to collectively pressure Netscape and Microsoft into adopting web standards that were, at the time, being largely ignored in efforts on the part of both companies to take control of the browser market (Web Standards Project, 2004). The project was co-founded by well-known blogger Jeffrey Zeldman and much of the group's advocacy has played itself out on the blogs of its members. As web designers and developers, the members were adamant about refraining from the use of proprietary formats in web documents and encouraged other builders on the web to do the same. They raised awareness of the fact that the escalating costs to maintain web presence was being further fueled by the amount of resources needed to address browser incompatibilities and published blog postings explaining how such practices ultimately limited the growth potential for the Web. As more developers and designers joined the efforts and became vocal in their own blogs, the pressure on the browser manufacturers mounted. Also, as more of the web's builders began ignoring the proprietary formats, it ceased to be an effective means of cornering the market. As a result, the current versions of all major browsers comply with the standards published by the World Wide Web Consortium.

What the examples above illustrate is that the democratic power of web logs is very real. In each case, the blogs in question were the medium for assertions and subsequent debate which lead eventually to a sort of public consensus that carried enough power to effectively challenge the established power. In fact, Trent Lott's resignation was considered by some to have been a defining moment when blogs were able for the first time to gain the attention of mainstream journalists, most of who had either treated bloggers with complete indifference or had been completely unaware that they even existed (Bloom, 2003). Ever since then, there has been wide spread speculation as to what role bloggers play in the world of journalism and public opinion. For

others, it has brought about much larger questions, such as what role blogs play in the makeup of the public sphere (Ó Baoill, 2004).

Does the Blogosphere Constitute a Public Sphere?

The work of Jürgen Habermas' which puts forth the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed,” (Eley, 1992, p. 298) provides a ideal democratic model of a space where individual citizens are empowered to shape their political environment through free debate which leads to a collective public opinion. Obviously, with the notion of Habermas being an idealistic model, it is unlikely that its criteria will ever be fully realized, but as a model against which to compare spaces where public discourse is carried out it is helpful. In fact, researcher Andrew Ó Baoill, has taken a set of criteria from Habermas' writing and used it as a tool for critical evaluation of digital communicative spaces like Slashdot, a news and discussion-based web site, and even the current blogosphere. His three criteria serve to enumerate the necessary components of such spaces and are helpful in determining how well such spaces hold up against the ideal model (Ó Baoill, 2004). His three criteria include:

Universal access – anyone can have access to the space

Rational debate – any topic can be raised by any participant, and it will be debated rationally until consensus is achieved.

Disregard for rank – the status of participants is ignored

Ó Baoill's analysis of the blog world does not conclude favorably citing “a number of structural impediments in the current implementation of weblogs- both in terms of production and reception- that seriously damage any claim of the blogosphere to be a strong public sphere.” Despite his negative evaluation, though, Ó Baoill seems to suggest some optimism in the ultimate democratic power of blogs and goes as far as to make suggestions for future developments that would help to correct several of the problems he has identified.

Additionally, much of the existing critique of the web as a democratic space remains relevant to any discussion of the sub-space of blogs. Including in this is Lisa Nakamura's assertion that Cyberspace's interfaces are hegemonic, "in the sense that they are enforced and informed by dominant ideologies." Her book, *Cybertypes*, illustrates perfectly that the democratic utopias that were described by early theorists, are still under construction until the debates and concerns of under represented group can be carried out without having to occupy the categories of "otherness" that mark their segmented space in the current tools for accessing the web. Like Ó Baoill, Nakamura explicitly denies the current state of the Web any claims to a public sphere, but also points out that it "comes the closest (albeit not very close at all)" (Nakamura, p. 109).

The claim that the web and its most vocal sub-space, blogs, have great potential as a space for public debate seems, for the most part, beyond question for most critics. Those who have levied the most criticism seem to do so in a way that opens up paths for further enhancement and development, rather than advocating discontinuation of such uses of the web. I would also suggest that, like those raised by Ó Baoill and Nakamura, the majority of the current limitations troubling the blogosphere's role as a public sphere comes as a result of the means of access. In the next section, I try to summarize the current issues of access troubling the current blogosphere and then examine the current available means of access paying close attention to the positive and negative characteristics of each.

Issues of Access

The history of democracy is one of balancing the idealistic notion of equal involvement of all against the practical limitations of access to the system in question. Virtually all current democratic systems, including the political system here in the United States, are representative democracies where only a select few are elected to be directly involved in the official political process.

While we continue to describe these representative systems as democratic, the ideal is not the election of representatives but the greatest public participation of people. (Levy, 2002, p. 64) All democratic governments are shaped by the idealistic desire to be guided by the collective voice of its citizens and the practical limitations of hearing and debating the ideas posed by so many voices. It should be no surprise then that as we begin to ask questions about the role of the blogosphere in shaping an ideal democratic space, the first set of issues are those of access to that space. In examining the existing critiques of the Internet and the blogosphere in terms of democratic ideals, four distinct and important issues of access continually surface: sheer mass of the population involved, the formation of very small numbers of highly visible voices, the disproportionately low visibility for under-represented groups, and the remaining socioeconomic and cultural barriers to electronically mediated debate.

Shear mass

With the amount of attention that blogging has received in the last couple of years, the population of the blogosphere has been growing at an incredible rate. Services like Blogger and LiveJournal have opened up blogging to a set of authors who would otherwise be put off by the technical hurdles involved in publishing on the web (Mortensen, 2004). There is always much debate on how to properly estimate the current size of the blogosphere and much variance in the estimates (Bloom, 2003). It is clear, though, that the number of bloggers is on the order of several million and that continues to grow at a significant rate. Technorati, the self-pronounced authority on what's going on in the world of weblogs, provides search and aggregation services for the blogosphere (Technorati, 2004). As of December 13th 2004, their monitoring service is tracking over 5 million blogs and that number has increased by about 70,000 in the past three days (Technorati). LiveJournal, one of the popular blog publishing services, is currently reporting that they are hosting about 5.4 million bloggers with 1.4 million of those blogs having been updated in the past 30 days and 349,251 having been updated in the past 24 hours.

The magnitude of the number in the sampling above should give an indication of the difficulty of an individual blogger to attract interested readers or to find other bloggers that share his/her interests. As a medium for public debate, high involvement serves as both a sign of success and a limiting factor. As more people join the enormous web of conversations being carried out on blogs it becomes increasingly hard to find those conversations (Ó Baoill, 2004).

Uneven Distributions of Readership

Another issue often cited in criticisms of the blogosphere is the formation of a group of highly visible bloggers who draw the majority of attention in the blogosphere. These A-list bloggers, as they are usually called, account for the majority of the traffic in the weblog world as measured by number of inbound links (Shirkey). Inbound links represent somewhat of a currency among weblogs, since most webloggers strive to increase their readership and the most reliable way to do so is by convincing other weblogs to link to their own weblog (Blood, 2002, p. 98). This seems logically sound since the number of inbound links to a particular blog would be directly related to the probability of it being seen and the subset of those viewers who would then become regular readers (Dresner and Farrell, 2004). The attention paid to A-List webloggers can be explained by this increased likelihood of attracting new readers for those who already have an established readership.

In the past two years, many researchers have conducted studies to attempt to better understand this phenomenon in terms of probabilistic models. In February of 2003, Clay Shirky used data made available from a system that monitors the links on weblogs to show that the distribution of those links followed a power law (2003). A few days later, blogger Jason Kottke showed that similar results from an analysis done on the dataset of Technorati. Power law distributions are mathematical models of probability that have been used to describe the distribution of wealth, word frequency in natural languages and, in recent years, a number of social phenomena (Shirkey, 2003) (Dresner

and Farrell, 2004). What this means for the blogosphere is that roughly 20% of the weblogs account for about 80% of all inbound links and that such a skew is self reinforcing since the number of incoming links is related to the likelihood of acquiring more links. From this it is easy to see how this compares to distributions of wealth and, in fact, many have described links among blogs as promoting a system where “the rich gets richer.” Some critics argue that the skewed distribution of readership undermines any claims that weblogs constitute a public sphere (Ó Baoill, 2004). This argument is made even more grim when linked with economic principles that suggest that such uneven distributions naturally occur whenever many people are free to choose between many options or, more succinctly: Diversity plus freedom of choice creates inequality (Shirky, 2003).

Under-represented Groups

While some recent demographic studies and the reported statistics of some weblogging services indicate that women bloggers now outnumber men, the common Internet user still tends to be “young, white, employed, well-educated, wealthier and suburban” (Greenspan, 2003). With most of the blogosphere's attention on a set of A-List bloggers and much of the discussion centering on a small number of topics, the concerns of underrepresented groups is in danger of falling to the periphery. The mathematical models from the last section would seem to indicate underrepresented groups are disproportionately less likely to be elevated to the level of A-list blogger. Since like-minded A-list bloggers work for many as editorial gatekeepers around certain topics of interest (Dresner and Farrell, 2004), the part of the blogosphere that deals with minority issues may be doomed to remain isolated, inaccessible and unorganized. This raises very serious skepticism about the democratic nature of the web and could lead to even fewer minority bloggers, since the challenges of gaining readership are even more pronounced.

Also since web builders including the builders of blog software and blog

access systems, tend largely to be white and male (Nakamura, 2002, p. 109), the software that allow for authorship and promotion in the blogosphere are less likely to consider alternate forms of promotion necessary to even sustain isolated minority debate (Bowen, 2003). As African American bloggers, like Michael Bowen, find new ways to establish a “different kind of critical mass” to support “black expression” in the blogosphere, will blog tool builders take notice (2003)?

Socioeconomic and Cultural Barriers

Certainly, the most underrepresented population in the blogosphere are those who are absent. Advocates of online democracy have long grappled with this problem, and the issue is somewhat more pronounced when considering blogs. “Blogs are only available to people of certain sophistication, comprising the ability to read and write, regular access to a computer and the training needed to structure thoughts and ideas into verbal expression according to accepted rules.” (Mortensen, 2004) Recent research indicates that 24% of Americans still do not have direct or indirect experience with the Internet (Lenhart et. al, 2003). Even for those who are online, there is also the time requirement of finding potential sources and contributing to debate that makes blogging unattractive or impossible for some (Ó Baoill, 2004).

Modes of Access

Critics of the democratic nature of the blogosphere have identified the issues of access listed above as ultimately limiting any claim the blogosphere can make about its role as a public sphere. (Ó Baoill) Identification of such issues is essential to ensure that future development of tools for authoring, promotion, search and categorization has the opportunity to improve the situation. In this section, I want to extend the criticism further and look directly at the tools used to access the blogosphere and assess the positive and negative characteristics of each. I have identified four categories or modes of access that are the basis for such tools: directories, search engines,

blog aggregators, and the discursive nature of weblogs.

Directories

Web directories, which fall in the larger category of web portals, attempt to map the contents of the web into a hierarchical index. While their popularity has waned in recent years, a few directories are still in wide use, including Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com>), the Open Directory Project (<http://www.dmoz.org>), and LookSmart (<http://www.looksmart.com>). The advantage of such systems is that they provide a means for open ended exploration of topics, allowing the reader to understand where a topic fits in a broader ontological scheme. Directories can also be a very powerful means of finding exhaustive lists within a subject, much like the Yellow Pages provide a convenient list of available plumbers.

The primary criticism of such tools, however, revolves around the larger question of whether systems that are centrally controlled and centrally governed can play a non-destructive role in a democratic process. Even the Open Directory Project, which was founded out of the frustration and powerlessness that many Internet users faced using Yahoo! when its legion of paid staffers struggled to keep up with rapidly expanding web content, has a somewhat unflattering history as ex-editors and concerned users have continually questioned whether their use of the term “Open” in their title is misleading. The most well-known episode began in March 2000, when technology consultant Andrew Goodman published a very critical article that disputed the openness of ODP on the grounds that there was no transparent process for acceptance of new editors and submissions, that there was noticeable incentive for editor corruption, and that the ultimate control of the directory rested in its corporate owner, AOL (Goodman, 2000). Goodman's condemnation was followed by column by a former unpaid editor of the Open Directory Project whose editing permissions had been suddenly revoked when, in his opinion, he began to argue for the creation of a “House of Commons” to “balance the power wielded by the 'House of Lords'” (Prenatt,

2000).

The degree to which directories can map and categorize the content on the Web without favoring the point of view held by the editors is unclear. The very act of arrangement is an act that leverages an understanding of the relationships among topics that tightly bound to the cultural environment of the arranger. Lisa Nakamura has written extensively about how the categories that are introduced as part of the user interfaces in cyberspace lead to a sort of cybertyping, where identity is constrained to a single choice from the available selections. (Nakamura, 2002, p. 102). Additionally, she points out, the absence of categories of “whiteness” illustrate the underlying assumption as the default option, which creates “a guided reading of the web that assumes that its reader is white.” Without the ability of monitories to fully form identities that aren't precoded, much of the individual perspective that plays a part in public discourse will likely be lost making it increasingly unlikely for minorities to be heard in mainstream topics of debate.

Finally, the very structure of the directories seems ill suited address the needs of the Internet as a medium for discourse. The model upon which such systems are build tend to regard the Web as an enormous repository of information where the timeliness of discovering and categorizing content is not one of the prominent concerns. The current methods of editorial maintenance depend on the availability of human resources to examine and categorize new information as it appears and to remove from the index information that has become unavailable. A subset of the process, can obviously be done autonomously, but it is doubtful that the staffing models used by the current directories would scale to accommodate the mass, rate and relational complexity of information published into the blogosphere.

Search Engines

Probably currently the most frequently used mode of access, search engines like Google (<http://www.google.com>) and MSN Search (<http://search.msn.com>),

attempt to maintain enormous databases with a virtual snapshot of the Web. The massive amount of content is constantly being analyzed to keep current an index that attempts to associate a set of descriptive keywords with every available web site on the Internet. As users type in their search criteria into the web interface, the condensed index is quickly searched for a set of results that best matches the user's search terms. (UC Berkeley Library) Despite the major search engines being similar in terms of maintaining snapshots that are transformed to a tractable index, there are differences in the way the analysis evaluates factors that lead to scoring of web pages in the index. Google, which is the widely touted as the dominant search engine on the Web (Ó Baoill, 2004), reached market dominance through the innovation of its ranking system, which it calls PageRank. One of the break through characteristics of PageRank is its favoring of analysis of inbound links over a page's actual content in calculating a page's importance score (Google). Google promotes PageRank as relying “on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structures as an indicator of an individual page's value.”

While few would argue that Google and other powerful search engines are now essential to providing reliable access to most of the Web, such systems still exhibit properties that limit access to debates carried out on blogs that must be addressed if the blogosphere hopes to better serve as a public sphere. The first of these issues stems from an assumption that is inherent in the way that PageRank works. Every inbound link to a web page is evaluated by PageRank as a positive assertion which adds to that page's credibility. “This means that every link to a website- even where such links are from posts that criticise that site- pushes up the rank of the target site on Google” (Ó Baoill, 2004). This fact could actually discourage bloggers from linking to those with whom they disagree, so as not to promote the opposing site's to a higher Google ranking. The result of such practices ultimately leads to the untimely termination of a debate, since the modes of access that depend on such links do not register the conversational connection between the two sites.

Another interesting property that has been discovered in ranking systems like PageRank, which use inbound links as an indicator of credibility, is that they are susceptible to manipulation by a small number of cooperating web-sites. In 2001, blogger Adam Mathes first wrote about and then later demonstrated that a few websites coordinating links could promote a site to the top of the search results for a particular set of keywords (Mathes, 2001). In Mathes this case, he chose the opportunity to attempt a joke on a friend, Andy Pressman, by attempting to promote Pressman's website to the top of the search results for the keywords "talentless hack." Mathes encouraged readers to create links from their own sites that pointed to Pressman's site with the enclosed text, "talentless hack." Very shortly, his hypothesis was proven correct much to Pressman's chagrin. Since then, many unscrupulous marketers have attempted to exploit the technique described by Mathes and is the primary reason that blogs must contend with the relatively new phenomenon of comment spamming. There is evidence that Google has since made some updates to its ranking system that reduced the likelihood of manipulation at the cost of devaluing content in blogs (Lemieux, 2004).

Blog Aggregators

Blog Aggregators are a relatively new mode of access which serves partly as a specialized Google for the blogosphere and partly as a means to monitor the hot topics being discussed. Sites like Blogdex (<http://blogdex.net>) and Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>) both attempt to monitor changes in content, nearly in real-time, of all the weblogs that constitute the full blogosphere. Like Google, blog aggregators use the interconnections represented by links as the primary focal point of analysis (Ó Baoill, 2004). Unlike Google, aggregators monitor only sites that meet some minimum criteria to be considered blogs and the primary goal is to rank the links by their recent popularity. The assumption is that high ranking links represent the topics that are being the most discussed in the blogosphere at the current moment. Such systems allow bloggers and their readers a conveniently condensed view of the topics that are at the forefront of the blogosphere's

collective conscience.

Since the techniques that drive the analysis of links are partially based on those that underlie Google's PageRank system, many of the criticisms listed in the last section also hold here. Included in this is the criticism that such link analysis works on the assumption that links indicate positive assertion and does not take into account the context of the link, which may very well be negative or make arguments that the information published on the site is not credible. (Ó Baoill, 2004) Also, there may be even more opportunities to manipulate the results of aggregation. One such scheme has already been shown to affect Blogdex, where a single blogger can use the ability to comment on a number of other blogs to elevate his/her position for a short time in the rankings (Marlow, 2003).

Another issue that limits the role of aggregators in promoting balanced access has been the lack of normalization across topics that leads to certain topics always dominating the top of the rankings (Ó Baoill, 2004). This phenomenon may seriously limit the ability to bring attention to topics that do not align with the interests of a majority of bloggers. Currently, the topics of technology, politics and blogging, seem to consistently dominate the rankings on Blogdex's list of the most "contagious information currently spreading in the weblog community." It has also been pointed out that this phenomenon results in aggregators strongly favoring topics that are of interest to Americans, since the United States still has the most weblogs of any other nation (Coates, 2003). A good example actually occurred not long ago when Blogdex's rankings were almost completely saturated in stories about the war with Iraq when at the same time there was no representation of the war in the Congo. Such skewing of the blogosphere's conscience to the majorities concerns could seriously limit the ability of blogs to mediate the concerns and debates of the international community.

Discursive Nature of blogs

The final mode of access to consider is one we would not normally think of in terms of the access it provides, but given the realization that web users have a tendency to return repeatedly to the same sites, it may prove more powerful than is immediately obvious (Abramson,1998, p. 59). The social networks that emerge by following the links and conversations in blogs provides a very powerful map that is to some degree a map of a bloggers intrests and opinions. The popularity of tools to monitor publications on individual weblogs, like RSS readers, and practices like bloggrolling, where bloggers provide links to other blogs they read, indicates that many of those reading blogs depend on a circle of other bloggers as their guide into the blogosphere. I would suggest that this dependence on the circle of like- minded bloggers is akin to the jounalistic gatekeeper role identified by Christopher Harper as a trait of traditional journalism that would logically carry over into the digital age of journalism (2004, p. 272). It is also important to note that Harper was describing a single editor whose job it is to “highlight stories, promote tends, sort the journalistic wheat from the chaff” whereas the gatekeepers in the blogosphere seem to be carrying out their job in a more collective fashion.

The limitations of such connections as a mode of access are quite pronounced. The shear mass, mentioned above, being on the order of millions of blogs makes finding the initial circle of blogs that share common interests a virtual impossiblity without the use of one or all of the other modes of access mentioned above. And logically, it will be even harder for under- represented users, who could benefit the most from establishing themselves in a community of blogs.

Additionally, the segmentation of blogs into communities based on personal interests or topics of debate seems to support Habermas' fear in the eventual degradation and segmentation of the public sphere into isolated non-communicating groups (Eley,1992). Recent related theories have been asserted by law scholar Cass Sunstein who points out that as new media outlets continue to focus on personalization and filtering based on one's interests, exposure to opposing thoughts and opinions becomes increasingly rare

(Sunstein, 2001, p. 49).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the Internet still fails to live up to the utopian ideals of a perfectly democratic society, it may still play an essential role in reshaping a more democratic society. Lisa Nakamura pointed out in her work that despite the problems she encountered on the Internet, it still remained the closest approximation to a public sphere (Nakamura, 2002, p. 109) and I would assert further that the discourse being carried out in the blogosphere is an even closer approximation than the communities that Nakamura described. In the remainder of this essay, I want to suggest some guiding principles for the future development of the tools and practices of blogging. In doing so, I hope that the slowly evolving blogosphere will continue to inch closer to Habermas' ideal.

The first of these principles draws inspiration from John Hartley's essay "The Frequencies of public writing: Tomb, Tome, and Time as Technologies of the Public" where he encourages a move away from the from the notion of technology as "black boxes" thought of in terms of scientific and technological innovations in favor of what he calls "technologies of democracy" and "technologies of the public" (Hartley, 2004, p. 259). I take Hartley's argument as a suggestion that we begin to explore the fringes of human involvement that current technology is still not so suited to handle and begin to move away from the highly abstracted central number-crunching systems like Google and Blogdex. The technologies of democracy are systems that allow us to operate on a human-to-human level while still having a means to affect change at a larger level. These technologies of democracy, I believe, also leverage heavily a sense of collectivity that Pierre Levy presented in his book *Collective Intelligence* (Levy, 2000).

In the blogosphere, these principles mean the empowerment of individual

blogs to clearly map their own relation to spheres of debate and conversations. The blog becomes both an endpoint where content is consumed and a starting point where domains of debate can be easily traversed by identifying just a single participating blog. Two practices already seem well aligned with this spirit, the practice of collective gatekeepers that I mentioned earlier and the TrackBack technology found in a few blog authoring tools.

Trackback is a technology and a practice where a blogger's posts are made open to responses from other bloggers in a way that allows readers to easily track the incoming responses. When a blogger responds to the original post, the page that displays that post is altered to include a link to and an abstract of the response (Trott and Trott). The net result is that the dynamics of the conversation are made more visible and more accessible. There is no abstraction that results in negative comments being skewed as credibility that was prevalent in the black box systems of Google and Blogdex.

As I suggest these principles, two large issues still loom. The first is the research that suggests that readership in the blogosphere will continue to follow a highly skewed distribution so that only a very small number will receive the vast majority of attention (Kottke, Shrkey, D&F). The second is the assertion by Sunstein and others that the blogosphere will continue to diverge into isolated spheres as filtering and personalization techniques are perfected.

To the first concern, the primary thing to keep in mind is that research on the probabilistic nature of links in the blogosphere, while very active, has yet to conclude what this means for democracy and representation. There are a few researchers who are already identifying that some A-list blogs form focal points around topics of debate making access to the conversation much easier (Drezner and Farrell, 2004). They also point out that bloggers who link to focal point blogs often have their voice somewhat represented by that blog. In many cases, the lesser known bloggers act in a collaborative fashion to bring

links and other found items to the attention of the author of the A-List blog. This research suggests that much of the lamenting about power law distributions may have been premature. Additionally, the self-organizing nature of other blogs around a focal point blog may indicate a stable system that may serve to ensure that focal point blogs continue to serve the needs of their readership or risk losing their prominent position in pretty short order. In comparison to the relatively slow and static set of checks and balances that are present in representative democratic governmental systems, the self-correcting system of focal points may provide a more constant and immediate check and balances.

The second looming issue is the assertion of Cass Sunstein and others that new media's tendency to serve up personalized and filtered material will lead to large scale "preaching to the choir." While such arguments seem logical, many argue that it still runs counter to their own experiences in cyberspace and particularly in the blogosphere. Yale law professor Jack Balkin, in his blog, argues that bloggers still systematically comment on each other and that criticisms are just as likely as agreement:

... most bloggers who write about political subjects cannot avoid addressing (and, more importantly, linking to) arguments made by people with different views. The reason is that much of the blogosphere is devoted to criticizing what other people have to say. It's hard to argue with what the folks at the National Review Online or Salon are saying unless you go read their articles, and, in writing a post about them, you will almost always either quote or link to the article, or both. Ditto for people who criticize Glenn Reynolds, Andrew Sullivan, or Kos, or Atrios. If you don't like what Glenn said about Iraq, you quote a bit of his posting, link to it, and then make fun of him. These links are the most important way that people travel on the Web from one view to its opposite. (And linking also produces good check on criticism because you can actually go and read what the person being criticized has said.)

Nevertheless, one might object, this argument is premised on the idea that the blogosphere has customs of linking that encourage give and take. What is to guarantee that these customs will continue? Obviously bloggers could give up their customs, and stop linking to each other. But

I doubt this will happen; the customs make sense given the way the technology works. And worrying about whether people will or won't continue to link absent a government regulatory apparatus that encourages linking completely misses the point about how Internet speech works: The fact that these customs developed says a lot about the health and vibrancy and pluralism of the public sphere in cyberspace.

In addition to Balkin's arguments I would also argue that Sunstein's arguments seem to assume that the discovery of new things which seems to drive many bloggers now as they scour media outlets in search of items to link, is only a byproduct of the bloggers inability to locate items of personal interest. I think it's a far stretch to say that perfections in personalization and filtering will eradicate the desire to discover and share. It seems just as likely that such technologies will free people to explore more of the topics that aren't in their immediate foreview, since they will leverage increased efficiency in discovering the things that are of direct interest.

The democratic potential for the blogosphere is far from exhausted, and while severe issues still continue to cripple its claims as an idealistic public sphere, there are plenty of optimistic signs pointing the way to further development. Practical democratic systems have always been forced to contend with balancing the opposing forces of access and representation, so the fact that the blogging must do the same should come as no surprise. The continued development of the blog space against the model of the public sphere will continue to overcome the issues identified above. While it is a virtual certainty that the blogosphere will never fully meet the criteria of a public sphere, it will continue to be a powerful forum for future ea_spouses to be heard and to inspire change.

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