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Watching the Watchdog: Bloggers as the Fifth Estate

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CHAPTER 8

The Blogosphere and the Public Sphere

As is to be expected after a technological or social innovation in communication occurs, there has already been a great deal of rumination about the influence of blogs on the public’s discussion of issues, events, and policy questions. It would be an interesting project — but beyond the scope of this work — to analyze the major viewpoints on blogs and the public discourse, with an eye for the social group in which those viewpoints are the conventional wisdom: say, among news professionals, among academicians, among bloggers, and in the general public. Here, it is enough simply to note that the estimations of blogs’ impact and value, potential or already realized, range from laudatory (e.g., Bennett, 2005; Hewitt, 2005; Leo, 2004) to derogatory (e.g., Engberg, 2004; Rall, 2005; Parker, 2005; Zerbisias, 2004). There are two major bodies of work in the scholarly literature on human communication behavior which will be helpful in bringing some clarity to this tumult. To that end it will be useful to approach the question of blogs’ impact on the public discourse with regard to both quantity (as the participation in the discourse) and quality (as the value of the contributions to the overall good).

Over the course of a number of works, Jürgen Habermas painstakingly built the case for a level playing field in public talk about issues and events, and outlined features such a discourse would need to embody. This body of work is essentially normative, a conceptual exploration of an ideal public sphere. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann identified a social dynamic in which individuals who disagree with what they take to be a majority opinion find themselves reluctant to give expression to that disagreement. In contrast, her body
of work is essentially descriptive, an empirical inquiry into an existing public sphere. While much different in their scholarly foundations, their derivation, and their implications, both of these well-known works offer insights into blogs as a feature of the social landscape.

The connection between these seemingly disparate theories, the ideal speech situation of Habermas and the spiral of silence of Noelle-Neumann, is that both deal with public discussion of issues of public concern. In Habermas we find a description of a beneficent communication environment in which this discussion can take place, an environment in which there is institutional support for a constructive discussion — that is, a practical means by which individuals can take part in the discussion — and group norms for speech acts which foster participation in that discussion space. In Noelle-Neumann we find the effects which individuals’ perceptions of that discussion space tend to have on their own willingness to contribute to the discussion. It will be useful to first summarize the main ideas in these two bodies of work which offer insights into the blogosphere: Habermas, regarding the blogosphere as a discourse, and Noelle-Neumann, regarding blogs as a mass communication medium.

The Ideal Speech Situation

Habermas’s notion of a practical discourse — the substantive public discussion of some issue — boils down to group decision-making by a process of argumentation. One characteristic in particular is crucial to this process: that there be no coercion bearing on the interested parties, other than the relative strength of the arguments themselves. His expectation, under that condition, is that any self-interested behaviors (such as manipulation, intimidation, or misrepresentation, for instance) will effectively be cancelled out, resulting in a “cooperative search for truth” (1990, pp. 88-89).

What might at first glance seem to be a naively optimistic — or otherwise problematic — view of actual human motivations and behaviors in a dispute, gets mapped onto a concise set of operating rules, which Habermas (1990, p. 89) credits to Robert Alexy (1990, pp. 166-167). Those operating rules for an ideal speech situation can be paraphrased along these lines: (1) Anybody can participate in the
discussion; (2) Every participant can raise any question, make any assertion, or express any feeling; and (3) No interference with another's participation is allowable.

By themselves, these rules would seem to invite chaos; is any string of words which anybody wants to inject into a discussion allowable, under the rules for an ideal situation? The short answer is no, because there is a qualifier — which, for the sake of parsimony, disappeared in this author's paraphrase — attached to the first rule. Any competent speaker (1990, p. 89) can participate; competent speakers are those who make comments falling into three defined classes, regarding their potential effect on the discussion (Habermas, 1990, p. 137, ff.; Farrell, 1993, p. 189, ff.). These three classes do impose constraints on the participants, and thus maintain some degree of order in the discussion. A constative concerns truth, in the sense of statements about real things in the real world. Assertions of fact or disputes about fact would fall in this category. A representative concerns the feelings of the speaker, and expressions of sincerity or intent would fall in this category. A regulative, as the label suggests, has to do with the acceptability of particular behavior, in this case, participation in a discussion. We can see a rough correspondence, then, between the constative and representative categories and the second rule, and the regulative category and the third rule. So while the three discourse rules, taken in isolation, are inadequate as a norm for an ideal discussion, this classification of competent speech acts provides sufficient additional constraint on what people might do in the discussion space.

In sum, the discussion is open to all who wish to join it, and to whatever constructive contribution they might wish to make to it. Hopefully the discussion will lead to a "rationally motivated recognition" of the best ideas (Habermas, 1975, p. 107), the quality of which is "grounded in the consensus of the participants through argumentation" (1975, p. 105). Regarding the overall beneficence of the collective decision process, "equal consideration [is] given to the interests of every individual in defining the general interest" (1990, p. 203). In effect, the ideal speech situation is Darwinian: the fittest ideas prevail, because they are based on the strongest arguments, which are the arguments most persuasive, and hence most acceptable, to the participants.
This model is very much in keeping with two famous passages in United States Supreme Court opinions. Justice William Brennan’s majority opinion in the *Times v. Sullivan* case (1964) rested largely on what he described as “a profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.” It seems fair to say that this passage has since been accepted as a regulative, itself, regarding the way public issues will be addressed in the public discussion space. Participation is presumptively open, as the large number of First Amendment decisions have repeatedly affirmed. Correspondingly, restrictions on speech are relatively few and require strong justification of some sort. In short, the operating principle Brennan affirmed is very much in keeping with the three discourse rules in Habermas’s ideal.

The conception of a reasoned consensus as the outcome of the discourse — or, at least, the acceptance of any decision finally reached — brings to mind Oliver Wendell Holmes’s dissent in *Abrams et al. v. U.S.* (1919). This opinion is the source of the marketplace of ideas metaphor, although those exact words do not themselves appear in the dissent. Of interest here is Holmes’s thought on how a public debate can best arrive at truth, a topic Habermas has also considered at length. In dissenting from the majority opinion that the Espionage Act of 1917, as amended in 1918, did not infringe on the First Amendment with its prohibition of language disparaging the government, Holmes wrote that “the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas — that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.” Clearly this is the kind of argumentation leading to a mutual recognition of the best ideas, which Habermas identified as the goal of a public discussion. The slang expression, “I’ll buy that,” meaning “I accept the truth of that,” is a reminder of the pervasiveness of Holmes’s metaphor.

Nonetheless there are a few issues with Habermas’s conception of an ideal speech situation which will be relevant to our analysis of weblogs, and we should note them at this point. One question concerns the overall beneficence of the discourse. The first rule holds that the discussion must be open to participation, so that whatever decisions are reached will take all stakeholders’ interests into account. As an ethical matter, this would seem intuitively obvious. But as a practical matter — a real operating rule for a real discussion in the real world
— the question of the boundary of the “communication community” (Habermas, 1975, p. 105) will inevitably arise, unless one considers every discussion *prima facie* to be open, on an equal footing, to every human being on the planet. This is not just a matter of logistics or networking, either, as the legitimacy of the discourse — that is, the degree to which it is binding on real people in the real world — relies on its openness to participation, and its ability to extend beyond the confines of its immediate time and space limitations (as in Habermas, 1990, p. 202). Since computer-mediated communication has largely erased time and space as practical constraints on individuals’ ability to take part in discussions, whatever they might have to contribute to it, the question of whether a discourse’s legitimacy is a function of its inclusiveness becomes all the more salient.

Related to this is the notion of consensus, which provides the philosophical grounding for whatever decisions might be reached through the discussion. It is the consensus, reached through a process of argumentation, which validates those decisions, and which, in effect, creates the value of the decisions (as in Habermas, 1975, p. 105). If the real-world communication community cannot simply be bounded by the human-ness (as opposed to inanimate-ness or animal-ness) of the participants, then perhaps the boundary is effectively created by the members’ acceptance or rejection of particular ideas. In that case, the consensus and the boundary are tautological; those who accept the consensus are members of the community, and those who do not, are not.

Moreover, what to make of a persistent issue about which no consensus forms, or about which (given the nature of the matter to be decided) no consensus could form, for logical reasons? Examples of such issues are plentiful; abortion, capital punishment, welfare programs, and warfare would be obvious illustrations of important yet highly polarized issues suggesting no easy route to a consensus. Are there multiple communication communities, in that case? As a conceptual solution, that answer would seem to undercut the entire purpose of Habermas’s ideal speech situation; we would simply go off in our own corners and talk among ourselves. And perhaps that is exactly what we often see happening, in the real world.

A similar tautology appears, regarding the qualifier on the first rule. To be a legitimate discussion, the discourse must be open to all
competent participants. How would we recognize a competent participant? His or her speech acts — contributions to the discourse, in other words — would fall into the three categories of legitimate speech acts. Very well, then: speech competence, which is the threshold for participation, and conformity with those categories are tautological. But if every possible speech act falls into one of the categories, there is no need for the categories; anything can be said by anybody at any time. In this case, we have no protection against the discourse becoming chaotic. On the other hand, if those categories allow for speech which calls the categories themselves into question, we may have on our hands the conceptual problem of an infinite regress.

In fairness, Habermas’s model may simply have hit the limit of how logically elegant a theoretical ideal can be, or, more likely, the limit of how ideal a truly practical discourse can be; both he (2001, pp. 102-103) and Alexy (1990, pp. 180-183) seem to acknowledge this limitation. But the question of how close a functioning, real-world discussion space can come to the ideal of “equality, universality, and lack of constraint” (Alexy, 1990, p. 166) will remain. Who, exactly, must be included, and who can legitimately be excluded? This is a question at the heart of mainstream media’s scorn for the “guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas,” a former CBS executive’s caricature of bloggers (Are Bush Memos Authentic?, 2004; Fund, 2004). If they are competent, the bloggers’ speech must be taken as seriously as that of the professional journalists; only if bloggers are not competent can they legitimately be ignored.

The Spiral of Silence

Noelle-Neumann’s goal, over the course of empirical work, was to explain what seemed a strange quirk in people’s expressive behavior. Even when living under a regime which vigorously protected their right to express opinions on the public questions of the day, there were circumstances under which people would be quite reluctant to do so, either verbally or with such visual devices as buttons or bumperstickers. She named this social dynamic the spiral of silence (1993), since the model includes both ongoing social
interactions and individual actions.

The essence of the spiral of silence model is that people make comparisons of their individual perspective on a public issue, and their sense of the general public opinion on that issue. Needless to say, they are aware of their own opinions; they base their idea of public opinion, as a collective mindset, on mass-mediated news reporting. When those two opinions diverge significantly, a built-in fear of isolation or exclusion leads an individual holding a minority opinion to refrain from expressing it (1993, pp. 201-202). This comparison is not a snapshot, or static comparison, however; people derive a dynamic sense of which opinions — or behaviors — are gaining or declining in acceptance among the general population from their own exposure to mass-mediated content. This comparison, in turn, influences their own expressive activity; they become more ready to give expression to their opinions, in both public and private situations, when they see a rising trend in the fit between their opinions and that of the general public, and more reluctant when they see a declining trend (1993, p. 202). In short, an individual’s expressiveness is influenced by his/her agreement or disagreement with what seems to that person to be the dominant opinion. As Noelle-Neumann puts it, colorfully, “feeling in harmony with the spirit of the age loosens the tongue” (1993, p. 26).

In essence, Noelle-Neumann is pointing to a social control mechanism, although not a kind of control which has been deliberately built into the social system, or one which is instantiated in law or regulation. Hence, the paradox that people living under a social system which guarantees their rights of expression may often feel inhibited about expressing themselves. Put another way, this model explains a subtle and decentralized pressure to conform, to be nonassertive in one’s expressions, and Noelle-Neumann says flatly that this form of indirect social control is, in fact, more powerful in shaping people’s actual expressions and behaviors than such overt controls as law and regulation (1993, p. 130). In short, individuals’ desire for social acceptability, and the benefits which come from social acceptability, may tend to outweigh their expressive needs. Noelle-Neumann is careful to point out that this is not a simplistic causal model; it is not the case that people’s expressive behaviors are determined by others. Rather, there is a tension between conformity and individualism, the need to be accepted by others — or, at least, to avoid becoming
isolated (see 1993, p. 6 on this point)—and the need to be a human agent, in one’s own regard (1993, p. 41); clearly, individuals differ in their personal negotiations of this tension, but nonetheless this is the crucial point of contact between the individual and society as a whole (1993, p. 229).

It is also important to note, in the spiral of silence model, the role of mediated communication. Ordinary people do not conduct their own opinion polls or any other kind of scientific measurements of general public opinion. Rather, they form a native sense of public opinion from the mediated information to which they are exposed. While people certainly learn about others’ thinking through their face-to-face interactions in the daily routine, mediated content is the greatest source of individuals’ sense of events beyond their own observation, and likewise, of public opinion beyond their direct experience (1993, p. 217). Hence, the fidelity of those media products to the actual opinions held by members of the public is of consequence in this dynamic public/personal calculus; along that line, Noelle-Neumann mentions some interesting examples of perceived public opinion distorted by news reporting. It is here that the ongoing discussion of media bias has relevance.

We should likewise take note of some issues with the spiral of silence theory, which will be relevant to an analysis of weblogs. An individual’s fear of isolation, perhaps even outright stigma, is the driving force behind the scaled-up social dynamic of the spiral of silence. While Noelle-Neumann provides a good amount of evidence for accepting this fear of isolation as an inherent trait in human beings, we need to note that individuals will differ markedly in this trait. That is to say, there are obviously individuals who are at the conformist end of the scale, in terms of their personal need for social acceptance, and others who are clearly at the nonconformist end of it. Moreover, there are plentiful examples of celebrities who gained some measure of their notoriety by deliberately exhibiting some sort of nonconformity. Ironically enough, we can think of their social acceptance (manifest as celebrity) as being the product of a calibrated degree of nonconformity! The point here is that this trait ought not be overestimated, as a determinant of people’s behaviors, even as it seems a strong explanation of a particular influence on their public expressions.

Another caution to be observed is that mediated content is
probably not the only influence on an individual's sense of public opinion. In the media effects literature, the two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 309 ff.; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968, pp. 151-152) was noted early on: the influence of mass-mediated content on an individual is, itself, mediated by people with whom that individual is in face-to-face contact. Moreover, a certain degree of skepticism about the accuracy of opinion polling, as reported in the news media, seems to have set in, among the general population. At the least, we should keep in mind, in thinking about blogs as a social system feature, that the analytical move from the level of individual human being to the level of the society as a whole is not always a simple, unproblematic move.

The Quantity Question

In short, Habermas and Alexy generated a theoretical ideal of a communication environment, one which combined institutional support for arguing about public questions with a shared understanding of the speech acts which are allowable in that environment. Here, we are thinking of weblogs as the technological facilitation of a practical means by which individuals are able to join in that argumentation, and the blogosphere as operating according to group norms which inhibit participation very little, if at all. In Noelle-Neumann there are empirically-derived insights into the effect the existence of such an environment might have on the content of the argumentation in it.

If Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory accurately describes a tendency in the communication behaviors of individual people in the real world, this tendency clearly has the potential to retard any social evolution toward Habermas’s ideal speech situation. That is to say, if individuals have an interest in a discussion but are still unwilling to give expression to their thoughts for fear of social stigma, the discussion as a whole falls short of that ideal. And while there may be no coercion in a structural or institutional sense, and there even may be a legal guarantee of their right to participate, this behavioral tendency — rooted in human nature, according to Noelle-Neumann (1993, p. 202) — will clearly inhibit the vigorous assertion and interrogation dynamic the ideal discourse is predicated upon. Even
allowing that Habermas’s ideal is more useful as a vision statement than as a performance benchmark for actual public discussion, a spiral of silence dynamic clearly degrades the quality of a discussion.

This concern is a matter of degree, regarding the source of the inhibition. If individuals are reluctant to participate in a discourse because they have no substantive contribution to make to it or are indifferent about the question under discussion, the discourse is not degraded by their silence, nor are their rights to participate in any way infringed. But if they want to talk about their own stake in the issue under discussion — a representative — or if they have a serious question to raise or serious assertion to make — a constative — or if they have an objection to another’s conduct in the discussion — a regulative — and are yet inhibited by their fear of isolation as a consequence of their speech, the discourse is therefore suboptimal.

Weblogs are beginning to mitigate the spiral of silence dynamic, and in that way, taking us a bit closer to the ideal speech situation. One way they do this by reducing the fear of being isolated. Given the extraordinary range of opinions expressed in the blogosphere, a blog reader is likely to find views more or less congruent with his or her own — as well as views posing challenges to his or her own. In itself, this counteracts a human’s inherent fear of isolation; a reader is likely to come away from the blogs with the perception that there are other people out there who have similar questions or perceptions about the events of the day. In short, blogs reduce the inhibitory effect of public opinion contrary to an individual’s personal viewpoint, by making evidence readily available through hyperlinking and blogrolling that one, in fact, is not alone in that viewpoint. And this is the essence of the blogosphere’s challenge to the mainstream media; the conventional storylines and frames of the established journalists no longer constitute the master narrative of current events; heterodox narratives are viable, now.

Regardless of the quality of the material in the blogosphere — quality measured by such important characteristics as factual accuracy, logical reasoning, critical insights, or ethical concerns — the sheer diversity of thought in the blogosphere will blunt the inhibitory effect of perceived isolation on an individual with a viewpoint on the issues significantly different from the mainstream media’s portrayal of public opinion. Certainly the quality of the material matters, both to the
individual and to the public! But the point here is that the wild frontier ethos of blogs, in itself, encourages participation in a discourse. We should keep in mind that the Habermas/Alexy rules for an ideal discourse do not themselves address the quality of the speech acts made in it; rather, those rules stipulate broad participation and a very high degree of freedom of expression, with the expectation that, operationally, bad thinking will be winnowed out and good thinking will prevail, under the conditions of an ideal speech situation. Further, the legitimacy of the discourse as public decision-making is predicated on the willingness of stakeholders to give expression to their own interests in the issue. Once again, blogs move us closer to the ideal simply by reducing the inhibitions on participating.

In short, blogs offer readers a much wider range of thinking than is available in the traditional outlets. Readers can choose material which either challenges or affirms their personal views on issues and events. The heterogeneity of the material washes out the relative conformity of "public opinion" as presented in the traditional channels. Put another way, blogs, by altering the media mix, have the potential to alter individuals’ perception of the general public opinion. For a reader with a viewpoint differing from conventional public opinion, exposure to blogosphere material can counteract the personal fear of isolation, and thereby lessen the reluctance to give expression, in one form or another, to that heterodox viewpoint. In that way, blogs can help an individual negotiate the tension between conformity and agency.

Another way the blogosphere moves us closer to the ideal discourse is by providing institutional support for it, albeit a nontraditional kind of institutional support. Apart from individuals’ willingness to enter a discussion, they need a practical means to do so (see Habermas, 1990, p. 209 on this point). It seems clear that blogs, as a social system feature, support the three discourse rules quite nicely. The first rule concerns the openness of the discourse; anybody who wishes can create a blog or read material on others’ blogs. Internet connections are readily available, the necessary computing machinery is affordable to the vast majority of people, no license or credential is required, and no physical travel is needed in order to contribute. The second rule concerns the content one can contribute to the discourse; apart from the recognized limitations on the First
Amendment — such as libel, creating a clear and present danger, or copyright infringement — the content is, quite simply, whatever the author wishes to post. The third rule concerns interference with another’s participation; apart from such mischief as hacking another’s site or creating denial of service attacks, no interference is possible.

Lest virtuality seem inadequate as institutional support — cyberspace has no bricks and mortar buildings, no paneled meeting rooms, no government agency overseeing it, no titled officials administering it — it is helpful to recall Anthony Giddens’s notion of social structure as interrelated rules and resources (1984, p. xxxi), which both enable people to act and are created by the actions they take. In a discourse, speech is action. The blogosphere is a medium, an existing resource which people can make use of to create their speech acts. At the same time, the blogosphere is the outcome of those speech acts. This is the property Giddens refers to as the duality of structure (1984, p. 25 ff.), and which he sees as inherent in the social system, across the board. While the blogosphere is virtual, it is no less a real social system feature than any other institution we have traditionally associated with the public sphere.

Moreover, the consequence of the blogosphere’s technological facilitation of a discourse (i.e., provision of institutional support for it), is that every individual can contribute to the collective sense of the public interest (as in Habermas, 1990, p. 203) more powerfully than before. Clearly the very low barriers to entry — money, technical skill, geographical constraints, temporal constraints — open the public sphere up to greater participation. Political commentary, broadly available to the general public, is no longer an oligopoly of the intellectual elite, as can be readily seen in the extraordinary variety of opinion available to anybody with a humble modem connection.

Habermas is mistaken in thinking that the ideal outcome of a discourse is a genuine consensus. It seems unlikely that a group of people could routinely arrive at a genuine consensus — a rational, unforced consensus — when those people are heterophilous (see Rogers, 1995, pp. 18-19) with regard to attitude, talent, preference, motivation, theological belief, or existential viewpoint. As a practical matter, there is hardly anything that everybody would agree on in a large, complex social system such as ours in the United States. It is difficult to image how that “rationally motivated recognition” of the
best decision would coalesce when a consequential issue plays against such a variegated cultural context. Therefore the goal of a discourse is better thought of as stakeholder-neutral behavior norms and equity in the available resources for the argumentation, without the vain expectation of achieving an actual consensus on the decision. In that respect, the rules Robert Alexy derived from Habermas's theoretical explorations would seem to form a workable environment, one which would generally be perceived as fair, and hence perceived as legitimate. Again, to think of actual consensus as a realizable end goal or to measure the beneficence of a discourse by how well it produces the appearance of consensus is a profound conceptual mistake. Indeed, Habermas himself has criticized the 20th century world on the grounds that the public sphere, including the traditional mass media, often induced the appearance of consensus without substantive agreement on the issues (Goodnight, 1992, p. 247, 249). Rather than thinking of the public discourse as either a completely rational and free exchange of ideas leading to universal agreement or a subtly coercive social control mechanism which deftly subordinates some players and privileges others, we would do better to recognize the inherent tension in that dichotomy which seems unavoidable in a real social world populated by human beings (as Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 220 ff. reminds us).

The key attribute implicit in Habermas's conception of a public discourse is procedural neutrality. For it to be truly possible for anyone to raise any question or make any assertion, regarding a public issue, the rules for participating in the discourse must apply uniformly to all participants. Given the foundational importance of the First Amendment in the United States' social system, and the strict prohibition against legislative interference in speech, we should construe rules in this context to be mean customary behavior or, perhaps, social acceptability, since overt regulatory controls are few and limited. And in the vein of the critical studies perspective — which includes Habermas, himself! — we should also take note of structural disparities which might effectively inhibit the participation of some individuals or organizations and their ability to bring certain ideas or viewpoints into the discourse. Clearly, a social stigma which inhibits expression of minority viewpoints — the spiral of silence dynamic, in other words — is a structural disparity which damages the
rational argumentation of positions on public questions (see Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 228 on this point). In this light, the benchmark of the discourse can be seen as the neutrality of the group norms with regard to the content of the speech and the identity of the speaker.

Habermas’s overall project was to think through modern social organization with the intent of identifying improvements. Goodnight (1992) put it in dramatic terms: the public sphere is broken, in essence has become dysfunctional as an actual group decision-making space but facile at producing a Potemkin village version of it, and the long-term goal of Habermas’s theorizing about an ideal speech situation was aimed at rebuilding a genuinely participatory and rational process by which questions of the public welfare can be constructively addressed. Ironically, the occasionally chaotic, largely unmanaged — and perhaps unmanageable — sometimes far-from-equilibrium thrashing of ideas in the blogosphere has led to the beginnings of a realization of Habermas’s ideal discourse in the real world.

The Quality Question

While ensuring that the public sphere is open to participation and that there are no undue barriers to people actually entering it are important considerations regarding the legitimacy of the decisions made in it, these conditions cannot in themselves guarantee that the decisions reached in that space will be wise. For that reason the quality of the speech acts themselves needs to be addressed, as well. It would be foolish to pretend that every thought expressed in the blogosphere was insightful, factually accurate, rational, or ethically motivated — but then again, it would be foolish to pretend that about the content distributed by the traditional news media, or about debates in Congress, either. It will be helpful to address the issue of quality from three separate directions: with regard to the speaker, to the reader, and to the media system as a whole.

Competence

Given the scathingly negative estimations of the blogosphere which have been expressed in some quarters — the characterization of
bloggers as “salivating morons” (attributed to Lovelady in Rosen, 2005) or “parasites too stupid to realize they are killing off their hosts” (Zerbisias, 2004), for instance — it is worth noting that the three types of speech acts Habermas and Alexy saw as constructive in a practical discourse are in ample supply in the blogosphere. The typology of media criticism illustrated in the preceding chapters can be mapped onto the Habermas typology of competent speech acts quite readily.

- accuracy: constatives
- framing and agenda-setting/gatekeeping: representatives
- journalistic practices: regulatives

The Habermas/Alexy criteria for speaker competence are only minimally restrictive, which is in keeping with the intent of having a maximally open discourse. As noted earlier, the criteria verge on a tautology. A speaker whose expression falls into those categories is competent; a competent speaker is allowed to contribute just about anything to the discussion. Perhaps pure flaming — rude *ad* *hominem* or *ad* *feminam* attacks on a person, with no substantive meaning other than derogation — would fall outside the categories of constatives, representatives, and regulatives, and thus indicate an incompetent speaker who need not be taken seriously in the discourse.

But two things seem obvious, then. First, although the term flaming originated in the realm of computer-mediated communication, that sort of speech act certainly occurs in real life as often as in virtual life, and occurred in real life before virtual life existed; hence, the existence of flaming (i.e., incompetent speech) in the blogosphere does not disqualify the blogosphere, in itself. Second, it is clear that a large proportion of speech acts in the blogosphere are constatives, representatives, or regulatives, however heterodox the assertions they make or problematics they raise may be; hence, the authors of that content are, by definition, competent speakers who have a legitimate place in the discourse. In short, those who would broadly exclude bloggers from the public discourse, or maintain that the blogosphere is not a legitimate component of the public sphere, have no grounds for doing so.
Cocooning

A different sort of concern pertains to the consumers of blogs, those readers who come to rely on the blogosphere as an alternative to the traditional news media. It is possible that some readers will “cocoon” themselves with their use of blogs; that is to say, some users will choose to expose themselves only to content they expect to be congruent with their existing viewpoints, only attend to commentary or news information which they expect to reinforce their own predispositions on issues. Those predispositions will not be tested by contrary evidence or argument, simply because the user is not exposed to any. The worry, here, is twofold: the discourse as a whole will become shallower because the readers’ understanding of issues will become one-dimensional, and that the larger discourse community (i.e., the general public) will fragment into small niches of like-minded readers with little interaction among them.

The first would seem, on the face of it, to be a harm which blogs are likely to bring about. We should note, however, that there is nothing truly different about this concern with the introduction of blogs into the media mix. A person who relied on only a single source in the traditional media, as a matter of habit — say only National Public Radio, or only CBS News, or only The New York Times, or only National Review — would be cocooned in exactly the same fashion as a person who only attended to Red State or The Daily Kos. In short, this is not an effect of blogs, but rather, a longstanding concern about the public discourse. Indeed, critical theorists bemoaned the “manufactured consent” produced by the traditional, mainstream media long before hypertext was devised.

In fact, there are features of the blogosphere which would tend to mitigate the cocoon problem in ways that are entirely new. Blogrolls are a common feature; they consist of a collection of hyperlinks to other weblogs, usually formatted as a table running down the margin of the page. While it is true that some bloggers only provide links to like-minded sites, many bloggers do provide links to material with noticeably different points of view from their own. The blogrolls on Belgravia Dispatch, OxBlog, Balloon Juice, TigerHawk, and Gay Patriot would be good examples. Further, we should note that the convenience, to the readers, of hyperlinks to other content sources is far greater than the mere availability of a different newspaper.
downtown, or the technical capability of recording and later viewing another network’s newscast at a later time. The reader’s ability to obtain more sources of news and commentary has not been diminished; if anything, the ability to do so has been made easier and far more convenient.

Moreover, the common blog practice of critiquing another outlet’s material brings that other material into a reader’s consciousness, out of necessity. The style of rebuttal called fisking, in particular, reproduces excerpts of a text the blogger disagrees with. The reader is incidentally exposed to that other material; should those ideas happen to be persuasive to the reader, a hyperlink typically leads directly to the other text. There is no comparable feature in the traditional media. While a newspaper or television broadcast may occasionally credit a report from another outlet, it does not typically reproduce substantial portions of that report nor provide instant access to it. If anything, blogs may actually mitigate a reader’s tendency to cocoon, simply as a technologically-enabled feature of the genre. It is clear, even in the early stages of the blogosphere’s evolution, that many serious blogs do expose their readers to multiple points of view, if only to critique them.

Some critics of the blogosphere have pointed to the occasional blogswarms (a relatively large number of bloggers posting on a particular topic, with a relatively high degree of congruence in their viewpoints) as an indicator of shallow thinking, rush to judgment, or conformity. While it certainly is possible that bloggers can be shallow, impulsive, or mindlessly imitative, the existence of blogswarms now and then is not sufficient to support a blanket characterization of bloggers in those terms. If it were, then one would likewise have to dismiss the mainstream media outlets for the frequent episodes of pack journalism, and for the routine echoing of each other’s reporting.

We should, however, note two potential problems related to the blogosphere. One is the problem Noelle-Neumann referred to as pluralistic ignorance (1993, p. 169), the condition in which people come to have a substantially distorted sense of the general public opinion. In the spiral of silence dynamic, an erroneous perception of consensus may inhibit some individuals’ participation in a public debate. It is conceivable, at least, that blog cocooning might be a contributing factor to pluralistic ignorance, but again, this is not a
concern which first arose with the appearance of blogs. Noelle-Neumann’s empirical work identified times when the traditional media seem to have contributed to a condition of pluralistic ignorance. Rather than leading readers to inaccurately perceive themselves to hold a minority opinion — that is, underestimate the degree to which their own points of view are prevalent among the general public — blog cocooning is more likely, if anything, to lead readers to overestimate the degree to which their opinions are shared by others.

Some observers have worried that the cumulative effect of individuals cocooning (in the sense of buffering themselves from exposure to viewpoints inconsistent with their own predispositions) could be a general polarization of groups toward the extremes of the opinion spectrum (for example, Sunnstein, 2002, pp. 185-186), possibly leading to some sort of overall social breakdown. This concern rests on empirical findings that homogeneous groups tend to migrate to the extreme of their shared viewpoint (Sunnstein, 2002, p. 176).

While the doomsday scenario cannot be dismissed out of hand, it seems less likely that the blogosphere will suppress viewpoint heterogeneity, across the entire discourse community, than it will foster it. Two dimensions of the blogosphere are especially relevant here, considered from the point of view of an individual consumer of mediated news and opinion. One is that the convenience of hypertext linking increases the chances that an individual will at least be exposed to opinions challenging his or her own; even if a person tends to reject those opinions, at least he or she is aware of their existence. This is apparent when one considers the greatly increased choices of content available through computer mediation compared with the restricted choices available through the traditional mass media. The second concerns the individual’s sense of belonging or being isolated, with regard to viewpoint — a perception which Noelle-Neumann found to often be inaccurate. The direction of the inaccurate sense of popular opinion is crucial to the individual’s choice to be silent or to participate in the discourse, since it is perceiving oneself to be in the minority opinion (i.e., an out group) which leads one to withdraw from the discourse. In contrast, if blog cocooning gives a reader a somewhat inaccurate sense that his/her opinions are mainstream, that reader will
be more comfortable with giving expression to those opinions, rather than less comfortable. In sum, if blogs loosen readers' tongues, it is a beneficial effect rather than a harmful one to the public discourse as a whole.

The second problem is perhaps a more serious concern associated with cocooning. This is the possible fragmenting of the communication community (presumably, the entire public) into narrow affinity groups which have little interaction with each other, or — worse — do not recognize each other as competent speakers or fellow stakeholders, at all. Should this happen to a significant extent, the harm to a system of representative democracy seems obvious: the political process by which conflicts are supposed to be negotiated degenerates into a spoils system for interest groups. If we take as axiomatic, for the purpose of examining this concern, the Habermas principle that the legitimacy of the political process rests on the decisions being “grounded in consensus of the participants through argumentation” (1975, p. 105), then it would seem any further impetus from the blogosphere in this direction could be a negative effect, indeed. The longstanding influence of special-interest lobbyists and single-issue advocacy groups on the legislative process is strong evidence that the problem predates blogs, but that in itself does not reassure us that blogs will not exacerbate the existing problem.

Perhaps the key to analyzing this concern lies in the conception of the communication community, itself. As noted a little earlier, the concept verges on tautology when pushed into service as a normative ideal. The goal of the ideal discourse is to foster a consensus (on a particular set of ideas) among the members of the communication community. The ideal communication community would include anybody potentially affected by the decision made in the discourse. The membership of the communication community is thus bounded by their interest in participating in the discourse, which implies at least some degree of concurrence (at least with regard to the group norms for participating — regulatives, in other words) with the consensus which appears to be evolving. In metaphorical language, showing up to play the game implies acceptance of the rules of the game, even though one retains the option to challenge the referee’s decision as one sees fit.

As a practical matter, there is no person who can possibly read
everything written about every issue — be open to every speech act in the discourse, in other words. And likewise, there is no person who can actively participate in every debate which might conceivably affect him or her — contribute speech acts to the discourse, in other words. To put it bluntly, everybody cocoons to some degree as a matter of necessity, if only to cope with the problem of information overload. It would seem more useful, then, to think of the communication community as bounded not by a population (i.e., a particular collection of people) but by an ongoing dynamic of argumentation. If so, the benefit of the blogosphere would clearly outweigh any potential harm. The blogosphere is available to anyone with an Internet connection, and enables anyone to participate either as a reader or a speaker in that discourse. Moreover, debates which develop in the blogosphere are tending to diffuse into the mainstream media, further enriching the argumentation dynamic as a whole. In short, while it might seem at first glance that the blogosphere might contribute to a fracturing of the communication community through individuals’ tendency to cocoon, in practice it will tend to mitigate any such problem rather than exacerbate it.

Again, it is a conceptual mistake to believe that an ideal discourse will necessarily lead to consensus, and that an ideal communication community will in time consist of group of like-minded altruists. The disadvantages of groupthink or forced conformity include the possibility of the community drifting toward an extreme point of view as social acceptability comes to outweigh decision quality. Regarding many issues about which reasonable people have substantial and heartfelt differences, it is unlikely that a true consensus would ever evolve. The short-term appearance of a consensus is likely to be false, an appearance driven largely by social acceptability rather than the actual merits of an idea or perspective. Put another way, the appearance of a consensus, paradoxically, may better be taken as an indicator of orthodoxy — which is to say, an indicator of a violation of the rule against coercion, that any perspective may be critiqued freely and any perspective may be articulated freely. Rather, an optimal discourse will produce, regarding issues of substantial controversy, a dissensus of respectful disagreement which is not tainted by the constraints of social acceptability but informed by the force of better argument and evidence. Put another way, the outcome
of a healthy discourse is more likely to be a plurality or majority, rather than a consensus. That of course implies that the decision will not be uniformly pleasing to all parties with a stake in it; nonetheless, a true plurality decision is more socially beneficial than the false appearance of a consensus.

Bias

It is also worthwhile to consider blogs in light of the longstanding issue of media bias. This has been a contentious debate, with at least as much heat as light, in both scholarly circles and the popular press. For our purposes here, we can think of media bias as some sort of systematic distortion in the reporting and interpretation of events and public policy decisions (Cooper, 2006b). In simplest terms, bias is manifest as a routinized mismatch between the mediated depictions of reality, and reality itself. While that sounds simple enough on the face of it, the arguments have been — and are likely to be! — endless, about exactly what an undistorted portrayal of reality would be (Cooper, 1994). And in itself, this interminable debate would be a fair illustration of an issue that is unlikely to result in a genuine consensus, a collective recognition of the most compelling combination of argument and evidence, in the foreseeable future. Given that there is no consensus about media bias in the traditional news outlets, it is unsurprising that bloggers have been characterized as everything from ignorant partisans (Rall, 2005), to “ego-gratifying rabble” (Parker, 2005), to reformers of the news industry (Bennett, 2005), to “the future of journalism” (Drummond, 2005).

Prior chapters have detailed various sorts of media criticism which have appeared in the blogosphere, that is, criticism of the mainstream media contained in blogs. As might be expected, corresponding criticism of blogs and bloggers has appeared in mainstream outlets. It would be tempting to dismiss this exchange as a shouting match between two competing sectors of the media industry, but that would gloss the possibility that the entry of blogs into the media mix has actually made reporting of events and commentary on issues less trustworthy, on the whole, or that blogs are untrustworthy, in general — which is what some observers have charged. Here again, the question of media bias predates the appearance of blogs; there is no reason to think blogs caused the issue.
to arise, when it was not a concern before. Again, the question here is whether blogs have contributed to any existing media bias, or whether they might have — contrary to emphatic pronouncements in some quarters — actually mitigated existing media bias.

Perhaps the most productive way to approach that question is to first consider the degree to which the traditional news media can be considered objective, that is, to be free of the distortion or slant which has come to be called media bias. In a sense, this gives a baseline indicator against which any change induced by blogs can be observed. As an indicator of how far from consensus even this limited question is, scholarly opinion of media bias — prior to the emergence of the blogosphere in the media mix — ranges from an assessment of the traditional media as leaning rightward (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988) to leaning leftward (Kuypers, 2002); indeed, there is not even a modest degree of concurrence, among the folks who make a living studying media or commenting on them, about what facts might constitute relevant evidence in weighing the answer to the question (see Cooper, 2006b; Cooper, 1994).

That said, we will take as axiomatic the impossibility of any journalism, in any channel, being universally acclaimed as objective — in the sense of being perceived as a perfectly transparent vehicle by which reality is conveyed across distance and time. This is not to say that the issue is irrelevant; clearly, the degree of coloration in the mediated accounts of reality matters, as does the political or economic interests such coloration may favor or disfavor. But just as it seems a vain hope that a perfect discourse on a contentious issue will lead, in the end, to a universally-shared sense of the best ideas about it, it likewise seems vain to expect any single news outlet to attain an ideal of objectivity, if we take objectivity to mean irreproachable fidelity of its products to reality.

A more modest, ostensibly attainable, goal is that journalism might be balanced, in the sense of neutral to all parties engaged in an issue and perceived by at least most of the readers as being fair to all parties. As a vision of ideal journalism this makes good sense, but there are also good reasons not to expect any single news outlet to actually exhibit this trait, and, indeed, few seem to. A given news outlet does tend to gravitate toward a certain point of view or consistency in perspective — regardless of the merits of the competing
positions in any given issue — if only for the sake of coherence in its content or style. This is to be expected, for two reasons. One is that a news outlet needs to attract and retain an audience, for the sake of maintaining a stable source of funding for its operations. This is a need which applies to both commercial and non-commercial outlets, such as National Public Radio. Just as the producers of other goods in a free marketplace establish their brand names, so do news outlets, in practice, develop an identity of their own in a crowded marketplace of news and commentary. To put this point quite bluntly, regarding the need to attract and retain a stable segment of the consumer market, there is no real difference between a private-for-profit media outlet and a so-called “public” media outlet.

A second reason has to do with organizational culture. For the sake of its own cohesion as a functioning organization, a news outlet will evolve a culture, in the sense of some degree of uniformity in values, attitudes, and practices among the organizational members. This shared viewpoint will manifest itself in the subtle, taken-for-granted value judgments embedded in the news content distributed by the outlet. By no means does this necessarily reflect a professional shortcoming on the part of newswriters; rather, it is an unavoidable trait of real news content created by normal human beings working collaboratively in organizations, content intended to be consumed by a greatly heterogeneous public.

So if even the very highest quality news outlets tend to develop bias, in the sense of a coloration in their depiction of reality — a point which the former public editor of The New York Times acknowledged about his own newspaper (Okrent, 2004c) — we ought look to the marketplace as a whole for the desired balance of viewpoints and perspectives, rather than any particular outlet or sector of the marketplace. In short, the chronic problem with the media bias debate has been a mismatch between its comparatively narrow scope and the actual breadth of the social phenomenon it attempts to encompass.

What to make, then, of the bloggers, with their overtly personalized content, their often-irreverent style, and their overtly viewpoint-centered ethos? Some have argued that despite the mainstream media’s professed standard of objectivity, as a professional value of journalism, there often seems to be preferential treatment of certain causes, ideas, or actors (e.g., Kuypers, 2002),
perhaps attributable to the socialization process journalists experience. In contrast, bloggers as a population are wildly heterogeneous with regard to the practices, assumptions, and world views which tend to be relatively uniform among professional journalists (see Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, 1990). While many bloggers say explicitly that they are only expressing their individual viewpoints, across the entire blogosphere there is a very broad and deep heterogeneity of perspectives, arguably far greater than that found among the traditional media outlets. Paradoxically, the subjective viewpoints of individual bloggers accumulate into a social object enacting the kind of multi-perspective objectivity promised, but not actually delivered, by the mainstream media.

If this author is correct in thinking that any process of writing an account of events or in suggesting interpretations of an event is inherently viewpoint-centered and any depiction of reality is inherently shaped by the finite awareness and predispositions of the author (see Kuypers & Cooper, 2005, for an example), the idea that any single account can attain objectivity, or that the objectivity of any single news outlet be beyond question, is a vain hope. The key idea in considering the effect blogs might have on the public discourse is that the free-for-all they generate is more likely to cancel out biases in the news marketplace than induce them. To the extent that the addition of blogs to the media mix have moved the public sphere away from an oligopoly and in the direction of a more strongly competitive marketplace of ideas, they have helped neutralize whatever media bias is attributable to the previously limited number of suppliers in that marketplace. In short, deficiencies in the quality of products available in the marketplace of news information goods — in this case, deficiencies in the form of bias in the content of those products — tend to be corrected by the entry of competing products from new suppliers to that market.

An alternative way of approaching the media bias question would be to use system theory as the analytical framework (see Demers, 1996, ch. 4 for an overview of system theory applied to the mass media). We would then think of the media system as a subsystem of the complete social system. Media dependency would be a condition apparent at a number of levels in the complex social system (see Demers, 1996, p. 83 for a concise illustration): individuals would be
dependent on the media system for gratification of their information needs; journalists would be dependent on various power centers for the raw materials from which to make their news products; those power centers would be dependent on the media for maintaining the social stability which permits the continuance of their power.

The introduction of a new component into the media system—in this case, the blogosphere—would clearly have the potential to reduce the rigidity of all those existing interdependencies. This is not to say that the blogosphere in itself would necessarily remain a permanent outsider to the web of interdependencies; that would seem quite unlikely, since as the blogosphere matures into a social object it will, by definition, become an established part of the social structure. But what the blogosphere may indeed do, long term, is to mitigate the severity of those dependencies throughout the entire social system, simply by offering alternative means of gratifying the various information needs of the various social actors.

In short, we might expect the increase in the complexity of the media system brought about by the introduction of the blogosphere to precipitate a corresponding reduction in the strength of media dependencies across the entire social system—at both the individual and institutional levels. And in turn, we might expect the degree of bias in media content attributable to the dependency of any social actors on any other actors to be attenuated, over time.

### Quantity and Quality, Both

So we can break the issue of the beneficence of the blogosphere, with regard to the social system, into two parts: the quantity of participation, and the quality of the participation. Regarding quantity, the question would be, is the blogosphere providing a new level of support for entry into the discourse? This author’s answer is, yes—decisively. It is easier now than it ever has been, for ordinary people to take part in the interpretation of events or debates over public policy. They can easily raise their questions, make their assertions, or express their concerns about any question in the public sphere. They can easily expose themselves to the unfiltered opinions of their peers, without the gatekeeping or intervention of a professional elite.

Regarding the quality of the discourse, the question would be, are
those new viewpoints being brought into the discourse constructive additions to it? This author’s answer is, yes, overall. This is not to say that every post or every blog is a constructive addition, but rather to say that the blogosphere as a social object is a constructive addition. Earlier chapters described many examples of substantive and thoughtful contributions, in the form of constructive criticism of the mainstream media, or alternative media products. Moreover, the public discourse is simply a more competitive marketplace of ideas for the new entrants into it; we have taken another step closer to that vigorous and free-ranging process of argumentation envisioned as an ideal.

Clearly the emergence of the blogosphere as a social feature has made that argumentation more raucous! It also seems clear that the outcome of the argumentation is more often a reasoned — if sometimes sullen — disagreement than a consensus. But if the quintessential critical question is “Whom does this discourse serve?” (Foucault, 1981, p. 115; Moore, 1997), the key point is that the blogosphere has opened up the discourse, apparently contrary to the preferences of some of the current actors, to newcomers with heterodox viewpoints. In that light, the discourse is the better for the emergence of the blogosphere.

Quite simply, the blogosphere exists because it fills a need. It was not brought into being by fiat; it evolved through the accumulation of individual acts. The many people who find it worth their investment in time and effort to create blog content surely do it because they find it fills a need for expression, for giving voice to their thoughts, in a way the previous outlets available to them did not. So, too, does the blogosphere fill a need for those who read the content, and participate in discussion by adding their comments. In this sense, then, the blogosphere represents a vox populi the technology did not determine, but did, instead, facilitate. This is clearly a free market perspective on the blogosphere; the author finds it the most satisfying understanding of it.

Probably the critical theorists, as a school of thought, would be discomfited by the notion that a blatantly commercial marketplace in communication technology has facilitated the evolution of a genre of computer-mediated communication (viz., blogs) with such a relentlessly individualist ethos, yet having such a clear public benefit.
Probably they would not have expected that a genre with such inconsequential roots (viz., personal web pages) could have opened up public discourse to a collective level only considered a theoretical ideal. Probably they would have assumed that even an approximation of that ideal discourse could come into being only through some sort of concerted political action, not through the accumulation of voluntary interactions in a decentralized, unmanaged virtual space. Yet, that is precisely what has happened.

This author is inclined to think that social structures which evolve through the voluntary interactions and exchanges among people — such as the blogosphere — tend in general to be more beneficial than structures created through the deliberate exercise of power, however well-intentioned — such as regulatory bureaucracies. That idea cannot be fully explored here. For our purposes, we can simply note that the blogosphere would seem to be a near-perfect instantiation of the ideal discourse.

Real life can often be a pleasant surprise. And that is a good thing about it.