Engaging Vernacular Voices: Exploring Online Public Spheres of Discourse for Everyday Citizens

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“Engaging Vernacular Voices: Exploring Online Public Spheres of Discourse for Everyday Citizens”

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Presented to the Faculty of
The Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies
McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts
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Doctor of Philosophy

by
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Daniel S. Schifino
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Abstract

This project considers the ways in which ordinary citizens engage in public discourse. This work is guided by what Michael Schudson calls the triumph of democratic sensibilities—the expectation that everybody owns public life. A politically active citizenry is, therefore, vital to a healthy democracy. Further, this inquiry assumes a rhetorical view of civic engagement, arguing that participation in a democracy is more than merely casting one’s vote. Consequently, it is essential to identify and evaluate the vehicles by which individual citizens can take part in discursive civic life.

The challenge to healthy public spheres of discourse in contemporary American society lies in large part with the domination of public discussion by professional communicators, thereby relegating everyday citizens to the private sphere and creating a communicative disconnect between citizens and their government. Yet, while the cacophony of professional communicators has muffled the sound of vernacular voices, it would be a mistake to assume that conversations of everyday citizens are not taking place. Vernacular voices are simply operating under the radar.

The media domination and professionalization of public discourse has caused everyday citizens to seek out non-traditional venues to discuss matters of public importance. The Internet appears to be one such venue. Through an investigation of politically-focused interactive discussion forums, this project seeks to explore the Internet as a venue for vernacular voices to more fully participate in public spheres of discourse and, thereby, more fully engage in the democratic process.
Introduction: Framing the Problem

*Civil society’s character is inherently rhetorical.* – Gerard Hauser

This project considers the ways in which the voices of ordinary citizens engage in public spheres of discourse. Public sphere theory has been an important focus of academic discussion for decades. From Habermas to Hauser and Benhabib, scholars have articulated a vision of vital and energetic public spheres that support the democratic process. By carving out an understanding of the nature of public discourse and public spheres and by identifying and examining responses to critiques of its current condition, this project seeks to extend the conversation on publics theory.

The importance of citizen deliberation in a democratic society cannot be overstated. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, democracy is a government *of the people, by the people, and for the people.* The people are sovereign. The word *democracy* finds its roots in the Greek words *demos*—people—and *kratos*—rule. The essence of democracy stems from the Greeks as well—principles by which the people assembled and expressed their views on issues facing the community as a whole. The goals are clear—the common good. Today, however, the democratic ideal faces what is arguably its greatest challenge—how can democracy work in a large, pluralistic society where communication is mediated, the public sphere is fragmented, and there is no agreed-upon common good. Many philosophers, political scientists, rhetoricians, and ethicists look to deliberative democracy as the savior for an ailing and dispirited democratic process.

Jurgen Habermas (Discourse Ethics, Further Reflections, Structural Transformation) provides a theoretical basis from which to understand public spheres of discourse and how they ideally operate in a democratic society. Guided by
Enlightenment ideals of universal norms and consensus-building, Habermas envisions a monolithic public that participates in a singular sphere of discourse. Publics theorists such as Seyla Benhabib (Models, Situating, Toward) and Gerard Hauser (Civil Society, Vernacular Dialogue, Vernacular Voices) have extended the Habermasian ideal to consider the pluralistic nature of contemporary societies. Recognizing the existence of disparate publics that emerge around diverse issues, both Benhabib and Hauser seek a discourse of inclusion that is accessible to multiple publics. This project assumes an understanding of public discourse as an exploration of ideas, issues, and options, rather than a building of consensus. Further, it assumes a multiplicity of publics (Hauser) who fully participate in the arena of public life.

This work is also guided by what Michael Schudson calls the triumph of democratic sensibilities—the expectation that every body owns public life (Good Citizen). Accordingly, a politically active citizenry is vital for the existence of a healthy democracy. The assumption that public debate is essential for a democratic society is acknowledged by constitutional guarantees. James Carey (Community) maintains that our first amendment rights to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to peaceful assembly describe the way in which a republic stays alive, and are, thus, woven into the fabric of democracy itself. Recognizing that the health of public spheres of discourse is inextricably tied to the health of democracy, scholarship in this area can make an important contribution.

Scholars (Benhabib, Carey, Hauser, Schudson) have carved out new lines of thinking about public discourse that respond to the demands of the democratic ideal, making insightful contributions to publics theory and to recognizing the connection
between a healthy public sphere and a healthy democracy. Carey describes the public sphere as the place “in which the public becomes visible to itself, visible to one another, and visible to the state” (Community, 12). In this sense, visibility is tied to a participatory understanding of citizenship. In order to support an energetic, healthy, and democratic public sphere, all citizens should have the ability to participate in public discourse—to make themselves visible. The challenge to a healthy public sphere in contemporary American society lies in part in the professionalization discourse—that of political strategists, lobbyists, special interest groups, media professionals, public relations practitioners, and advertisers—putting forth carefully crafted messages that seek to orchestrate public opinion. Usually mediated, and often responding to polls and surveys, professional discourse represents institutional voices. As Leon Mayhew (New Public) points out, professionalized public discourse is rooted in the assumption that publics can be orchestrated and manipulated.

If we understand the role of a public as Hauser (Vernacular Dialogue) explains it—not only as a witnessing audience, but also finding a means to express its own views—then clearly, professional discourse excludes the genuine engagement of citizen publics. Additionally, conditions of a mass-mediated society have altered public discourse in a way that challenges the ability of publics to become visible. It would seem that the cacophony of professional communicators has muffled the sound of vernacular voices (Hauser). Yet, while the everyday conversations of ordinary people have limited access to the professionalized sphere, it would be a mistake to assume that these conversations are not taking place.
This project assumes a rhetorical view of civic participation. Hauser, Benabib and others have argued for a rhetorical turn that highlights the discursive elements of everyday voices in the public sphere.\(^1\) As Hauser contends, “the rhetoricality of public opinion is central to our understanding of democracy as we live and experience it today” (Rhetorical Democracy 5). Publics are rhetorical constructs that negotiate the salient meanings by which private citizens understand their world, and the rhetoric of everyday publics lies at the heart of citizenship participation. However, scholarship examining the vehicles by which publics actually engage in public discourse has received less attention. Given this, the driving question for this project is: how do vernacular voices participate in the discursive public spheres of contemporary American life?

Drawing on Hauser’s (Vernacular Voices) understanding of publics as everyday members of society who hold diverse views and seek to solve problems through discourse, this project is concerned with how the vernacular voices of publics can be animated. Hauser’s argument suggests that the public institutions (government and the press) supposedly devoted to public deliberation are in actuality disconnected from vernacular voices. Further, the decline in civic participation through traditional venues that Robert Putnam (Bowling Alone) describes, points to the necessity of finding non-traditional venues where citizens can discuss matters of public importance.

The Internet appears to be one such non-traditional venue—a new sphere of communication within which to engage vernacular discourse. Each day, private citizens

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\(^1\) Carol Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang provide a useful discussion of the discursive turn in public sphere studies in their article “Sighting the Public: Iconoclasm and Public Sphere Theory” Quarterly Journal of Speech 90, 4
log on to interactive Weblogs\(^2\) and discussion forums to engage in conversations about matters of public concern. Many Blogs and forums appear to be less encumbered by the institutional constraints, economic pressures, and ideological influences that serve to circumscribe the professionalized public sphere. Accordingly, they may well provide a more inviting communication vehicle for the participation of everyday citizens.

Citizenship in a democratic society involves being informed on issues of public concern, thinking critically about the implications of those issues, and engaging in deliberation about potential solutions. Participation in a democracy is more than merely casting one’s vote. Consequently, it is imperative to identify and evaluate the vehicles by which publics can take part in discursive civic life. Through an investigation of politically-focused interactive discussion forums, this project seeks to explore the Internet as a potential venue for vernacular voices to more fully participate in public spheres of discourse and, thereby, more fully engage in the democratic process.

Chapter One: The Nature of Public Discourse and Public Spheres

Rather than searching for the public, we should expect a developed society to be populated by a montage of publics. And rather than anticipating publics as already existing, we should seek them through actual discursive engagements on the issues raised... Gerard Hauser

The public sphere has long been emphasized as the most important conceptual location for a discursive view of democracy. Yet, there are diverse views as to what constitutes the public sphere and how we define public life. This chapter argues that: 1) it is necessary to examine public spheres from a rhetorical approach in order to fully capture the nature and character of publics and their discourse; 2) public discourse in a democratic society relies upon certain institutional guarantees, without which healthy, open deliberation cannot occur; 3) contemporary discursive life encompasses a multiplicity of public spheres that are diverse and are naturally competitive; 4) in order for discourse to contribute to the outcomes of public deliberation, it must reflect a rational argument that can withstand scrutiny; and 5) the boundaries of public discourse are temporal, porous, contextual, and contested. Ultimately, the democratic process is best served by a deliberative view of democracy that understands public spheres as rhetorical constructs that are protected by institutional guarantees, guided by reasoned deliberation, and open to the varied concerns of competitive and diverse publics.

Theoretical Approaches

There are two major approaches to understanding public discourse in a democratic society: a procedural approach that focuses on the process of discourse and the normative framework within which it occurs, and a rhetorical approach that concentrates on the discourse itself. A rhetorical approach to examining public
deliberation captures the very essence of discourse as unfolding, lively, fluid, and diverse. While I ultimately argue for the value of a rhetorical understanding of public spheres, this chapter begins by acknowledging the necessity of procedural elements to sustain healthy public discourse.

Institutional guarantees are essential in order for democratic public discourse to thrive. Without government assurances that support a free and open marketplace of ideas, deliberative democracy could not exist. In the United States, government’s role in supporting the existence of healthy deliberative public spheres is rooted in First Amendment freedoms. The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States guarantees that:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Thus, the first amendment provides assurances necessary for individuals, publics, media, and politicians to participate fully in deliberative democracy.

However, there is an important distinction between acknowledging the necessity of institutional rules that guarantee free speech and understanding public discourse from a rules-based model. While the philosophical principles that ground First Amendment guarantees—freedom, liberty, equality, justice—are essentially the same principles that ground both procedural and rhetorical approaches to public discourse, these diverse approaches invite distinctive outcomes. In order to more fully grasp their distinction, it makes sense to examine both procedural and rhetorical approaches.
Procedural Approach

Much contemporary scholarship on publics theory is rooted in, or responds to, the work of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas describes the public sphere as “the private people, gathered to constitute a public” (Structural 127). The Habermasian public sphere is a singular entity comprised of a mass public that operates as a collective to deliberate on issues of common concern. Habermas assumes that the goal of deliberation is to arrive at a consensus—a collective public opinion. Operating under the belief that consensus can only be achieved under ideal conditions, Habermas develops a normative notion of the public sphere that is founded on procedures, universals, rationality, and discourse ethics (Discourse Ethics, Normative Models).

The Habermasian approach to public deliberation serves as the foundation for most procedural models. Based on the principle of an ideal speech situation, Habermas holds that discursive space is one that is equally accessible to all members of society, wherein all participants have the same chance to initiate and perpetuate discourse, to put forward, call into question, and give justification for their positions (Discourse Ethics, Further Reflections). Accordingly, Habermas’ core philosophy of discourse is rooted in principles that are consistent with the democratic ideal of equality. To accomplish his ideal, Habermas relies on procedures. He argues that deliberative democracy should emerge from “a network of fairly regulated bargaining processes and of various forms of argumentation, including pragmatic, ethical, and moral discourses, each of which relies

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on different communicative presuppositions and procedures” (Normative Models 25). While procedures provide the foundation for discourse, its legitimacy derives from an *ideal speech situation* (Further Reflections).

Habermas’ discourse ethics—what he describes as a “discourse centered concept of democracy”—relies upon rules and procedures to furnish a yardstick for the *ideal speech situation* (Further Reflections 448). Habermas’ ideal speech situation rests on ethical principles of inclusion, the ability to question assertions and introduce new assertions, and the open expression of opinions (Discourse Ethics). Habermas describes the key elements of the ideal speech situation as:

1. *Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.*
2a. *Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.*
2b. *Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.*
2c. *Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.*
3. *No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).* (Discourse Ethics 86)

Habermas grounds his understanding of public deliberation in a discourse ethic that lays out the essential conditions for the ideal speech situation. However, Habermas assumes universals that serve as a foundation to his normative principles. Accordingly, he seeks to ground his discourse ethic in something more universal than given cultural norms (as varying from culture to culture). Habermas understands the ideal speech situation as occurring within the domain of discourse based on reason where truth and rightness claims are tested and contested through argumentative enterprises that rest upon
universal rules and procedures (Discourse Ethics, Three Normative Models, Further Reflections). Thus, Habermas operates under the assumption that public issues can be adjudicated through a reliance on normative universals and by adherence to principles of ethics and rationality (Discourse Ethics, Normative Models).

Habermas relies on empirically-based understandings of the praxis and conditions of discourse. As a result, Habermas's discourse ethics, while charting out the necessary conditions of the ideal—and thereby, democratic—speech community, are at the same time overtly dependent on procedure. As Thomas McCarthy maintains, Habermasian theory relies heavily "...on forms of socialization and social reproduction that can be counted upon to foster the requisite capacities and motivations" for engaging in ideal discourse (47-48).

Habermas’ reliance on procedure centers the focus on process rather than on the content of discourse. McCarthy observes that Habermas’ focus on praxis can be problematic for open public deliberation. In fact, McCarthy argues that much of Habermas's writings can be understood "...as a protracted examination of, and barriers to, the implementation of practical discourses." (48). McCarthy views Habermas’ procedurist conception of deliberative democracy as one wherein the procedure or form of discourse is the central praxis of democracy. The implication of grounding deliberative democracy in praxis is a reliance on institutional norms that serve to frame public discourse.

John Rawls also locates his approach to deliberative democracy in procedures and normative principles; for Rawls, the central principle for democratic deliberation is

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4 In his "Kantian Constructivism and Reconstructivism: Rawls and Habermas in Dialogue," McCarthy points out the focus on praxis is characteristic not only of Habermas in particular, but of the Frankfurt School in general.
justice. Rawls builds on the liberal tradition of social contract theories (Locke, Rousseau) by crafting a theory of justice that relies upon democratic principles of equality and liberty. Rawls’ explains:

Our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason. This is the liberal principle of legitimacy (Political Liberalism 137).

The principle of legitimacy—a key feature of the democratic ideal—assumes that we view citizens as reasonable and rational as well as free and equal. Democratic legitimacy rests on a commitment to public justification—policies should be justified by reasons that are accepted by those affected. Legitimacy—sometimes referred to as justification and tied to principles of justice—assures that decisions that affect the well-being of a collectivity are the outcome of a free and reasoned deliberation among those individuals who are members of that collectivity.\(^5\)

Like Habermas, Rawls relies upon normative a priori principles to ground his discourse theory (Political Liberalism, Theory of Justice). Further, in order to live out principles of justice and legitimacy, Rawls envisions a procedural model of public discourse that places institutionalization central to deliberative decision-making. The tension between modernist and postmodern philosophies frames differing views of deliberative democracy. Procedural models are based on institutional practices and

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universal norms that seek to frame deliberation in the public sphere. Rhetorical approaches emerge from concerns that classical approaches are not valid—indeed not democratic—in diverse societies.

A procedural understanding of participation in public discourse is reliant on all-purpose systems and universal norms to provide a symmetrical and balanced relationship among participants. Following in Habermas’ theoretical footsteps, Michael Schudson argues that conversation is not the starting point for democracy; rather, the norms of democracy itself give rise to democratic conversations. According to Schudson, democracy does not emerge from conversation; rather, “democratic political norms and institutions instruct and shape conversations to begin with” (Why Conversation 305).

The core of Schudson’s argument is that “democratic conversation presumes not so much equality and spontaneity as a normative order that insists on equality…” (Why Conversation 306).

In Habermasian style, Schudson’s concept of deliberation is rooted in procedural norms that outline the rules of engagement for public communication. For Schudson, democratic conversation presumes a normative order that ensures equal access to the public sphere and equal participation in setting the ground rules for discussion. Ultimately, however, Schudson notes that democratic deliberation depends on mutual support to stay engaged—a degree of good will and civility.

Like Habermas and Rawls, Schudson recognizes that political norms and institutions must provide the assurances that give life to free speech, an acknowledgement that is almost universally shared by theorists from both procedural and rhetorical approaches. Through First Amendment guarantees, government furnishes the
environment within which public discourse can emerge freely and openly. Yet, while
government provides the assurances necessary to support a healthy, thriving deliberative
democracy, government does not create citizen discourse. Institutional assurances
support public discourse, they do not establish discourse. Public discourse is established
by members of public spheres who engage with each other on issues of common concern.
Further, while government provides the assurances for public discourse through first
amendment, and government rules over the procedures for discourse through the
judiciary, government does not rule over the nature of discourse. Thus, while
institutional assurances are essential, they do not serve as the conceptual foundation for
understanding public discourse and publics.

While government assurances are an essential element to deliberative democracy,
purely procedural models that focus primarily on rules and norms of discourse are
limited. Normative models that rely on universals fail to address contemporary
challenges of difference, and purely procedural models can exacerbate the disconnect
caused by agenda-setting and circumscribed spheres of discourse. The problem with
institutionalizing discourse is that it invites government to provide the framework for
citizen debate, thereby setting up the parameters for what is discussed and who
participates in the discussion. Democratic public discourse relies on government to
assure a free and open environment within which public debate can grow and thrive—the
environment for healthy public spheres is akin to the soil in which any plant can be sown
to grow freely. Conversely, normative, procedural models of public discourse are similar
to a tomato cage that supports the plant, but also limits the plant’s growth.
Difficulties may arise for the democratic conversation when institutional norms define discursive participation—a process that, by its very nature, needs to be fluid. Habermasian concepts of communicative action that serve to coordinate discourse presuppose a rational organization of social life. Procedural models coordinate what is already existing, while a rhetorical approach allows for an opening up of the discourse that is consistent with its vibrant and inventive character. Accordingly, a reliance on normative models fails to capture the essence of everyday citizen discourse.

Rhetorical Approach

Certainly, deliberative democracy benefits from being instituted by a “constitution” of sorts (Bowman)—the background understandings and constraints of democracy in terms of ideals and principles. Yet adherence to principles of equality and justice do not necessarily force us into an institutionalized version of public discourse. Deliberative democracy lives within the discourse itself—real conversations between real people. The actual deliberation, rather than the procedural process by which it occurs, is the soul of deliberative democracy. Rhetorical approaches to understanding public discourse and public spheres respond to the limitations of procedural models.

Joshua Cohen suggests that deliberative democracy institutionalizes the ideal of free public deliberation among equals (Procedure and Substance). It calls for a framework of social and institutional conditions that facilitate free discussion among equal citizens through various forms of participation and association. Cleary, deliberative democracy is philosophically grounded in ideals of freedom, and equality

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6 In “Coming of Age in Deliberative Democracy,” James Bowman offers an insightful analysis of some of the major theorists offering procedural models of deliberative democracy. Bohman addresses issues of justification, inclusion, epistemic and social norms, and feasibility.
and is supported by principles laid out in the First Amendment. Yet, institutionalizing an ideal differs both philosophically and practically from institutionalizing public discourse.

In what may be the beginning of a theoretical movement from procedural norms, Cohen argues that the shift to a postmodern society without a cohesive narrative to serve as a background to public debate does not necessarily drive us to a procedural view of democracy. Cohen seeks to formulate a conception of democracy that is suited to the kind of human difference captured in what he calls the fact of reasonable pluralism—“the fact that there are distinct, incompatible understandings of value, each one reasonable, to which people are drawn under favorable conditions for the exercise of their practical reason” (Procedure 96). Cohen combines an assumption of reasonable pluralism with what he contends is a more substantive conception of democracy. He argues that this combination is a natural result of a deliberative understanding of democracy. While Cohen acknowledges the inherent problems of living out the democratic ideal in a pluralistic society, he argues that deliberative democracy “represents a compelling interpretation of the democratic ideal” (Democracy 187).

As one of the prominent speakers on the issue of deliberative democracy, Cohen is an important voice in the conversation. While his theories of publics discourse are rooted in procedure, Cohen seems to recognize some of the limits for contemporary society of purely procedural approaches. Accordingly, Cohen invites an argument for shift to a rhetorical approach to deliberative democracy.

As Finnegan and Kang observe, “public sphere theory is increasingly invested in the idea that the public is best theorized as a discursive construction” (377). The authors argue that the turn to a discursive model of the public has been a valuable one as:
When the public is studied through analysis of discursive practices, then membership in the public does not depend on one’s social location (Habermas’s bourgeois citizen), access to particular spaces of political engagement (Aristotle’s and Arendt’s citizen of the polis), or commitment to predetermined rules and topics (the proceduralism of the Liberal model) (377-8).

Rhetorical approaches to understanding public discourse respond well to the dynamics and contexts of contemporary publics.

Seyla Benhabib offers a theory of public discourse that serves to transition democratic societies from the procedural models grounded in normative universals to a rhetorical approach that accommodates post-modern, democratic society. To begin with, Benhabib’s privileges a deliberative model of democracy, arguing that in democratic societies, decisions that affect the well-being of a collectivity are the outcome of a free and reasoned deliberation “among individuals considered as moral and political equals” (Toward, 68).

Benhabib addresses criticisms from liberal theorists that a deliberative model of democracy would lead to the corrosion of individual liberties. For example, Benhabib examines John Rawls’ idea of public reason that limits deliberation to a restricted agenda, that views reason as a regulative principle rather than a process, and limits public sphere to the state and its organizations (corporations, associations, churches, etc are considered by Rawls as non-public). Benhabib argues that a deliberative model is more interested in what Rawls calls background cultural conditions because, according to Benhabib, “politics and political reason are always seen to emerge out of a cultural and social

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7 Habermas and Rawls follow a liberal political tradition rooted in the thinking of Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill.
context” (Toward 76). In her response to Rawls, Benhabib concludes that the deliberative model:

1. does not restrict the agenda of public conversation
2. locates the public sphere in civil society and is interested ways in which the political process and the background culture interact
3. focuses upon non-coercive and non-final processes of opinion formation in an unrestricted public sphere.

Benhabib also argues that the deliberative model can offer certain conceptual and institutional solutions to the tension between the liberal emphasis on individual rights and liberties and the democratic theory emphasis on collective deliberation and will-formation. Benhabib’s particular model of deliberative democracy is founded on the assumption that “moral respect for the autonomous personality is a fundamental norm of morality and democracy” (Toward 78). Benhabib argues that the deliberative model of democracy presupposes a discourse theory of ethics as its underlying moral principle. Participants are equally entitled to universal moral respect as well as the principle of egalitarian reciprocity—the right to initiate topics, question presupposition about conversations. Benhabib contends that principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity answer the concern for protecting the basic rights and liberties of the individual.

Finally, Benhabib addresses the issue of institutional distrust of deliberative democracy. She responds to the criticism that deliberative democracy is utopian stating that, “the deliberative theory of democracy is not a theory in search of practice; rather it is a theory that claims to elucidate some aspects of the logic of existing democratic
practices better than others” (Toward 84). Benhabib contends that, “The question is not whether discursive democracy can become the practice of complex societies but whether complex societies are still capable of democratic rule” (Toward 84).

Benhabib’s argument centers around the belief that discourse ethics is at the core of deliberative democracy. Thus, she privileges communication ethics as the underlying principle upon which the deliberative model of democracy exists. Yet, Benhabib extends her Habermasian roots to accommodate diverse contemporary societies. In framing her understanding of deliberative democracy, Benhabib moves to a rhetorical approach to understanding public discourse, and serves as a transition to rhetorical models of democracy.

Gerard Hauser moves Benhabib’s discussion toward developing a distinction between a deliberative and a rhetorical democracy: “A rhetorical democracy is not merely a collection of whatever is said under the banner of free speech, nor is it synonymous with deliberative democracy if that formulation implies a normative standard of rational discourse” (Rhetorical Democracy 9). The core of Hauser’s argument in this regard is that, “For rhetoric to be democratic, it must go beyond procedural norms to embrace practices of deliberative inclusion” (Rhetorical Democracy 9). Hauser develops a publics theory that delivers a fully rhetorical understanding of deliberative democracy.

Central to Hauser’s argument is his understanding of publics. Hauser locates publics as operating within the public sphere, which he defines as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them” (Civil Society 21). Hauser
recognizes the deliberative nature of the public realm and the goal of discourse as coming
to decisions about society’s problems. Like Cohen and Benhabib, Hauser does not resort
to procedural models. Rather, Hauser’s publics are rhetorical constructs that exist in
webs of discursive arenas (Vernacular Voices).

It is also important to note the difference between publics and the public, a
distinction that Hauser makes clear: “the public is a generic reference to a body of
disinterested members of a society” (Vernacular Voices 14). Hauser compares the public
to the undefined reference to they, while a public is a clearly defined collective
participating in rhetorical processes. Hauser defines publics as, “the interdependent
members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to
influence its resolution through discourse” (Vernacular Voices 31). In foregrounding the
rhetorical nature of publics, Hauser understands their existence as animated through
discourse. He contends that publics exist through their participation in rhetoric; they are,
thus, a process, not an entity. Hauser contends that Habermas’ vision of the public sphere
“is at odds with the rhetorical features of discourse as it is practiced in a democracy”
(Vernacular Voices 55). For Hauser, publics are diverse rhetorical inventions that seek
to resolve a variety of public problems.

As Hauser points out, the value of a rhetorical approach to understanding public
discourse is that it foregrounds the voices of publics; and, thereby, foregrounds the role of
citizens in a deliberative democracy. By understanding public spheres as rhetorical,
citizen discourse is understood in terms of sovereignty and legitimacy. A rhetorical
approach acknowledges the importance of institutional guarantees, yet opens up our
understanding of public discourse in a way that answers the limitations of a purely procedural model.

A rhetorical approach to examining public discourse accommodates the character of public spheres as diverse and competitive. In keeping with Hauser’s argument, John Dryzek observes that, “The public sphere is at any time home to constellations of discourses” (Discursive Democracy 657). In our contemporary society, the ideas and ideals from which discourses emerge are numerous and varied. The values held and norms practiced by individuals and groups within public spheres are becoming increasingly diverse. The problems of value diversity and contested norms present a challenge for deliberative democracy. The key question that emerges is how legitimate public decisions can materialize from a society that cannot find the common ground upon which to deliberate. If we cannot even agree on the questions, how indeed can we arrive at answers?

How do we come to agreement?

Rousseau presupposes that there is a single common good, and that the wants and needs of all the citizens coincide with this good, stating that “what generalizes a will is not so much the number of voices that speak out in its favor as the common interest that harmonizes them” (44). Rousseau’s views emerge from an Enlightenment society rooted in a universal notion as to what constitutes the common good. Habermas also operates under the assumption that public issues can be adjudicated through a reliance on a common good. For Habermas, the common good is expressed through normative universals and by adherence to universal principles of ethics and rationality (Discourse Ethics, Normative Models). Habermas’ normative universals are part of his larger
‘project of modernity’ which he interprets, in part, as efforts to develop universal morality and law (Burrell 9). Coming from a Kantian approach, Habermas develops a universalistic approach to human understanding that attempts to ground experience in a priori universals—a praxis. It is from this philosophical grounding that Habermas develops his procedural approach to discourse ethics.

Feminist theorists have argued that notions of a public sphere, as envisioned by Habermas and Rawls, tend to ignore pluralism, power differences, and marginalized voices. One such critic is Nancy Fraser who cautions that the Habermasian public sphere assumes an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters. Fraser claims that, “we can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal; it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule” (116). Fraser contends that there is always a plurality of competing publics—counter publics that contest the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public. Accordingly, Fraser claims that the Habermasian public sphere needs to undergo critical interrogation and reconstruction in order to respond to actually existing democracy.

Similarly, Chantal Mouffe critiques the Habermasian approach as dominated by an individualistic, universalistic, and rationalistic framework, arguing that the modernist model of publics theory does not accommodate the pluralistic character of today’s democratic public sphere. Mouffe contends that the Habermasian view ignores inherent dimensions of power and antagonism that are at the center of all public discourse. For Mouffe, any attempt to arrive at rational consensus without recognition of dissent is impossible. Mouffe’s notion of agonistic pluralism views political discourse as by nature
exclusionary—“always concerned with the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them’”(755). Like Arendt’s conception of the agonistic public sphere, Mouffe views the political as always holding a dimension of conflict. However, Mouffe does not draw an Arendtian demarcation between discussion of public and private matters. Mouffe’s model of agonistic pluralism is one where “the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere…. but to mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs” (755-6). Mouffe points to the inherently conflictual aspect of discourse in a postmodern society.

Carol Gould also develops an understanding of public deliberation that is informed by feminist theory, focusing on recognizing and representing difference in the public sphere. Like Fraser, Gould also has a problem with Habermas’ “characterization of discourse as having a built-in criterion of consensus as its ultimate and ongoing aim” (174). For Gould, the concern is that communicative action that aims at consensus to achieve legitimation may create undue pressure on those deliberating. She uses the example of the pressure on dissenting jurors in criminal trials where unanimous consent is needed. Even if one does not view consensus as requiring unanimous consent, Gould’s argument suggests how pressure to conform could result in group-think rather than genuine deliberation.

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8 While Arendt’s conception of the agonistic sphere acknowledges the competitive nature of public life, the realm within which competition takes place is rooted in shared values and norms. In *Situating the Self*, Benhabib offers insight into Arendt’s agonistic space as reminiscent of the Greek polis where individuals can excel in a competitive arena that is situated in a broader culture in which political greatness and heroism are revealed and shared with others.

9 The film “12 Angry Men” serves as a useful example of Gould’s point.

10 Rousseau understood that it is not necessary for general will to be unanimous; rather, “what is necessary is that every voice be taken into account” (35). See *The Social Contract*, Willmoore Kendall, trans. Chicago, 1954. (originally published 1762)
Gibson Burrell identifies what he believes to be the problem with Habermas’ universal approach for contemporary society: “Habermas’s communicative thesis is grounded in an utopian assumption about the way the social world ought to be” (8). Modernist approaches rooted in universal norms and consensus building do not respond well to changing historical situations. Universalist approaches ignore the particularities of contemporary publics. In contrast to the Enlightenment views of the public sphere as a discursive space where a unified public seeks consensus and common ground, scholars such as Benhabib and Hauser offer theories that address the nature of diverse publics.

According to Hauser and Benoit-Barne, the pluralistic nature of the public sphere can be accommodated through a rhetorical understanding of deliberation that stems from grassroots resources of civil society. The authors contend that a rhetorical perspective addresses what they point to as the central problem for deliberative democracy—the problem of trust. Hauser and Benoit-Barn contend that, “civic community require[s] citizens who are capable of participating in the deliberative interactions of civic conversation and who trust this conversation to prove consequential for policies eventually enacted in response to public problems” (271). Ultimately, the authors argue that the arenas of civil society that form the major source for building this sort of trust are in the internal and emergent public spheres wherein members of society engage in vernacular rhetoric.

Hauser and Benoit-Barne reject existing theories of deliberative democracy, offering a conception in which “civil judgment results from rhetorical exchanges, both formal and vernacular” (264). The Hauser, Benoit-Barne model moves deliberative democracy from a procedural model to an equality model that accommodates pluralistic
politics. The authors argue that a rhetorical model stresses principles of deliberative inclusion that treats all reasoning as legitimate contributions to the deliberative process. A deliberative conception of the democratic process moves beyond the institutional constructs of democracy to include the associative networks wherein most citizens experience democratic participation and deliberation. Hauser and Benoit-Barne contend that civil society occurs within a network of rhetorical arenas in which strangers encounter difference, “and where they may develop the levels of trust necessary for them to function in a world of mutual dependency” (271). Trust becomes the social mechanism through which a discursive locus of public opinion is formed.

Trust is a key issue in Hauser’s understanding of publics theory: “Before we can have a productive civic conversation with difference, we first must overcome the menace of difference that provokes distrust and the antidemocratic rhetorics of intolerance, cynicism, or withdrawal from the political process” (Rhetorical Democracy 10). For Hauser, our ability to engage a variety of diverse publics is crucial to sustaining a deliberative democracy. Hauser argues: “For democracy to be a functional form of governance in a society of strangers, citizens must learn how to engage difference in a way that recognizes the individual and the group as a subject” (Rhetorical Democracy 10). Hauser envisions the political subject is situated within context, but not reliant on community; it is free to use reason in concert with cultural identity.

Like Hauser’s understanding of the individual subject, Benhabib’s notion of the particular other helps frame an understanding of diverse publics. While Habermas argues for universal norms upon which to build public deliberation, Benhabib builds a theoretical extension from the generalized to the concrete other. Benhabib describes the
concrete other as the “individual moral person who is unique with a certain history, needs, and limitations” (Situating 10). In a theoretical continuum, Benhabib extends the Habermasian commitment to universal moral respect to include respect and care for the concrete other.

Robert Ivie’s discussion also gestures to Benhabib’s argument that everyday voices in public spheres are embedded in real life contexts—situations that reveal real problems seeking real solutions.11 Ivie explains that his conception of “rowdy” deliberation “places a premium on strategies of identification … that are situated, partial, ambiguous, temporary, and achieved through various styles of communication, all of which are addressed to particular audiences” (279). In his understanding of the role of the particular, Ivie argues from a tradition that includes Gadamer’s idea of the historically situated self (Truth and Method),12 Benhabib’s notion of the concrete other (Situating the Self), and Hauser’s understanding of the individual subject (Rhetorical Democracy).

Benhabib and Hauser offer much toward understanding the particular other within public spheres of discourse. Hauser observes that since civil society’s character is inherently rhetorical, its web of associations are rhetorical arenas in which “strangers encounter difference, learn of the other’s interests, develop understanding of where there are common goals, and where they may develop the levels of trust necessary for them to function in a world of mutual dependency” (Rhetorical Democracy 9). Hauser understands difference within the realm of public life as a positive, expanding, learning experience. Hauser notes that, “Civic community does not depend on citizens thinking

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11 In Studies of Public Discourse, Edwin Black explains the interrogative function of rhetorical analysis as a study of real questions that illicit real answers.

12 Gadamer’s notion of the historically situated self places the individual within the context of the historical moment.
alike, or even having consensus on underlying values. It does require citizenly competence to participate in civic conversation and trust that it will be consequential on how we address public problems” (Rhetorical Democracy 10).

Arguably, Seyla Benhabib is the thinker who may come closest to resolving the problems of a modernist model of public discourse in American democracy. Skeptical of a modernist project that does not accommodate diversity, Benhabib argues for a post-Enlightenment reform of public discourse that is interactive, cognizant of difference, and contextually sensitive. Benhabib suggests that a desirable alternative to both purely procedural and agonistic approaches lies in a deliberative vision of democracy that can also do justice to the agonistic spirit.

As previously noted, Benhabib draws on Habermas to develop a vision of deliberative democracy that rests on communication ethics. She identifies one of the elements necessary for ethical deliberation as participation governed by norms of equality and symmetry. Benhabib contends that deliberative democracy is founded on the assumption that “moral respect for the autonomous personality is a fundamental norm of morality and democracy” (Toward 78). She reforms the Habermasian principle of universality into an argument that participants are equally entitled to universal moral respect as well as the principle of egalitarian reciprocity—the right to initiate topics and question presuppositions. For Benhabib, what needs to be universal is respect—not a priori principles that serve to marginalize some voices. Through her concept of interactive universalism, Benhabib argues that all norms must be “interactive, not

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13 Benhabib works from a tradition of thinkers who understand the importance of considering rhetoric within its social, economic, political, and cultural context, drawing from Gadamer’s understanding of individuals as embedded subjects (Truth and Method), but also related to Dewey (The Public and its Problems) and Hauser (Vernacular Voices), who both argued that publics must be understood as situational.
legislative” and that they should be “contextually sensitive” (Situating 3). Benhabib acknowledges that all procedural theories must presuppose some substantive commitments. She contends, however, that:

the issue is whether these substantive commitments are presented as theoretical certainties whose status cannot be further questioned, or whether we can conceive of ethical discourse in such a radically reflexive fashion that even the presuppositions of discourse can themselves be challenged, called into question and debated. (Situating 74)

While she contends that all norms are contestable Benhabib acknowledges that if we want a democracy, then we must choose norms of universal respect.14 Through her principle of interactive universalism, Benhabib seems to be making an effort to distance herself from Enlightenment notions of universalism. Contending that values are arrived through discourse, Benhabib frames a discourse-centered ethic that is process rather than rule based. The implication of Benhabib’s approach is the realization that if we choose the wrong norms, we jeopardize the democratic ideal. Accordingly, Benhabib’s version of deliberative democracy can turn on itself.

Benhabib addresses concerns raised by feminist theorists that deliberative democracy extend itself broadly enough to be truly inclusive (Fraser, Young, Gould). Feminist scholars argue that democratic theory privileges the male mode of self-representation and also that democratic institutions are biased and restrictive in practice. Benhabib points to Iris Young’s theory of communicative democracy in which individuals attend to one another’s differences in class, gender, race, religion, etc. Social

14 Carol Gould suggests that by framing an understanding of norms that are both contestable and yet necessary for the democratic process, Benhabib’ wants to have it both ways.
positions do not abandon their perspectives, but participants use communication to transcend and transform their situated knowledge. Benhabib argues that Young’s idea of transcendence and transformation does not really differ from the mutual agreement that is reached in processes of deliberative democracy. However, Benhabib disagrees with Young’s argument that greeting, storytelling, and rhetoric are modes of public communication. Benhabib argues that in order to attain legitimacy, “democratic institutions require the articulation of the bases of their actions and policies in discursive language that appeals to commonly shared and accepted public reasons” (Toward 83). Benhabib points to Nancy Fraser, who contends that once the unitary model of public sphere is abandoned concerns of women and other excluded groups can be accommodated. Benhabib agrees: “when conceived as an anonymous, plural, and multiple medium of communication and deliberation, the public sphere need not homogenize and repress difference” (Toward 84).

The value of the feminist thinkers (Fraser, Young, Gould) is that they call our attention to the problems with hierarchical public spheres and pre-set agendas that do not allow for self-regulating publics. Contemporary society is comprised of diverse public spheres in which competing arguments are put forth for deliberation. Publics put their ideas and concerns into competition with each other. It is important to note, however, that public deliberation is competitive in the sense of competing arguments, not in the sense of contestation for the sake of contestation. A rhetorical approach to understanding public discourse invites an examination of competing arguments from diverse publics. In a democratic society, decisions that affect the collectivity are the outcome of a free and reasoned deliberation.
**Reasoned Deliberation**

Whether one views public space as rooted in common action or a competitive and fragmented space, participants in public discourse must apply elements of reason to public issues in order to arrive at decisions. How, then, are we to understand public reason? At the birth of American democracy, the public’s ability to reason was tied to Enlightenment views of rationality. In *The Declaration of Independence*, Jefferson maintains that his argument for revolution should be *submitted to a candid world*. Presumably, that candid world would include a public of American citizens who were able to apply reason to Jefferson’s argument. In the time since the American Revolution, the ideal of the democratic process has been complicated by changed notions of what constitutes public reason.

In an Enlightenment view of public discourse, rules and procedures furnish the framework for deliberation. Habermas, for example, understands the ideal speech situation as occurring within the domain of discourse based on reason where truth and rightness claims are tested and contested through argumentative enterprises that rest upon universal rules and procedures (*Discourse Ethics, Further Reflections, Three Normative Models*). Coming from a German Kantian tradition, Habermas envisions universal rules of argumentation that allow for a free speech situation that is liberated from repression and inequality. Ultimately, however, through his reliance on notions of a priori rationality and rational consensus, Habermas subordinates practical judgment for normative principles.¹⁵ Habermas’ notion of *intersubjective validity*—that we have

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¹⁵ Habermas argues that truth and rightness claims are tested through forms of argumentation that rely upon universal norms. In *Discourse Ethics*, Habermas argues that the principle of universalization is what makes argument possible.
enough in common to know what is rational—fails to address the pluralistic nature of contemporary society.\textsuperscript{16} A different approach to understanding rationality is necessary to grapple with the arguments put forth by diverse and competing publics.

For John Rawls, the idea of free public reasoning contains guidelines of inquiry and virtues of reasonableness and fair-mindedness. Rawls’ solution to the problems of conflict and stability is to restrict the nature and scope of public reasons to those offered by citizens in light of a political conception of justice. For Rawls, public reason refers to common reason—that of the public in its capacity as citizens” its limits do not apply to our personal deliberations and reflections about political questions” (Political Liberalism 215). Accordingly, public reason is limited to political advocacy by citizens operating in a public forum.

The Rawlsian ideal of public reason sets a threshold on what counts as evidence for claims and what sorts of claims can justify political proposals. Rawls argues that citizens and officials should base their claims on publicly available evidence that is both accessible and ascertainable by other concerned citizens. The ideal of public reason establishes the meaning of political reasonableness—citizens are willing to collaborate with others in proposing fair terms of social cooperation and have the commitment to act on these terms. Rawls contrasts public reason with non public reason used by special interests and private associations. The Rawlsian conception of public reason limits deliberation to a restricted agenda and views reason as a regulative principle rather than a process. While Rawls approach begins the movement from an Enlightenment understanding of reason, it places public discourse within limited public forums.

\textsuperscript{16} Habermas’ concept of intersubjective validity is rooted in a modernist, idealized understanding of society founded on commonly held values, norms, and understanding of the common good.
Consequently, Rawls’ conception of reason ignores arguments put forth by everyday citizens. Additionally, Benhabib’s concern with Rawls lies with his limited model wherein consensus and unanimity are attained at the cost of silencing dissent and curtailing minority viewpoints.

Joshua Cohen shares Benhabib’s concerns. Cohen observes that, “there are distinct, incompatible philosophies of life to which reasonable people are drawn under favorable conditions for the exercise of practical reason” (Democracy 187). He understands *philosophies of life* as all-embracing views that account for ethical values and provide guides to individual and collective conduct. In developing his concept of *reasonable pluralism*, Cohen distinguishes between *public reasoning*—that places emphasis on methods of collective decision-making—and *public discussion* that places its emphasis on discussion. The idea of reasonable pluralism is that good faith efforts at practical reason by reasonable people do not converge on a particular philosophy of life. Reasonable people may disagree about matters of moral truth and public policy. Cohen’s discussion serves as a useful segue to examining the contested philosophies of universalism and pluralism.

Rationality is an essential element to argumentation and, thus, to deliberative democracy. One limitation of an Enlightenment a priori notion of what is rational is that it pre-judges the validity of discourse in advance. Accordingly, a priori notions of rationality stifle the fluid character of deliberative discourse, thereby inhibiting free speech. Yet, freedom of speech does not mean that anyone can say anything in public without scrutiny or implications. Free speech ensures entrée to public spheres of free and reasoned deliberation. Public speech is always subject to scrutiny; yet, the criteria by
which discourse is scrutinized are not determined a priori—it emerges through deliberation. Participation in public discourse is evaluated as reasonable—or not reasonable—by the participants.

Benhabib’s response to the question of how reason is to be understood in a diverse contemporary society lies in her principle of *interactive rationality* (Situating). Benhabib looks to discourse to achieve agreement, arguing that the goal of conversation is not consensus as Habermas envisions, but the “anticipated communication with others with whom I must finally come to some agreement” (Situating 9). Agreement, for Benhabib, is achieved through ethical discourse: “the capacity to reverse perspectives, that is, the willingness to reason from the others’ point of view, and the sensitivity to hear their voice is paramount” (Situating 8). The principle for ethical discourse is *interactive rationality*, a concept that transforms the criteria for public discussion from the rule of rationality to the aspiration of agreement. With this conceptual transformation, Benhabib makes an important contribution to situating publics theory in postmodern terms.

As Hauser points out, publics develop their own understandings for what is reasonable: “Public spheres, then, are discursive spaces where society deliberates about normative standards and even develops new frameworks for expressing and evaluating social reality” (Features 439). The rules of public discourse, therefore, are worked out in public spheres by the participants. Benhabib’s notion of interactive rationality provides a participant-based understanding for judging the validity of arguments as well as the contexts of social realities.
As Vico observes, argumentation is rooted in our *sensus communus*—our common sense (The New Science). What we have in common is our ability to reason—to grapple with the issues of an argument. Benhabib’s principle of interactive rationality relies upon—and places faith in—the common sense of participants in the deliberation. Like Dewey, Benhabib trusts the ability of citizens to deliberate and to judge the arguments of their fellow citizens.

Hauser notes that, “Rhetorical democracy at its best does not expect contestants to find one another’s reasons acceptable as their own, but it does respond to them as legitimate contributions to the deliberative process” (Rhetorical Democracy 9). The point is that what is universal is our common sense. This does not mean that that issues, values, standpoints, agendas, or conclusions are universal—we may have nothing else in common other than our common sense. Regardless, however, of whether one holds the philosophical position that we think we are all the same, but we are really different, or that we think we are different, while we are really all the same, the point is that our notions of what is reasonable and rational are not universal. Within multiple spheres of diverse and competing publics, arguments are scrutinized and held to be reasonable or not within the rhetorical context of the actual discourse.

**The Boundaries of Public Spheres**

The boundaries of public discourse in a deliberative democracy are temporal, porous, contextual, and contested. Yet, there are those who argue for narrowly defined

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17 Vico understands common sense in an Aristotelian tradition that is tied to the common nature of all humans. In *New Science*, Vico defines common sense as judgment without reflection that is shared by the entire human race.

18 In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey puts forth his conceptualization of the rational individual. Dewey has faith in the ability of individual citizens to understand the issues, and to engage in deliberation
boundaries that frame deliberation on a variety of issues. John Rawls makes a case for a rigid division between public and private spheres. Rawls uses the term *nonpublic* to refer to the family as well as voluntary associations such as churches, clubs, schools, etc, which he views as social associations (Political Liberalism). Rawls contends that the public, political sphere operates from principles of justice in “a certain political tradition” while the culture of the social operates on doctrines of religions, philosophical, and moral principles that he refers to as “background culture” (Political 14). For Rawls, the distinction between the private person who acts within the social realm and the public citizen who acts in the political realm is an important one.

What distinguishes Rawls’ model of political liberalism is its limited scope. Rawls notes a key difference from Habermas’ approach is that “his is comprehensive while mine is an account of the political and it is limited to that” (Reply to Habermas 132). For Rawls, individuals act as citizens in the political arena, basing decisions on political values rather than ethical values. Thus, Rawls makes a clear distinction between the private person and the public citizen.

One implication of Rawls’ argument is that such a clear delineation between private and public realms of discourse relegates many important issues to the private sphere. Recognizing the distinctions between public and private domains does not mean that we must keep seemingly private issues out of the realm of public discourse. The problem in so doing is that important issues—such as domestic and family issues, right to life and choice, stem cell research, separation of church and state, etc—are not deliberated.
As a critical theorist, Habermas also addresses the boundaries of public discourse. Habermas envisions a *bourgeois public sphere* made up of the middle-class, arising historically in conjunction with a society that has become separated from the state (Structural). He argues that capitalism has created a blurred distinction between public and private, and he raises concerns that the public sphere has been absorbed into other spheres. Media monopoly, economics of journalism, challenge of access, all serve to squelch the open public sphere of citizen discourse. While Habermas points to concerns that have only been exacerbated in our contemporary, media-dominated society, his project is an effort to recapture a lost ideal through a return to rational-critical debate, a prescription that is rooted in Enlightenment notions that could serve to circumscribe debate and relegate everyday voices to the private sphere.

Hannah Arendt is also concerned with the public and private arenas being blurred by the encroaching of the professionalized sphere—what Arendt calls *the rise of the social* (Human Condition). Arendt draws distinctions between the private sphere of the household on one hand and the public realm of the political on the other hand. However, Arendt’s position differs somewhat from Rawls and Habermas. Arendt’s concern is that the economic marketplace has permeated private life, transforming the public place into a “pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer ‘act’ but ‘merely behave’ as economic producers, consumers and urban city dwellers” (Benhabib, Situating 90). The notion of an active life—*la vita activa*—is key to understanding Arendt’s conception of what constitutes public life (Human Condition). Arendt laments that the rise of the social has created a public sphere wherein citizens no longer participate in public action.
Arendt also distinguishes public from private spaces based upon the content of the discourse, defining public space by specifying the agenda of the conversation. For Arendt, the public realm is viewed first as a sphere where “everything can be seen and heard by everybody” and, secondly, as the common world that at the same time relates and separates us (Human 50-52). Arendt understands the distinction between the two realms “equals the distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden” (Human 72). Arendt’s concern is for issues of privacy and the threat that private matters cannot always withstand the “bright light of the constant presence of others…” (Human 51).

There are those scholars who challenge delineations between public and private spheres identified by Arendt and Rawls. Carol Gould opposes these distinctions to the extent that they limit public discourse. Gould contends that putting private issues into the public sphere of discourse does not threaten the boundaries of the public and private. Gould claims:

there may be a confusion between the domain for legality and rights and the domain of the discourse of the public sphere. Of course, anything can be discussed freely in conversations of the public sphere without putting in question any boundaries between the public and the private, except perhaps the publicly accepted norms concerning personal relations, and the public awareness of domination and oppression (179).

Gould’s contention is that the domain of privacy can be protected without excluding public discussion about what are perceived as private issues. Gould argues instead for a
broad public domain that includes a diversity of contexts and agendas and provides opportunities for the effective expression of difference and for its appropriate recognition.

Benhabib also addresses the scope of public spheres. While she acknowledges that “any theory of publicity, public space and public dialogue must presuppose some distinction between the private and the public” (Situating 107), Benhabib contends that Arendt’s attempt to define public space by defining the agenda of public conversation is futile. Benhabib argues that what is important is not so much what public discourse is about as the way in which this discourse takes place. Further, Benhabib differs with Rawls in his appropriation of issues of justice to the public realm, contending that “the struggle to make something public is a struggle for justice” (Situating 94, emphasis added). Thus, Benhabib argues for a view of participation in the public domain as “an activity that can be realized in the social and cultural spheres as well” (Models 86).

Accordingly, Benhabib moves from the narrowly-defined political realm, painting a broader picture of public spheres that accommodate a variety of discursive situations.

Yet, Benhabib understands that public spheres of discourse are bounded by constraints. She contends, however, that in a democracy those constraints themselves are contestable. Benhabib explains:

Democratic debate is like a ball game where there is no umpire to definitively interpret the rules of the game and their application. Rather in the game of democracy the rules of the game no less than their interpretation and even the position of the umpire are essentially contestable. But contestation means neither the complete abrogation of these rules nor silence about them. (Situating106-7)
For Benhabib, in democratic discourse nothing is really off the agenda. Yet, there are fundamental rules of discourse which are both constitutive and, at the same time, contestable.

Like Habermas, Benhabib’s model of discourse ethics has a procedural element. She envisions agreement through discursive participation as “reached through procedures which are radically open and fair to all” (Situating 9). However, Benhabib is concerned with adopting procedures that will foster open-ended conversation that includes all voices whose interests are at stake. Paying particular attention to the issue of agenda setting, Benhabib’s model envisions a sphere of discourse wherein “neither scope nor agenda of which can be limited a priori” (Situating 12). Lines of conversation are drawn by the participants who, by the principle of egalitarian reciprocity, have the right to initiate topics and question presuppositions (Benhabib, Toward). Benhabib envisions a democratic public space that is ensured by procedures, yet is not circumscribed by them. Thus, Benhabib creates a framework for discourse that is at the same time procedural and rhetorical.

Whether one views the public domain as encompassing all of civil society or only the political, we are reminded by Benhabib that the issue is less a question of what is discussed and more an issue of how discussion takes place. Benhabib moves the theoretical discussion to accommodate what John Dryzek calls “a constellations of discourses” (Legitimacy and Economy 657). The size and scope of deliberation is, thus, indeterminate in Benhabib’s discourse of inclusion.
Conclusions

Benhabib’s principles of interactive universalism, egalitarian reciprocity and interactive rationality create an understanding of public discourse that is contextually sensitive, cognizant of gender and other differences, and is highly rhetorical. Benhabib weaves a conception of deliberative democracy that acknowledges the necessity of procedural norms, while respecting individual rights and liberties, thus extending Habermas to accommodate a postmodern world. While Habermas proposes an ideal speech situation, Benhabib insists on principles of universal moral respect; while Habermas concentrates on achieving consensus, Benhabib’s focus is on the process through which agreement is reached. Ultimately, both look to normative principles to guide public discourse.

The value of Benhabib to this inquiry lies in her understanding of the public domain as discursive. Benhabib, thus, gestures to the rhetorical turn in publics theory. Additionally, by moving from a limited public sphere to open public spheres, and through her understanding of diverse publics, Benhabib serves as a theoretical bridge from Habermas to Hauser.

Michael Schudson (Good Citizen) contends that the triumph of democratic sensibilities is the expectation that everybody owns public life. In order to live out Schudson’s claim, contemporary democratic societies need a post-Enlightenment reform of public discourse that is contextually sensitive, is cognizant of difference, and is highly rhetorical. Hauser’s argument for a rhetorical construct of the public domain is perhaps the closest to a view that responds to Benhabib’s concern for broad public spheres that foster open-ended conversations and include all voices.
To begin with, Hauser makes a clear distinction between publics and *the* public. Hauser claims that “the public is a generic reference to a body of disinterested members of a society” (Vernacular Voices 14). Hauser compares *the* public to the undefined reference to *they*, while *a* public is a clearly defined collective participating in rhetorical processes. Rather than the undifferentiated, monolithic mass public that Habermas envisions, Hauser views the public domain as comprised of a web of differentiated publics—multiple spheres that emerge around diverse issues (Vernacular Voices). Hauser claims that, “Rather than searching for ‘*the* public,’ we should expect a developed society to be populated by a montage of publics. And rather than anticipating publics as already existing, we should seek them through actual discursive engagements on the issues raised…” (Vernacular Voices 35). Thus, Hauser critiques Habermas’s idealized universal public sphere that conceals or excludes marginalized voices by crafting an understanding of reticulate networks of a multiplicity of diverse publics.

Hauser locates publics as operating within the broader public sphere, which he defines as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them” (Civil Society 21). While Hauser recognizes the deliberative nature of the public realm and the goal of discourse as solving society’s problems, he does not resort to procedural models. Rather, Hauser’s publics are rhetorical constructs that exist in webs of discursive arenas. In foregrounding the rhetorical nature of publics, Hauser understands their existence as animated through discourse. He contends that publics exist through their participation in rhetoric; they are, thus, a process, not an entity. Hauser contends that Habermas’ vision of the public sphere “is at odds with the rhetorical features of
discourse as it is practiced in a democracy” (Vernacular Voices 55). For Hauser, publics are diverse rhetorical inventions that seek to resolve a variety of public problems.

Like Benhabib (Situating the Self), Hauser’s publics are situated within a social, cultural, context. Hauser explains: “Public communication lies at the heart of society’s ongoing activity of appropriating and reappropriating its histority, of society’s fundamental dynamism as it produces itself” (Features 438). Hauser views publics as called into being by current social, political, economic issues of common concern.

Hauser observes that, “At the pre-institutional level, movements often create their own public space” (Features 439). Thus, public spheres are rhetorical constructs created by publics.

Hauser’s publics are located in multiple arenas “where strangers engage with one another through ‘vernacular rhetoric’” (Vernacular Voices 12). Accordingly, publics are everyday citizens who communicate with each other in everyday language. It is through their conversations about issues of common concern that publics are manifested. Hauser explains that publics emerge through discursive processes—their “collective participation in rhetorical processes constitutes individuals as a public” (Vernacular Voices 34).

Hauser identifies the discourse of everyday publics as vernacular voices—a term used to define the “dialogue in which an active society critiques, negotiates, associates, and ultimately constitutes its interests and opinions on the issues confronting them” (Vernacular Dialogue 91). According to Hauser, it is through this dialogic process of opinion-making that the social condition of a society can change. Hauser’s vision of

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19 Hauser draws upon Gadamer’s concept of historicity in recognizing the historical, contextual situatedness of publics.

20 In The Public and its Problems, John Dewey argues that publics are called into being by situations—issues of common concern and with public consequences.
webs of public spheres encompassing a multiplicity of active publics helps us understand
the dynamic nature of deliberative democracy. Rhetorical democracy is comprised of
everyday citizens engaging in multiple conversations situated within diverse contexts and
issues. Vernacular rhetoric is energetic, lively, and immediate.

Ivie’s discussion of rhetorical models of democracy calls attention to the
immediacy of vernacular rhetoric. Ivie suggests that a rhetorical conception of
deliberation “promotes democratic practice immediately—in the here and now—rather
than positioning it indefinitely into a hypothetical future…” and that “rhetorical
deliberation is often a rowdy affair, just as politics is typically messy” (Rhetorical
Deliberation 278). With this characterization of the everyday discourse of citizens—
messy, difficult to place within boundaries and limitations, unwieldy—Ivie’s notion of
public deliberation echos Hauser’s vision of vernacular voices.

This chapter began by arguing for a rhetorical approach to examining publics and
their discourses. While acknowledging the necessity of institutional guarantees to
provide basic freedoms of speech, procedural approaches that focus purely on underlying
guarantees fail to fully capture the nature and character of public discourse in
contemporary society. Contemporary publics are self-regulating rhetorical inventions
that operate in a multiplicity of diverse and competitive public spheres, the boundaries of
which are porous, contextual, and contested. In order to serve the democratic process,
publics require an environment that encourages the free and open participation that is
consistent with the fluid and open character of discourse itself. Public spheres are not
grounded in what Hauser refers to as a Habermasian “idealized fantasy grounded in
shared interests” (Vernacular Voices 14). Rather everyday citizen publics reflect the
diversity of developed societies, who while ideologically fragmented, can work together to seek resolution of mutual problems through discourse.

Hauser’s view of rhetorical participation understands the necessarily flexible and changing character of public discourse. I share Hauser’s contention that participation in civic society is necessarily rhetorical. Further, I understand that rhetorical participation is inherently messy—the discourse of vernacular voices is not neat, it cannot be categorized, and should not be circumscribed by procedures and institutions. Public spheres of discourse in a democracy belong to the participants. Consequently, vernacular discourse often operates under the radar where individual citizens routinely speak out on public issues through unorganized and sometimes random venues.

The key to vernacular rhetoric in contemporary democracy is to allow everyday voices to emerge, to deliberate, and to offer their opinions for public scrutiny. In short, for everyday citizen publics to influence the society in which they live, they must participate in public discourse. Vernacular discourse cannot be relegated to private spheres—it must be allowed to see the light of day (Arendt) where topics can be introduced, exchange of information can take place, and arguments can be scrutinized.

Participation is a fundamental prerequisite to democracy. Cohen points to the participative character of the democratic process, arguing specifically that discursive participation plays a central role in a democratic society (Democracy and Liberty). Cohen explains that a discourse-centered view of democracy must accommodate what he refers to as “the principle of participation” (Democracy and Liberty 106). This principle ensures equal rights of participation such as voting, association, and political expression. Further, Cohen’s view of participation ensures equal opportunity for effective influence.
Thus, Cohen points to an important distinction between genuine participation that has efficacy and a counterfeit form of participation lacking real influence. The challenge to genuine participation in a democratic society is to carve out a theoretical understanding of what it means to participate in civic life.

Publics theory is only meaningful to public life to the extent that theoretical discussions are situated within temporal realities. Thus, in order for an examination of publics theory to have significance for civic life, we must consider the socio-cultural, political, and economic influences that serve to create the environment in which publics engage in discourse. For the purposes of this project, in order to capture the character of public spheres in this historical moment, we must turn our attention to the current conditions within which the discourse of publics exists.
Chapter Two: Current Conditions of Public Discourse and Public Spheres

*In the New Public, instrumental influence is dominated by professional practitioners who largely control the channels, forms, and messages of public communication...*  
Leon Mayhew

In order to develop a full understanding of the nature of publics and public discourse in contemporary society, this chapter examines the current conditions of citizen participation in political discourse, the role of the mass media in our contemporary democracy, and the influence of the media and of professional communicators on public spheres. Publics are one component in the triangulation of political discourse in America, which is comprised of 1) government and political leaders, 2) the press and mass media, and 3) individual citizens and citizen publics. In contemporary America, public spheres of discourse are influenced by the mediated nature of public discourse, which is dominated by media and professional communicators (Habermas, Structural; Mayhew). Political consultants, pollsters, media professionals, advertisers, lobbyists, and public relations practitioners dominate public communication. While mainstream media can serve as a bridge for communication between public spheres, they also function as a wedge between citizens and political leaders and between publics (Garnham, Mayhew). The implication of these conditions suggests a state of public discourse that does too little in service of the democratic process. This chapter argues that current public discourse is dominated by the mass media and by professional communicators, and that their control of public conversation serves to exacerbate the disconnect between citizen publics and political leaders, thereby inhibiting the democratic process.
Citizen Participation

This project rests on the assumption that citizen participation is a necessary element of a democratic society. As discussed in the first chapter, Cohen (Democracy and Liberty), Hauser (Vernacular Voices), and Benhabib (Toward), are among those who maintain that the character of democracy is inherently participatory. Citizen participation in the democratic process includes activities such as voting, lobbying for candidates and issues, membership in political parties and associations, and political expression through discourse.

Principles of a Liberal democracy are founded on the rights and duties of the citizen to be informed and to participate in the process of self government. Michael Schudson describes the public sphere as “the playing field of citizenship” (Good Citizen 12). Schudson observes that, “Progressive Era politics instructed people in a citizenship of intelligence rather than passionate intensity. Political participation became less a relationship to party than a relationship to the state, less a connection to community than to principles and issues” (Good Citizen 182). Accordingly, the good citizen during America’s Progressive Era was expected to be informed about the issues of the day. Schudson contends that the Progressive Era ideal of the informed citizen influences how we view citizenship today: “It is the lamp held aloft by journalists committed to their profession, it directs civic education… and it still dominates public understanding of civic obligation at election time” (Good Citizen 294).

If we agree with Schudson, we must conclude that the contemporary American citizen has not only a right, but a duty to be informed on the issues of the day and to participate in civic discourse about those issues. There are a variety of communication
venues within which individual citizens can exercise their rights and duties to engage in discursive public spheres. Opportunities are available for individuals to communicate directly with their government by writing letters, sending e-mails, or making phone calls to public officials. Individual citizens can also participate in a deliberative form of democracy by attending public hearings and town hall meetings, and through activities such as involvement in political meetings, marches, protests, and rallies, wearing political buttons, and placing bumper stickers on cars and signs on lawns. Yet, as Robert Putnam points out, every form of direct civic involvement is in decline: “year after year, fewer and fewer of us took part in the everyday deliberations that constitute grassroots democracy” (Bowling 43). The implication of a weakening in civic community is a diminishing social capital.21 Putnam argues that, “what really matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement is not merely nominal membership, but active and involved membership” (Bowling 58). Putnam points to the distinction between formal membership in civic organizations and actual involvement in grassroots democracy.

One challenge to direct civic involvement is that in contemporary society, civic participation often relies upon mediated communication, such as writing letters to the editors of newspapers and other publications, calling radio talk shows, or e-mailing or phoning television programs. Where can we place the blame for a decline in direct civic participation? Putnam explains:

I have discovered only one prominent suspect against whom circumstantial

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21 The theoretical foundation for Putnam’s book, *Bowling Alone* is his theory of social capital. The idea of social capital applies the concept of reciprocity to community involvement. Social networks have value, and participation in those networks is an investment that yields a return in the form of social capital.
evidence can be mounted, and in this case, it turns out, some directly
incriminating evidence has also turned up. This is not the occasion to lay out the
full case for the prosecution, nor to review rebuttal evidence for the defense, but
I want to present evidence that justifies indictment. The culprit is television
(Strange Disappearance).

Yet, the media is not the only culprit that Putnam identifies. According to
Putnam’s studies, participation by professional communicators is on the rise.22
Frequently, discursive civic participation occurs through interest groups and lobbying
efforts—through messages framed by professional communicators. While, as Putnam
claims, every form of direct civic involvement is in decline, Americans are still active in
creating professional associations. Not all social networks have atrophied—they have
just changed. Special interest political organizations (e.g. AARP, NRA, the Sierra Club,
NAACP) tend to be dominated not by member input, but by headquarters staff. These
professionally staffed advocacy groups have replaced direct civic involvement, creating
what Putnam calls a citizenship by proxy (Bowling). Citizens participate by sending in
their membership checks rather than by engaging in discourse. Putnam explains the
danger of this growing trend: “It may be more efficient technically for us to hire other
people to act for us politically. However, such organizations provide neither
connectedness among members nor direct engagement in civic give-and-take, and they
certainly do not represent ‘participatory democracy’” (Bowling 160). The implication of

22 Putnam offers charts demonstrating that for the same years in which there has been a decline in actual
participation in community and civic causes, membership in professionally staffed civic organizations—
such as non-profits and interest groups—is on the rise.
Putnam’s observation is a professionalized form of political participation that replaces the active involvement of individual citizens.

Putnam’s project claims that we have moved from the social beings that de Tocqueville\textsuperscript{23} described to a nation of disintegrating social bonds. Putnam contends that the quality of our public life is tied to engagement in public spheres, and he laments that our social capital is eroding due to a withdrawal from civic engagement. Putnam’s observations make a valuable contribution to the study of civic discourse by alerting us to declining trends of civic association. Yet, Putnam’s work is descriptive in nature, identifying trends and raising concerns without prescribing solutions. The real value of Putnam is that he gets us thinking once again about the importance of citizen participation in the democratic process.

I have argued that citizen participation in a democracy necessarily contains an element of deliberation. Paul Waldman (Deliberation in Practice) offers three general benefits of citizen deliberation: that it incorporates the fundamental democratic ideals of participation and equality, and thus makes good on the democratic promise; that the process of deliberation engenders a transformation among the participants; and that it exposes citizens to facts and arguments about the interests of others and of the larger community (153). Inherent in Waldman’s understanding of citizen deliberation is the belief in self-government and the confidence in one’s ability to participate in the democratic process. Thus, deliberation builds political efficacy.

\textsuperscript{23}In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observes that American life in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} Century was characterized by what he referred to as the principle of association. De Tocqueville claims that the United States was the only country on earth where “the continual exercise of the right of association has been introduced into civil life, and where all the advantages which civilization can confer are procured by means of it” (205).
Deliberation in contemporary public spheres is comprised of a triangulation of participants: citizens, public leaders, and the media. Meaningful public deliberation necessitates that these participants have access to each other in order to engage in open dialogue about issues of concern. As Gerard Hauser points out, “A liberal democracy is predicated on the principle that representatives are aware of the views of the represented” (Rhetorical Democracy 5). A deliberative approach to understanding democratic participation highlights the necessity of open, active, and frequent discourse among and between individual citizens, publics, and government. Yet, contemporary public spheres of discourse are dominated by mass media and professional communicators that impair, rather than facilitate, discursive civic engagement.

Professional Communicators

Political consultants, media professionals, advertisers, lobbyists, pollsters, and public relations practitioners dominate public communication. As Leon Mayhew (The New Public) contends, “In the New Public, instrumental influence is dominated by professional practitioners who largely control the channels, forms, and messages of public communication…” (51). The implication of these conditions suggests a state of public discourse in contemporary America that does too little in service of the democratic process. Following the social critiques of Habermas (Structural) and Putnam (Bowling), Mayhew expresses concern for the loss of citizen debate in favor of professionalized and commercialized discourse (New Public). Mayhew questions if the public domain has eroded and the content of public discourse has changed from debate to what Edward
Bernays referred to as the *engineering of consent*\(^2\). Mayhew’s basic argument is that professionally engineered discourse undermines the connections between citizens.

In what Mayhew refers to as the *new public*, media-guided professional discourse “offers brief bits of symbolic information” that has replaced rational argumentation. (New Public 14). Manufactured, one-way communication substitutes for civic dialogue, resulting in sound bites and packaged discourse. Mayhew’s concern is that professional communicators are producing narrow messages and token arguments that serve to manufacture consent rather than engaging publics in persuasive arguments. Mayhew explains that in the *new public*, communication is dominated by professional specialists who employ techniques historically rooted in commercial promotion such as advertising, market research, and public relations. The danger, Mayhew argues, is that commercial techniques of persuasion have been systematically applied to political communication.

According to Mayhew:

> The experts of the New Public have brought us the often impugned methods of civic persuasion that now dominate public communication: sound bite journalism, thirty-second political advertising, one-way communication, evasive spin control by public figures who refuse to answer questions, and the marketing of ideas and candidates by methods developed in commercial market research (New Public 4).

Systematic market research has replaced conversation, resulting in a Bernays style manufacture of consent, the consequence of which is abridged token argument that discourages dialogue. Mayhew refers to these abbreviated arguments as mere *tokens* of

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more ample arguments. Limits of time and other costs create shortcuts of information that people accept in lieu of amplified arguments that would presumably be supplied were time and opportunity available. Sound bites and brief bits of information lacking in context—what Mayhew calls tokens—have come to dominate public discourse.

The rise of professional experts—advertisers, public relations practitioners, political operatives, and pollsters—who offer what Mayhew claims are brief bits of symbolic information serve to diminish the quality of public discourse. Concern for the specialization of messages with narrow strategies create what I refer to as targeting versus talking—one-way monologic communication that does little to promote discursive civic engagement. The fundamental problem with professionally engineered discourse is that it undermines the connections between citizens—media guides the discourse.

Mayhew offers a compelling argument. One needs only to view an evening of televised news and political talk shows to witness sound bites offered up as a pretense for discourse. Mayhew’s description of a professionalized contemporary discourse paints a media culture of attack and allegation over argumentation. Certainly, mass media cannot survive in contemporary society without professional communicators; nor do I believe that Mayhew is arguing for such a restructuring of the media. The value of Mayhew’s argument is that it forces us to come to grips with the extent to which professional communicators have dominated the public forum.

Yet, some question the American appetite for civic debate. Kevin Mattson suggests that Americans do not see deliberation as part of their roles as citizens, rather

25 My critique of Mayhew’s argument is that it is rooted in a functionalist approach that lacks the interpretivist character that I would argue is necessary to capture the full nuances of public spheres of discourse in a postmodern age. Mayhew understands communication as process, which does injustice to the essence of content; and, like Habermas, Mayhew privileges an Enlightenment understanding of reason over rhetoric and understands the goal of communication as consensus.
taking the attitude that “politicians are supposed to deliberate because, in many ways, citizens are not expected to” (Do Americans Really Want 328). Further, Mattson claims that Americans have become apathetic about their role in deliberation due in part by issues of empowerment—citizens feel that they are simply shouting to the wind. Thus, if we are to believe Matson, citizen debate in America lacks efficacy and energy.

Yet, beyond the contention of citizen apathy, other socio-cultural influences surely play a role in the condition of public spheres. Nicholas Garnham (The Media and the Public Sphere) examines public discourse in today’s mediated society, arguing that the key problem in realizing democratic communicative action is one of adapting the basic Habermasian understanding of the public sphere to the conditions of a large-scale society in which communication is mediated. According to Garnham, a mediated public sphere raises three problems: first, the theory of the public sphere is “based upon face-to-face communication in a single physical space”; second, the content of communication—or in Habermasian terms the experience of the *lifeworld*—also became mediated; lastly, “a mismatch has developed between our theories and practices of democratic politics and our theories and practices of communication” (Garnham 365-66). Like so many other critics of mediated communication, Garnham is concerned with what he views as the media providing the background ideological context for debate. The implication of Garnham’s argument is a view of American citizenry that is reliant on media professionals to situate the terms and conditions of public discourse. Coupled with Mattson’s view of an apathetic public, it would seem that everyday citizens lack the interest, information, and contextual understanding necessary to support engagement in civic discourse.
In 1922, Walter Lippmann was already expressing doubt about the public’s ability to give their attention to matters of public interest (Phantom Public). Considering the information overload produced by today’s media, Lippmann’s concerns would seemingly be magnified. In light of his concern for a public too limited in time and knowledge to deal with civic issues, Lippmann argues for a mediated form of public discourse. According to Lippmann, “representative government… cannot be worked successfully… unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions” (Phantom 19). Lippmann believes that public opinions must be organized and translated: “The working of the popular will…has always called for explanation” (Phantom 127). While Habermas, Mayhew, and Putnam alert us to the threats of a media controlled sphere of discourse to the democratic process, Lippmann envisions the media playing the role of experts who provide organization and context.26

Rather than understanding the role of the press as providing the information with which individuals and publics can form their own opinions, Lippmann’s conception suggests that the opinions of the mass public can be orchestrated. Lippmann’s views are philosophically comparable to that of his contemporary, Edward Bernays. Both Lippmann and Bernays recognize the power of a growing mass media to manipulate public opinion and to reduce public discourse to a media event. What they fail to recognize is that the public cannot be removed from public life if the public sphere is to survive. As James Carey points out, Lippmann “took the public out of politics and

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26 See James Fallows’ Breaking the News NY: Vintage, 1996 and James Carey’s “The Dark Continent of American Journalism” in Manoff and Schudson, eds Reading the News NY: Pantheon, 1986 for in depth discussions of the role of the press as sense-makers. Both Fallows and Carey suggest that the media must provide the how and why of events—what Carey calls the “thick text”
politics out of public life” (Press, Public Opinion, and Public Discourse 390). Ultimately, Lippmann asserts that the public is a mere phantom and that democracy is a false ideal.

Yet, Lippmann does not assert that concrete publics do not exist; nor does he argue that citizen publics cannot be informed on particular issues. Lippmann simply observes that “the environment is complex. Man’s political capacity is simple. Can a bridge be guilt between them?” (68). The value of Lippmann to this project is that he forces us to grapple with this question.

John Dewey (Public & Its Problems) argues that Lippmann’s diagnosis of democracy’s ills is misguided in that Lippmann identifies democratic ideals as the cause of the problem. According to Dewey, weaknesses in political democracy are not the cause of problems, but rather are the symptoms of a disorganized public domain. Contrary to Lippmann’s view that the public is a phantom, Dewey believes that the public does exist. While Dewey’s understanding of the democratic process is idealistic, his argument highlights the importance of educating the public on issues of the day. Inherent in that argument is a view of everyday citizens as capable and interested.

Dewey’s idea of the public is tied to a distinction between the concepts of public and private. Publics are called into being by issues that have public consequences. However, as publics are “unorganized and formless,” they need offers of the state to act on their behalf (Dewey 67). For Dewey, the state is “the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members” (33). Therefore, the public is made up of rational individuals dealing with matters of public concern; the state, according to Dewey, is simply an organized public. Further, the state, like all publics, is situational: “The state is tied to conditions which are always changing
and so the state must always be re-discovered” (Dewey 34). Accordingly, Dewey’s concept of the democratic process is dynamic—changing and adapting to each new situation—and is animated by diverse groups of individuals and publics who rely upon the state to provide a cohesive vehicle for their organization.

The diverse groups that Dewey envisions are today’s publics. As Hauser (Vernacular Voices) argues, publics emerge from their interest in and discussions about issues of common concern. While the public is not omnicompetent, as Lippmann points out, publics are knowledgeable about specific issues and are, accordingly, competent to engage in discussion about those issues. Accordingly, we can read Lippmann in a slightly different fashion: perhaps Lippmann is correct that the public is a phantom, while publics are real, informed, competent, and engaged.

The significance of Lippmann to this argument lies, in part, with his distinction between the general and the particular. Lippmann correctly observes that general information is too broad for citizens to consider: “life is too short for the pursuit of omniscience” says Lippmann (Phantom 34). He notes that most opinions are specific and particular in nature. While everyday citizens cannot possibly engage society as a whole, groups of citizens can form specific opinions about specific issues, which give “rise to immediate acts” (Phantom 36). Thus, while public opinion is far too general a concept to have a direct and immediate impact on matters of government, opinions of publics—ad hoc, situational, insiders—can generate significant influence.

The process through which publics exercise influence begins with discussion. Lippmann notes that publics are insiders—it is publics that have the first hand knowledge about an issue. Publics are particular and situational; accordingly, they are perfectly
suited to understanding the intricate details and nuances of an issue. Publics initiate discussion through their concern about an issue, providing background information and context that serves to inform the broader public.

One challenge for publics to participate in contemporary public discourse lies with how individual citizens and citizen publics are informed about issues of public concern. Members of publics need information to provide the foundations for their understanding of political, economic, and social events. Yet, being informed alone does not constitute participation in civic life. This project assumes that participation in the public sphere is a rhetorical act—one must engage in discourse in order to fully participate. In a mediated society, participation in public spheres of discourse is circumscribed by journalistic conventions, competitive news cycles, marketplace constraints, and access.

The Media and Public Spheres

The competitive nature of contemporary mass media challenges the press’ role to inform, and creates obstacles for citizens to fully participate in deliberation. Habermas notes that, “the public sphere was safeguarded whenever the economic and social conditions gave everyone an equal chance to meet the criteria for admission” (Structural 86). In commoditized public spheres, access is—at least in part—limited to those who have the financial investment necessary for ownership in a media outlet. The media exercise control over much of public discourse in America today. Mass media dominate civic discourse by monopolizing the ownership of mainstream media outlets, by setting the agenda of public discourse, by presenting propagandized discourse rather than open inquiry, and by framing public issues as sensational entertainment and contestation.

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27 H.L. Menchen was fond of saying that freedom of the press is limited to those who own one.
Consequently, forums for the deliberation of individual citizens and publics are framed by media professionals.

**Monopolization of Mainstream Media**

Mass media control civic discourse in part by monopolizing the ownership of media outlets. As Ben Bagdikian points out, “Market dominant corporations in the mass media have dominant influence over the public’s news, information, public ideas, popular culture, and political attitudes” (Media Monopoly, 5). Concentrated control over media outlets serves to diminish real choices for citizens as to where they can obtain information about current events and public issues. Bagdikian notes that large media operators often maintain that there is a check and balance against the media exercising this kind of power. Media conglomerates claim that if they abuse their power, the public will reject them. But, as Bagdikian points out, “in order to have the power of rejection, the public needs real choices and choice is inoperative where there is monopoly” (8). Accordingly, even when the most blatant deterioration of the media’s duty to inform takes place, the public has little power to force changes. Bagdikian makes the astute observation that the likely reason why there is no public outcry against media monopoly is that the public ‘has seldom seen in their newspapers, magazines, or broadcasts anything to suggest the political and economic dangers of concentrated corporate control’” (15).

Bagdikian’s argument has merit. According to the Columbia Journalism Review’s online guide to what major media companies own, as mass media increases in numbers of outlets, the conglomeration of those outlets is increasing. The obvious

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28 See Appendix A. for a partial sampling from CJR’s list of “Who Owns What”. A full interactive list can be accessed at http://www.cjr.org/tools/owners
concern for Bagdikian and others is that the domination of media conglomerates will dominate the marketplace of public ideas. Bagdikian offers a prescription for reform that includes a restoration of competition and diversity as well as increased media literacy. Whether or not we adopt reforms such as what Bagdikian prescribes, his discussion serves to raise questions about the dangers to democracy of a mass media that is so largely controlled by corporate conglomerates. Bagdikian makes a compelling argument that the enemy of democracy is ‘the insidious power that comes with unchallenged dominance over the information of others’ (237). The danger is that the marketplace of ideas has been diminished by the monopolization of ownership in mass media outlets.

Like Bagdikian, Habermas also warns us of the dangers to democratic deliberation presented by the commercialization of the public arena (Structural). Habermas argues that the public domain has been transformed into a commercial sphere that has squelched the ideal speech situation. Habermas contends that mainstream mass media’s commercialization of the flow of information has destroyed public spheres of discourse: “discussion is now a business” (Structural 164). The commoditization of the news has led to a marketplace framing of political discourse that bears little resemblance to democratic deliberation. Habermas points to competitive constraints that commercialize the press and, thus, invade the public sphere. According to Habermas, the

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29 In *The Media Monopoly*, Bagdikian lays out his prescription for diluting the concentration of media ownership by: 1) taking a new approach to the application of anti-trust laws that focuses on local—rather than only national—media ownership, 2) initiating a progressive tax on advertising to reduce its volume and to restore the wall of separation between the business interests and journalistic responsibilities of media corporations.

30 Habermas lays out the concept of the ideal speech situation in his two volume *Discourse Ethics*. The foundation of this concept lies in principles of equality and freedom for participants. Habermas argues that every subject with the competence to speak and act should be allowed to take part in discourse.
marketplace model has moved the political and ideological to the commercial—from journalism to advertising. News has become a product that is sold to consumers.

Further, Habermas contends that public discourse is dominated by publicity that is created by an elite group of special interests. Consequently, public opinion is influenced by a publicity model of public relations rather than emerging from open public debate. According to Habermas, “opinion management with its ‘promotion’ and ‘exploitation’ …invades the process of ‘public opinion’ by systematically creating news events or exploiting events that attract attention” (Structural 193). The publicity model of public relations manipulates public opinion, replacing public debate with “self-presentations of privileged private interests” (Structural 195). Echoing Lippmann, Habermas views public opinion as a pretense and the public sphere as a sham.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (Manufacturing Consent) have posited similar arguments regarding the commercialization of public discourse. The authors point to the reality that mass media is a business. Mainstream mass media in America has a bottom line orientation. Just like any other business venture, media owners must consider start up costs, operating expenses, competition, and return on investment. As Herman and Chomsky point out, market factors serve to commercialize the journalistic process by placing financial constraints on the process of news gathering and reporting. Additionally, the authors argue that the sizeable initial investment necessary for ownership in a media outlet limits ownership to an elite segment of society.

The value of Herman and Chomsky’s observations is the awareness of how market ideology has weakened public discussion. The ubiquitous commercialism of the news reporting environment pollutes the process of civic enlightenment and public
discourse. Similar to the concern for the commoditization of news lamented by Habermas, Herman and Chomsky argue that public spheres of discourse have been displaced by a consumer culture. Instead of publics who organize themselves around issues, audiences are fashioned by marketers organized around the selling of goods and services. As the primary source of income for commercial media outlets, Herman and Chomsky assert that advertising determines media content. The authors argue that advertisers hold a “de facto licensing authority” since their support is needed for ad-based media to survive (Manufacturing 14). Reliance on advertising income gives corporate institutions a powerful influence over media content.

Bagdikian, Habermas and Herman and Chomsky point to powerful commercial factors that serve to frame—and constrain—public discourse. Writing in the 1980s, Habermas presents a prophetic argument that laments the loss of the world of letters—the salons, reading societies, and “gentlemen’s associations” that fostered public discussion (Structural 163). His concern that the public arena has been transformed into a media orchestration where “professional dialogues from the podium, panel discussions, and round table shows” have turned rational debate into “production numbers” has come to fruition (Structural 164). One need only watch the talking heads of both network and cable operated television to see professional communicators commandeer the discursive arena. Yet, as Hauser observes, we live in Athens, but we work in Berlin (Vernacular voices). The reality of current conditions of public discourse is that economic constraints inhibit mainstream media from reclaiming their role as promoters of public discourse.

While the press has always been a commercial enterprise, there was a time in America that the press was less centralized and less constrained by the competitive 24
hour news cycle. Consequently, the press of the early twentieth century was better positioned to foster public discourse. James Carey observes that in early America, “the press did not so much inform or educate the public or serve as a vehicle of publicity or as a watchdog on the state—roles it would assume in a later period. Rather, it reflected and animated public conversation and argument” (The Press, The Public, and Public Discourse 382). The press furnished material for public discussion. Carey argues that the modern day public is disengaged from public life, and he attributes this disengagement in part due to the loss of a localized press that sustains a community of citizenship. 31 Carey’s discussion helps us see how the role of the press has changed by its marketplace constraints—from the early penny press, offering the fuel for discussions about community issues to a national mass media machine that cranks out sound bites and rhetorical tokens. The public sphere of a democratic society can be recaptured only when critical debate is no longer a commodity fashioned for market consumption. Under current conditions, it does not seem feasible for mass media to function as a facilitator for public conversation.

Agenda-setting and Framing

The problem of a diminished marketplace of ideas based in part by the commoditization of discourse is exacerbated through media agenda-setting—individual citizens and publics are told what to discuss. As Jamieson and Waldman point out, “the press both covers events and, in choosing what to report and how to report it, shapes their outcome” (Press Effect 95). The agenda-setting function of contemporary media,

31 Carey situates this argument within a larger project wherein he laments the loss of community and calls for a recapture of common purpose. Carey ties the role of the press to sustaining a common cultural, social, political narrative.
critiqued early on by Gay Tuchman and more recently by Neil Postman, serves to give the press power over civic discourse. These media critics point to the increasing power of the media to shape public discourse, begging the question of how ordinary citizens can fully participate in the public sphere in the sense that Benhabib, Schudson, and Hauser argue is important for the democratic process.

There are a number of metaphors used to describe how the media report news. Some claim that journalism is a mirror that reflects reality, a view that places reporters in the role of providing the public with an image of the truth. Others suggest that journalists report events by way of lenses through which they view the world. The mirror and the lens portray journalists as almost passive instruments with which the public can view reality. Yet, reporters and editors may take a more active role in producing the news. Gaye Tuchman describes news as a frame, an organizing vehicle that inherently makes judgments about what is important (Making News). Reporters highlight some issues and downplay others; they focus on certain quotes and either bury or ignore others. Thus, according to Tuchman, “journalists help mold public understanding and opinion by deciding what is important and what can be ignored, what is subject to debate and what is beyond question, and what is true and false.” (Tuchman quoted in Jamieson & Waldman’s The Press Effect, xiii). The lens with which journalists view news events and the way in which they frame those events through stories—what Jamieson and Waldman call the press effect—shapes the public’s understanding of the world.

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32 See Tuchman’s Making News NY: Free Press, 1978 wherein Tuchman argues that the media sets the frame within which the public must debate.

33 In Amusing Ourselves to Death NY: Penguin, 1985, Neil Postman warns of the threat to democracy by a media that gives importance to ‘fragmented and irrelevant information’ thereby transforming American culture into show business and altering the meaning of being informed.
Bagdikian suggests that agenda-setting produces two kinds of impact on public opinion: the single news item and the portrayal of events over time—“one brief and transient, the other prolonged and deep” (Media Monopoly15). Bagdikian contends that “it is in that power—to treat some subjects briefly and obscurely but others repetitively and in depth” is where commercial interests most influence the news (16). It is certainly a legitimate task of journalism to decide what to include or exclude, what events to treat in depth or what to keep superficial. Because these decisions are a normal and necessary part of news reporting, it is difficult for the public to detect illegitimate elements of agenda-setting done for private ownership interests. Regardless of the underlying reasons, the implication of agenda-setting is that it serves to circumscribe public discussion, to limit the marketplace of ideas, and, thereby, to weaken deliberative democracy.

The mass media—what they communicate and how they frame and present it— influence what Americans believe about issues, policies, government, and political leaders. David Paletz and Robert Entman argue that the general effect of the mass media is to:

- socialize people into accepting the legitimacy of their country’s political system;
- lead them to acquiesce in America’s prevailing social values; direct their opinions in ways which do not undermine and often support the domestic and foreign objectives of elites; and deter them from active, meaningful participation in politics—rendering them quiescent before the powerful (Media, Power, & Politics 149).
Thus, the media serve to socialize citizens by identifying and maintaining political norms, values, and beliefs. Political socialization sustains the legitimacy of governing institutions and officials.

The socialization role of the press is especially apparent in times of crisis when, as Jamieson and Waldman point out, “reporters abandon irony, cynicism, and occasionally even skepticism to see the world through a nationalistic and patriotic lens” (Press Effect 130-1). Crisis generally produces press coverage more favorable to the administration as a ‘rally round the flag’ mentality takes over both journalists and public opinion. For example, post September 11, 2001, the media did their part to maintain the nation’s patriotic mood by allowing politicians to revive a sense of national unity by invoking the September 11th events. Thus, as Jamieson and Waldman note, reporters participate with government officials in a common enterprise of unifying the citizenry and reasserting the strength of democracy and America itself (Press Effect).

In addition to ideological assumptions and political socialization, practical constraints also frame news reporting. In their critique of the structural factors that shape the basic principles of reporting the news, Herman and Chomsky (Manufacturing Consent) propose a propaganda model as an analytical framework that examines relationships between the media and other societal institutions. The authors argue that the American media operate in a culture so dominated by political ideologies and commercial constraints that news is merely propaganda for the powerful elite. Herman and Chomsky point to the ownership and control of media outlets, dependence of advertisers as sources of funding, and close relationships between members of the press—journalists, editors, and producers—and official sources as structural constraints
that dictate the operations of the press. Due to the incentives, pressures, and constraints caused by these structural realities, news reports serve to “propagandize on behalf of the powerful societal interests that control and finance them.” (Herman & Chomsky xi).

Dependence on official sources is one implication of these structural realities.

It is certainly true that economic considerations, along with an increasingly shortened news cycle, have created a reliance on official sources. Richard Davis notes that, “Economic pressures of competition impel any news organization to channel its resources in predictable directions” (The Press & American Politics 19). Reporters’ beats center on around official sources they can rely upon for access to information and quotes. Some argue that the media have come to assume the role of spokespersons for the government. ABC reporter, Sam Donaldson acknowledges that, “as a rule, we are, if not handmaidens of the establishment, at least blood brothers to the establishment” (quoted in Lee & Solomon, 19). The result of these practices is a lack of opposition voices used as sources, the effect of which is to weaken the quality of discourse. Too often, the press has become—as Herman and Chomsky argue—a propaganda arm of the government, the implication of which is that their power to inform becomes diluted.

Perhaps nowhere is the problem of objective reporting so clearly problematic as when reporting on the administration and its policies. James Fallows argues that the White House press corps lacks “a sense that their responsibility involved something more than their standing up to rehash the day’s announcements.” (Breaking the News 35). In press conferences and briefings, The White House office of communication is no more that a public relations firm for the administration. Claire Shipman, NBC’s White House reporter, admits that it is difficult “to fight the message that the White House is constantly
trying to hand out to you. It's hard to step back and say hey -- that might be their story, but that's not my story” (quoted in Garfield).

The implication of reliance on official sources is a citizen public that is socialized to the party line rather than informed. Bagdikian argues that “overemphasis on news from titled sources of power has occurred at the expense of reporting ‘unofficial’ facts and circumstances” (Media 213). The consequence of Bagdikian’s observation is an overemphasis on a picture of the world as seen by the authorities or as the authorities wish it to be seen. By accepting the frames set by official sources it could be argued that reporters are simply practicing Public Relations—or even supplying printed ads—for the administration, creating a subservient quality to news reporting on administration policies. As events are framed by government leadership, disseminated by the press, and adopted by the public as truth, the press serves as what Jamieson and Waldman refer to as “rhetorical stand-ins” for government (Press Effect 154). Contemporary mainstream journalists may be little more than vehicles through which the powerful pontificate to the public.

News gives occurrences what Gaye Tuchman calls their “public character” —it transforms mere happenings into publicly discussable events (Making News 1). Yet, Ideological, political, and economic constraints make it unlikely that mainstream American media is able to provide the ideal in reporting. Deadlines, budgetary restrictions, staffing, and other logistics often determine the selection of sources. Ideological assumptions of reporters are usually the same as ideological assumptions of the broader culture, creating a culturally biased version of events. It seems unlikely—perhaps unreasonable—to expect that journalists can extract themselves from their
situatedness in the world around them. Accordingly, readers are never challenged to get outside their own cultural heads in order to engage differing perspectives on world events. Thus, citizens attempting to engage in critical analysis are challenged by news reports that are framed by ideological biases and practical constraints, the implication of which is a less informed citizenry.

News as Entertainment

The challenge of keeping individual citizens and citizen publics informed is exacerbated by a mainstream mass media that trivializes discourse and morphs the duty to inform into the desire to entertain. Perhaps no one has made this argument more consistently than Neil Postman. Postman contends that television has raised “the interplay of image and instancy to an exquisite and dangerous perfection” (Amusing, 78). Television has become the command center for a new epistemology—public understanding that is rooted in disconnected sound bites and split-second images. One consequence of what Postman calls a peek-a-boo world (Amusing) is a society of citizens who receive incoherent and trivial messages instead of coherent and contextualized information of value. This outcome is most dangerous in the instance of televised news. Broadcast news provides a disconnected signaling of events lacking in what James Carey refers to as the how and why (Dark Continent). The public is left without an understanding of how events relate to their lives and why they are important.

Postman asks of television: “What kind of conversations does it permit? What are the intellectual tendencies it encourages?” (Amusing 84). Postman argues that “Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television” and he points to the entertainment format of televised news demonstrated through such conventions as “the
good-looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the shoe, the vivid film footage, the attractive commercials…” (Amusing 87). Postman contends that that television is a performing art: “a stylized dramatic performance whose content that has been staged largely to entertain” (Amusing 103). The show business conventions of televised news serve to trivialize the message. Even worse, rather than providing information, televised news provides what Postman calls *disinformation*—information that is misleading, misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented, or superficial (Amusing). According to Postman, the effect of televised news packaged as entertainment is that audiences are presented with fragmented news “without consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness…” (Amusing 100). Accordingly, Postman concludes, “thinking does not play well on television” (Amusing 90).

The problem of entertainment dominating discourse and challenging deliberative democracy is not new. 34 Yet, I would agree with Postman that the increasing focus on the entertainment element of news has cheapened the quality of public discourse and, thereby, diminished the ability for individuals and citizen publics to participate in deliberative democracy. James Fallows agrees, asserting that the entertainment framing of news has diluted the ability of media professionals to live out their function as informing the public has produced media celebrities instead of competent journalists, and has created a game mentality that re-frames political issues into contests (Breaking the News).

34 In *Democratic Revival*, William Keith notes that the tradition of the Chautauqua included performance of music, theatre, etc as a means of holding audience attention to lectures on current topics.
Fallows argues that media stars are less concerned about their credibility as journalists than their star power, asserting that celebrity “matters more than being taken seriously” (Breaking 45). Certainly the creating of journalist celebrities is tied to the marketplace constraints of mass media, particularly television broadcasting. The pressure for ratings creates a need for television journalists to be attractive and likable, qualities that increasingly become more important than being smart and credible. The result is a reprioritizing of those qualities that make a good journalist. As Fallows points out, “because journalism is not a profession and has no formal rules, it is made and continually remade by individual examples of new routes to success” (Breaking 91). Thus, the star journalist becomes the standard-bearer for achievement, focusing on the element of celebrity over journalistic competence. Not only does the framing of journalists as stars shift the criteria for journalism, but it also shifts the focus of public affairs reporting. Stories covered by celebrity journalists tend to focus on the media event being covered rather than the issue that gives rise to the event. Fallows asserts that this shift in focus turns reporters into actors and editors into celebrity managers, and produces the self-aggrandizing behavior of today’s prominent star journalists. The more dangerous consequence for democracy, however, is the weakening of the mass media’s ability to engage serious issues. It is not only the positioning of journalists as celebrities, but also the framing of the stories they report that dilutes the thoughtfulness of mediated public discourse.

The game metaphor of framing public discourse serves to further trivialize the public agenda. The sporting event mentality of reporting on political campaigns places the focus on who is winning rather than an exploration of issues. In what Fallows refers
to as *news as sports*, journalists discuss politics drawing on sports metaphors: Strategists lay out their *game plan*. As election time nears the campaign that is behind faces a ‘fourth and long’ situation with ‘the clock ticking down,’ so in desperation it tries a ‘Hail Mary’ play” (Breaking 159-60). The point behind Fallows’ observation is that for the media, public affairs are sport, the effect of which is the treatment of national issues as though they matter little more than the outcome of Sunday’s football game. Accordingly, politics as reported in mainstream media is all about individual players and strategies as though nothing of societal importance is at stake. By framing discourse as a game, public debate is further trivialized, and the substance of scrutiny—the foundation of critical thinking—is minimized in favor of gamesmanship.

In addition to trivializing public affairs, the sport metaphor of reporting places the focus of politics on competition. It is obvious that in any political campaign, someone will win and someone will lose. Yet, as Fallows points out, the competitive framing of public affairs causes citizens to view public life as a series of conflicts. This tendency of mainstream media to sensationalize conflict has reframed public argumentation from conversation to contestation.

*Conversation or Contestation?*

Mainstream media’s compulsion to encourage—even celebrate—contestation over conversation serves to sensationalize discourse. The media’s craving for contest results in public discourse presented in a hostile and antagonistic fashion. The idea of discursive contestation is supported in arguments presented by scholars such as Hanna Arendt (Human Condition) through her concept of *agonistic pluralism*, a discussion furthered by scholars such as Chantal Mouffe (Deliberative Democracy) and Darrin
Hicks (The Promise of Deliberative Democracy). In Hicks’ response to Arendt’s discussion of agonistic pluralism, he recognizes the role of oppositional argument in democratic politics. Hicks argues that public deliberation can accommodate both dialogue and oppositional argument: “the challenge is to discover models of deliberative engagements that do not require that citizens discount their passions, cultural knowledge, and deeply held convictions” (254).

William Keith (Democratic Revival) contributes to our understanding of oppositional argument by pointing to the difference between discussion and debate. Keith explains that discussion is cooperative, focused on problem-solving using constructive reasoning and reflection. Debate, on the other hand, is characterized as adversarial, strategic, and focused on decision-making. Keith argues that the democratic process is best served on the citizen level of discourse through discussion: “discussion is something anybody can do and hence participate in the democratic process” (315). Keith contends that full and free discussion is a better problem solving tool for democracy than is debate.

Yet, the rhetorical engagement of ideological differences that Keith explains and that Hicks proposes is seldom manifested in contemporary mainstream media. Notions of discursive contestation have been morphed by mainstream media into aggressive contests that serve to sensationalize discourse. The media’s tendency to present issues in a black or white, yes or no, right or wrong format does a disservice to classic understandings of argumentation. The framing of conversation as contestation produces hostility between combatants rather than debate on the issues. The consequence of public

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35 Chapter One of this project offers a discussion of discursive contestation.
discourse misconstrued as contest is that the substance of scrutiny is minimized in favor of media sensationalism.

Traditional media seems most suited to deal with political issues in a thoughtful way that encourages debate. Yet, the tragedy is that mainstream radio and television seem to be trapped in an entertainment style format that challenges serious handling of public issues. The expectation for radio talk shows is biting commentary and partisanship, typically with some element of listener participation through call in opportunities. Political talk radio has been dominated by conservative voices such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity who are known for their confrontational, and sometimes inflammatory, style. More recently, politically liberal talk radio has emerged, primarily through Air America Radio. AAR was founded in 2004 as an alternative to conservative talk radio; however, talk radio is still dominated by conservative voices and a more conservative-leaning listening audience. Political talk radio is also dominated by sensationalized contestation. As Rosa Eberly (Citizen Rhetorics) points out, for radio broadcasters and on air personalities, “callers are props” (82). Callers to talk radio shows may be attempting to generate public discourse; however, their calls are primarily used to incite.

According to a 2004 news release from The Pew Research Center, “political polarization is increasingly reflected in the public’s news viewing habits” (Pew News

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36 Rush Limbaugh has hosted a popular, yet controversial, conservative AM radio talk show since the mid 1980s.

37 Hannity, another conservative AM talk radio host, also co-hosts FOX television’s Hannity & Colmes.

38 According to a 2004 report from The Pew Research Center, 41 percent of talk radio listeners are Republican while only 28 percent are Democrats. In contrast, National Public Radio’s audience is 41 percent Democrat and 24 percent Republican.
Release). Pew points to television programming on FOX as becoming primarily conservative, while CNN is drawing an increasingly liberal viewing audience. The political polarization of television programming is not only apparent in network partisanship. Television shows themselves have become the locus of polarized discourse. Rather than offering an examination of issues and their complexities, television programs—such as “Crossfire” and “Capital Gang”—focus on promoting conflict (interestingly CNN cancelled both shows in 2005). The consequence of television programming that promotes sensationalized verbal sparring over civilized discussion is a missed opportunity to help educate the public on political issues of the day.

Unfortunately, the “Crossfire” mentality of political punditry serves up theatre instead of discourse.

Neil Postman’s (Amusing Ourselves) characterization of the current mass communication environment as a trivial pursuit – facts as a source of amusement—posits a legitimate indictment against mainstream mass media. Our mediated world of disconnected messages and information without context, along with a show business mentality that frames public discourse as entertainment, contestation, and sensationalism, discourages the critical thinking that is necessary to process the implications of current events. As Mayhew argues in The New Public, professional pundits offer bits of information and argumentation—what Mayhew refers to as mere tokens of more ample

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39 “Crossfire” ran on CNN from 1982 to 2005 and offered debating pundits from the left and from the right, purporting to offer opinions from both sides of the political spectrum. The show was sometimes criticized for its rancorous approach to debating political issues.

40 “Capital Gang,” another CNN offering that aired from the mid 1980s until 2005, pitted conservative and liberal panelists against each other on current political issues.
arguments—cheating the public out of adequate information. Accordingly, the current media environment challenges—rather than advances—the democratic process.

The Libertarian philosophy that framed America’s early view of the press held that the role of the press is to help find solutions to public problems by informing the citizenry and encouraging free discourse. The press lives out this role by providing information, contextualizing that information, inviting participation in debate, providing the forum for that debate, and acting as a facilitator to the debate. In contemporary American society, rather than serving as a bridge for communication between public spheres, mainstream mass media too often functions as a wedge between citizen publics and between citizens and the political leaders that represent them.

Public Discourse and Polling

The sovereignty of a people in a democratic society rests, in part, upon the principle of legitimacy. Democratic legitimacy is founded on a commitment to public justification—policies should be justified by reasons that are accepted by those affected. Legitimacy—sometimes referred to as justification (Rawls, Political Liberalism) and tied to principles of justice—assures that decisions that affect the well-being of a collectivity are the outcome of a free and reasoned deliberation among those individuals who are members of that collectivity (Habermas, Normative Models; Benhabib, Toward a Deliberative Model). The concept of legitimacy—that in a representative democracy political leaders are empowered by everyday citizens—assumes that leaders know how the sovereign citizenry think on matters of public concern. Accordingly, there is an assumed understanding—presumably achieved through communication—between citizens and public officials.
The question of how the governed communicate their will to the government is framed nicely in Edmund Burke’s “Speech to the Electors of Bristol”\textsuperscript{41} wherein he makes the distinction between congress as ambassadors of, and instructed by, the people versus parliament as an independent deliberative assembly. The question raised by Burke directly relates to the problematic communication disconnect between leadership and the people—the concern that drives this project. Assuming we view congress as ambassadors, how do they come to know the opinions of publics? On the other hand, if we view congress as an assembly that is free to deliberate without concerns for opinions of publics, then the question is more one of legitimacy and gets solved through the electoral process. In a representative democracy, does the representative lead or follow? Perhaps the role of representatives in a republic is one that exists in tension between these two roles and contains elements of both. While this question is likely to be of great interest to political scholars and everyday citizens alike, it is not within the purview of this project to answer. What is important to this project is an understanding that the issue of legitimacy situates the inquiry into discursive public spheres. Whether one holds that political representatives are ambassadors or deliberators, the principle of legitimacy dictates that they are ultimately responsible to the sovereign people – never mind the practical consideration of getting re-elected. Accordingly, we must be concerned with \textit{how} the communicative relationship between leadership and everyday citizens plays out in the deliberative process. If we cannot look to the media and to professional communicators to foster engagement of deliberative democracy, to whom or to what should we look?

\textsuperscript{41} A copy of Burke’s speech is available through the Online Library of Liberty: http://oll.libertyfund.org/ToC/0005-04.php
Some argue that polling is a valuable tool in identifying and measuring public opinion. A scientific quantification of opinions on a variety of public issues, polling is increasingly seen as the best way for political leaders to understand the will of the people.\textsuperscript{42} Polling organizations use telephone calls, mail in surveys, and increasingly internet and e-mail surveys to gather statistical information that purports to reflect the will of the people. Polling the opinions of individual citizens on a variety of public issues is not new. George Gallup,\textsuperscript{43} one of the earliest, and arguably the most famous political pollster, began as a market researcher in the early 1930s and went on to predict the victory of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election. Since that time, countless other organizations have joined the ranks of political polling creating a reliance on the opinion poll or sample survey as an essential tool for journalists and politicians alike.

The basic belief that sustains polling is that public opinion can be quantified—what Susan Herbst (Classical Democracy, Polls, and Public Opinion) refers to as an aggregation-oriented approach. The theory behind the aggregation approach is that public opinion is the sum total of all individual opinions—a quantified view of public discourse that I contend dices up and categorizes the opinions of individual citizens and citizen publics as though public opinion was separate from the free-flowing, value-laden, rich discourse that produces it. Yet, mass media, professional lobbyists, advertisers, and

\textsuperscript{42} See Appendix for a partial list of major polling agencies

\textsuperscript{43} Gallup was a market researcher for Young & Rubicam, a New York advertising agency when in 1936 he correctly predicted the results of the Roosevelt-Landon presidential election. The Gallup website available at \url{www.gallup.com} offers a brief history of Gallup and the beginnings of his organization.
public relations practitioners, along with government officials and politicians continue to rely on polling data to reveal what the people are thinking about public issues.

According to the National Council on Public Polls, “Polls provide the best direct source of information about public opinion. They are valuable tools for journalists and can serve as the basis for accurate, informative news stories” (20 Questions). Some of the more popular polling organizations such as Zogby and Gallup routinely conduct polls on political issues and then offer results to be reported in the mass media.\(^{44}\) Additionally, broadcast and print media outlets routinely conduct and report their own public opinion polls.

The reporting of polling results is wrought with problems that go beyond any theoretical quarrel polling as a practice. Due to time constraints placed on media, rarely are entire poll reports published or made available to the mass viewing or reading public. Consequently, the journalistic framing of polling results are susceptible to the same vagaries that occur in framing news reports in general. Additionally, polling results sometimes suffer from inaccurate reporting.\(^{45}\) Since polling, by its very nature relies on statistical accuracy, erroneous or sloppy reporting can distort the poll results. The consequence of sound bite reporting or inaccurate representations of poll results is an ill informed public.

A number of scholars have come forward who are concerned about the value of polls and statistics and have offered alternative methods that hope to foster democratic

\(^{44}\) All of the major polling agencies such as Gallup, Zogby, Polling Point, Pew, etc. list mass media outlets as their clients.

\(^{45}\) The National Council on Public Polls offers a critique titled “Media Coverage of the Gallup Poll of ‘The Islamic World’” in which the NCPP review board points to inaccuracies in reporting the Gallup poll results. The critique is available online at http://www.ncpp.org/islamic_world.htm.
deliberation. Two prominent examples are Daniel Yankelovich (Coming to Public Judgment) who argues for a method that suggests that public judgment can be deduced from surveys; and James Fishkin (The Voice of the People) who proposes an elaborate plan that entails citizens spending several days immersed in briefing materials and intensive discussions after which they are polled in detail.

In *Coming to Public Judgment* Daniel Yankelovich offers a view of understanding public opinion that begins with the assumption that, “public opinion in America is largely what public opinion polls measure” (39). While he admits that, polling is beset with practical difficulties, Yankelovich views scientific measurements as accurate assessment of public opinion. Yet, Yankelovich recognizes that polls cannot measure public *reason*. Accordingly, he proposes a plan that distinguishes public opinion from public judgment. Yankelovich argues that the pursuit of public judgment sometimes lies in wisdom rather than science: “all the measurement, number-crunching, poll taking and computer models in the world cannot substitute for a touch of wisdom” (236). Yankelovich’s proposal replaces the focus on public opinion with an eye to understanding public judgment.

Yankelovich defines public judgment as “a state of mind that we deduce from surveys designed to test stability, coherence, and recognition” (234). Yankelovich attempts to get behind the polls—to understand how individual opinions get formed. He offers a three stage process that describes how the public reaches judgment: conscious-raising, processing information, and resolution. The problem with Yankelovich’s plan is

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46 Yankelovich is co-founder, with former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, of Public Agenda, a New York-based nonprofit that does opinion surveys on a range of issues. Public Agenda’s website is: http://www.publicagenda.org/
that first, while he focuses on individual judgments, he speaks of the public as though it is a singular entity rather than a multiplicity of individuals and publics. Second, Yankelovich’s three stage progression ignores communication. His focus on the individual cognitive process fails to recognize the communicative aspect of forming public judgment. Thus, while Yankelovich acknowledges the need to understand the critical judgments that emerge from publics, his proposal is one that seeks to read publics rather than communicate with them, and ignores the deliberative aspect of forming judgments about public issues.

James Fishkin (The Voice of the People) proposes a plan that does focus on deliberation. Fishkin expresses concern about the sampling element of surveys and polls that offer a synecdoche as representative of public opinion. In addition to polls and surveys, Fishkin points to the televised town meeting as another example of allowing a microcosm to speak for the whole. In an argument that echoes Hauser, Fishkin contends that the solution to the problematic effects of sampling in polls and surveys lies in “the ideal of face-to-face democracy” (Voice 4). Fishkin suggests that, “the public can best speak for itself when it can gather together in some way to hear the arguments on the various sides of an issue and then, after face-to-face discussion, come to a collective decision” (4). In order to achieve true public representation, Fishkin calls for a deliberative poll that “attempts to model what the public would think, had it a better opportunity to consider the questions at issue. Fishkin proposal takes a random sample of individuals from across the country to a single place where they would be immersed in
intensive discussion of the issues.\(^{47}\) After several days, the participants would be polled in detail, the results of which would offer “a representation of the considered judgments of the public—the views the entire country would come to if it had the same experience of behaving more like ideal citizens immersed in the issues for an extended period” (Fishkin 162).

Recognizing that democracy is reliant upon citizen participation in deliberation, Fishkin seeks to provide a vehicle that will enhance the public’s engagement in debate. He acknowledges the problem with polls is that they necessarily involve a small sampling of the public, and he asserts that they also foster a disconnect from shared political identity. Fishkin’s proposes a solution that seeks to “promote mass deliberation” as a realistic goal (41). What Fishkin seems to ignore is the plurality public opinions—he appears to be attempting to measure one singular mass public opinion, ignoring how a multiplicity of publics deliberate about a variety of issues.

Fishkin’s proposal is further flawed in that it fails to recognize the emergent and self-aware quality inherent in publics. As Hauser points out, Fishkin’s plan “fails to regard society’s discursive practices on their own terms” (Vernacular Voices 280). By using randomly chosen participants, deliberative polling is an artificial construct that is no more discursive in nature than the televised town meetings that Fishkin criticizes. Fishkin’s intent is to promote mass deliberation by bringing people into the process where they can be engaged and think fully about public issues—an admirable goal. Yet, the end result of his proposal is a synthetic creation that manufactures public opinion as

\(^{47}\) Fishkin is Director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, an organization devoted to research about democracy and public opinion using Fishkin’s method of Deliberative Polling®. The center’s website is available at: http://cdd.stanford.edu/
though it was a product, ignoring the organic and free-flowing quality that is inherent in discourse.

There are scholars who have recognized the limitations of polls, surveys, and other artificial constructs that purport to orchestrate or replicate public discourse. John Dryzek (Mismeasure of Political Man) offers one critique of the limitations of political surveys. Dryzek notes that the principle findings of public opinion and voting surveys suggest that, “most people are uninterested and uninformed about politics” (Mismeasure 705). Dryzek argues with this conclusion and suggests that the problem is not with a disinterested public, but with survey methodology. Dryzek contends that the opinion survey “can produce only a fundamentally flawed account of politically relevant human dispositions” (Mismeasure 706). Accordingly, survey research measures beliefs, attitudes, and opinions independent of actual discussion.

Taking a theoretical position consistent with Hauser (Vernacular Voices), Dryzek argues for a style of political discourse “more in the way of active dialogue among competent citizens” (Mismeasure 707). Consistent with his prior argument (Legitimacy and Economy…) in which he asks that we detach the idea of legitimacy from a head count, Dryzek’s approach rests on a conception of discursive democracy that emphasizes the contestation of discourses in the public sphere. Dryzek seems to get it—that healthy public spheres of discourse are first and foremost communicative actions.

Dryzek’s proposed solution, however, continues to rely on the instrumentality of the survey. Dryzek offers a statistical methodology that arranges survey data. Dryzek calls for reform through implementation of Q Methodology, which Hauser describes as “a highly sophisticated statistical method for arraying survey data” (Vernacular Voices
In the process of analyzing public opinion, it would seem that Q Methodology applies additional scientific instrumentation to an already flawed process. In his argument for discursive legitimacy, Dryzek defines public opinion as “the provisional outcome of the contestation of discourses in the public sphere as transmitted to the state” (Legitimacy and Economy 660). Yet, Dryzek’s Q Methodology relies on empirical analysis and statistical methods to determine what discourses exist and what is their “relative weight” (Legitimacy 661). Accordingly, Dryzek’s response to the limitations of polls and surveys seems inconsistent with his philosophical position.

The scholar who I would argue responds most appropriately to the problems inherent in polls and surveys is Hauser, who contends that “polls suggest direction without narrative…” (Vernacular Voices 231). Hauser’s critique of polls is that they do not consider the complex communicative process whereby opinions of publics are formed and communicated:

A poll could not capture the passion with which these views were held and were being expressed, the spontaneity and dynamism of the public engagements in which citizens individually and collectively tried to shape the … political horizon, or the persuasive influence they may have had on others in the political community (Vernacular Dialogue 91).

Hauser goes on to argue that polls and surveys are insufficient to disclose the shape and character of public opinion “because they are tone deaf to the heteroglossic dialogue48 of vernacular narratives and arguments that give meaning to issues and express their relationship to peoples lives” (Vernacular Dialogue 103-4). Hauser’s argument is

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48 In “Vernacular Dialogue” and in Vernacular Voices, Hauser likens vernacular rhetoric to Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia wherein the dialogue of voices encompasses the social situatedness of the actors, going beyond semantics to capture a deeper meaning.
compelling in that he recognizes that opinions of publics emerge through rhetorical processes that are fluid, complex, vibrant, and even messy.

Hauser criticizes proposals offered by Yankelovich, Fishkin, and Dryzek, stating that they ultimately seek “a sanitized form of rationality itself divorced from the untidy realities of democratic political relations” (Vernacular Voices 280). Hauser contends that any reliance on quantified opinion polls and surveys can both manipulate and misconstrue the character of public opinion. Arguing that opinion polls are “instrumental constructs built through the technological application of polling data to message design” that serves to promote an agenda rather than invite discourse, Hauser views polls as a pragmatic activity. Rather than the detached observation of scientific inquiry or the engagement of discursive activity, Hauser contends that polls and surveys simply serve to reinforce what is already viewed as popular: “in short, our public officials gauge our concerns, preferences, and commitments on the basis of rapidly conducted telephone surveys. Then they inform us of what our fellow citizens believe with selectively released information that supports a particular point of view or policy” (Vernacular Voices 197). If we are to understand Hauser’s critique, opinion polls are in reality more monologic than diologic, more informing than inquiring, and more persuading than engaging, thus giving polling results rhetorical weight that serves to frame rather than understand public opinion.

As an example of how government officials can contribute to the formulation of public opinion, Hauser offers Carter administration’s handling the Iran hostage crisis as an example. 49 Carter consistently used rhetorical strategies that responded to polling results as opposed to engaging the public in genuine debate on the issue. Hauser argues

49 Hauser devotes a full chapter in Vernacular Voices to this case study.
that by viewing public opinion as a technologized construct and relying on 
technologically derived data as a guide for crafting messages, political advisors 
ultimately caused Jimmy Carter to lose his 1980 bid for re-election.

In contrast, Hauser proposes a *vernacular rhetoric* model that he argues provides 
a deeper understanding of public opinion: “taking actual discourses as the prima facie 
evidence from which we infer public opinion elevates the ongoing concerns of social 
actors to a central place in detecting and deciphering its content” (Vernacular Dialogue 
84). In developing a rhetorical perspective, Hauser places rhetoric rather than research at 
the center of understanding public opinion (Vernacular Voices).

As Hauser points out, “There can be no such thing as a public opinion 
independent of the discourse that tests ideas and leads to judgment” (Vernacular Voices 
109). I am not certain how we ultimately move from targeting to talking, but I am 
certain that we must begin with a shift from the quantification of public opinion through 
polls and statistics to engaging public opinion through discussion of issues. Neil 
Postman relates a story demonstrating how the power of opinion polls guides public 
policy:

I have been in the presence of a group of United States congressmen who were 
gathered to discuss, over a period of two days, what might be done to make the 
future of America more survivable and, if possible, more humane. Ten 
consultants were called upon to offer perspectives and advice. Eight of them were 
pollsters. They spoke of the ‘trends’ their polling uncovered; for example, that 
people were no longer interested in the women’s movement, did not regard 
environmental issues as of paramount importance, did not think the ‘drug
problem’ was getting worse, and so on. It was apparent, at once, that these polling results would become the basis of how the congressmen thought the future should be managed. The ideas the congressmen had (all men by the way) receded to the background. Their own perceptions, insights, and experience paled into irrelevance. Confronted by ‘social scientists,’ they were inclined to do what the ‘trends’ suggested would satisfy the populace. (Technopoloy 133)

Whether we view our government leaders as ambassadors or agents, it is clear that a reliance on polling data over deliberation can only serve to diminish the democratic process. If we continue to advance opinion polls over engaging publics in conversation, we risk the danger of manipulating rather than understanding public opinion, the consequence of which is to ignore the will of the people.

Summary and Conclusions

In the triangulation of political discourse—comprised of government and politicians, mass media and professional communicators, and private citizens—individual citizens and citizen publics are effectively shut out of discursive public spheres. Public discourse is so controlled by media and so dominated by communication professionals that the conversations of everyday citizens have been relegated to the private sphere. Rosa Eberly points out that:

Too often, even when citizens might want to ‘engage’—when they have something they want to individually or jointly to say—they do not have the means of getting what they want to say or share or ask or wonder or do before the eyes or ears (e.g. into the attention economies) of others (Citizen Rhetorics 81).
Certainly, the average citizen has some access to communicating with the media—individuals can write letters to the editors of newspapers and other publications; they can call in to increasingly popular talk radio shows; and they can make phone calls or send e-mails to a variety of television programs. Additionally, most media outlets have websites where individuals can click on a link to contact a media representative. Accordingly, the problem of engaging individual citizens in public discourse is not access to the media, but in direct and unmediated access to political leaders and to each other.

While some fear that the marketplace of ideas seems to have almost disappeared, there are still some areas of the public arena that foster intellectual debate. The media, for all its pandering to the advertising mind set, can also provide a vehicle for the airing of issues through letters to the editor, some public television forum discussions, televised candidate debates, etc. However, too often, the consequence of public discourse controlled by mass media and by professional communicators excludes everyday citizens. As Hauser points out, “the dominant voices that seem to mold public opinion are less those of citizens engaged in public deliberation than those of elites who possess access to the forums that court public support, bankroll political candidates, and decide public policy” (Vernacular Voices 26). Public debate has, indeed, become big business.

Perhaps the most serious implication of media-dominated public discussion—produced by agenda setting, framing, gate-keeping, and trivializing of issues—is the communication disconnect that excludes conversations between citizens and their government. The wedge between political leaders and individual citizens and citizen publics has reduced citizen discourse in its importance and effectiveness and relegated vernacular voices to the private realm. The consequence of privatizing public discourse
is that the substance of civic deliberation is placed more securely in the hands of media and professional communicators. And, thus, the downward spiral of civic dysfunction continues—the more the media dominates realms of public discourse, the more citizens are shut out of any meaningful conversation on the issues that frame their lives, the more vernacular voices are reduced to private conversations.

This chapter began by asserting that citizen participation in public spheres of discourse is an essential element to the democratic process. In his examination of Dewey’s theory of the public sphere, Robert Asen (The Multiple Mr. Dewey) points to Dewey’s expansive view of democracy – not just voting and not shaped solely by institutions, but democracy constituted as a way of life. Asen explains that for Dewey, “the significance of democracy lay not in a predetermined end, but in the means of public life” (174 emphasis added). Dewey strongly held that “democratic ends could not be obtained for citizens by others; citizens themselves had to achieve democracy” (Asen 174). Putnam has demonstrated that citizen participation in contemporary America has become bureaucratized, as individuals increasingly opt for mailing list membership over active involvement in civic organizations. Thus, the current conditions of citizen public discourse reveal a lack of vibrancy and health.

For a healthy democracy to exist there is a need for citizen publics to take ownership of public problems. Accordingly, individual citizens must be informed, motivated, and encouraged to participate in debate about public issues. I share John Dewey’s vision of a highly participatory democracy that is rooted in an optimistic assessment of citizens’ capacity for public deliberation and judgment. Yet, I acknowledge that in order for citizens to live out their potential for civic participation,
they must see practical venues for discussion and they must believe that their rhetorical participation matters.

As Schudson points out, healthy public discourse is not so much a matter of whether the media and other professional communicators promote rational discussion, but really is more a matter of whether, when an issue arises, citizens have various effectual access points to governmental decision-makers. Schudson contends that, “The effective operation of a public sphere depends also on whether, through the networks of talk, complaint, letters, petitions, interest groups, parties, suits, demonstrations, and picket lines, people feel they can and actually can move issues into the public agenda” (Good Citizen 238). What Schudson points to is the matter of efficacy—not only do citizens need some access to their government decision-makers, but they need to be able to engage in civic conversation that actually introduces topics of concern into public discussion. Similarly, James Carey observes that, “Only when we can speak and act as citizens and have some promise that others will see, hear, and remember what we say will an interest in public life grow and persist” (Press, Public Opinion & Public Discourse 383). Thus, the health of deliberative democracy depends on citizen efficacy and empowerment. As long as the substance of deliberation is circumscribed by media professionals, citizens will be separated from public spheres of discourse. Without substantive participation in the public realm of discussion, citizens lack ownership of public problems.

The current conditions of public discourse lack much of what our founders hoped. However, as William Keith notes, citizens participating in the democratic process “have to work, at some point, through the flawed current institutions” (Democratic Revival
317). Keith’s point is well taken. It is important to note that I do not view current conditions as a crisis demanding radical measures. I am not arguing for drastic institutional restructuring or revolutionary government policy reform. Nor do I see publics necessarily at odds with government. Rather, I contend that the communicative disconnect between political leaders and citizen publics challenges the health of the democratic process. As such, I see an exigency that requires a response.

I am reminded by Hauser that we do, indeed, live in Athens and work in Berlin. Accordingly, we must recognize that the current conditions of public spheres of discourse are circumscribed by constraints. These are the cards we are dealt. Public spheres of discourse are influenced, delineated, and confined by media and professional communicators, a condition that has diminished the health of deliberative democracy. While I lament this situation, it is not within the purview of this project to call for a removal or even a reformation of these constraints. The contribution this project seeks to make is to identify the implications of the constraints placed on public spheres of discourse, and then to discover new venues of civic participation wherein vernacular voices can be manifested.

As Habermas points out, our forebears were aware of the importance of direct participatory venues for public discourse among citizens. Habermas looks back nostalgically to a time when a lively public sphere existed in cafes and salons (Structural). This inquiry is dedicated to finding the ‘cafes and salons’ of contemporary mediated society. I do not contend that the public sphere is lost—thus, it does not need to be recaptured. I recognize, however, that public spheres of citizen discourse are not clearly visible. Accordingly, the current condition of public discourse begs for inquiries
into how the disconnect among everyday publics and between citizen publics and political leaders can be restored so that vernacular voices can be engaged.
Chapter Three: The Internet and Active Publics

We desperately need an era of civic inventiveness to create a renewed set of institutions and channels for a reinvigorated civic life that will fit the way we have come to live.

William Keith

This chapter offers a theoretical examination of the Internet as a public domain for citizen discourse. Recognizing that there are limited options for members of everyday publics to communicate among and between each other and with their political leaders, I will investigate the Internet as viable alternative to traditional communication environments. In determining the viability of the Internet to provide a vehicle for public discussion that furthers the democratic process, I intend to analyze issues such as accessibility, decentralization, and autonomy from those institutional and marketplace constraints that tend to stifle citizen voices in favor of professionalized discourse. I will also examine the Internet in terms of its potential to offer an egalitarian commonplace for all voices to participate in civic discourse unconstrained by social institutions that empower professionalized voices over the vernacular and that privilege the voices of those with social status and power over those of the everyday citizen. Ultimately, this examination seeks to determine if the Internet meets criteria for healthy public spheres of discourse and responds to challenges presented by the mediated and professionalized character of current public discourse in America.

In Chapter One, I argue that while public spheres of discourse in a democratic society necessarily rely upon institutional guarantees, they must be free from the systemic constraints that inhibit democratic discourse. In order for public discourse to maintain its inherently open, fluid, and naturally competitive character, its boundaries must be porous
and contested. Further, the democratic process is best served when individual citizens and citizen publics enjoy an environment that encourages free and open deliberative participation. A democratic view of public spheres, therefore, assumes that the voices of everyday citizens can emerge to deliberate and to offer their opinions for public scrutiny.

In Chapter Two, I outline the obstacles that inhibit contemporary public spheres from meeting these criteria. Public discussion is so dominated by media and professional communicators that it most often results in the exclusion of citizens and citizen publics. Media guided professionally engineered discourse has replaced citizen deliberation. These conditions serve to circumscribe discourse and relegate citizens to the private sphere, creating a disconnect between individual citizens and their government and, thereby, inhibiting the democratic process. Accordingly, there exist practical as well as philosophical challenges to animating vernacular voices.

In this chapter, I argue that the Internet offers a viable alternative to traditional venues of communication by addressing many of the criteria for healthy discursive public spheres and by responding to the challenges of contemporary professionalized public discourse. Its increasing accessibility, decentralized structure, freedom from many of the institutional and marketplace constrains of more traditional venues, and egalitarian character make the Internet a constructive alternative for political discussions by everyday citizens.

The Internet also provides a communication forum for individuals that dilutes many of the social power issues that circumscribe contemporary public discourse. Online, individuals are free to maintain a certain degree of anonymity. One can engage in discussion without divulging personal characteristics such as gender, race, age, etc.
Consequently, others participating in the discussion are left to engage ideas put forth without the social and cultural attributions that can delineate participants and inhibit the free flow of discussion. Ethos attains new significance online.

The Internet offers an alternative, non-traditional venue for citizen participation in public spheres—a new sphere of communication with which to engage vernacular discourse. Each day, private citizens log on to interactive Weblogs\(^{50}\) and discussion forums to engage in conversations about matters of public concern. Many Blogs and forums appear to be less encumbered by the institutional constraints, economic pressures, and ideological influences that characterize professionalized public spheres. Accordingly, Blogs, and forums may well provide a more open and egalitarian communication vehicle for the participation of everyday citizens.

Questions that drive this examination of the Internet as a vehicle for vernacular public spheres are these:

1. How well does the Internet demonstrate what we understand as a public arena within which multiple spheres of discourse can thrive in a way that promotes the democratic process?

2. To what extent does the Internet provide a vehicle for citizen discourse that is easily accessible and is relatively free from the control of media and professional communicators?

3. Does the Internet move toward solving the communication disconnect among citizens, among and between citizen publics, and between publics and government?

4. How well does the Internet offer information on public issues that is richer in depth of coverage, broader in scope, and less reliant on official sources than mainstream media.\(^{51}\)

**Accessibility**

This chapter begins by examining the accessibility of the Internet for American citizens. According to an October, 2005 report from the Pew Research Center,\(^{52}\) 68 percent of American adults, or about 137 million people, use the Internet, up from 63 percent the previous year. Accordingly, 32 percent of American adults—or about 65 million people—do not go online, either as a result of circumstance or by choice. However, those who are currently offline have had varying levels of exposure to the online world. The Pew report notes that only one in five American adults say they have never used the Internet or email and do not live in an Internet-connected household. At the other end of the spectrum, 53 percent of home Internet customers have high-speed access, creating a new divide among Internet users.

The Pew report indicates that on a typical day at the end of 2004, some 70 million American adults logged onto the Internet to use email, get news, access government Websites, check out health and medical information, participate in auctions, book travel

\(^{51}\) Due in large part to marketplace constraints of time, competition, etc, mainstream media typically rely upon official sources, the consequence of which is that stories are framed by those official sources.

\(^{52}\) The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project makes their full reports on Internet use available online at \texttt{http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/c/2/topics.asp}. The particular demographic information cited herein is drawn from a report on demographics titled “Digital Divisions” and is available online at: \texttt{http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/165/report_display.asp}.
reservations, research their genealogy, gamble, seek out romantic partners, and engage in countless other activities. That represents a 37 percent increase from the 51 million Americans who were online on an average day in 2000 when the Pew Internet & American Life Project began its study of online life. According to a February, 2006 report, the Internet is increasingly a place where Americans just hang out.  

It must be acknowledged, however, that many American citizens do not have easy access to the Internet. The digital divide is real—social and economic stratification, education, age, and race, among other variables, impact Internet use. According to a 2003 U.S. Census Bureau report, the largest percentage of Americans with home Internet access are those who have higher family incomes, hold college degrees, and are between 25 and 55 years of age. Not surprisingly, the poor, the less educated, and the elderly have lower percentages of Internet access from home. Additionally, other characteristics impact home Internet access, such as geography (those living in the Northeast and West are more likely to have Internet access at home than those living in the Midwest or South), and race (whites are more likely to have Internet access at home than Blacks or Hispanics).

Although computer ownership and home Internet access are out of reach for some, Internet use for Americans across all social characteristics is on the rise. While we should not ignore the digital divide, it is fair to presume that politically engaged citizens who are interested in communicating about issues of public concern can do so online.

53 The Pew report of February, 2006 is available as a data memo and can be accessed online at: http://www.pewtrusts.org/pdf/PIP_Surf_0206.pdf

The Pew Internet and American Life Project’s report of December, 2005\textsuperscript{55} indicates that 72 percent of all adults use the Internet, a higher percentage than those who own a home computer. Accordingly, if one does not own a computer or have Internet access at home, it is likely that he/she has access to the Net at work, school, or the public library. The increasing accessibility and level of ease with which Americans make use of the Internet supports the argument that the cyber world is an environment appropriate for public discourse.

Decentralized Character of the Internet

With increasing access for most Americans, some view the Internet as a cyber utopia—an answer to all of our modern-day communication challenges. The Net facilitates commerce, allows friends and colleagues to connect in real time, and helps sustain the idea of the world as a global village. With typical American optimism, the notion of an electronic revolution has historically been viewed by many as the benefactor of mankind: technological innovations provide massive diffusion of scientific and technical information, eliminate the challenges of time and space, and foster a democratic utopia of decentralized government. James Carey (Communication as Culture)\textsuperscript{56} explains that, as a redeemer of dreams, the electronic sublime is expected by some to “exorcise social disorder and environmental disruption, eliminate political conflict and personal alienation, and restore ecological balance and a communion of humans with

\textsuperscript{55} The Pew report on Demographics of Internet Users is available online at http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_12.05.05.htm

\textsuperscript{56} James Carey devotes one half of his book, Communication as Culture to the relationship of technology and culture. Carey argues that technology “is thoroughly cultural from the outset” and is so woven into the fabric of our contemporary culture that our goal should not be to constrain or eliminate it, but rather to figure out how to use it as a resource.
nature” (Communication As Culture, 116). For many, the myth of technology supports a utopian view of the Internet.

Others take a neo-Luddite view of the Internet as a threat that limits our ability to personally connect with each other, that restricts rather than expands our freedoms, and that presents a danger to our privacy and a hazard to our children. Gilbert Rodman (The Net Effect) offers an insightful argument that the Net is all of these and cannot be viewed as a singular enterprise producing a one dimensional consequence. Rodman points out that “it is more accurate to think of the Net as multiple media rather than as a single medium” (Net 13). The effects of the Internet are as varied and multifaceted as the Net itself.

The true value of the Internet as a decentralized communication vehicle lies in its unwieldy nature. While admittedly positing potential dangers, the inherent character of the Internet as a relatively open and unrestricted communication vehicle makes it perfectly suited to discourse for everyday citizens. Mark Poster agrees:

“The Internet is above all a decentralized communication system. Like the telephone network, anyone hooked up to the Internet may initiate a call, send a message that the or she has composed, and may do so in the manner of the broadcast system, that is to say, may send a message to many receivers, and do this either in ‘real time’ or as stored data or both” (Cyber Democracy 3) Accordingly, the Internet provides individuals with a communication environment whereby they can initiate discussion. Unlike mediated and professionalized

57 In “Tools For Conviviality,” Ivan Illich argues that the unrestrained growth in size and power of technology and industry is a threat to human life. Illich laments that society has become a slave to its tools, and he argues that in order to have a convivial society, technology must be limited.
communication vehicles, the Net invites everyday citizens to set the agenda, control the message, and, in turn, invite others to join in the discussion.

Gilbert Rodman supports this view, maintaining that “the Internet’s built-in resistance to centralized control makes it inherently more egalitarian and democratic than other forms of mass media” (Net Effect 28). Accordingly, the Internet provides everyday citizens with an unprecedented ability to publish their own ideas to a global audience. Rodman explains:

In a society where the average citizen rarely has access to a public forum where he or she can share (and not just consume) opinions and ideas, the ability to “publish” one’s thoughts where potentially millions of people might read them is a dramatic deviation from the status quo (Net Effect 29).

In addition to relative freedom from practical and institutional constraints, the Internet also enjoys a good deal of freedom from marketplace controls. The Net works well as a communication vehicle for everyday citizens in large part because most websites dedicated to citizen interaction operate outside the control of the commercial marketplace. This is certainly not to say that the Internet is not a commercial enterprise—to a large extent it is just that. Thousands of corporations operate at least a portion of their commercial ventures online, creating a growing e-commerce business environment. 58 Others use the Net itself to create commercial enterprises, creating a digital economy of information technology companies that produce the hardware and

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58 According to a February, 2006 U.S. Census Bureau report, e-commerce retail sales for 2005 were estimated at over 86 billion dollars. This is an increase of over 24 percent from 2004, while total retail sales for the same period increased to just over seven percent. The implication of this report is that e-commerce is growing at a pace faster than the general economy.
software that allow us to use the Net. 59 While the digital economy is thriving, the Internet itself remains comparatively free from marketplace controls.

Yet, the Internet is likely to remain free and relatively unlimited only to the extent that society’s institutions will allow. As Habermas (Structural, Three Normative) and Benhabib (Situating) argue, public discourse is at least in part reliant on institutional structures to support its democratic character. While the nature of the Internet is open and somewhat unwieldy, it does not operate completely outside the influence of economic, political, and cultural constraints. For example, there are currently several bills before the United States Congress dealing with the Internet. 60 Attempts to regulate cyber communication certainly will have implications for the future of discourse on the net. As Denis Gaynor observes, cyber democracy is challenged by some institutional and marketplace influences. Gaynor claims that it is difficult to create a public sphere distinct from government or commerce, noting that “technologies can reinforce traditional hierarchical structures as easily as they can subvert them” (Democracy).

Gaynor argues that the key to resisting such influences lies at the grassroots level, “where real and virtual communities 61 can validate the voices of there members” (Democracy). Gaynor’s argument suggests that an examination of the vernacular discourse posted on Weblogs and forums may provide some insight into the Internet as a public sphere that supports the democratic process.

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59 A 2003 report from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics & Statistics Association, the information technology economy continues to grow. While current growth does not match the dot com surge of the 1990s, the IT economy grew at a rate that doubled that of the general U.S. economy from 2001 to 2003.

60 See the Center for Democracy and Technology website available at http://www.cdt.org/legislation/ for current legislation.

61 In his book, Virtual Community, Howard Rheingold, is attributed with introducing the term ‘virtual community’. Rheingold’s conception of the virtual community is discussed later in this chapter.
Like all technology, the Internet is temporal in nature. The growth of technology in general and the Internet in particular points to how issues such as decentralization, institutional constraints, and marketplace profitability are fast moving and ever changing. While we must acknowledge these changing issues, they are not central to the core questions that drive this inquiry. At the heart of this discussion are enduring principles of rhetoric and deliberative democracy. One such principle that deserves further examination is the egalitarian character of online discourse, which helps us understand the extent to which the Internet meets criteria for democratic discourse for everyday citizens.

Much of our discussion thus far dealing with issues such as access and decentralization supports the claim that the Internet offers a communication environment for everyday citizens to engage in discourse that is free from institutional and marketplace constraints. On the Net, the opinions of individual citizens are manifested outside the limitations of gate-keeping, agenda setting or framed questions. Online, individuals can initiate topics, publish their own ideas, communicate free from the interference of editors, publishers, or producers, and engage in open unmediated discourse. Relative freedom from the institutional constraints that limit free-flowing discussion in more traditional communication venues, the Internet offers an unparalleled marketplace of ideas for vernacular voices.

The Internet as Information Source

For the most part, the Internet has the ability to supply sources of information beyond what traditional mass media currently offers. As Neil Postman points out, mainstream media—specifically television—has created a peek-a-boo world (Amusing
Ourselves to Death) that serves up sound bites and bits of disconnected messages rather than in-depth details. Additionally, the entertainment framing and game mentality of televised political coverage trivializes public issues, and frames political issues into sports contests, all of which leaves citizens ill-prepared for participation in public discourse.

The Internet serves as a valuable supplement to mainstream media by providing in-depth coverage of current events that is easily and continuously accessible to the citizen public. The 24 hour per day constant availability of information on the Net serves as an umbrella of sorts to more traditional media news outlets. Not only do most American mass media outlets have a presence on the net, but their online versions are available at any time of the day or night that the audience chooses. The Internet makes this pursuit relatively quick and easy. With the variety of sites available on the Net, Americans are increasingly turning to the Internet to stay informed.62

In addition to the presence of mainstream American media, Websites sponsored by alternative and international media abound. One need only search for a news event or political issue to find thousands of online news reports offering layers of information from a variety of perspectives.63 In an economically and politically interdependent, yet culturally diverse world, it seems increasingly difficult for the average citizen to understand the complexities of world events. As citizens of a democratic society, we

62 A March, 2006 report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that some 50 million Americans turn to the Internet every day for their news. The results of a December, 2005 survey represent what Pew termed as a “high water mark for online news gathering” The Pew report can be accessed online at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_News.and.Broadband.pdf

63 As an example, a Google search for ‘L.A. immigration march’ on March 26,2006 (the day after a march occurred in Los Angeles) produces over seven thousand news reports from national as well as international media and from mainstream as well as alternative news outlets.
cannot participate in the political process with any degree of confidence unless we are informed. Yet, the information we receive about world events is too often shaped by traditional mass media outlets that operate within marketplace constrains as well as cultural biases, and that rely upon official sources. Thus, the average citizen who relies upon network and cable television for their news receives sound bite tokens of information from one perspective. Additionally, when Americans rely solely on national news coverage of events, they limit their understanding of the complexities and implications of those events.\(^{64}\) It would seem that, especially relating to world events, American citizens need to supplement mainstream media reports with independent and foreign press coverage in order to have the complete story—from different perspectives, founded on diverse assumptions, and providing a dissimilar framing to news events. By supplementing our consumption of mainstream American media with independent media and reports from foreign news sources, we are able to form a more richly informed analysis of events. The Internet makes this activity relatively easy.

Not only does Internet technology offer American citizens almost unlimited resources through which they can learn the news of the day, it also provides an abundance of supplementary information related to current events and issues. Internet news reports typically contain links to background sources that serve to supplement, contextualize, and provide deep layers of analysis. Through links embedded into online

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\(^{64}\) For example, in 2003 I conducted an analysis of news articles from mainstream American newspapers reporting on a March, 2003 press conference by President G.W. Bush wherein he made his case for the war in Iraq. A comparison of reports from the \textit{N.Y. Times}, \textit{L.A. Times}, \textit{Washington Post} (among other American news outlets) with the \textit{London Times}, \textit{Jerusalem Times}, and \textit{Saudi Gazette} (among other international papers), revealed that story framing, headlines, quote selections, and other elements varied dramatically between American and international reports.
news stories, Internet users are able to access a depth of coverage that is not practically accessible through traditional news media.

For example, an online news report from the Associated Press on March 26, 2006 about Senator Russ Feingold that demonstrates this point. Along with the text of the story, the Web page includes links to background information about Feingold including other news stories, his bio, and his voting record. Additionally, the article provides links to information about other people (President Bush and Rep. Sherron Brown) as well as subjects (Iraq and The Republican National Committee) that are related to this news report. Furthermore, the Associated Press Webpage includes an invitation for the reader to request e-mail alerts to new stories about the people or issues discussed in this article. There are also links to the top political new items of this date. And so, with the click of the mouse, the Internet user can access a variety of additional sources that enhance this news report.

By providing links to other news reports, background information, and primary sources (actual text of speeches and news conferences, original documents and photographs, etc), the Internet provides what James Carey calls a thick text (Dark Continent) of news events. Accordingly, the Internet has augmented the presses role to inform by offering the means to contextualize that information. Gay Tuckman reminds us that news gives occurrences their public character (Making News) by transforming mere happenings into publicly discussable events. Those citizens who supplement

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65 The full Associated Press article from March 26, 2006 can be accessed at http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1603349/posts
mainstream media by accessing news reports online are potentially better equipped to enter into public discussions.\textsuperscript{66}

**Publics Online**

In previous chapters, I draw primarily on Hauser to carve out an understanding of publics. Hauser defines publics as “the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (Vernacular Voices 31). In examining similar discursive constructs that develop online, scholars (e.g. Fernback & Thompson, Komito, Rheingold, Wise) frequently refer to them as *virtual communities*. It is important to our discussion of online publics, however, to spend some time examining how the term *publics* differs in meaning, if it does, from *virtual communities*.

Fernback and Thompson offer a useful definition for understanding virtual communities as “social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g., a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest” (Section III). Fernback and Thompson understand cyber communities as issue driven, much the same as Hauser’s publics. Yet, much of the discussion that seeks to characterize virtual communities focuses on how cyber communities compare to real communities, questioning to what extent cyberspace can replicate real space or real experiences. J. Macgregor Wise wonders, “whether one can match the intensity of real-life experience in a virtual realm” (112).\textsuperscript{67} It seems that, for

\textsuperscript{66}Interestingly, the offering of links embedded in online communication is an example of how mainstream media have had to conform to the expectations of savvy Internet audiences. The medium has, indeed, influenced the message in this regard.

\textsuperscript{67}Wise offers an in-depth discussion of the authenticity of online communities, focusing on the extent to which the concept of affect frames cyber communities. Wise concludes that the task of the virtual community is to learn how to unleash the potential intensity buried under reams of data.
some, the notion of community carries with it the necessity of immediate and personal connections. However, understanding communities as reliant on face-to-face interactions ignores the issue driven character of political communities. The question of whether virtual communities provide a venue for vernacular public discourse does not necessitate replication of real time, real space, or face-to-face interactions.

Howard Rheingold, who coined the term, defines virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relations in cyberspace” (Virtual Community 5). Inherent in Rheingold’s definition is the stipulation that virtual communities emerge through their discussions, that those discussions are public in nature, that the discourse has some enduring, repetitive quality, and that the participants infuse their conversations with some human feeling. While both Rheingold and Wise add a component of affectation to their understanding of virtual communities, as Fernback & Thompson point out, the nature of relationships in cyberspace need not be personal in order to meet the definition of a virtual community.

Understanding online communities as publics helps us to view them as rhetorical, rather than spatial, constructs. As Hauser (Vernacular Voices) instructs, publics form around topics of discussion—thus, their existence relies on issues of concern rather than physical location. Like publics, cyber communities are voluntary, temporary, and created by virtue of their discourse. As such, I propose an understanding of cyber communities as virtual publics—rhetorical in nature and delineated, as Fernback and Thompson suggest, by topic of interest. Thus, virtual publics function as online versions of Hauser’s understanding of publics.
The Internet and the Democratic Process

Underlying this inquiry is the assumption that public discourse is a prerequisite to the democratic process. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine to what extent the Net in general, and online public discourse in particular, fosters democratic public deliberation. Such an examination, in large part, questions to what extent the Net can renew the declining civic participation that Putnam (Bowling Alone) observes. As William Keith puts it, “an unresolved question is whether electronic associations, and there are many kinds, could in principle replace the network of civic associations” (322).

Arguably, the mere fact that citizens use the Net to learn about public issues and events is reason alone to claim that the Internet fosters civic participation. Bruce Gronbeck contends that “Surfing the Net with politics and politicialization on one’s mind assuredly must be counted as a kind of political activity—and it’s sharply on the rise” (26). Certainly, the ease with which citizens can access information about political issues and then publish their opinions about those issues supports the view of the Net as fostering civic participation.

The Net also acts as a means of educating citizens on civic participation. In his study of how the Internet is helping to foster deliberative democracy in Japan, Yuki Ishikawa (Calls for Deliberative Democracy in Japan) maintains that Japanese citizens are in need of a civic education aimed at turning citizens into practitioners of democracy. Ishikawa notes the decline in associated life in Japan similar to that in American life that Putnam has observed, and he maintains that the Internet is a tool for jump-starting deliberative democracy in Japan:
The Internet is a groundbreaking tool for putting democracy to work, for enabling a potentially vast number of people to relieve themselves of pressure from formal and informal networks of power, and to freely express their opinions on public issues….the Net may be a shortcut to democracy (332).

Ishikawa’s study concludes that the Internet, in the form of an electronic forum, is emerging as a powerful tool to enable the people of Japan to become more communicative and is, therefore, jumpstarting deliberative democracy in Japan.

Central to the argument that the Internet provides an environment for deliberative democracy is the question of freedom of expression. In his online article “Virtual Communities: Phony Civil Society?” Rheinhold concludes that “electronic communications do not offer a utopia, but they do offer a unique channel for publishing and communicating, and the power to publish and communicate is fundamental to democracy” (“Virtual Communities”). Freedom to express oneself outside the boundaries of institutional and marketplace constraints inherent in traditional communication media is at the core of deliberative democracy. Accordingly, it is essential to analyze how issues of equality, identity, and power are manifested in online discourse.68

*Democracy Online: Equality and Ethos*

Having examined in Chapter One the elements that determine the open character of citizen discourse, this chapter applies the concepts of interactive rationality, and power—those issues that contribute to understanding the extent to which discourse is

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68 I acknowledge that an element of standpoint is certainly inherent in all discourse. Thus, communicants are not stripped of their social and cultural identity. However, the discourse of everyday citizens takes on a more egalitarian character when citizens are not relegated to private spheres of discourse based upon their lack of power or social standing.
egalitarian—to online discourse. Benhabib’s idea of *interactive rationality* (Situating the Self) implies that the criteria for evaluating the rationality of one’s argument emerges from the discourse itself. As explained in Chapter One, Benhabib argues for a discursive rationality that is free from a priori criteria and is, rather, tied to a communication ethic that asks participants to hear the voice of the other. Agreement, for Benhabib, is achieved through ethical discourse: “the capacity to reverse perspectives, that is, the willingness to reason from the others’ point of view, and the sensitivity to hear their voice is paramount” (Situating 8). Benhabib’s principle of *interactive rationality* offers a discourse ethic that transforms our idea of how we come to engage in and evaluate the discourse of the other.

Certainly, online discourse has no exclusive corner on the marketplace of other-centered discourse. To the contrary, online discussions often deteriorate into uncivil rants just as frequently or easily as any other mode of communicative interaction. What is distinctive about most Internet communication is the possibility of anonymity. However, anonymity is a double-edged sword. Thomas Benson observes that online anonymity “may encourage boldness or offensiveness of expression—without responsibility or personal consequences—even as it permits a sort of sincere individualism” (364). Yet, it is the anonymous character of much online discourse that lends itself to the kind of ethical, empathetic discourse that Benhabib argues for.

Principles of ethical discourse imply that ideas are judged on their own merit. While scholars such as Benhabib point to the significance of acknowledging the standpoint of one’s self and of the other, standpoint is not to be used as a priori criteria for judging the rationality of one’s argument. Inherent in ethical discourse and in the
notion of interactive rationality is the agreement by the communicators to put aside power issues that serve to pre-judge the participant and, by extension, his/her discourse. Accordingly, the anonymous nature of much online discourse lends itself to judging positions through the process of interactive rationality—rationality that emerges from the discourse itself and is evaluated by the participants. Ideas put forth by anonymous participants are left to be judged on their own merit.  

The anonymous nature of online discourse also serves to diffuse power relationships that often frame political discourse. Mark Poster contends that the Internet invites “new kinds of relations of power between participants” suggesting a new politics online that is more egalitarian (The Net As Public Sphere 4). Poster points to the inherently reciprocal nature of public spheres of discourse: ‘the notion of a public sphere suggests an arena of exchange, like the ancient Greek agora or the colonial New England town hall” and he questions if this kind of discursive space can exist in cyberspace (The Net 5). Poster observes that “on the Internet individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogues not as acts of pure consciousness” (The Net 9). Discourse is not constrained by gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics inscribed in face–to-face communication, but is constructed through the actual discourse in what Poster refers to as the “democratization of subject constitution” (The Net 9). Poster’s argument suggests that the communicative practice of self-constitution through discourse

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69 It is important to acknowledge that anonymity invites deceit. Certainly the Net is populated by those who are not who they claim to be. Plants (those who do not divulge that they are engaging in conversation on behalf of a special interests) as well as trolls (those whose goal is to annoy or antagonize discussion participants) can deceive by their ability to remain anonymous. Accordingly, anonymous discourse is inherently risky. While some danger in manipulation of ideas exists with anonymous discourse, the risk must be balanced against the benefits.

70 By anonymity, I do not mean identity theft. Rather, I refer here to the ability to withhold demographic information that might categorize discussion participants, thereby appropriating power.
radically changes the nature of political authority by discouraging the endowment of individuals with inflated status. Accordingly, traditional power hierarchies are broken down in virtual communities.

By diluting power relationships and foreground ideas over demographics, the anonymity of much online discourse creates a distinctive communication environment wherein the validity of arguments takes precedence over preconceptions of rhetor. Thus, ethos—or credibility—is inherent in the discourse. Ethos, one of Aristotle’s modes of persuasion, is defined as “the manner and means of investing speeches with moral character” (The Rhetoric 1391b, 22). It is incumbent on the rhetor to infuse his/her argument with ethos, and it is incumbent on the audience (other participants) to judge the worthiness of the rhetor and of his/her argument based upon the merit of the discourse.

In explaining his conception of ethos as a mode of persuasion, Aristotle states that the rhetor must ‘make his own character look right’ (1377, 23). Accordingly, the rhetor’s credibility is not conferred upon him/her by outside forces; but, rather the character of the orator emerges from the discourse itself. Aristotle explains that “this kind of persuasion (ethos) like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak” (1356, 7). Yet, certainly an audience cannot ignore other elements, such as the rhetor’s reputation. Accordingly, the speaker’s standing can be viewed as a rhetorical constraint (Bitzer)—an intrinsic element of the rhetorical situation to which the speaker must respond. 71 With anonymous discourse, the

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71 In “The Rhetorical Situation”, Lloyd Bitzer outlines his framework for understanding all rhetorical situations as called into being by exigencies (urgencies) that can be resolved through discourse. Bitzer explains that all discourse is marked by constraints—both positive and negative elements that contribute to the rhetorical situation, and to which the speaker must respond.
constraint of the rhetor’s reputation is removed, and the audience is left to engage ethos as purely inherent in the discourse.

Ethos lends credibility to one’s argument by infusing the discussion with trust. Yet, the very nature of anonymity problematizes trust and credibility. Participants have nothing else to rely upon other than the speaker’s ability to invest his/her speaking with moral character. Anonymous discourse foregrounds ideas over identity and, thereby demands that each participant engender credibility within his/her argument. The rationality of the argument and the speaker’s power to create persuasive appeals are the sole criteria against which other participants evaluate credibility. Thus, anonymous online discourse lends a distinctive understanding of ethos—credibility purely inherent in the argument. Ethos online is content laden. Arguably, this nuanced conception contributes to the egalitarian character of public discourse online.

In summary, an analysis of the Internet as a vehicle for vernacular voices reveals that in many respects, the Net meets criteria of a deliberative public sphere: easily and widely accessible, relatively unencumbered by the institutional and marketplace constraints that confine traditional mass communication, offering current and contextualized information from a variety of perspectives, and providing a communication network that is egalitarian in nature. Mark Poster poses an essential question regarding the relationship of the Internet to the democratic process:

Are there new kinds of relations occurring within it which suggest new forms of power configurations between communicating individuals? In other words, is there a new politics on the Internet? One way to approach this question is to
make a detour from the issue of technology and raise again the question of a
public sphere, gauging the extent to which Internet democracy may become
intelligible in relation to it. (The Net 5)

Poster contends that the open nature of the Internet promotes a decentralization of
discourse that, in turn, supports democracy.

Certainly the free, unlimited character of communication on the Internet creates a
virtual public domain that is in the hands of the participants and is, accordingly,
egalitarian in character. Overall, The Internet is unwieldy, decentralized, relatively
autonomous, and democratic. Accordingly, the Net holds much promise for the
animation of vernacular voices. It would benefit this project, therefore, to look at the
structure of specific Web environments.

Cyber Public Spheres

Cyberspace is generally made up of Websites that function to inform, to entertain,
and to sell a variety of products and services. As this project is focused on the Internet
as it relates to public spheres of discourse, I will limit my analysis of the Net accordingly.

In my search for cyber public spheres, I will examine the three basic formats of the
Internet environment: Websites, and their sub categories of Weblogs and discussion
forums.

Websites

Merriam-Webster defines a Website72 as “a group of World Wide Web pages
usually containing hyperlinks to each other and made available online by an individual,

72 Note that the word “Website” is seen both capitalized as well as not. Both Merriam-Webster and Oxford
English Dictionary prefer the capitalized version, which is the version used in this project, except where
direct quotes differ.
A definition offered by the University of Illinois explains:

A website is entertainment, education, enrichment, and enjoyment. It contains art, music, museums, and culture. Further, a website is political, governmental, and religious. And, it is trash, grunge, and filth. In short, a website is anything its designers and writers want it to be. It’s us, from all over the world, on electronic pages.

A Website functions a vehicle for communicating all types of messages—personal, professional, as well as political. Most Websites are characterized by one-way communication. Information is provided directly on most sites with links to other sources of information. Websites also offer a place for the rhetoric of institutions and professional communicators. Political messages in the form of postings, text of speeches, press releases, and other forms of persuasive messages dominate most political Websites.

A simple Google search for political websites produces over 48 million results. The White House has a Website, as does every member of the United States Congress. Just about all government offices and most politicians at every level of government maintain Websites where they keep constituents informed about programs and initiatives and where political leaders expound. A report from the Pew Internet and American Life

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73 Definition by Merriam-Webster Online available at: http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/website

74 The University of Illinois at Chicago offers this definition as part of The College of Education’s CIE480 Course in Technology and Multimedia. This definition was drafted in 1997 and is available online at the CIE480 Website: http://www.uic.edu/clases/cie/cie480/assign/website.htm.

75 A Google search for “US political Websites” produced over 40 million results including sites sponsored by government, politicians, media outlets, and individuals. Results also included some Blogs and Discussion Forums.
Project determined that on a typical day in 2003, 12 million Americans visit government websites. In another report, Pew found that nearly 75 million Americans—37 percent of the adult population and 61 percent of online Americans—used the Internet to gain information about the 2004 presidential election.\textsuperscript{76}

Professional communicators also maintain Websites. As previously noted, most traditional outlets as well as a number of independent media have a Web presence. Political, special interest groups, social advocacy associations, charitable organizations, and a variety of other categories of publics have a presence on the Net.\textsuperscript{77} It seems that for media, government, and professional communicators, maintaining a Website has become an expected common practice.

A presence on the Net is also possible for individuals. Web software makes designing and maintaining a Website relatively uncomplicated so that even the most inexperienced Internet users can create an online presence. Software is easily available to create, maintain, and host sites on the Net. While the most sophisticated software is somewhat expensive, several economical Web templates are available online.\textsuperscript{78} Many

\textsuperscript{76} The May, 2004 report entitled “How Americans Get in Touch With Government” by Pew senior research analyst, John Horrigan reports on the frequency and reasons that Americans access government Websites. A March, 2005 report from Pew researchers Lee Rainie, Michael Cornfield, and John Horrigan discusses the impact of the Internet on the 2004 presidential election. Both reports are available on the Pew Internet and American Life website at \url{http://www.pewinternet.org/}

\textsuperscript{77} These groups are too numerous to list here. Online presence is as widespread and varied as American society itself.

\textsuperscript{78} Software such as Macromedia’s Dreamweaver, for example (available at \url{http://www.macromedia.com/software/dreamweaver}) costs approximately $400, and Microsoft’s Front Page (available at \url{http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/XP010858021033.aspx}) is sold for just under $300. However, Web templates are available from sources such as Free Templates (available at \url{http://www.freewebtemplates.com/}) and can be downloaded for as little as $27.99.
Website hosts and servers are available free of charge for basics and with small monthly fees for upgraded hosting.\(^79\)

The value of general informational Websites lies in their ability to offer information on just about any subject that is continuously available and easily accessible. As previously noted, the Internet is an enormously useful source of information. General informational Websites, however, are less valuable as venues for public discourse. Their format is useful for offering information and less valuable for providing an environment for dialogue.

In general, however, most informational Websites lack an interactive quality. Certainly, most sites have links where the reader can send an e-mail. Yet, one wonders who, if anyone, is actually reading the e-mail message and engaging in its content. E-mail messages from individual citizens, for example, might offer an excellent opportunity for government leaders to connect with constituents.

It is difficult to determine, however, whether political leaders are reading the e-mail correspondence received through their Websites in order to determine the thinking of constituents—in the same fashion that FDR relied upon letters from everyday citizens—or relying more on polling results.\(^80\) While Website e-mail links provide a communication vehicle for Internet users to send messages to the site domain, there is little opportunity on typical Websites for genuine discussion. Accordingly, though they

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79 Examples are Web Spawner (http://www.webspawner.com) and Pro Hosting (http://free.prohosting.com), both of which offer Web hosting for as little as $5 per month.

80 Hauser (Vernacular Voices) points to the example of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the first great communicator president, who considered letters from typical Americans as his most reliable index of public opinion. FDR would then use what he learned from the public’s correspondence as the basis for his communication with them through speeches and radio addresses. A skilled communicator and astute politician, FDR recognized the significance of vernacular rhetoric in acquiring a sense of public opinion as well as the importance of responding to citizens by engaging in them in the larger public conversation. Accordingly, Roosevelt lessened the communication divide between citizens and their leader.
are relatively easy and economical to create and maintain, most standard Websites lack
the interactive quality that is necessary to view them as potential venues for public
spheres of discourse. However, two Website sub categories—Weblogs and discussion
forums—are more interactive in character, and are, therefore, worth exploring as cyber
public spheres.

Weblogs

What is a Blog? Blog is a hybrid word standing for Weblog—a small web site
made up of usually short posts arranged dairy style in chronological order. Blogs are
usually maintained by one person, updated regularly, with a high concentration of repeat
visitors, and generally focused on a single subject or unifying theme (Anatomy of a
Weblog). George Siemens offers a working definition of a Blog as, “A format
constant… personalized, community-linked, social, interactive, democratic, net model
innovation built on the unique attributes of the Internet” (The Art of Blogging).

In 1997, Dave Winer created what is generally ascribed as the first Weblog
(Lascia), addressing technology and business in what Winer contends is the longest-
running Weblog currently on the Internet (Winer). The content of Weblogs is sometimes
personal, but many Blogs offer commentary about current events, politics, and other
news websites. In 1999, Dan Gillmor, business columnist for San Jose’s Murcury News,
was the first mainstream journalist to author a Weblog that was published on a newspaper
web site (Lascia). Hugh Hewett’s book on the Blogosphere (Blog) reports that in 2005,
over four million Blogs have appeared on the Internet covering subjects as varied as
technology, religion, literature, genealogy, and science fiction. Yet, Technorati, a

81 Technorati’s Website states that the real time search engine tracks over 32 million Blog sites and over
two billion links. is available at http://technorati.com
search engine that tracks the Blogosphere, reports that their service alone tracks over 32 million Blog sites. While it is difficult to determine the exact number of Blogs in cyberspace, clearly blogging is a growing phenomenon.

A Weblog generally consists of a running commentary with pointers to other sites. Blogs are famed for their linkages—approximately 80 percent of active Blogs are linked to at least one other site (The Blogging Iceberg). According to a January, 2005 report from The Pew Internet and American Life Project\(^\text{82}\) on the state of blogging, 38 percent of all Internet users say they know what a Blog is, and 27 percent say they read Blogs, a jump from 17 percent in February of 2004. The Pew report also notes that seven percent of the 120 million adults who use the Internet say they have created a Blog—this represents more than eight million people.

Who blogs? Most Blogs are created by individuals and are somewhat personal in nature. Millions of Blogs exist for the nano-audiences, typically written by teenagers and twenty somethings who use Weblogs as a type of social newsletter for friends.\(^\text{83}\) According to a 2005 report from Perseus Development, a Web survey software developer, over 90 percent of Blogs are created by people under the age of 30 (The Blogging Geyser). Accordingly, political Weblogs are only the tip of the iceberg as far as percentage of total Blogs.

How does one set up a Weblog? Software to set up and run a Blog is easy and economical. For example, Blogger, Blog Easy, Blog Spot, and Movabletype are just

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\(^{82}\) The Pew data memo of January, 2005 is available online at: http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf

\(^{83}\) According to the 2005 Perseus report, My Space—a social networking site popular with college students—has grown to over 12 million users
some of the services available on the Web that offer free software to create a Weblog along with free hosting on their server. For $39.95, RadioUserland will provide the software to build and publish a Weblog on the Internet with one year of free hosting.\(^{84}\) A blogger can begin posting within minutes with any of these services. Using the free software and hosting available from Blog Spot, I created my own Weblog in a matter of minutes.\(^{85}\)

Blogging has also emerged as an income producing endeavor. Bloggers can join one of the many blogging networks that categorize Weblogs by topics and actually pay contributors who have a following of readers. For example, Blogit offers readers a subscription for $9.95 per month for access to thousands of Blogs on their network. Some portion of the subscription fee is passed along to contributing bloggers. This brings us to the question: are bloggers journalists?

As Paul Andrews, a technology blogger and columnist for the Seattle Times points out, “not everyone who keeps a journal is a journalist.” (Andrews quoted in Lascia). Yet, many web logs are written by serious-minded bloggers, such as technology and business experts, journalists, and political aficionados. In addition to Andrews, many other bloggers are technology reporters—not surprising considering the technological format. Examples of other journalist-type bloggers include, television columnist Aaron Barnhart, business reporter D.C. Denison, and religion columnist Kathy Shaidle (Lascia).

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\(^{84}\) These are just a few of the blogging services that are available as of this writing. Blogging software and services are subject to the ever-changing, fast-paced nature of the Net itself; accordingly, sites and services appear and disappear with some frequency.

\(^{85}\) Creating and posting a Blog was much easier than I expected. The free software on Blog Spot provides numerous templates that make formatting the Blog quick and easy. My Blog can be accessed at: http://vernacularvoices.blogspot.com
Mainstream online media outlets are also embracing blogging. Most network and
cable broadcasters have added Blogs to their Websites. NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN,
MSNBC, and Fox News represent just some examples. Yet, at this writing, the vast
majority of Weblogs exist outside the control of traditional media. Most bloggers use the
Internet to publish their own thoughts and respond to the thoughts of others, and they do
so outside the control of publishers and editors. Hugh Hewitt observes:

In the past, opinion and news purveyors always had to persuade someone to be
allowed to attempt to persuade someone. When I wanted to write about the race
for the United States Senate in 1992 in California, for example, I had to persuade
the deputy editor of the editorial page to publish my take on the contest between
Bruce Herschenson and Barbara Boxer. He made edits I didn’t like, but I was in
no position to argue.….Bloggers are the same people they were a few years ago.
But now they don’t have to persuade anyone to be allowed to persuade anyone.
The information monopoly, especially in the world of politics, is shattered
because the gatekeepers have lost their authority (107-8).

For some, the value of Blogs is that they are unfiltered, excluding editors and publishers
from the journalistic process.

Some may criticize the unfiltered, unedited character of Blogs, questioning the
accuracy of reports and pointing to the ideological bias that is characteristic of much of
what appears on independent Weblogs. Yet, Paul Grabowicz, professor at the University
of California School of Journalism at Berkeley sees Weblogs as a powerful new form of
communication. Grabowicz observes that traditional journalism is very good at
collecting information, writing great narratives and crafting a story. But, that’s just the
starting point, he argues: “if there’s no conversation, it’s like making art and not showing it in a gallery. To me, the whole point is to get people talking.” (Grabowicz quoted in Allemang).

An analysis of the value of Weblogs to citizen participation in public spheres of discourse leads to some conclusions worth making. First, Weblogs provide some depth of coverage and analysis on public issues. Most Blogs frequently offer information that is contextualized in a manner that is not often the case in the press and rare on television news. Accordingly, Blogs serve to augment the information found elsewhere, providing what Carey calls a thick description that offers the why and how of current events (Dark Continent of American Journalism). If you routinely read one or two Blogs, you are as limited as if you read one newspaper or view one network news broadcast. The key is to access information from a variety of resources and then enter the debate. The free-flowing nature of the Internet, where individuals are constrained by time and space, provides an information environment that invites in-depth analysis and description that is not routinely offered by mainstream communication vehicles. Since Blogs are typically known for their abundance of links to news sources as well as to other Blogs, they demonstrate the value of the Net as a rich and varied information source. Like the Net in general, Blogs in particular serve as a means of providing citizens with a wealth of information and analysis regarding public issues.

Further, while Blogs devoted to political issues are a small percentage of the blogosphere, they represent a new force on the country’s political landscape. Certainly, the bloggers posed a significant influence in the 2004 presidential election. Bloggers from all ideological and political perspectives and representing a variety of special
interests weighed in on the issues surrounding the 2004 election. Former Vermont governor, Howard Dean, lead candidates into the blogosphere with his Blog for America site, while other 2004 presidential candidates quickly followed suit.\(^{86}\) Journalists from mainstream and independent media used Blogs to analyze issues surrounding the election as well as to make horse race predictions about candidates.

In addition to official and professional voices, blogging also provides entrée to public debate for anyone who has access to the Internet. Grabowitz remarks that “The Internet was founded on rigorous debate, and you don’t have to go far to see a lively discussion” (Grabowicz quoted in Allemang). Debates found on two sites devoted to the war in Iraq—Tacitus\(^{87}\) and Warblogging\(^{88}\)—are good examples of interactive Blogs. Some independent Blogs offer a level of interactivity that is rarely found in mainstream media, and, thus, serve to encourage discussion by inviting participation from private

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\(^{86}\) Under the guidance of then campaign manager, Joe Trippi, Dean’s Blog for America web presence in 2003 inspired the Democracy for America site that has maintained an online presence beyond the 2004 presidential election. Dean, the first of the leading 2004 presidential candidates to extensivly use the Internet in his campaign, is credited with engaging America’s youth by creating an Internet following. Throughout the summer of 2003, other 2004 presidential candidates such as John Kerry, John Edwards, and Wesley Clark followed the Dean lead by creating Websites that included Blogs. By the end of 2003, President Bush added his Blog to those of the Democratic candidates.

\(^{87}\) Tacitus is a pro war Blog that was created in October, 2002 and named for first century Roman orator, Cornelius Tacitus. The war in Iraq is only part of this Blog’s focus, as it deals with other issues as well. While Tacitus is a conservative site—most postings are in favor of the Bush administration and its policies relating to the war—the Blog’s creators claim that they will not ban postings due to ideological disagreement; and there were, in fact, a number of postings from the left, making for a lively debate. Each posting has a link to “comments” showing responses to that posting. Tacitus also provides for quick, simple methods to contribute postings and responses, creating an invitational environment that makes it easy to enter the debate. Thus, while most postings are created by Tacitus, the opportunity to respond to postings as well as contribute original postings provides for a reasonable level of interactivity. Tacitus can be accessed at: http://www.tacitus.org

\(^{88}\) Warblogging is an anti-war Blog. While it is dedicated primarily to the war in Iraq, Warblogging also deals with related issues, such as the war on terror, homeland security, and the Patriot Act. This site is created and written by George Paine—a pseudonym with allusions to American pamphleteer, Thomas Paine. Paine writes reports and essays titled “War Stories”, and he edits those essays written by others. Yet, Warblogger is not without an interactive quality. Each posting offers a link to “comments” which provides space for readers to offer responses to the postings. Warblogging can be accessed at: http://www.warblogging.com/
citizens. Certainly, private citizens enter public debate through posts their own Weblogs (my own Blog serves as an example). The value of Blogs to citizens and citizen publics wanting to engage in political discussion lies in the ease with which anyone can enter the blogosphere and, therefore, gain entrée to public spheres of discourse by passing traditional institutional gate-keepers.

However, since the level of interactivity varies among Weblogs, it seems that one may find it necessary to initiate and maintain one’s own Blog in order to assure that one has a voice. While most Blogs offer a link for visitors to comment, the owner of the site generally determines the topic of discussion, thus creating an agenda setting character to Weblogs. The proprietary nature of Weblogs stipulates that the level of interactivity is at the discretion of the publisher. Accordingly, there are some limits to the participatory character of blogging.

*Online Discussion Forums*

Online discussion forums address some of the limitations found in the format of other sites. Participation is the key characteristic defining online discussion forums. The function of online forums is to provide site visitors the opportunity to engage with each other in discourse about issues of common concern. Accordingly, more than any other presence on the Net, political discussion forums respond to the deliberative character of participatory democracy.

As William Kieth points out (Democratic Revival and the Promise of Cyberspace), the public forum has historically played a significant role in American democracy. Keith explains that while many versions of the forum existed throughout our history, most were characterized by a “connected series of meetings, tied together by
either speaker, topic, or audience” (313). Inherent in our understanding of a forum is the assumption that discussions would be ongoing and would include more than one occurrence.

Forums historically functioned to provide a communication vehicle to enfranchise and educate citizens. Keith explains:

First, forums present an attempt to deal with the problem of scale by making a kind of participation possible for voters, in a sense including them in the larger deliberative system. Second, as instruments of adult education, forums could politically reenfranchise segments of the population by giving them the information and arguments to make them competent voters, even in the face of very complex issues (314).

The problem with forums through the early part of the 20th Century is that they did not include open discussion by all participants. Structured by opening remarks, panel discussion, audience questions and speakers’ answers, the forum format seldom included open dialogue between and among citizens in the audience. As argued in Chapters One and Two of this project, citizen participation in public discourse is a central quality to the health of open public discourse and to the democratic process. While early public forums helped to educate the citizenry, without the element of free-flowing citizen discussion, the traditional forum structure failed to invigorate vernacular discourse.

Today, the Net offers an abundance of what I refer to as vernacular venues, many of which are in the form of online discussion forums wherein individual citizens can participate in political discourse. For example, a simple Google search for ‘political
discussion forums’ results in over 75 million responses.89 Most of these forums offer a communication environment whereby individuals can become informed about issues, engage in discussion, read and respond to postings, generate new postings, and offer new topics of discussion. Accordingly, of the various rhetorical structures currently online, discussion forums offer the most promise as a vernacular venue.

Like informational Websites and Blogs, discussion forums also serve as a source of information about public issues. Most forums on the Net include links within the postings that direct participants to news reports, primary texts (e.g. speech transcripts and documents), and other Websites, Blogs, and forums. Links to sources included in forum posts differ, however, from informational links on general Websites and Blogs. The sources linked within forum posts are chosen by the participants and put forth as grounds for their arguments. While similar linking exists on other Net formats, sources and the links that point to them are generally chosen by the Web domain owner or the blogger. On the other hand, discussion forums postings offer links to sources that are as varied as the opinions of the participants.

Discussion forum contributors also have some liberty to choose the subjects of their discussions. Unlike typical Blogs and websites where the site ‘owner’ puts forth topics, forum participants can offer new topics for scrutiny and discussion. It is this ability of individual participants to set the agenda that in large part distinguishes the online forum from other formats on the Net and, thereby, contributes to the value of discussion forums in carving out a place for vernacular rhetoric. Participants in forums also choose how to frame their discussions. Individual contributors choose which issue

89 A Google search for ‘political discussion forum’ conducted March 24, 2006 resulted in 75,700,000 responses.
connections should be made, thereby determining how to contextualize the issue being discussed. Participants also determine which aspects of their arguments are highlighted and which are ignored. Thus, contrary to most Blog and Website rhetoric, discussion forums offer posting contributors a large degree of freedom from outside agenda setting and issue framing.

Yet, the quality of interactivity may arguably be the most important contribution of online discussion forums to citizen public spheres. Since fostering dialogue is the discussion forum’s primary function, importance is placed on the site’s interactive quality. By their very design, online forums are interactive. Additionally, the real time nature of forum conversations creates a dialogic quality that is not generally replicated on other Web formats. Accordingly, discussion forums come closest to meeting the immediacy characteristic of face-to-face discussions.

The egalitarian nature of accessing discussion forums also contributes to their value as environments for democratic deliberation. Anyone with access to the Internet can join most forum conversations. Generally, first time contributors are asked to register, a process that asks participants to select a user name and access password along with providing their e-mail address. Registration and subsequent participation on almost all discussion forums is free. While only a few sites charge a nominal annual fee to participate in the conversation, none that I have encountered charge to access and view postings.

The forum structure arguably comes closest of the online formats to meeting the criteria for a democratic public sphere: access to the conversation is easy and relatively

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90 For example, Common Ground Common Sense at http://www.commongroundcommonsense.org charges $7.95 for an entire year’s membership. This is the only forum site that I have encountered to date that charges a fee to participate.
free; participants set the agenda, decide on the sources that will support their claims as well as the framing and context for their arguments; and the forum format is interactive by design, allowing for immediate dialogue between participants. Additionally, forums are a popular online format for political discussions with membership in the thousands.  

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter started by asking to what extent the Internet provides a discursive environment that meets the criteria for a democratic public sphere. As Gilbert Rodman (Net Effect) correctly points out, the Internet is too recent a phenomenon for us to make claims as to its long-term impact on American culture or the democratic process. Yet, an examination current conditions demonstrates that the Net clearly holds the potential to provide a venue for the discourse of everyday citizens, as well as a vehicle for solving the communication disconnect between individual citizens and government.

With increasing accessibility (Pew Reports), the Internet is a resource for a large percentage of citizens to obtain in-depth information about current issues and events. The open, unwieldy structure of the Internet provides an environment wherein a broad source of information is available from a variety of perspectives. Information online is generally free from the institutional and marketplace controls that constrain traditional media.

The Internet is also a receptive communication medium for citizens and citizen publics to engage in debate about public issues. As Bruce Gronbeck (Citizen Voices in Cyberpolitical Culture) points out, “The Internet is an essentially unregulated discursive space—a place for free speech—and it’s chaotic enough to make an effort at control almost impossible” (26). Conversations online operate freely—outside the gate-keeping

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91 A Google search conducted on March 31, 2006 for political discussion forums resulted in almost 23 million results.
and agenda-setting constraints that characterize mediated communication. Generally speaking, there are fewer publishers, editors, or producers to alter or censor what gets heard. Online, citizens are relatively free to publish their own thoughts and opinions, offer claims to the scrutiny of fellow citizens, and critique the arguments of others. Without institutional constraints, widespread agenda-setting, and regular editing of messages, vernacular voices are free to engage each other in open, un-mediated discourse.

The interactive quality of online conversation enhances the Net as a venue for democratic public discourse. It is difficult to arrive at a single agreed-upon definition for interactivity as a wide variety of scholars from diverse disciplines have offered various meanings and approaches to understanding the concept of interactivity. What these definitions have in common, however, is that they all address the extent to which discourse is controlled by one participant to the exclusion or restriction of others. Lombard & Snyder-Duch offer a definition of interactivity that is appropriate to examining online discourse: “we define interactivity as a characteristic of a medium in which the user can influence the form and/or content of the mediated presentation or experience. It is not dichotomous (a medium is not just interactive or not) but can vary in degree (from not interactive to highly interactive) as well as type (different aspects of the form and/or content that can be influenced by the user)” (section on Understanding Interactivity).

Online discussions, particularly those in discussion forums, operate freely and openly—to a large degree, users influence the form (through adding new topics and

92 While I recognize that a computerized network itself operates as a mediator, I contend that the Internet is no more mediated communication than telephone calls. While both are mediated by technology, they are not mediated in the sense that a communication gate-keeper is pre-selecting or editing messages.
threads of conversation) as well as the content. Understanding interactivity as defined by the degree to which participants control form and substance helps us recognize the highly interactive nature of conversations on the Net. Arguably, the degree to which citizens control their discourse characterizes the degree to which the discursive environment is egalitarian.

What most distinguishes online discourse from other less democratic forms of public deliberation, however, is the ability of participants to remain anonymous, thereby removing sources of social power that corrupt deliberative democracy. As Poster observes, “The Internet seems to discourage the endowment of individuals with inflated status” (Cyber Democracy, section on Cyborg Politics). Anonymity sets the stage for vigorous public debate where ideas are fore-grounded over identity, and where argument is given precedence over social status. Accordingly, robust discussions enter the marketplace of ideas free from the prejudices that are typically attached to public discourse. The anonymous character of online discourse invites a content laden understanding of ethos that relies upon the substance of the argument. Public discourse on the Net places the focus on ideas over identity. William Keith suggests that cyber forums of discussion can dilute power and minimize difference: “identities established in cyberspace are more fluid than face-to-face identities” (319). Participants can choose the degree to which they divulge their identity in online discussions. The question of online identity—or lack thereof—creates a level discursive field that is uniquely egalitarian.

The issue of anonymity in online conversations is not without its critics who warn of the possibility of self-misrepresentation of participants. Hubertus Buchstein (Bytes that Bite) expresses the concern that the Internet encourages individuals to present virtual
selves that may not represent their true identities. Buchstein argues that anonymity encourages uncivil behavior and “filters out the contextuality and warmth central to morally engaged political interaction” (258). Yet, As Thomas Benson points out that while anonymous posting may promote boldness or offensiveness of expression, “amidst the hostility, ideological rigidity, name-calling, and obscenity, substantive arguments were in advanced” (373). If Benson’s observations are accurate, one can conclude that while anonymity may regrettabley courage some levels of incivility, it does not discourage substantive debate.

Further, the anonymous character of online discourse allows participants to engage each other in discussion that focuses on content rather than agency. Online conversations foster an egalitarian engagement of ideas that flattens hierarchy, dilutes power, and invites voices that might otherwise be relegated to the margins. Online, individuals construct their identities in relation to ongoing dialogues, an activity that brings about what Poster describes as “…a ‘democratization’ of subject constitution because the acts of discourse are not limited to one-way address and not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications” (Cyber Democracy, section on A Postmodern Technology?). Poster’s observations concur with the notion of content laden ethos.

Yet, not everyone agrees that the Web is an appropriate space for democratic public discourse. Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg do not look to the Internet to provide a common forum for public deliberation, claiming that the Net keeps people isolated and “involved in their own independent information-seeking pursuits, or locked into specialized and often exclusive talk enclaves…” (99). The argument seems to be
that going online is unto itself an independent enterprise. Yet, we learn from Putnam (Bowling Alone) that citizens are not often engaging with each other collectively in real spaces. Accordingly, bowling online seems an improvement over bowling alone.

The growing popularity of the Net together with its fast moving, decentralized, open quality, invites the kind of grassroots discourse that characterizes vernacular voices. Individuals can access the Net 24 hours a day, seven days a week to engage in information gathering as well as real-time discussion. Additionally, the Internet creates a communication environment whereby everyday citizens can sort through the muddy and complex issues that define public life in a direct and unmediated fashion. Denis Gaynor explains:

Unlike previous mass media, electronic networks allow people to directly interact with the information with which they are presented. Consequently, citizens can have ‘real-time’ conversations with each other, regardless of geographical constraints. In addition, people with similar interests or goals can go to ‘virtual’ spaces to meet like-minded individuals and discuss issues of interest. In some cases, citizens can even converse with their political representatives about legislation on which they have an opinion (Democracy in the Age of Information, section on Participatory Democracy).

The open, decentralized structure of the Internet, together with its easy accessibility and egalitarian characteristics offers promise for the vernacular voices of everyday citizens. In order to further examine the value of the Net in promoting deliberative public spheres for citizen voices, we must examine the discourse itself. As Hauser contends, we understand publics by looking at their discourse. Hauser’s content centered view of
public discourse is the starting point for an examination of vernacular voices online.

Since the structural makeup of online forums make them the closest to meeting criteria for public spheres for citizen discourse, the next chapter of this project will offer a case study of the online discourse of discussion forums.
Chapter Four: Vernacular Voices Online: A Case Study

*It is revolutionary, is it not?*

_We have a forum to reach the world now, where before we did not._

Posting on Common Ground Common Sense, November 8, 2004

This project begins with the assumption that a politically active citizenry is vital to the existence of a healthy democracy. Our Constitution guarantees that individual citizens are able to participate in America’s democracy through the electoral process, and by exercising their rights to free speech and peaceful assembly. Thus, participation in the democratic process is more than voting—public debate is an essential element to a healthy democracy. This project carves out an understanding of deliberative democracy that is rhetorical in its practice and egalitarian in its character.

Gerard Hauser’s (On Publics, Rhetorical Democracy, Vernacular Dialogue, Vernacular Voices) notion of public discourse, public spheres, and publics presents us with a fully rhetorical understanding of deliberative democracy. Discursive public spheres in a democracy belong to the participants—to everyday citizens who, in order to live out the democratic process, must be free to deliberate on public issues with their fellow citizens. Central to Hauser’s argument is his understanding of publics as rhetorical constructs. Hauser contends that “a _rhetorical_ understanding of publics begins with the premise that the human world is significantly…a rhetorical invention” (On Publics 278). In foregrounding the rhetorical nature of publics, Hauser understands their existence as animated through discourse—publics exist through their participation in rhetoric.

Hauser describes the discourse of everyday publics as the “dialogue in which an active society critiques, negotiates, associates, and ultimately constitutes its interests and
opinions on the issues confronting them” (Vernacular Dialogue 91). Accordingly, vernacular public discourse is necessarily flexible, changing, and inherently messy. It is through this dialogic process of opinion-making that the social condition of a society can change. Thus, the key to deliberative democracy is to allow vernacular voices to emerge, to deliberate, and to offer their opinions for public scrutiny.

Unfortunately, however, current conditions do not foster a deliberative environment for individual citizens. Citizens and citizen publics are one component in the triangulation of political discourse in America, comprised of 1) government and political leaders, 2) the press and mass media, and 3) individual citizens and citizen publics. Yet, public discourse in contemporary American society is dominated by the mass media and by professional communicators who control public conversation, often to the exclusion of vernacular voices. Citizen debate has given way to televised talking heads, conversation has been replaced by sound bites, and public scrutiny has surrendered to the engineering of consent.

The challenge to a healthy public sphere in contemporary American society lies in part in the professionalization and mediation of discourse. Professional communicators—political strategists, lobbyists, special interest groups, media professionals, public relations practitioners, and advertisers—put forth carefully crafted messages that seek to manufacture public opinion. As Leon Mayhew (New Public) points out, professionalized public discourse is rooted in the assumption that publics can be orchestrated and manipulated. Usually mediated, and often responding to polls and surveys, professional discourse represents institutional rather than citizen voices.
The implication of the professionalization of public discourse is that a wedge exists between publics and between political leaders and citizens. In the triangulation of those whose participation is essential in a democratic public sphere, the cacophony of professional communicators has muffled the sound of vernacular voices. Thus, the voices of everyday citizens have been relegated to the private realm. If we are to understand the role of a public as Hauser (Vernacular Dialogue) explains it—not only as a witnessing audience, but also finding a means to express its own views—then clearly, professional discourse excludes the engagement of citizen publics. In order for citizens to live out their potential for rhetorical civic participation, they must have access to venues for public discourse.

While the discussions of everyday citizens in contemporary American have limited access to the professionalized sphere, it would be a mistake to assume that these conversations are not taking place. Rhetorical engagement in the democratic process emerges each day through vernacular dialogue on the Internet. The Internet serves as a viable alternative to traditional venues of public communication by addressing many of the criteria for healthy discursive public spheres and by responding to the challenges of contemporary professionalized public discourse.

An examination of the structure of the Internet reveals that its increasing accessibility, decentralized network, freedom from many of the institutional and marketplace constrains of more traditional venues, and egalitarian character make the Net a constructive alternative for political discussions by everyday citizens. On the Net, individuals enjoy direct access to engage with each other in conversation situated within an egalitarian environment that creates a space suitable for democratic deliberation.
Further, the option for participants to engage in anonymous discourse tends to defuse social power structures and to focus attention on ideas over the status of the communicator, thereby creating a content laden ethos that supports a marketplace of ideas. Accordingly, the Internet provides a constructive alternative for political discussions by everyday citizens.

This case study is in an attempt to assess the extent to which online discussions demonstrate everyday citizens engaged in participative, vibrant public discourse in a manner that potentially furthers the democratic process and that moves toward closing the disconnect between publics and between citizens and government. The study examines sample postings by individual contributors to online political discussion forums. Finally, this analysis will examine to what extent the ideas posited by participants are judged by their merit rather than by the standing of the speaker. Hauser reminds us that if we are to understand how publics function, we must begin by looking at their discourse. Hauser’s rhetorical approach inspires this analysis of vernacular voices online.

Hauser contends that understanding the expression of public opinion “requires a different mode of analysis and discussion than is currently dominant. It is a dimension expressed in the ongoing dialogue on public issues among those who belong to a community or a society” (Vernacular Voices 6). Thus, vernacular rhetoric can be read as an example of democratic participation in the formation of public opinion. The online postings examined will be treated as rhetorical documents (Hauser) illustrative of vernacular rhetoric.
Discussion Forums Online

There are a variety of Website configurations available for the study of public spheres on the Net. An examination of the Internet reveals that the structure of online discussion forums renders them closest to meeting the criteria for constructive venues for online citizen discourse. Discussion forums by their very definition are interactive spaces of discourse; egalitarian in character, they are open to all participants; and, most discussions are political in nature (this case study will focus on political forums).

Choices of discussion forum sites for examining online discourse are seemingly endless. A simple Google search for “political discussion forum” produces over fifty sites. Many, however, are no longer available; some have not had contributor postings for months; others have membership counted in the hundreds, which is far less than the most popular sites. For this case study, I have selected three political discussion forums: Common Ground Common Sense, a forum that describes its mission as “Bridging the gap between political labels and issues” (CGCS Mission Statement), Whistle Stopper, a discussion forum created in 2003 that invites participants to “sound your political whistle” (WS Home Page), and US Politics Online, one of the longest running online political forums.

While these three sites are certainly not the only popular online political discussion forums, they are representative models for venues that meet the criteria for everyday citizens to engage in online political discourse. The sites selected are popular

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93 See Appendix B for a list of sites produced by this search conducted in April, 2006.

discussion venues—each site has over 2,000 members, is accessed daily by users, and has several new discussion threads posted daily. The forum sites chosen are also easily and economically accessible\(^ {95}\) as well as user friendly.\(^ {96}\) Additionally, as a practical matter, the three chosen sites have demonstrated some stability. As previously noted, Websites in general and discussion forums in particular, are exceedingly temporal.\(^ {97}\) Yet, as this study relies on repeated visits, the long standing (by Internet standards) sites provide greater reliability as case study models.

Finally, the case study sites are selected in part because they represent voices from diverse political perspectives. Many of the online discussion forums evaluated are dedicated to one political ideology, making for discussions that lack the expression of diverse views or competing arguments. Common Ground Common Sense, Whistle Stopper, and US Politics Online are each comprised of members from left, right, and moderate political perspectives, who engage in lively, and often times agonistic, discourse. Accordingly, the sites selected offer excellent examples of vernacular voices engaged in deliberative democracy.

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\(^ {95}\) Each of the sites has a slightly different membership: CGCS is open to anyone with an e-mail address; however, the site charges a nominal $7.95 annual membership fee—or two cents a day for your two cents—to participate in the CGCS features. Citing success of the Website which pushed bandwidth beyond the site's limits, CGCS required its own server, the cost of which is absorbed by annual membership fees. Membership to Whistle Stopper is free as the site accepts advertising to support the cost of the site, with banner ads appearing across the top and along the side of the forum screen. Upgraded membership is available at various levels of paid subscription (costs range from $60 to $400 annually) in order to browse WS free of advertisements. USPOL also has free membership; but, like WS, offers upgraded subscriptions costing from $18 to $72 annually for extra forum features.

\(^ {96}\) Each of the sites studied are hosted by either vBulletin or Invision power Board. Both are popular online bulletin board software packages that make discussion forums easy to navigate even for the novice user.

\(^ {97}\) It is interesting to note that the changing nature of discussion sites on the Net matches the shifting and temporal nature of active publics as described by Hauser (Vernacular Voices). This connection will be discussed later in this chapter.
Common Ground Common Sense

Common Ground Common Sense (CGCS) launched its site in November, 2004 and currently claims over four thousand members who have contributed over one half million posts to the discussion forum.\(^\text{98}\) CGCS describes itself as an Internet community for Progressives, Moderates, and Independents (CGCS Mission Statement). With a tag line of “Bridging the Gap Between Political Labels & Issues”, this admittedly Liberal leaning site claims to be non-partisan in purpose—to provide the opportunity for individual participation without regard to labels or political parties in a nation-wide discussion of political issues. Yet, the paradox within the CGCS mission is glaring. The site’s tag line contends that it seeks to bridge labels and parties, while at the same time acknowledging in its mission statement that the venue specifically invites participation by Progressives, Moderates, and Independents. This seeming inconsistency raises questions regarding the extent to which the site is truly open to diverse political views, or whether there are boundaries to CGCS in terms of its openness to diversity. Viewed as a public, however, it would seem that CGCS members are a collective with shared perspectives, and common goals and interests.\(^\text{99}\)

The discussion forum format, referred to on the site as an Internet Town Hall Meeting, is not the only offering with which users can participate. CGCS offers a link to

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\(^{98}\) As of April 26, 2006, the site reports 4,190 members who have contributed 528,038 posts. The most users online at any given day was on December 12, 2005 when 1,557 members were accessing the CGCS site.

\(^{99}\) CGCS, as well as the other forums studied, does not meet all of the criteria for a vernacular public. However, ideal conditions are never really met in the real world of praxis. Recognizing the necessarily messy nature of real world publics, the discussion forums included in this study may be the best that we can hope for.
Weblogs where members can post their Blogs, an editorial page where site administrators select and publish editorials as well as opinion pieces written by contributing members, and a live chat link where users can participate in real time discussions. While additional features round out the site, CGCS functions primarily as a discussion forum. Like most discussion forums, CGCS categorizes its threads by discussion topics, referred to on most sites as forums. CGCS is organized around several forum categories: national issues such as health care, immigration, and education, global issues such as the environment and civil rights, as well as state and regional forums where members can discuss issues common to their geographic locale. CGCS also offers a forum on grassroots organizing where members can discuss topics such as media watch, organizing petitions, and organizing resources. Most forum categories on CGCS are topical in that they deal with events currently in the news, such as the popular forum on war and peace as well as a forum dedicated to discussion the trial of Saddam Hussein, while others offer theoretical discussions on political philosophy and religion.

Whistle Stopper

Created in September of 2003, Whistle Stopper (WS) is the largest of the three case study sites in terms of reported users, currently listing over five thousand

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100 According to the CGCS Website, as of April, 2006, members have created 44 Blogs.

101 The CGCS live chat feature requires JAVA software. While the software can be downloaded free of charge from the JAVA website, some browsers are not compatible. Accordingly, the live chat feature on this (as well as some other sites) is not easily accessible to all users.

102 See the CGCS site at http://commongroundcommonsense.org for a list of forums.
members.\textsuperscript{103} WS claims to be a “neutral ground….a place where conservatives and liberals, republicans and democrats, and right and left from around the world can gather for civil discourse” (WS Forum Home Page). Whistle Stopper does not communicate a mission statement; however, its homepage claims that the site “was created to provide an opportunity for people from a wide range of backgrounds to come together to share ideas” (WS Forum Home Page).

Like CGCS, Whistle Stopper is organized by discussion topics—or forums.\textsuperscript{104} The forums on the Whistle Stopper site fall into three general categories: General Politics, which includes national as well as international forums, Culture, and Academic.\textsuperscript{105} The majority of threads and postings fall into the General Politics category, with the most active being the U.S. and North American Politics forum. With its large and politically diverse membership, Whistle Stopper serves as an excellent subject for this case study.

\textit{U.S. Politics Online}

One of the longest running discussion forums, operating in some configuration or another since early 2001, is U.S. Politics Online (USPOL). Created by a Political Science graduate student, US Politics Online currently reports over three thousand active

\begin{footnotes}
\item[103] The Whistle Stopper Home page claims that as of April, 2006, WS counts it membership 5,316 users who have contributed 750,057 posts through 42,916 threads.
\item[104] Whistle Stopper’s discussion forum is the only interactive element on the site. Unlike CGCS, Whistle Stopper does not include Blogs, live chat, or editorial pieces. WS does, however, include a link to “Books”, a commercial site that provides users with the opportunity to purchase books and other publications, and a link to “Resources”, which offers a links to Websites representing mass media, Blogs, political parties and government Websites. See Appendix C for the WS list of Political Resources.
\item[105] Forums dealing with the logistics of the site are also included. See the WS site at http://whistlestopper.com for a list of Whistle Stopper’s forums.
\end{footnotes}
While postings offer discussion from both conservative and liberal perspectives, the site’s creator—administrator as well as several of the twelve moderators are self-described conservatives. Accordingly, US Politics Online offers a balance compared with the more liberal leaning Common Ground Common Sense forum.

US Politics Online is organized around several discussion forum categories. Forums include Current Events, which consists of topics in the news such as the Saddam Hussein trial, a forum on War and Peace, which counts the most discussion threads, and discussion on current immigration policy, Issue Politics, which is organized around issues such as healthcare, the environment, and education, and Political Arenas, devoted to discussions on foreign affairs, political theory, and which includes a formal debate forum.

Summary

Each of the sites selected for this case study provide an environment that promotes the emergence of political discourse by individual citizens and citizen publics. All are easily and economically accessible, and are uncomplicated to navigate. If one has access to the Internet and is only moderately familiar with computer use, online discussion forums are relatively simple and trouble-free environments with which to engage in political conversation. All of the sites selected for analysis are comprised of a variety of forum categories about which members can engage in discussion.

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106 As of April, 206 US Politics Online reports 3,019 members who have contributed 623,066 posts.

107 See the USPOL site at http://uspoliticsonline.com/forums for a list of all USPolitics Online forum categories.

108 Each category—or forum—is comprised of threads, representing lines of discussion about the designated forum topic. Threads are created by site members as initial offerings to generate discussion. Once a thread is initiated, other members join in simply by posting their comments within the thread. Most importantly, by initiating threads, participants can introduce new topics of discussion.
Accordingly, citizens can easily find an ongoing conversation around almost any current political issue.

As publics come into existence through their discourse, the discussion forum format seems to invite the rhetorical emergence of publics and public spheres. Through the organization of forum categories that identify issues of common concern, individuals can recognize others who have similar interests. Thus, publics are connected with each other through their shared interest, and are animated through their discourse.

**Publics and Public Spheres Online**

Hauser defines publics as “the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (Vernacular Voices 31). Publics are rhetorical constructs that emerge through their discourse around issues of mutual concern. Forum categories organize topics of discussion with which individual participants can align themselves. It is through this alignment with others around a common issue that publics emerge. Each of the discussion Websites studied offers a variety of forum topics that speak to diverse issues, creating a discursive environment that is comparable to Hauser’s understanding of publics (Vernacular Voices 12). Accordingly, online discussion forums provide a valuable resource for individual members of society to connect with others who share a common knowledge and concern about a public issue.

The topical categories offered in each of the forum sites represent a plurality of publics operating within multiple discursive arenas, creating what Hauser refers to as *reticulate public spheres* (Vernacular Voices). The reticulate nature of publics refers to the interconnectedness of public spheres, which form a web or network of discursive
arenas. The paradox of publics is that the public spheres within which they emerge are
distinct, yet connected; publics are disparate in their interests and concerns, yet are
interdependent; vernacular voices of individuals are particular, yet they engage within a
community of voices. Publics emerge in a multiplicity of discursive spheres to become
part of the interconnected dialogue that is the public.  

Public engagement online supports civic participation in the real world in a
manner that bypasses the orchestration of professional communicators. Activist
publics use discussion forums (as well as other Internet venues and vehicles) to
connect with each other and to promote communication between citizen publics and
government. For example, Whistle Stopper hosts an Activist Forum designated to “put
your passion into action. List and read about opportunities to get active in your
communities and in the world” (WS Forum Index). Postings also call members to
participate in other forums of online communication such as sending e-mails or visiting
Websites. Common Ground Common Sense offers a selection of forums under the
designation of “Grassroots Organizing” wherein contributors discuss specific talking
points and ideas to promote activism, offer a media watch, host petitions, and offer
organizing resources (CGCS Forum List).

Yet, the discussion forum participation in grassroots engagement goes beyond

109 Online discussion forums also offer venues for what some sites refer to as forum communities. While
virtual publics are organized around issues of common concern, forum communities are designated by
virtue of self-identification with a particular demographic. Common Ground Common Sense, for example,
offers community sub-forums for artists and musicians, gays and lesbians, seniors, people of faith, etc. It
is important to recognize the distinction between these demographic communities and virtual communities
(Rheingold, Fernback & Thompson) that operate as virtual publics, existing as a consequence of common
concerns about public issues.

110 An interesting thread on Whistle Stopper poses the question “How many of you are activists?” The
discussion reveals the variety of ways that contributors define activist. The full thread is available at
the cyber world as threads generated on discussion forums represent grassroots civic engagement that transcends the virtual world. Contributors make pleas to other members to take action by making phone calls, send faxes, or to attend events. For example, a thread posted on the Common Ground Common Sense forum site promotes participation in a national event to show support for the rights of illegal immigrants.\textsuperscript{111} What is most notable is that communication in the virtual world has implications for political engagement in the real world. The interface between virtual and real civic participation has changed the political landscape as the Internet in general and discussion forums in particular move toward solving the disconnect among citizens and among and between citizen publics.\textsuperscript{112}

Virtual activism also promotes connections between citizens and government. For example, in a thread on Common Ground Common Sense in November of 2004 contributors discussed what went wrong with the Democratic party’s 2004 presidential campaign.\textsuperscript{113} At the conclusion of a discussion that lasted over two weeks and included approximately 12 pages of 236 postings, the initiator of the thread created a summary of all comments and sent it via e-mail to the Democratic National Committee as well as to several Democratic U.S. Senators. Certainly, individual citizens have the ability to send

\textsuperscript{111} The full thread from Common Ground Common Sense titled “A Day Without an Immigrant” is available at http://www.commongroundcommonsense.org/forums/index.php?act=ST&f=220&t=53977. It is important to note that time markers on discussion thread postings align with the time zone identified by forum contributors. Consequently, the chronological sequence of postings may appear to be out of order when in actuality postings are displayed in time sequence.

\textsuperscript{112} It is important to acknowledge that many of the real world activities of citizen publics demonstrate the influence of mass media. Many activities, such as marches and rallies that seek media attention, rely on professional communication models to accomplish their goals. However, conversations online also generate communication among publics and between publics and political leaders that provides a point of hope in circumventing professionalized discourse.

\textsuperscript{113} A full copy of the Common Ground Common Sense discussion thread titled “What Went Wrong and How to Fix it” can be accessed at http://www.commongroundcommonsense.org/forums/index.php?act=ST&f=260&t=141
messages via e-mail, letter, or phone to their government representatives without the aid of online publics. However, what is significant about this particular message is that it was generated in cyberspace by members of a virtual public where discussion forum contributors grappled with a common problem and came to conclusions about how to solve that problem by engaging each other rhetorically. The result of their virtual engagement then had an impact on the real world when they forwarded their collective message to political leaders. Accordingly, this example demonstrates how political discussion forums can impact politics in the real world by promoting connections between individual citizens, citizen publics, and government leaders.

Connection among members of publics is also manifested through their sharing of information about issues of mutual concern. Publics are reliant upon common knowledge to serve as a foundation for rhetorical engagement, and discussion forums serve to enrich and support that knowledge base. By providing each other with information on public issues, citizen publics build a body of knowledge upon which they can support their activism. Whistle Stopper, for example, provides a list of links to political information resources such as news organizations, Blogs, and government Websites. Both USPOL and Whistle Stopper have forums designated to Breaking News wherein contributors generate threads providing information about topics currently in the news. Discussion threads posted in these and other forums serve as venues for publics to build upon their mutual body of knowledge.

Many posts include quotes from or links to sources of information. For example, a May 5, 2006 post on USPOL’s Breaking News forum announces that Porter Goss

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114 See Appendix C for Whistle Stopper’s resource list.
resigned from his position as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.\textsuperscript{115} The initial post, along with later contributions, includes links to news sources offering supplemental information which serves to maintain the discussion thread. In another USPOL thread, a contributor posts a link to a National Public Radio report about Army recruitment, which generates discussion on the issue.\textsuperscript{116} The home page of Whistle Stopper on May 9, 2006 presents three threads, each of which calls participants’ attention to sources of information. One thread announces that miners who had been trapped in a Tasmanian gold mine for two weeks have been freed. Recognizing that the forum audience would expect to be provided with a link to the source of this information, the contributor of this message states, “only been on the radio so no link yet” (WS Home Page May 9, 2006).\textsuperscript{117} Another posting regarding foreign investment of U.S. ports links to an article from FOX News Website, while still another post presenting comments about U.S. peacekeeping in the Sudan offers a quote from the Associated Press as well as a link to an article from the Canadian Globe and Mail. These examples demonstrate how forum contributors use information from all forms of mainstream and other media to keep each other aware of emerging events, thereby contributing to the body of knowledge that supports their discussions.

While information offered within the contents of forum threads is certainly available to discussion forum participants in more mainstream news contexts, the value

\textsuperscript{115} The full USPOL thread entitled “Porter Goss Resigns” is available at http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=28085&referrerid=5239

\textsuperscript{116} The USPOL thread “Army Recruiting Gap May Force Compromises” can be accessed at http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=28149&goto=newpost

\textsuperscript{117} Like any other communication medium, the Internet in general and discussion forums in particular have their own conventions. Participants, therefore, come to expect forum contributors to conform to the convention of including a link directly to sources of information to which the post refers.
of information sharing by members of online publics is twofold: first, discussion participants call each other’s attention to breaking news items, making it easier to stay informed; second, by presenting current news that relates to issues of common concern, participants provide the collective public sphere with information that serves as the foundation for discussion, thereby promoting and sustaining discourse.

Yet, it is important to note that individual members of publics are no different than professional media in the sense that each choose their sources selectively. Online forum contributors make presumably strategic decisions as to which sources of information they will present in their postings. In this sense, forum participants frame their messages in the same fashion as media and professional communicators. What is significantly different, however, is that forum contributors present information within a dialogic environment wherein other participants can challenge sources or provide additional or conflicting accounts. Accordingly, the information sharing process that takes place with online publics takes on an egalitarian, reciprocal character not seen in professionalized discourse.

Publics online operate to a large degree in a fashion similar to that of publics in the real world. They come together around issues of common interest and concern, seeking solutions to mutual problems. Online publics congregate around discussion forum topics, creating virtual collectives that inform each other on the issues and inspire each other to action. Finally, online publics transcend the virtual community by motivating political activism and by providing communication connections among and between each other and between publics and government.
Discussion Agendas Online

Not only do forum participants keep each other informed, but they also contribute to setting the discussion agenda. Like engaged citizens operating in the real world, online discussion participants enter conversations based on their interest in the forum topic. However, unlike publics engaging in the real world, the conversations of virtual publics are carried out to a large degree outside the direct control of mainstream media, and professional communicators. Participants in online discussion forums enjoy greater freedom to introduce new topics. By inviting the creation of new forums, and new discussion threads within forums, citizens and citizen publics are able to direct the course of their discussions online. Consequently, online public spheres have the opportunity to operate with greater freedom from the challenges of agenda setting that frame public discourse in the real world.\(^\text{118}\)

Discussion forum categories are created through a deliberative process, emerging around topics and issues that site members have identified as being of interest and concern. Each of the three sites studied allow for members to initiate new forums, although some agreement must be reached that a new forum is actually necessary and is not redundant. Whether or not a proposed new forum is distinct from other forums is decided at least in part through discourse.

Whistle Stopper created a venue specifically for participants to discuss the forum process, to offer feedback about the site, and to make suggestions about new forums or features. I asked JD3, a moderator for the Whistle Stopper discussion forum, about the

\(^{118}\) While the opportunity for vernacular agenda-setting exists in online forums, the reality is that participants are influenced by the topics that are the focus of mainstream media. It is difficult, therefore, to determine to what extent cyber publics are following agendas are setting them.
process of generating new forums as well as for ending forums that have outlived their interest or currency. JD3 replies:

Suggestions are made by either members or moderators. We discuss it and often vote. Up2date owns the site and always has the final word. Like the American election forum, that closed once the elections were over. However, that too went through a discussion as to when to officially end it.”

While JD3s comments indicate that members have some input into setting the discussion agenda, he/she also makes it clear that some hierarchy exists in the decision-making process. On the Whistle Stopper site, individuals can submit suggestions about new forums or changes in the forum’s procedures, generating discussion among members and moderators. While the final decision is not totally within the control of forum contributors, the forum procedures are somewhat democratic in nature. In spite of the authority of forum administrators, the suggestion and discussion process demonstrates an egalitarian character not seen in the real world where mass media and professional communicators set the agenda for public discourse.

US Politics Online also has a space dedicated to discussion about the initiation of new forums. One site member, for example, suggests a new forum for the purpose of discussing the topic of illegal immigrants: “Illegal immigrants section? Maybe it's time to make one, just like for the "Saddam Trial. There's quite a few threads on the subject.” Other USPOL participants, including at least one moderator, join the discussion.

119 This discussion with JD3 occurred through an e-mail on May 6, 2006, a transcript of which is attached as Appendix D

120 The full USPOL thread titled “Illegal Immigrants Section” is available at http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=27425&referrerid=5239
discussion thread debating the pros and cons of the proposed new forum. Ultimately, the conversation results in the creation of a new forum dedicated to the discussion of immigration policy and reform. The entire discussion thread leading up to the initiation of the new forum takes place over less than two days. After three weeks in existence, the Immigration Policy forum contains 90 threads and over 2,600 postings. Creation and subsequent participation in the USPOL forum on immigration demonstrates the ease with which discussion forum participants can set the agenda for public discourse.

As issues that motivate public spheres of discourse are ever-changing, forum topics are constantly being revised and renewed. The temporal nature of forums is similar in character to the temporal and shifting nature of publics and the ever-changing issues that animate them. Accordingly, as political issues move from the national radar, as problems get resolved, and as new topics enter the discursive arena, obsolete forums are retired or moved to less prominent positions. As Crystal, a USPOL administrator explains:

> …we don’t really retire them. We shuffle them around. For example, the immigration policy forum, once interest has died on the topic I will move it down the list a little bit. It will no longer have a place at the top of the forum list. At some point, it may be necessary to combine forums, so Immigration Policy might be combined with some other forum. The current events section of the forum will change from time to time depending on what the current events are. Obviously, once a subject is no longer a current event it will be moved.  

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121 See Appendix E for a copy of Crystal’s e-mail wherein she discusses the process of creating new forums and relegating obsolete forums.
While the decision to move USPOL forums rests with administrators, Crystal's comments indicate that a contributing factor in making this decision is the amount of interest demonstrated by forum participants. Through their participation—or lack thereof—forum members exercise some jurisdiction over the existence and placement of forum topics.

As Benhabib (Situating, Toward) argues, participation in deliberative democracy is characterized by norms of equality and symmetry. These norms are the foundation of Benhabib’s principle of egalitarian reciprocity wherein there are no prima facie rules limiting the discussion agenda—all participants have the right to question the topics of conversation. While online discussion forum categories are subject to the final approval of administrators, forum participants have the ability to suggest new topics and question existing topics. Thus, forum contributors benefit from a more egalitarian public sphere of discussion than what they are likely to experience in the real world.

Yet, the more significant agenda-setting element offered to participants in the discussion forum environment is the ability of contributors to initiate lines of discussion within forum categories. Benhabib’s principal of egalitarian reciprocity stipulates that all participants in the discussion have the same opportunity to initiate speech, to question, to interrogate, and to debate. This condition is animated in online discussion forums through the ability of participants to initiate lines of discussion within forum categories. By creating new discussion threads, each contributor gets to initiate new lines of discussion and, thereby, exercise some control over the discussion agenda. Conversations that occur in forums are framed by the participants. Individual participants initiate forum threads and then are joined by others who have a shared
interest in the discussion. Once engaged in a forum thread, one is free to ask new
questions, pose open-ended responses, and, most importantly, engage in open dialogue
without interruption, manipulation, or termination of the conversation by an outside
source. The conversation goes on as long as there are willing and interested participants
and providing the rules of civility are followed.

Limits to Discourse Online

Yet, while forum participants can exercise influence in setting the agenda, there
are boundaries to their power to organize the discussion format, to dictate discussion
topics, and even to post messages. Each of the discussion forum sites studied (as well as
all that were considered) includes rules for participation which forum administrators and
moderators attempt to enforce. Accordingly, online discussion forum contributors are
called upon to comply with regulations that limit freedom of speech in favor of civility
and respect for the rights of others. In this sense, the challenges of cyber communication
are no different than the ongoing tensions between freedom of speech and boundaries of
civility that exist in all public communication contexts within our society.

Rules and regulations proffered by online forum administrators and monitored by a
community of participants are analogous to the parameters of free speech set forth by
government institutions as well as offered by communication ethics scholars (Benhabib,
Habermas, Rawls). As Benhabib (Situating, Toward a Deliberative Model) points out,
discourse ethics rests at the core of deliberative democracy. Benhabib’s particular model
of deliberative democracy is founded on the assumption that “moral respect for the
autonomous personality is a fundamental norm of morality and democracy” (Toward 78).
Each of the forums studied offers moral respect for the other as the foundation of their rules and regulations.

Forum moderators observe discussions to determine if members comply with rules and regulations that frame what is acceptable or unacceptable discursive conduct. The rules for participation on the Common Ground Common Sense forum are set forth in a posting from Michael, the forum administrator.\(^{122}\) Michael explains:

…the goals of this forum are to further civil discussion of the issues we face as a nation. If your intention is to disrupt this discussion or to deride your fellow forum members you should not participate in this discussion site…

The moderators have broad discretion to act in the interests of maintaining the civility and goals of this discussion” (CGCS Forum Rules).

Breaking CGCS forum rules may result in membership privileges being limited or revoked. Michael’s comments gesture toward the subjective quality of enforcing forum rules regarding civility and propriety. Accordingly, CGCS offers a grievance procedure for participants who object to decisions or actions taken by forum administrators in this regard.

Forum rules posted by Whistle Stopper and USPOL are similar to those of CGCS to the extent that they support the goal of civility and respect, and administrators and moderators operate with broad discretion in defining these goals and in enforcing forum rules.

\(^{122}\) See http://www.commongroundcommonsense.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=6 for a copy of Common Ground Common Sense discussion forum rules
Marc, USPOL’s administrator has this to say about the balance between free speech and respect for others:

As for popularity [of the forum site] a lot of it has to do with finding some good moderators and setting some good rules that minimize limitations on free speech, but also provide some restrictions so people won't be afraid to speak thinking they may be insulted every time. This is not easy and we have revised the rules many times. I have worked hard to make sure the rules maintain this balance; many other sites don't have a good balance from my experience.  

Neither Whistle Stopper nor USPOL provide grievance procedures in their rules and regulations, however, leaving arbitration of the rules presumably at the sole discretion of site administrators. Whistle Stopper refers to monitors as “community guides” (WS Rules), while USPOL relies upon a collection of 12 monitors to act as guardians of the forum rules. Yet, since in all probability site moderators cannot observe every posting by every forum participant, it would seem that enforcement of forum rules and regulations is a community affair that necessitates forum members to report infractions. In that sense, the enforcement process takes on a cooperative spirit that tends to flatten the hierarchy and to create to some degree a self-monitoring public community.

Public discourse on discussion forums is held to similar rules of ethical conduct as those that operate in the real world, demanding that participants engage each other with civility and respect. Yet, online publics enjoy certain freedoms not often seen in the real world.  

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124 Marc offered these comments in an e-mail communication that responded to my inquiry about the USPOL site. A copy of my inquiry and Marc’s response is attached as Appendix F
Discussion forums offer individuals and citizen publics a more open access to the marketplace of ideas and a greater ability to influence the discussion agenda that is not feasible in professionally orchestrated real world public spheres. Accordingly, online discussion forums offer the potential for everyday citizens to more fully participate in the deliberative democratic process.

**Vernacular Voices Online**

Hauser explains that “publics deliberate in ways not confined to the orderly debates of parliamentary bodies. They take a variety of forms, suited to their time and place and within the cultural understanding of their audiences…” (Vernacular Voices 92). Certainly, discussion forums provide publics with a venue suited to participating with other like-minded individuals at a time, place, and form of their choosing. An examination of discussion forums reveals the discursive engagement of individuals who align themselves with topics and issues about which they have some concern and can exercise a degree of influence. Contributors share information, building a body of knowledge that sustains their discussions. Hauser (Vernacular Voices) instructs that rather than anticipating publics as already existing, we should seek them through actual discursive engagements on the issues. Clearly, publics are made visible through their discursive engagement online. Yet, Hauser also argues that if we are to understand publics, we must look to their discourse. Accordingly, this study now turns to the actual discourse of vernacular voices online in order to more fully explicate the extent to which online discussion forums foster deliberative democracy. This study of vernacular voices online seeks to understand how the conversations of everyday citizens in discussion forums meet the criteria set forth for lively, open, and egalitarian public discourse.
Benhabib (Situating, Toward a Deliberative Model) presents principles for democratic public discourse that guide this inquiry. In her discussions of deliberative democracy, Benhabib carves out a discourse of inclusion—an understanding of public discourse as an exploration of ideas, issues, and options that is open to all citizens. Further, Benhabib argues that participants in public discourse are equally entitled to the principle of *egalitarian reciprocity*—the right to initiate topics and question presupposition about conversations. Benhabib contends that principles of universal moral respect and egalitarian reciprocity answer the concern for protecting the basic rights and liberties of the individual. Finally, Benhabib places her concept of *interactive rationality* (Situating) at the center of her understanding of ethical discourse. *Interactive rationality* is the principle that transforms criteria for public discussion from the rule of rationality to the aspiration of agreement. Agreement, for Benhabib, is achieved through ethical discourse: “the capacity to reverse perspectives, that is, the willingness to reason from the others’ point of view, and the sensitivity to hear their voice is paramount” (Situating 8). Through her conceptualization of ethical discourse rooted in principles of inclusion, egalitarian reciprocity, and interactive rationality, Benhabib offers coordinates for examining the discourse of vernacular voices online.

**Inclusion**

Holding forth the principles that foster a discourse of inclusion is not as easily accomplished as one might hope. In a recent thread put forth on USPOL, a contributor using the name Frank announces that he/she has “invited people from a white nationalist and an anti-racist site to USPOL….So my idea is to create a new forum in which racism
issues can be discussed. Several posts express strong disagreement with creating a forum that invites inclusion of the white nationalists inclusion, while others contend that the forum should be inclusive for all political perspectives.

Mad Michael: I say let the Aussie racists go create/pay for their own internet forum to discuss their little twisted ideas in peace. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to make them feel comfortable here

Pogo: so ‘free speech’ is great stuff only so long as it falls within predetermined parameters?

Donkey Left: He didn’t say we should stop them from talking. He just said that we shouldn’t give them their own little forum for racist diatribes

War On Ignorance: Exactly. There’s no such thing as total free speech rights anywhere

Frank: […] as long as they obey the rules of the forum why should they not be welcomed? Because they hold views you do not approve of? Nobody says you have to like them or even address them but as long as they obey the rules they are just as welcome here as you are MM

The discussion ensues over a period of approximately one week and includes 60 posts, wherein several other contributors weigh in on the pros and cons of including the white nationalists. There appears to be no real conclusion.

What is significant about this thread, however, is that inclusion is decided rhetorically with forum participants debating the question. The irony of this thread is that forum members cannot exclude the white nationalists (or any other group members with

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125 The full USPOL thread titled “A new forum to discuss racism” from April 25-26, 2006 can be accessed at http://www.uspoliticalonline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=27781&referrerid=5239
whom they have ideological disagreement) from the discussions. Since forum contributors are not required to offer personal information or political affiliation, the white nationalists cannot be identified per se. Like any other demographic or ideological community, the white nationalists can be identified only to the extent that they choose to reveal themselves; or, they can be recognized through the content of their discourse.

Identification

Forum participants choose how and to what extent they will divulge identification markers such as gender, ethnicity, profession, geographic location, age, and political ideology. Discussion forum contributors use strategic self-identifiers such as user names, avatars, and signature lines to construct an online identity. For example, USPOL invites (but does not require) members to create a user name, a signature line, and a graphic avatar, and to designate a primary and secondary flag, all of which are revealed in every post. USPOL’s published members list (listed by user name) also invites members disclose their geographic location, biographical information, occupation, and interests; only geographic location is revealed in forum posts. Both CGCS and WS sites make similar identifiers available to member contributors. While some members post without identifiers, many contributors on each of the forums presented avatars such as photos, graphics, flags, and animated cartoon characters, which serve to create a strategically developed persona.126

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126 An examination of avatars and other graphics used on the three study sites reveal a playful attitude. Members frequently use avatars that are reminiscent of cartoon characters and super heroes. While avatars and other graphic representations are an interesting component of online self-identification, they are not a significant factor in this inquiry and, therefore, I did not conduct an extensive examination of their selection or use.
Yet, the more revealing identifier of political ideology is encompassed in the signature lines that are created by members and that appear at the end of each forum posting. Signature lines become a part of the forum contributor’s every message, thereby creating a rhetorical theme that plays a significant role in the online discussion. Examples of signature lines are often quotes from famous Americans like Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin or from journalists such as Edward R. Murrow or H. L. Menchen; some quote lyrics from Bob Dylan or John Lennon; others are either quotes from anonymous sources or original sentiments of the forum contributor. What is significant is that that signature lines themselves are rhetorical offerings that become part of the vernacular engagement of forum participants.

One example of rhetorical self-identification is seen through the postings of a USPOL moderator. All posting by drgoodtrips end with the following: "Government big enough to supply everything you need is big enough to take everything you have... The course of history shows that as a government grows, liberty decreases.—Thomas Jefferson."[127] Drgoodtrips identifies him/herself as a 26 year old puppeteer living in Chicago, thus offering demographic information that may or may not be accurate (there is no way of confirming biographical information) and that does little to contribute to the political discussion. Rather, it is the contributor’s user name and signature line that offers indicators as to his/her political perspectives.[128]

Another forum contributor offers a signature line that serves as an overt political

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[128] This member’s user name leads me to conclude that drgoodtrips is likely to support the decriminalization of drugs. The selection of this particular quote from Jefferson as a signature line indicates that drgoodtrips believes in less, rather than more, government.
advertisement. USPOL moderator, *benjamin*, ends each of his/her posts with this announcement:

Too Conservative for The Green Party, too Liberal for the Republican Party, and still hate the Democrats?.....

Join The Republican Green Club

Thus, *benjamin’s* signature line offers a political message that serves to supplement the discourse offered within his/her postings.

As Mark Poster (*The Net*) explains, the identities that individuals construct online are revealed through their dialogue. The implication of strategically selected user names and signature lines is that forum contributors are identified by self-created rhetorical signs rather than being classified by social-cultural status indicators that serve to prejudice discourse. As discussion participants are viewed and understood through the content of their discussions, which include their rhetorically created self-identifiers, credibility (ethos) is placed squarely in the hands of the vernacular rhetor. In a process that Poster (*The Net*) refers to as the democratization of subject constitution, the power of political authority tied to inflated social status gets diluted in favor of content laden ethos. Accordingly, the traditional power hierarchies experienced in real world political discourse are broken down in virtual public spheres as online discussion participants engage with others relatively free from the constraints of social status.

129 *benjamin’s* USPOL membership page is available at http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums/member.php?u=1441

130 Some discussion forum contributors choose to reveal biographic and demographic information about themselves beyond what is invited on members’ pages. For example, on USPOL a member initiated a thread entitled “Introduce Yourself” wherein contributors revealed personal, professional, as well as political information. The full thread, which includes over 600 posts, can be accessed at http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=727
Interactive Rationality

The dilution of social power hierarchies encourages discussion forum participants to focus on argument. Accordingly, individuals must support their views by articulating good reasons in a public context, forcing the participants to consider what would count as a good reason for others. Thus, discussion forum contributors participate discursively in deciding what is rational. As previously discussed, Benhabib’s principal of *interactive rationality* (Situating, Toward) transforms criteria for public discussion from relying on a priori rules of rationality to a communicative process whereby participants define what makes for a sound rational argument. Benhabib explains that “reason is a natural disposition of the human mind, which when governed by proper education, can discover certain truths” (Situating 4). Participants decide through their discursive interactions what makes common sense and what are discernable truths.

Examples of vernacular discourse found in discussion forum threads demonstrate Benhabib’s interactive rationality principal. For instance, a recent thread initiated on USPOL by Samantha quotes an article in *The Providence Journal* that tells the story of a US Marine stationed in Iraq who wrote to his mother “that he and the men in his unit were all about 10 pounds lighter in their first few weeks in Iraq. They were pulling 22-hour patrol shifts. They were getting two meals a day and they were not meals to remember.” The soldiers mother is quoted in the article as saying, “He told me the two meals just weren’t cutting it. He said the Iraqi food was usually better. They were going to the Iraqis and basically saying, feed me.” Samantha comments on the article: “This is

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131 The full USPOL thread titled “Starving American troops: America’s Shame”, which includes the full text of the Providence Journal article, is available at: http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=28280&referrerid=5239
a really bad story….Shameful that our troops are 10 pounds lighter and asking Iraqis for food. Rumsfeld should be drawn and quartered…” What follows is a discussion wherein participants decide if the conclusions drawn by Samantha are rational:

Mrs. M: I think I’ll wait until I hear more about this from other soldiers rather than take one mother’s word for it. It’s definitely not unusual for troops to lose weight when they’re in battle and I have to wonder if maybe this mother didn’t overreact to a simple request for favorite foods.

Gadfly: I’d like to torture some liberals that believe every cock and bull story that reflects badly on the current administration. Ten pounds is easy enough to lose if you go into a desert, wear heavy body armor and stay active all day. Hell, you can lose that much in water alone.

Mrs. M. […] It just seems odd that the only information on this comes from one mother and it leads me to believe that IF she’s telling the truth, it’s the fault of the commander of those guys.

Tim: […] I don’t know if it’s actually true—I would defer to Mrs. M. on a lot of this. I have not seen evidence. Starving is a strong word […]

hoopy: Again with this crap, If you honestly believe Soldiers are starving in Iraq you have truly gone off the deep end…… There is a distinct difference between not having food and preferring something else. […]

Meridious: When you find a case of a US troop that starved, you let us know. K?

Through their discursive interactions, the participants of this exchange (there were approximately ten contributors to this thread) decide that conclusions drawn by Samantha
do not make common sense. The discussion thread ends (as of this writing) with Meridious challenging Samantha’s initial claim as premature and lacking grounds.

In another example, a Whistle Stopper contributor with the user name whatever initiates a discussion thread that poses the following question:

the thread on capital punishment got me to think about this.
capital punishment is the killing for the purpose of punishment.
euthanasia is the killing for the purpose of lessening the pains of the patient.
Do you support only 1 or both, or none? Why? If you support only one, why
Is killing for one purpose better than killing for the other?\textsuperscript{132}

Whatever’s post asks forum participants to make a judgment on the practices of capital punishment and euthanasia. Inherent in the question is the invitation for fellow participants to offer claims that can be held up to scrutiny. Some responses to whatever’s initial post:

Churlant: Euthanasia is a righteous act. The death penalty, as it is used in our country, is the opposite of righteous. Simple as that.

moody1: there are different kinds of euthanasia, I believe that some are justified but not others. As for capital punishment, it is a purely revenge driven concept. No one can say that capital punishment is an act of justice or protection.

Duo_Maxwell: Euthanasia is sometimes asked for by the patient. The penalty is not. Still, the two are very different in context as well as rational [sic].

\textsuperscript{132} The full Whistle Stopper thread on “euthanasia/capital punishment” can be accessed at: http://www.whistlestopper.com/forum/showthread.php?t=40220)
whatever: I’ll clarify more: Capital punishments as discussed here will be one where where [sic] all the evidence have point to the criminal’s guilt without a doubt. and it is legal in the country it takes place in.

Euthanasia will be according to the law in the country taken place, the patient will be certified by at least two independent doctors as being terminally ill, of sound mind and is free from pressure from any person.

the Doctor administering the injection is qualified and independent.

whatever: how do you define righteousness?

Churlant: In this context I would take the second definition of ‘righteous’ located on dictionary.com. Quote: In accordance with virtue or morality.

The discussion on capital punishment and euthanasia continues with contributors posing diverse opinions, raising new questions, and analyzing each other’s claims. What is significant about this exchange is that participants look to each other to flesh out working definitions of key concepts, to grapple with framing the question posed, and to work through criteria for how claims are scrutinized. Accordingly, deciding what is rational emerges through the deliberation as claims are evaluated as reasonable or not reasonable by the participants. Benhabib’s notion of interactive rationality provides a participant-based understanding for judging the validity of arguments as well as the contexts of social realities. The discussion forum threads examined here demonstrate Benhabib’s principal in action.

133 It is important to note, however, that while forum participants work through the rationality of each other’s arguments, the topic has been framed to a large extent by the mass media and professional communicators. As these issues receive a good deal of public attention, vernacular discussions cannot escape the influence of media and special interest groups.
Seeking Agreement

Benhabib’s principal of interactive rationality also transforms criteria of consensus to the aspiration of agreement. Rather than insisting upon consensus, the goal of seeking some workable agreement toward solving common problems acknowledges the naturally competitive pluralistic character of contemporary society. The vernacular discourse found in forum threads demonstrates citizens working toward agreement.

The previously mentioned CGCS discussion thread “What went wrong and how to fix it” is an excellent example of a citizen public arriving at agreement on a common problem. In this thread, participants analyze the 2004 Democratic presidential campaign, seeking to identify problems and arrive at some agreement as to solutions. Lcyberlina, the thread initiator, offered initial points for discussion, after which other forum participants questioned assumptions, asked each other for clarification, and contributed new points. While contributors did not reach consensus on every point, they ultimately came to some agreement about what went wrong in the campaign and what should be done differently.

In other examples of forum discussions, the participants cannot seem to arrive at an agreement. For example, a USPOL thread wherein participants argue about the inception of human life began in November of 2004 and continues at this writing with over 800 posts and little agreement. As the initiator of this thread frames the question

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135 This topic is another example of one that receives a good deal of public attention. Thus, the topic has been framed to a large degree by media and professional communicators. The full USPOL discussion thread on the inception of human life can be accessed at http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums/showthread.php?t=10159
as “When does human first become a human?” not surprisingly a long debate pitting the
right to life against the right to an abortion ensues. Contributors each carve out their
theoretical ground, and after more than 800 posts over a period of 18 months, there is no
consensus reached. Yet, the desire to resolve this controversial issue is evidence by the
tenacity of the participants.

In another example of forum participants struggling to reach agreement,
::Major_Baker:: initiates a Whistle Stopper thread with the comment “this brings out the
conservative in me”136 The discussion thread is inspired by a case where a pregnant
mother of six living in a homeless shelter is accused of murdering her 22 month old son.
The initial poster states: “I hate stories like this. It makes me ashamed to support public
assistance. Why do we help these people?” In the discussion that ensues, a variety of
related issues are discussed from the pros and cons of public assistance to forced
sterilization for child abusers. There is little agreement in the discussion, and after
approximately ten days of deliberation and over 50 posts, participants are still debating
the issues at this writing.

While discussants acknowledge their diverse perspectives, they also recognize the
value of their participation in public debate. Such is the case with a recent Whistle
Stopper discussion thread wherein JD3 poses the question “What’s wrong with
America’s high schools?”137 JD3 refers to a recent Time Magazine cover story wherein
researchers claim that nearly one out of three American public high school students won’t

136 The full Whistle Stopper thread titled “this brings out the conservative in me” is available at

137 The Whistle Stopper thread “What’s wrong with America’s high schools?” can be accessed at
graduate. Forum discussion participants identify a variety of evils that might contribute to this alarming statistic:

Madrigalian: High schools have become daycare centers. More interested in ‘controlling juvenile free time’ than with teaching any truly useful skills…

STOP DUMBING DOWN. Challenge these kids […]

Ash112619: I got a solution. If you drop out of HS, you get conscripted. That would help fill the enlisted mens [sic] ranks, it will teach them a skill or two […].

Faithfulservant: Now there’s a truly dumb idea. Let’s make the military the dumping round [sic] for the people who couldn’t cut it in High School.

Patrickt: Why should a high school diploma mean something to a teenager when it doesn’t mean anything to anyone else?

Although they seem to agree on the problem, clearly forum contributors see diverse solutions. Yet, these discussion participants recognize the importance of continuing to debate the problem. JD3 states, “…just because the problem is complex and multifaceted doesn’t mean we don’t continue the battle.” The WS forum debate about public high schools continues at this writing.

What is significant about these examples of vernacular voices online is that they make clear that everyday citizens are compelled to deliberate controversial public issues, no matter how conflict-ridden and complicated. Claims are held up for public examination, lines of argument are scrutinized, and solutions are negotiated. The discussions examined reveal that individual citizens have a desire—perhaps a need—to
engage each other, to grapple with complex issues, and to work toward some agreement in solving the problems that impact their lives.

Setting or Following the Agenda

As argued throughout this writing, one of the greatest challenges for everyday citizens in contemporary American society to engage in public discussion is the pervasive influence of mass media and professional communicators in setting the discussion agenda and framing the issues. While it is nearly impossible to evade these influences, vernacular voices online demonstrate points of hope by carving out discussions on issues that matter to them. The WS discussion thread on America’s high schools is a good example. Certainly, the information that spawned this discussion was provided by the media—in this case a *Time Magazine* cover story. However, postings in this discussion thread demonstrate that participants offer their own perspectives on the problem, as well as a variety of solutions, demonstrating some degree of ownership of the issue. Several posts draw on personal knowledge and observations, which give richness and context to the discussion, such as these examples:

Patrickt: A friend of mine saw his son's proposed class schedule for the next year and went in to the school to discuss the lack of any academic classes. The administrator said that the classes were the ones the student signed up for. The father said it was unacceptable. The administrator explained that the father wasn't the student, was he? Then the father explained, rather forcefully, who paid the taxes.

JD3: There is a problem here. My father in law was a poor student by his account. Straight "C" student. Work [sic] as a mechanic all his life. Thinks of
himself as a strong back weak mind type. From HS, he still remembers how to reah [sic] Chaucer. Can even quote several lines. He can read. dittohead not!: Rubbish. When I went to high school in the '50s, we were told the drop out rate was around 40% It was OK to admit it then. Those dropouts mostly went to work in manufacturing of one kind or another. Not everyone who did graduate took four years of English. It wasn't required. Algebra wasn't required. Geometry wasn't required. It was possible to warm a seat for 4 years and graduate.

Posts on this thread also demonstrate some recognition that everyday citizens must take ownership of public problems. JD3 offers this comment about the problems in America’s high schools:

    JD3: Schools are no bette [SIC] than the people who work and support them. We the people need to take back our communities, our schools and our children. No system will work until we do that.

Additionally, there is recognition by some forum contributors that solving public problems often requires placing them in a local context. Soren observes:

    Soren: Another thing which must be noted is that solutions which work in one place aren't always the best solution for another. A program which assumes certain things of students in the school's boundaries may be right in doing so, but that doesn't always mean the same assumptions are necessarily supportable in the school ten miles away which serves a different group of students.
The vernacular voices posting on this WS discussion thread demonstrate that while the media generally places topics into the public arena, individual members of society offer context and framing. Accordingly, everyday citizens play a significant role in public discussion by adding their personal observations, offering particular (rather than party line) opinions, and taking ownership of public problems.

There are other points of optimism where forum participants have taken up issues that are not a prominent focus of media attention. A USPOL thread is initiated concerning a recent ABC News story reporting that the US prison population has risen to 2.18 million inmates, representing a 2.6 percent increase in one year. The discussion thread continued:

daisym: any ideas why? I'm posting this because I am curious to hear some ordinary Americans express their views on why this may be so ... what is there about the US that makes either crime, or incarceration, so high ... Is it culture? Is it policy? What factors drive this?

Slon: I'm guessing the War on Drugs is a big factor here.

Government Man: Oh it's culture, sure. People growing up in cultures that foster hate and are permissive to violence are going to be far more likely to grow up hateful and violent.

T.F.B.M: It gives jobs.

glockmail: Longer prison terms as a result of "get tough" legislation back in the

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late 80's. Crime has actually gone down since then. Apparently the message finally got across to the two digit IQ crowd: do the crime, and do the time.:thumbup1:

Sucre: Poverty and lack of perspectives

CorpMediaSux: Our criminal justice system is a complete failure. Our crime rate compared to western Europe is laughable and our laws are much more punitive than those nations. If you think those things are unrelated, your [sic] goofy.

dsanthony: It's a result of urban decadence, and a liberal/Hollywood "wink-wink" to gang culture of violence and drugs.

Opinions offered on this thread come from conservative and liberal perspectives, with solutions from ranging from tough on crime to social advocacy approaches. What is significant about this thread is that an issue that is not highly publicized in mainstream media gets the attention of everyday citizens who proceed to engage in discussion, defining for themselves the terms of the debate.

Another spark of hope comes simply through the recognition by individual contributors that public discussion is framed by professional communicators. The following comments are from a CGCS thread entitled “MSM [mainstream media] makes me sick”\(^\text{139}\)

MrJim The incredible bias of the MSM has never been more grossly apparent than in the Alito nomination. It is so obvious that they are TELLING us what to think -- GIVING us our opinions.

\(^{139}\) The full GCGC thread can be accessed at http://www.commongroundcommonsense.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=48145&st=
kindergarten teacher: I have noticed the MSM bias also. Who decides what to run on their programs?

wundermaus: We buy the corporate products that pay the salaries of these propagandists. If we stopped buy their cr@p, maybe we could get our public airwaves back...

The mere fact that discussion participants are cognizant of the pervasive influence of mainstream media places them in a better position to question the agenda-setting and framing effects of media-dominated public discussion.

Summary and Conclusions:

Hauser highlights the active nature of publics, noting that we should seek publics “through actual discursive engagements on the issues raised in civil society as emergences of society’s active members” (Vernacular 35). Publics operating within the discussion forums studied emerge through their discourse by engaging in conversations that seek solutions to common problems and concerns. Discussion forums serve to connect members of publics to other like-minded individuals, thereby creating a discursive environment for publics to engage each other. Through their discourse, virtual publics create a network of interconnected, reticulate public spheres (Hauser) that foster the civic engagement that Putnam (Bowling Alone) laments is lacking in the real world.

Through online connections, activist publics are able to identify each other, build a common body of knowledge, sort through their opinions on common issues, and mobilize their efforts in the real world. Individual citizens and citizen publics transcend their virtual environment as online discussions serve as the catalyst for real world activities. Accordingly, the discourse of virtual publics impacts the real world of politics
in a way that moves toward closing the communication disconnect between all points of the political communication triangulation: individual citizens and citizen publics, media and professional communicators, political leaders and government.

Online public discourse also invites everyday citizens to carve out topics of conversation, allowing for agenda-setting capabilities not often seen in a real world dominated by professional communicators. The ability of individual participants in online forums to put forth questions, set out claims, and engage in discussion about topics of their choosing shifts control over public discourse from the talking heads of mass media to everyday citizens. The direct and unmediated (except for technological mediation of the Net) nature of online discourse places public discussion in the hands of the citizens whose lives are impacted by the issues. New forum categories and threads of discussion are introduced, while obsolete topics are relegated to the background. The temporal, unwieldy, and shifting character of discussion forums (and of most Internet sites) seems a perfect environment for the discourse of temporal, reticulate and diverse publics.

Further, the egalitarian character of forum discussions meets criteria set forth by Habermas, Benhabib, and Hauser for vibrant public spheres that further the democratic process. Forum administrators and participant monitors call contributors to exercise respect and civility while encouraging free speech and open discourse. The ability to post messages anonymously dilutes the social power structures that so often serve to circumscribe discourse. Anonymous discussions shift the focus from demographics to ideas, creating a content-laden discourse that is difficult to replicate in face-to-face interactions.
Many of the examples examined of online discussion also demonstrate Benhabib’s principle of interactive rationality in action as participants judge the validity of each other’s arguments. Thomas Benson makes this observation of online discourse:

Amidst the name-calling, the flaming, and the ideological demonization common to both sides there is a demonstrable fait of some sort in the power of argument and passionate advocacy. Despite the virtuosic individuality of expression, glorying in the unfettered freedom of speech offered by the Internet, it also appears that the actors in these debates are performing, however boisterously, within fairly stable lines of argument that are also advanced by the presidency, the Congress, the news media and talk radio” (375).

Participants in the discussion forums studied demonstrate their ability to engage each other in vibrant exchanges wherein they scrutinize, analyze, and make sense of each other’s claims.

Hauser tells us that publics exist only as they manifest their publicness (Vernacular Voices 97). This study of vernacular voices online demonstrates how citizens and citizen publics reveal themselves, connect with each other and with their political leaders, and engage in deliberation about issues they care about. Online discussion forums are not pristine examples of public discourse for everyday citizens, and they certainly do not solve all of the challenges presented by current conditions of public discourse. However, they do offer points of hope by providing a communicative environment wherein vernacular voices can contribute to the lattice of discursive arenas that create significant and intersubjective meanings in the real world. Accordingly,
vernacular voices emerge online to participate in deliberative democracy and the
democratic process of self-government.
Chapter Five: Engaging Vernacular Voices: Implications and Conclusions

Democratic governance rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate – Gerard Hauser

This examination of vernacular public spheres is rooted in a deliberative understanding of democracy that acknowledges the essential connection between public discourse and the democratic process. Implicit in the practice of deliberative democracy is the recognition that everyday citizens participate rhetorically in the public arena. Yet, animating vernacular voices is a challenge in contemporary American society. While mass media can and does act as a vehicle for informing the public about issues, the press does little to promote the deliberative process for everyday citizens. In a country where free speech is promised in the Bill of Rights and protected by government institutions, few citizens are invited into the public arena to engage in debate.

Rhetorical citizen engagement is challenged in part because of three circumstances: 1) the press has failed to promote rich political discussion; 2) political leaders are responding to perceptions of mass public opinion generated by polls and surveys; 3) professional communicators dominate political discourse. Consequently, the disengagement of vernacular voices is in large part the result of a communicative disconnect between individuals, publics, and political leaders. While not yet a crisis, the current conditions of public spheres of discourse in American society represent an exigency that requires a fitting response. I am arguing that a fitting response must:

1. Foster citizen ownership of public problems by recognizing the efficacy of everyday citizens as rhetorical influencers of public policy. Fostering citizen
influence relies on creating a rhetorical culture that recognizes the grass-roots nature of building public opinion and is achieved through the following practices:

2. Promote access to public forums of discourse for everyday citizens where they can build a body of common knowledge about public issues and can grapple with solutions to shared problems. This element relies on the existence of accessible venues for citizens and citizen publics to communicate with each other.

3. Engage vernacular voices in public conversation with political leaders, thereby diminishing the domination of public discourse by professional communicators that relegates citizen discussions to the private sphere. This aspect focuses on enhancing direct communication between citizens and government.

It is important to note that I am not arguing for institutional reforms, per se. Nor do I see publics necessarily at odds with government or with media. Rather, I am seeking ways in which everyday publics can more fully engage in the triangulation of political discourse that includes citizens, professional communicators, and political leaders. I acknowledge that our basic constitutional structure and government institutions are adequate to allow, and even encourage, vernacular voices to engage in public discourse. Yet, democracy is more than the sum of its institutions. A healthy democracy depends in large part on the development of a democratic civic culture. In a deliberative democracy, civic culture is inherently rhetorical.
Recognizing Rhetorical Efficacy: The Citizen as Influencer

If we are to heal our civic dysfunction, we must begin by answering the question: how do vernacular voices gain legitimacy in discursive public spheres? We are reminded of the Habermasian notion of the public as connected to the principle of legitimacy—a public is empowered as “private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself” (Structural 25). The public also operates as judge—as the “carrier of public opinion; its function as a critical judge is precisely what makes the public character of proceedings … meaningful” (Structural 2). Habermas views the public as operating in discursive spheres in order to arrive at decisions that legitimize public action.

However, Hauser (Vernacular Voices) points out that publics do not function as decision-makers. Rather, they function rhetorically to influence those who make decisions. Hauser’s distinction is an important one as it points to the difference between having a voice and having a say. Say is legitimized by principles of democracy and is animated through the electoral process. When we have say, we act as decision-makers. Thus, say holds inherent efficacy. Publics function to influence those with a say. Accordingly, publics have a voice. It would seem that in a democratic society, it is essential that the voices of citizens and citizen publics are also legitimized by having access to those with a say.

In order for everyday citizens to exercise their influence in the public arena, they must first take ownership of public problems. Taking ownership implies efficacy—citizens must have some faith in their ability to make a difference. Certainly, electoral legitimacy holds inherent efficacy; however, deliberative empowerment relies on the
ability of individual citizens to act as rhetorical representatives of publics. For deliberative democracy to work, citizen publics must be empowered to act as influencers to political decision-makers. Decades ago, John Dewey called our attention to the essence of democracy as being tied to the individual citizen:

Individual human beings may lose their identity in a mob or in a political convention or in a joint-stock corporation or at the polls. But this does not mean that some mysterious collective agency is making decisions … When the public or state is involved in making social arrangements … it still acts through concrete persons (The Public and Its Problems, 23).

In terms of deliberative democracy, concrete persons engaging in conversation with others about shared concerns serve as the grassroots influencers on matters of public opinion.

The voices of individual citizens and citizen publics emerge as activist rhetoricians in a variety of contexts: first, individuals engage each other in conversation about issues that matter in their collective lives; then, individual members of publics initiate attention to issues, thereby functioning as rhetorical representatives; finally, publics serve as liaisons to other influencers—fellow citizens, diverse publics, opinion leaders—as well as to decision-makers. As Hauser points out “living in a democracy involves a greater degree of uncertainty than living in other forms of government. Its processual nature produces decisions that are made on the basis of deliberation, not edict” (Vernacular Voices, 262). In a deliberative democracy efficacy is manifested as influence, and influence is animated rhetorically.
Rhetorical legitimacy relies on building a rhetorical culture. Hauser explains that a rhetorical culture is found in the secondary associations that constitute the web of civil society—in the internal and emergent public spheres where members consider issues that have significance for their association as well as the networks in which they are involved. (Rhetorical Democracy). Thus, a rhetorical culture is sustained by legitimizing the vernacular discourse of publics. Accordingly, we must recognize that public opinion begins with individual citizens and citizen publics who generate action regarding public issues. In order to empower citizens as rhetorical influencers, political leaders must recognize the efficacy of vernacular voices so that we as a society embrace not only the principle, but also the practice of deliberative democracy.

Providing Access to Public Forums:

Fostering citizen ownership of public problems and recognizing the legitimacy of citizen deliberation is a communication challenge. For deliberative democracy to work, everyday citizens require access to venues that promote rhetorical participation. It is important to note that it is not necessary for all citizens to participate in public discourse in order to achieve rhetorical legitimacy. What is important is that all citizens have access to discursive public spheres. By promoting communicative environments that encourage vernacular discourse, the conversations of individuals can emerge from private realms into the public arena where citizens can play a more prominent and influential role in deliberating about the issues that affect their lives.

The challenge of engaging vernacular voices can be met through open access to discursive public spheres—not only in terms of venues within which to communicate, but also in terms of an egalitarian communicative environments in which participants have
the ability to initiate topics, to pose questions, to contribute to a common body of knowledge, to scrutinize the discourse of others, and to engage in genuine deliberation. It is important to note that deliberation is not a passive enterprise—it involves attention to public matters, critical thinking about the implications of issues, and active engagement in discussion about public issues with other individuals. Accordingly, not all citizens will find civic engagement appealing. However, for those citizens who have the energy and interest, genuine participation in deliberative democracy requires access to communication venues that serve as civic commonplaces. While the activity of deliberative civic participation is not necessarily easy or convenient, entrée to communication venues for citizen deliberation must be reasonably accessible in practice and egalitarian in character.

Citizen ownership of public problems and the grass-roots building of public opinion cannot occur without conversations between and among citizens and citizen publics. Individual citizens need access to each other in order to initiate discussion about issues of common concern. Citizens engaged in conversation keep each other informed, thereby building a body of common knowledge and providing the context within which to understand public issues. Individual citizens need to engage each other in conversation in order to consider all sides of an issue, as well as to put forth their own arguments for public scrutiny. Deliberative democracy is both a theoretical ideal as well as a practical communication endeavor through which everyday citizens generate action regarding public issues. Accordingly, citizens in a democratic society need reasonable access to communication venues within which to function as genuine deliberators.
Engaging Vernacular Voices: From Targeting to Talking

Engaging vernacular voices is more a revelation of what exists than a recapturing of what has been lost. Citizen public discourse has not been lost—it has simply been operating under the radar, relegated to private spheres. The challenge facing deliberative democracy in contemporary American society lies in large part with the domination of professionalized, bureaucratized and quantified public discourse. As Putnam (Bowling Alone) and Mayhew (New Public) point out, American civic engagement has become increasingly professionalized, turning politics into the business of mass marketing public policy. The commercialization of political discourse serves to deprive everyday citizens from living out their role as deliberators.

Certainly the rhetorical influence of everyday citizens is diminished by the power of lobbyists and special interest groups who command the attention of political leaders. The domination of political communication by special interest groups has created a culture wherein citizens may be encouraged to believe that influence in formulating public policy is no longer a function of the individual citizen. In order for political leaders to engage citizens in the deliberative process, they simply need to tap into the multiplicity of vernacular voices already engaged in conversation.

Hauser emphasizes the value in examining the discourse of vernacular voices in terms of understanding public opinion:

Looking for and listening to vernacular rhetoric may lead us to see the men and women in our society as anything but apathetic and perhaps not completely unhappy. In their responses to the world we might hear a convergence of voices

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140 In Bowling Alone, Putnam argues that one of the consequences of this mind-set is that individual citizens join special interest groups that function as stand-in participants in civic engagement, creating what Putnam refers to as citizenship by proxy.
that introduce us to publics that are engaged but often overlooked or forgotten because they lack a place in our institutional public spheres. Finding them will not produce easy solutions to complex problems, nor will their discovery erase competing interests and the agonistic relations they spawn. But locating them and hearing their voices can provide a basis for engaging one another in ways that make democracy something more than a theory … (Vernacular Voices 266-7).

Hauser points out that vernacular talk is our prima facie rhetorical evidence that a public exists and what it thinks. Without attending to vernacular dialogues of publics, we lose the narratives in which opinions are contextualized and which allow us to interpret the meaning of judgments.

While vernacular rhetoric serves as evidence of the opinions of citizens and citizen publics, so often public opinion is gauged by polls and surveys. Hauser notes that “the predominance of survey data has replaced conscious attention to and reflection on rhetorical transactions as evidence of ‘the public’s’ existence, character, and opinion” (Vernacular Voices 6). Discursive public spheres are necessarily dialogic, allowing for open interaction between participants. In order understand opinions of publics, political leaders must move targeting to talking. So how do we practically move from the world of polls and surveys?

Concerned scholars have responded to the decline in civic participation and the decrease in citizen voices in public spheres with a variety of proposed solutions. However, most proposals continue to include a quantification of public opinion. John Dryzek’s Q Methodology\textsuperscript{141}, James Fishkin’s deliberative polling\textsuperscript{142}, and Daniel

\textsuperscript{141} Dryzek (Discursive Democracy), who argues for a style of political discourse that is more in the way of active dialogue among citizens, calls for reform through the implementation of Q Methodology. Hauser
Yankelovich’s model for public judgment\textsuperscript{143} offer varying approaches to understanding public sentiment. Each, however, fails to recognize the emergent, reticulate, and somewhat messy character of opinions of publics. As Michael Calvin McGee observes:

To determine the ‘effects’ of an argument, or to describe ‘the will of the people,’ a poll or survey is taken, and terms like majority or plurality are used to define the collective life. So in any age studied, individuals are distinguished, divided, and weighed by age, sex, occupation, religion, education, income, ad nauseam. It is supposed that an arithmetic of sorts can capture the spirit of a ‘people’ (In Search of ‘The People’ 342).

Proposals put forth by Dryzek, Fishkin, and Yankelovich do not move away from the quantification of discursive public spheres and continue to apply scientific measurements in an attempt to read public opinion instead of communicating with publics.

Public opinion is perhaps the most sought after and, yet, often the least understood political resource of our time. If we are to transcend the orchestration and quantification of public opinion by professional communicators, we need only listen to the discourse of everyday citizens. Rather than categorizing individuals demographically describes Dryzek’s method as “a highly sophisticated statistical method for arranging survey data” (Vernacular Voices 231). As it simply manipulates survey data rather than engage actual discourse, it would seem that Q Methodology applies additional scientific instrumentation to an already flawed process.

\textsuperscript{142} Fishkin (Voice of the People) also expresses concern about the sampling element of surveys and polls that offer at best a synecdoche as representative of public opinion. Alternatively, Fishkin argues for a face-to-face encounter where citizens can deliberate public issues. However, by orchestrating the discursive environment—randomly selecting participants and pre-selecting topics of discussion—Fishkin’s model fails to recognize the emergent and self-aware quality inherent in publics.

\textsuperscript{143} Yankelovich (Coming to Public Judgment) recognizes the need to understand the critical judgments that emerge from publics. Yankelovich claims that “the missing concept is a set of terms to describe the quality of public opinion and to distinguish ‘good’ public opinion from ‘bad’” (15). A psychologist by discipline, Yankelovich attempts to understand the conscious-raising process of how the public reaches judgment, a perspective that ignores the rhetorical character of publics. Additionally, while he acknowledges that polling is beset with practical difficulties, Yankelovich continues to rely on scientific measurement to understand public judgment.
and psychographically based upon pre-determined groupings, formulaic sets of questions, and random samplings, we should be engaging vernacular voices in conversation. If politicians and government leaders want to understand what individual citizens and citizen publics think about public problems, they need to move from targeting to talking.

A question remains as to how and where we locate the vernacular rhetoric of individual citizens and citizen publics. I have argued here—as Hauser has argued—that polls and surveys do not capture the rich texture of vernacular dialogue, and that we must, accordingly, look to the discourse itself if we are to understand the opinions of everyday citizens. There are those who might question the reliability of examining vernacular rhetoric to understand opinions of publics by pointing to the challenges of locating and sampling vernacular discourse. Admittedly, decisions as to which voices we listen to and how we choose them cannot escape inherent biases. Yet, unlike polling samples, vernacular conversations are not pre-determined by professional communicators and political operatives. Nor are the voices of everyday citizens and citizen publics pre-selected in the same fashion as newspaper editors choose which letters and opinion pieces get published, or the manner in which television or radio producers decide who gets on the air. Vernacular voices are not pre-selected—they emerge rhetorically as they are moved to speak out about issues that capture their interest in communication venues of their own choosing. Hauser explains:

We locate these narratives in the myriad of public spheres in which people exchange opinions about the impact of worldly conditions and public policies on families, jobs, health, neighborhoods, children, the environment, schools, and the
host of problems that are the common struggles they share with strangers”

(Vernacular Voices 265).

Hauser offers a valuable theoretical perspective for understanding the nature of publics and their discourse. If we are cognizant of the emergent quality of vernacular dialogue and seek to engage everyday citizens in conversation without the pre-determined framing of polls and surveys, then we must tap into conversations with everyday citizens. Yet, where do we find vernacular dialogue? I maintain that this is a practical question that calls for practical solutions. Throughout this project, I have argued that the Internet offers hope in providing a communicative environment for vernacular voices.

*Deliberative Democracy Online: Implications of the Internet for Vernacular Voices*

To a large extent, the Internet in general and discussion forums in particular respond to the challenges of citizen discourse in contemporary American society. The Internet seems to offer a commonplace that can move toward bridging the communicative disconnect between individuals, publics, and government. Online discussion forums provide cyber activists a discursive sphere within which they can initiate discussions, provide each other with context and background information, sort through differences in opinion, and generate action. The Internet, thus, serves as a rhetorical commonplace where cyber publics emerge as a community of sorts that integrates into a reetriculate web of public spheres.

One of the questions that has resonated throughout this inquiry is the extent to which citizen engagement in virtual communities can replace the face-to-face civic associations that have declined. Certainly, cyber communities cannot entirely replicate the interdependence of shared neighborhoods with real neighbors whose lives are
intertwined. Yet, as Putnam (Bowling Alone) points out, most of us do not participate actively in our neighborhood communities; and Hauser reminds us that discursive communities emerge not in physical places, but in rhetorical spaces. While they are not perfect, the online discussion forums studied serve as catalysts for deliberative engagement of vernacular voices by offering rhetorical common spaces.

Citizens who use the Internet to participate in political activity are also more likely to be civically engaged in the real world. In a 2004 study that draws on Keller and Berry’s *The Influentials*, the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet at George Washington University found that citizens involved in politics through the Internet are far more likely to engage in other civic activities (Darr, Banko & Robinson). The institute’s study found that online activists are:

- Seven times more likely than the general public to have attended a political rally, speech or protest in the last two to three months.
- Nearly five times more likely to have contacted a politician.
- Over four times more likely to have donated money to a political candidate.
- Three times more likely to have written a letter to the editor.
- Three times more likely to belong to groups trying to influence public policy.

Assuming these findings are representative of a trend in the relationship between online and offline political engagement, it would seem that the Internet provides some hope in reinvigorating a decline in associative life.

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144 Keller and Barry argue that about one in ten of the adult population of the US are those influential Americans who make the society, culture, and marketplace run. Highly engaged in workplace and community, the influencers are responsible for trends in the marketplace and in politics by influencing mass opinion through word of mouth.
Certainly, one could question whether activity on the Internet inspires civic engagement or whether political participation motivates cyber activism. Regardless of which activity inspires the other, the correlation is clear—politically active individuals participate in online civic engagement. Accordingly, the Internet clearly offers a communication venue that citizens have embraced. To those who might argue that time spent online is really a sole activity and, therefore, just another version of *bowling alone*, I would point to the increase in real world civic engagement that corresponds to political activity on the Internet.¹⁴⁵

The significance of the Internet as a venue for everyday citizens to participate in the democratic process is being recognized in academic, corporate, as well as political arenas.¹⁴⁶ For example, a number of institutions of higher learning sponsor public discourse initiatives that include an online element. Some of the more prominent endeavors include Fishkin’s Deliberative Polling project through the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, the Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet at George Washington University, and the Virtual Agora sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Information Technology & Society at Carnegie Mellon University. Public and private institutions are also supporting projects that examine public discourse and the Internet, such as the Pew Charitable Trust’s Internet & American Life Project. In the corporate world, the Computer Professionals for Social

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¹⁴⁵ Not only are everyday citizens engaging in political activities online, but the assimilation of the Internet into real world politics is evident at all points of the political communication triangle. Political campaigns use the Internet for recruiting volunteers and raising money; interest groups and grass-roots activists alike connect with supporters on the Net; and mainstream as well as independent media have Websites and Blogs. Certainly, those participating in the real world of politics have embraced the Internet as useful—and arguably a necessary—communication tool. Political communication on the Net has clearly integrated itself into the real world political landscape.

¹⁴⁶ See Appendix G for a partial list of some of the more prominent initiatives that seek to encourage the deliberative process. Many of these projects connect their public discourse initiatives with the Internet.
Responsibility sponsor the Public Sphere Project, an initiative that promotes the use of communication technology in civic and community problem solving. What all of these initiatives, in addition to numerous others, have in common is that their sponsors are clearly concerned about a lack of participation in public discourse by everyday citizens; and, in many instances, they seek to inspire greater citizen participation through efforts that recognize the value of incorporating communication on the Net.

Not only does the Internet provide a commonplace for cyber publics to participate in civic discourse, but it also offers an exceptional opportunity for political leaders to engage constituents in real dialogue. From a practical standpoint, the Internet presents a communicative environment where politicians can tap into existing vernacular conversations and initiate new discussions with constituents. Many government officials, civic leaders, and political hopefuls have created an Internet presence with Websites and, in some instances, with Blogs. Yet, the Internet also offers a valuable communication tool for political leaders to understand the grass-roots public opinion formation of their constituents, as well as to participate in dialogue with them. Through participation in pre-existing discussion forums, or by offering discussion forum formats on their own Websites, politicians can practically move from a reliance on polls and surveys to engaging everyday citizens in conversation. Unlike typical Websites and Blogs, which often serve as just another avenue by which politicians can deliver their message, interactive discussion forums invite citizens to post comments without pre-framing or interference from professional communicators. Accordingly, political leaders can engage constituents in open dialogue about issues that are deemed important by citizen participants. The Internet offers the means to move from targeting to talking.
Challenges and Opportunities for Cyber Publics

Certainly, the Internet enhances communication, which is fundamental prerequisite for social connections. As Putnam points out, social capital is about networks, and the Internet is the mother of all networks (Bowling Alone). One of the benefits to citizen discourse online is the open and unwieldy character of the Internet that allows for discussions to take place relatively free from government and marketplace interference. However, the Internet’s autonomy is being challenged by its increased commercialization. Lincoln Dalhberg explains:

While state censorship and surveillance has been readily targeted by online civil liberties groups, a possibly greater threat to public online discursive spaces is the increasing commercialization and privatization of cyberspace. The rapid commercialization of cyberspace and increasing control of Internet infrastructure and content by major corporate players, driven by vertical integration such as the massive Time Warner-America Online and Vodafone-Mannesmann mergers in 2000, is leading towards a consumer-oriented cyberspace that promises to either marginalize online public discourse or incorporate it within privatized and individualized forms of interaction: online commerce, entertainment, and business communication. (Extending the Democratic Sphere)

While I would question Dahlberg’s conclusion that commerce presents a greater threat to public discourse online than does state censorship and surveillance, Dahlberg correctly observes that given the embeddedness of the Internet within society’s broader political and economic context, discourse in cyber space cannot completely avoid government and
marketplace influences. Dahlberg notes, however, that an examination of the Internet reveals a multiplicity of discursive spaces that are relatively free from direct corporate or government control. As this investigation of online discourse suggests, the easy and economical access of online discussion forums provides somewhat open venues for citizen interaction. While the Internet obviously does not operate outside of the commercial and political forces that serve to restrict all discourse, nevertheless, it provides a promising communication venue for self-directed citizen discussion.

Discussion forums on the Net also enjoy some freedom from the domination of professional voices. As the case study in Chapter Four demonstrates, everyday citizens are engaging in discussions about public problems that matter in their lives. However, it is important to recognize that online discussions are not immune to the broad influences of media and professional communicators in framing public conversations. In spite of the ability of forum participants to introduce new topics, the mainstream media continues to have an agenda-setting influence on forum discussions. For the most part, everyday citizens must rely on the media to inform us about current events. Accordingly, the media sets the broader agenda within which vernacular discussions take place. And so, while citizen voices engage each other with relative freedom from direct control, online discussion forums do not operate in an unspoiled communication environment.

As I have argued elsewhere in this project, a significant benefit of online discussion is the ability of participants to remain anonymous, thereby avoiding preconceptions and attributions that are tied to status and power and that serve to corrupt the egalitarian character of discourse. Online, power relationships are defused as anonymous discourse is free of the social cues that serve to circumscribe face-to-face
discussions. Consequently, the validity of online arguments lies within the discourse itself, creating what I have referred to as a content laden ethos that foregrounds ideas over identity. Without the inherent credibility that may come with status, online discussion participants must engender credibility within their argument.

Not only does content laden ethos contribute to the egalitarian character of online discussions, it also foregrounds the quality of argument. The validity of claims, the credibility of sources that are used as grounds, and the rationality of arguments are the sole criteria against which other discussion participants judge credibility. Anonymous discourse places responsibility on discussion contributors to put forth arguments that can hold up to the scrutiny of other participants. Thus, well substantiated argument becomes a bi-product of anonymity, diminishing what Mayhew (New Public) refers to as token arguments lacking amplification and context that dominate public discourse.

Yet, anonymous discourse is not without its problems. While online conversations are relatively free of the social markers that can circumscribe face-to-face discourse, anonymous communication can also invite deception. Ideas can be manipulated when one engages in conversation with someone who is not who he/she claims to be. For example, a post by David Duke on Stormfront, a White Nationalist Community forum, instructs supporters to advance Duke’s message by anonymously infiltrating online discussion forums. Duke tells supporters that, “If your posts are intelligent and thought-provoking other people on the forums will begin discussing your posts and the play will become very wide again. Any dedicated person can reach tens of thousands of new people with our message each evening if they are disciplined enough to
do it! It would seem that the anonymity of the Duke supporters allows them to manipulate the forum venue in service of special interest group publicity, reducing them to *spammers* rather than discussants. Yet, forum participants seem capable of recognizing those who seek to manipulate discussion forums—perhaps by discerning the nature of the website links or articles that are included in posts (such as the Duke example) or perhaps simply through the discourse itself—as forum threads are abundant with posts that seek to expose *plants* and *spammers*. The same holds true for *trolls* who take advantage of anonymity to visit discussion forums for the purpose of annoying or antagonizing rather than participating in debate. Forum participants collaborate as watchdogs by exposing *trolls* and the deceptive practices of those that serve to hinder civic discussion and to taint the vernacular character of discussion forums.

Undoubtedly, anonymity can be a threat to civil discourse — it invites the possibility of deceit and idea manipulation; it allows special interest publicity-seekers to infiltrate citizen discussions; it may even encourage offensiveness of expression, and uncivil behavior. However, I would argue that these risks are offset by the benefit afforded to participants by the absence of social cues that inhibit a genuine marketplace of ideas. I am reminded of this amusing quote attributed to Mark Twain: *In Boston they ask, how much does he know? In New York, how much is he worth? In Philadelphia, who were his parents?* I would add that in online discussion forums they ask, how good is the argument? In part as a consequence of anonymity, participants judging the value of

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147 Duke’s post is available on Stormfront, the White Nationalist Community’s online forum. Note that Stormfront is the community that was invited to engage in discussions about racism on USPOL—an invitation that generated a spirited debate on the USPOL site and which is mentioned in Chapter Four of this project. The full Stormfront discussion thread which includes Duke’s post is available at: [http://www.stormfront.org/forum/printthread.php?t=171172&pp=40](http://www.stormfront.org/forum/printthread.php?t=171172&pp=40).
cyber discussions must base their evaluations on the quality of ideas, the soundness of arguments, and the reasonableness of conclusions. We have little else to go on, and that is ultimately a good thing.

Conclusions:

I acknowledge that we Americans have historically looked to technology for solving many of our social ills. Certainly, technological advances in communication have impacted the American political landscape: railroads provided for the mass distribution of print materials; the telegraph offered instantaneous election results; radio allowed citizens to hear the voices of our political leaders, a tool so skillfully employed by FDR with his fireside chats; television altered the ways in which political candidates presented themselves, as dramatically demonstrated with the 1960 presidential debates. Most recently, the Internet is connecting citizens and citizen publics to information, to each other, and to their government in a manner that is instantaneous and highly interactive. As Thomas Benson observes, “everyone has the floor, twenty-four hours a day”(363). While the Internet is not a utopian communicative environment and it is not without its problems, it offers a rich and energetic commonplace for citizens to participate in civic discussion.

The Internet has clearly become a part of the fabric of American life—we shop, bank, do research, make travel plans, chat with friends, and just hang out online. We also discuss issues that matter in our public lives. Marshall McLuhan (Understanding Media) argues that societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which we communicate than by the content of the communication. While I would argue that both the medium and the message shape our culture, McLuhan’s assertion offers a fitting
insight for this inquiry. American citizens are adapting to civic discourse online in increasing numbers. We are learning how to log on, post contributions and scan threads—all using the technological conventions of the Net. However, we must be mindful of the temporal and shifting character of the Internet. Like all technology, the Internet is a transient tool and, thus, provides only a temporary answer to some of our public communication challenges.

Admittedly, this work does not constitute a comprehensive examination of political discussion on the Internet. Nonetheless, some conclusions can be drawn as to the challenges and opportunities that the Net holds for the engagement of vernacular voices. The implications of the Internet in general, and discussion forums in particular for animating vernacular voices are these: first, the Internet plays a significant role in fostering ownership of public problems by promoting venues for citizen discussion where participants can inform and engage each other, working through solutions to shared problems; secondly, discussions that take place online extend and enliven citizen participation that is declining in face-to-face venues, a consequence that has implications for the real world political landscape; finally, cyber public spheres—especially discussion forums—are in large part the jurisdiction of everyday citizens, thereby diminishing the control of professional communicators over public discourse.

What it means to be politically engaged has not changed in theory. The principle of deliberative democracy is still valid—that democratic legitimacy results from free deliberation by citizens about matters of common public concern. Yet, the pragmatic aspect of deliberative democracy—how we actually live out the deliberative process—changes with the times. The public spheres within which we deliberate are necessarily
dynamic and adaptable. How political engagement gets lived out is in a constant state of change as society changes. What is important is to be ever-mindful of the inextricable connection between healthy public spheres of vernacular discourse and a healthy democracy. So, we must continue to adapt our thinking about how vernacular voices are animated.

Our complex contemporary society challenges our capacity to stay informed as well as our ability to circumvent the cacophony of media and professional communicators. Yet, vernacular voices are participating in civic life. To those who wonder if the pollsters and pundits will stop and listen for vernacular voices to be heard, I would point to the increasing number of political operatives and government representatives who are turning to the Internet to connect with constituent publics. As political leaders come to realize that everyday citizens are talking about issues with each other and are forming opinions outside the direct control of professional communicators, perhaps vernacular voices will gain a greater efficacy. The recognition that online discourse transcends the cyber world into the real world political landscape gives hope for deliberative democracy.

Future Research: Where Do We Go From Here?

This project began by seeking to examine the ways in which ordinary citizens engage in public spheres of discourse. Through this inquiry, I have attempted to answer some questions about the relationship between deliberative democracy, public spheres of discourse for everyday citizens, and cyber space. Still, there are a number of questions yet to be answered, and future research would enhance this work.
This inquiry is riddled with tensions—finding a middle ground that respects freedom of speech as well as the boundaries of civil discourse, balancing the need for sustainable venues of public communication against the agenda-setting consequences of marketplace influences, and negotiating the paradoxical consequences of anonymous discourse. Certainly, these dilemmas are not new; the current conditions of public discourse along with the technology of the Internet merely provide a new set of frames within which to decipher them. Hopefully, the conclusions and implications revealed through this inquiry can contribute to ongoing research into the montage that is deliberative democracy in action.
Appendix A

A Partial List of Political Polling Organizations
(excluding mass media)

International public opinion and strategic research firm providing consulting services for advocacy organizations, political candidates, political parties, government officials, labor unions, and corporations.

Metropolitan Atlanta firm that specializes in providing quality research and strategic advice to corporations, associations, and Republican political candidates.

Center on Policy Attitudes - http://www.policyattitudes.org
Founded in 1992, The Center on Policy Attitudes was created to help give a greater voice to the American public in the policymaking process by conducting in-depth nationwide polls, focus groups, and interviews.

Charlton Research - http://www.charltonresearch.com/
A full-service research and consulting firm which specializes in conducting public affairs and public policy research for a wide variety of clients ranging from large corporations and trade associations to government and quasi-governmental agencies.

Part of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University and under the direction of James Fishkin, the center is devoted to research about democracy and public opinion obtained through Deliberative Polling, a technique which combines deliberation in small group discussions with scientific random sampling to provide public consultation for public policy and for electoral issues.

A Colorado-based public opinion and political analysis firm. Provides results of current polls, links on current issues and list of upcoming events.

Eagleton Institute/ Rutgers University - http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/
Explores state and national politics through research, education, and public service, linking the study of politics with its day-to-day practice.

An international survey and strategic consulting firm serving political candidates and corporations.
Hamilton Beattie & Staff - http://www hbstaff.com/
Offices in Washington, DC and Fernandina Beach, FL. Clients include political parties, candidates, media, issues advocacy, referenda, and major corporations.

Boulder, Colorado, political polling, PR research, market research, and strategic consulting firm.

Hill Research Consultants - http://www.hillresearch.com
A national firm that has provided accurate and cost-effective public opinion polling and market research since 1988 to political campaigns, corporations, schools, law firms, and associations.

Marist Institute for Public Opinion, Marist College - http://www.maristpoll.marist.edu
Founded in 1978, the Marist Institute for Public Opinion (MIPO) is a survey research center at Marist College and is used as a source by print and broadcast media organizations throughout the country.

Mason-Dixon Polling and Research - http://www.mason-dixon.com/
A major US political polling firm specializing in state polls.

An international survey research and strategic services company, specializing in public opinion polls, market research, strategic consulting services, and media buying.

Moore Information, Inc. - http://moore-info.com
A Portland Oregon firm that provides public opinion research for campaigns and corporations across the United States.

Now in its 27th year of operation, the firm has conducted well over 5,000 public opinion surveys. The Garin-Hart-Yang Research Group, the political division of the firm, does political polling for Democratic candidates.

An independent opinion research group that studies attitudes toward the press, politics and public policy issues.

Polling Point – http://www.pollingpoint.com/polls.html
Managed by Polimetrix, a non-partisan polling organization located in California, PollingPoint conducts surveys over the Internet about public affairs and other topics of general interest.

An independent, nonpartisan resource on trends in American public opinion regarding politics, business, society.

PRiMeR, Ltd. – http://www.v-primer.com/
Providing opinion research and polling for candidates, organizations, and governments in the US and worldwide. Capabilities include focus groups, face-to-face interviews, and telephone surveys.

Worldwide independent survey firm employing telephone interviewing.

Public Agenda - http://www.publicagenda.org/
Founded by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda, a New York-based nonprofit that does opinion surveys on a range of issues.

a national Republican political and public affairs research firm with its roots in political campaigns, its research is focused on producing information that drives decisions and results.

Olney, Maryland-based polling and research firm specializing in U.S. state and local elections. Staff and company profiles, op-eds, media citations, and poll result archives included.

Roper Center for Public Opinion - http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/
Roper Center is the largest library of public opinion data in the world. The Center's mission focuses on data preservation and access, education, and research on public opinion.

Schapiro Research Group – http://www.schapiroresearchgroup.com
National political and public opinion polling firm which provides public opinion research and strategies.

Founded in 1981, SRB is a full-service global strategy and research organization specializing in public policy and opinion surveys.

Scientific Marketing Analysis – http://www.scientificmarketing.net/
A public opinion, market research and political consulting firm specializing in polling for Republican candidates, corporations and interest groups.

A survey research company specializing in political and election surveys, litigation services, church and religious organizational surveys and media research.
The Gallup Brain – http://brain.gallup.com
searchable databases of poll data since 1935 on a fee basis.

The Gallup Organization – http://www.gallup.com/
Provides research and consulting services around the world. Publisher of the Gallup Poll, a widely recognized barometer of American opinion.

The Polling Company – http://www.pollingcompany.com/
A full-service market research, public affairs and political consulting firm with offices in Washington and San Francisco.

The Tarrance Group – http://www.tarrance.com/
A national Republican polling firm, providing polls, election information, and related services.

On-line public opinion research firm specializing in database surveys.

Zogby International – http://www.zogby.com/
A leading polling firms in the United States and the official North American and South American political polling agency for Reuters.
Articles on and discussion of world issues and geopolitical events.

  Professional discussion on the diplomacy, international organizations, and issue regarding news media.
- Political Discussion Forum - http://www.geocities.com/comradediscussion/
  Message board and opinion polls.
- The E-opinion Political Weekly - http://www.geocities.com/ghsiesopnieopinion
  We are a news site devoted to giving you the news like it is and then giving you opinions to form around.
  After you decide where you stand on an issue, we supply you with chat rooms and forums for you to
  voice your new opinions.
- Arcis Foundation - http://www.arcis.co.uk/
  Open and free discussion of important political, current world affairs and religious issues.
- WeBaddiesForum - http://igreenesper.org/phpBB
  A forum for discussing the proposition that the developed Western world are the 'bad guys' of the world
today.
- Political Roundtable - http://www.politicalroundtable.com/forums/
  Forum for discussion and debate of political issues.
  Open forum for the discussion of social and political topics.
- Spin Shield - http://www.spinshield.org
  Add your own comments and read the comments left by other visitors. Topics include the economy,
  foreign policy, elections, government, media, law and order and religion.
- Citizens for Fair and Just Voting (CFJV) - http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CFJV
  Advocates electoral reform in the United States.
- International Perspectives Forum - http://ipf.vintari.com
  Discussion forum for international issues and the contingent factors that impact global foreign affairs.
  Intends to promote intelligent discussion of news and issues in order to create a better understanding of
  opposing points of view.
- Patriotic America - http://pub38.ezboard.com/patrioticamerica
  Forum open to all viewpoints.
- Scullyspost.com - http://scullyspost.com/
  An online community for debating politics and current events.

Help build the largest human-edited directory on the web.
Submit a Site  Open Directory Project  Become an Editor

Modified by Google - ©2006 Google
Advertise with Us • Jobs, Press, Cool Stuff...

Appendix C
Whistle Stopper Political Resources

News
Google News
Yahoo News
Reuters
MSNBC
Fox News
CNN
BBC News
World Press Review

Blogs
Asymmetrical Information
Crooked Timber
Daily Kos
Eschaton
Instapundit
Little Green Footballs
Matthew Yglesias
MOOREWATCH
MyDD
Obsidian Wings
Political Animal
Political Wire
Right Wing News
Sensible Election
Talking Points Memo
The Smirking Chimp
USS Clueless
Wonkette

Opinion/Editorial
AlterNet
Common Dreams
Counter Currents
counterpunch
National Review
The New Republic
TomPaine.com
Townhall.com
Opinion Journal from the Wall Street Journal

Political Parties/Candidates
Democratic National Committee
Green Party
Republican National Committee
George W. Bush
John Kerry
Ralph Nader
Conservative Party (UK)
Labour Party (UK)
Liberal Democrats (UK)

Polls/Election Resources
Polling Report
Rasmussen Reports
Zogby

Reference
Congress Merge
The Declaration of Independence
The United States Constitution
Amendments to the Constitution (including the Bill of Rights)
Congress.org
Political Dictionary
OpenSecrets.org: Money in Politics
THOMAS - search Bills, sponsors, votes, etc.
The World Factbook (CIA)

Government Sites
U.S. House of Representatives
U.S. Senate
Supreme Court of the United States
The White House

Government Statistics
Fed Stats
National Center for Education Statistics
U.S. Department of Labor

Political Humor
About Political Humor
The Onion

Religion
Religious Forums
Bible Reference
Appendix D
Whistle Stopper E-mail Discussion with JD3

Private Message: Re: using this site in my doctoral dissertation

Re: using this site in my doctoral dissertation

Originally Posted by rhetorician
Hello,

I'm using the Whistle Stopper site in a case study chapter of my doctoral dissertation on citizen public spheres of discourse. I'm writing to you as I see you are a moderator and I'm hoping that you can answer a question.

I have a specific question that I can't seem to answer by looking on the site: how do forums get started? Can members initiate new forums?

Also, how do forums that have outlived their interest get 'retired'? Who decides? These questions are important insofar as I'm interested in to what extent participants control the topics of conversation.

I'm very grateful for any insight you can give. Thanks so much for your time!!

best,
Linda / a.k.a. rhetorician
Suggestions are made by either members or moderators. We discuss it and often vote. Up2date owns the site and always has the final word. Like the American election forum, that closed once the elections were over. However, that too went through a discussion as to when to officially end it.

Hope this helps.

Joe

Joe

"We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine; and remember that we are not descended from fearful men. Not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate, and to defend causes that were for the moment unpopular... We can deny our heritage and our history, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result."
Appendix E
E-mail discussion with Crystal at USPOL

U.S. Politics Online: A Political Discussion
Forum;http://www.uspoliticsonline.com/forums
==================================================

From : rhetorician
To : Crystal
Date : 2006-05-06 13:07
Title : using this site in my doctoral dissertation
---------------------------------------------------
Hello Crystal,

I see that you are an administrator on this site (and Samantha suggested I contact you), so I'm hoping that you might we willing to help me with some information about the site. I'm using this site in a case study chapter of my doctoral dissertation on citizen public discourse.

My question revolves around the initiation of new forums. How do new forums get started? Can a member start a new forum? If so, what is the process? If not, then who decides. Also, what about old forums that outlive their interest? How do they get 'retired'. Basically I'm interested in to what extent members / contributors can set the agenda.

Any insight you can give will be enormously appreciated.

Thanks much!
Linda, a.k.a. rhetorician

Folder : Inbox
#######

From : Crystal
To :
Date : 2006-05-09 00:22
Title : Re: using this site in my doctoral dissertation
--------------------------------------------------------------
I am so sorry about the delay in my response.

There are two types of forums within this one forum. There are public forums and private forums. A public forum would be the main sub-forums that everyone sees and registered members can participate in. Access to a private forum is by invitation only;
although we do have one private forum that members gain access to once their post count reaches a certain number.

Members on this site may not open a public forum. Only an administrator may set up new public space. For example, the hot topic these days has been illegal immigration. The sub-forums "Breaking News in Politics" and "US Politics" were flooded with immigration topics which prevented other topics from receiving much attention. I set up a separate public sub-forum for immigration policies.

Subscribing members (members who donate money to help with monthly costs) may request a private forum be set up. The member names the forum, decides what the theme of the sub-forum will be, and invites only the members they want into the private forum. Membership is handled differently in the private forums. Some private forums take a vote on if "so-n-so" should be invited. Others say, "Hey, I wanna invite so-n-so." and then an invite goes out. Invitations must be accepted to be granted access to the private forum. Some private forums require a majority approval for an invite. Some require a 75% approval for an invite. We also have two private forums where no vote takes place. In one of those a regular member will say, "Hey, let's invite so-n-so" and an invite is sent. In the other, someone will say, "Hey, let's invite so-n-so" and then that person is automatically given access to the private forum, regardless of if they want to be there or not. Of course, any member of a private forum may opt out the private forum at any time.

WRT forums that outlive their interest, we don't really retire them. We shuffle them around. For example, the immigration policy forum, once interest has died on the topic I will move it down the list a little bit. It will no longer have a place at the top of the forum list. At some point, it may be necessary to combine forums, so Immigration Policy might be combined with some other forum. The current events section of the forum will change from time to time depending on what the current events are. Obviously, once a subject is no longer a current event it will be moved.

to be cont...

---
From: Crystal
To: 
Date: 2006-05-09 00:23
Title: Re: using this site in my doctoral dissertation

cont...

As for the extent of the members involvement in setting the agenda, I listen to and consider every suggestion. We have a forum for suggestions and comments. I wholehearted believe that this is our member's site. I "work" for them because without them this place would not exist. I want this forum to continue to grow and to be
successful and I want members to help with the monthly costs of operation and in order to achieve those goals this has to be a place members feel is worth donating money to, worth spending their time at, and worth suggesting to friends. If you look down in the suggestions forum you will see a request for an “illegal immigrants section”. I read it and set up the Immigration Policy section. Sometimes members will also ask if certain threads can be merged if we have two or more threads on the same or similar topic. Also, all members can report any post. We get several reports from members and they range from reporting a violation to asking "why is so-n-so allowed to have that screen name (for a variety of reason ranging from vulgar to their name is spam) or even,"hey, check out this sig. Is that allowed?". When re-writing the rules, which have yet to be posted, I kept member suggestions in mind. Also, members know they can come to me or O'Sullivan Bere (Peter) with anything and that we will listen and be fair. Our members have a lot of say in this board and I think that's why so many chose to stick around for years.

I have to admit, it's easy to give the members a lot of say because after being here for years friendships have formed. I've met members, several members have my phone number. We instant message each other, email each other, send private messages and genuinely care for one another despite our political differences. I have to brag on my members for a minute. Last September when Hurricane Katrina struck, we have two members who live in the area...one in New Orleans and one in Slidell. It was suggested by a member that a fund be set up to help out. Marc, the site owner, did just that and all money donated to the site that month was evenly divided between those two. We collected over $1,100 to be divided. We have a real community here, not just some internet board.
Appendix F
E-mail Discussion with Marc at USPOL

Date: Sat, 29 Apr 2006 17:55:11 -0700
From: "U.S. Politics Online" <marc@uspoliticsonline.com>
To: "rhetorician @ U.S. Politics Online: A Political Discussion Forum"
<lsrhetorician-politics@yahoo.com>
Subject: Re: U.S. Politics Online: A Political Discussion Forum Contact Us Form - Site Feedback

Linda,

Just wanted to let you know that I got your e-mail and will respond the best that I can. The site was started December of 2000. The main thing I was trying to do at first was to create an online discussion forum for my students at the time as I was a graduate teaching assistant for some undergrad Political Science courses. I had several public forums and registered the site in major search engines, including Google and Yahoo! There wasn't really too much activity way back then, but a little. I think it would be quite useful for you to print some usage graphs from inception until now as it graphically illustrates the slow days and then the days after I finally had a little more time to put effort into it and get some active moderation going. This wasn't until 2002 if I remember right, but maybe early 2003. I asked a couple other members to be moderators and started doing what I could to make the site more appealing. It was a major month when we first hit 1,000+ posts in a single month. Since it has taken off we have had months with 30,000+...or 1,000+ per day. I have had to change service providers a couple of times due to the increased activity and eventually moved to a dedicated server.

As for popularity a lot of it has to do with finding some good moderators and setting some good rules that minimize limitations on free speech, but also provide some restrictions so people won't be afraid to speak thinking they may be insulted every time. This is not easy and we have revised the rules many times. I have worked hard to make sure the rules maintain this balance; many other sites don't have a good balance from my experience.

I am looking forward to reading your chapter(s). This fall I plan on finally applying to some PhD programs. I have my MA in Political Science with an emphasis in Public Policy and American Government and am currently working on my MPA from the UW. If you have any more questions please do not hesitate to ask. It may also be helpful to remind be about getting you those usage statistics as I get quite busy working 40-50 hours per week and going to graduate school full-time. =) Where are you going to school? If you ever have interest in a joint venture on a paper or anything just let me know. =)

Talk to you soon.
Marc

rhetorician @ U.S. Politics Online: A Political Discussion Forum wrote:
The following message was sent to you via the U.S. Politics Online: A Political Discussion Forum Contact Us form by rhetorician.

--------------------------------
Hello,

Currently, I am writing my doctoral dissertation on public discourse by everyday citizens, looking to the Internet in general and discussion forums in particular as venues for citizen rhetoric. I find this site to be one of the best sites for my purpose. Accordingly, it will be one of the focus sites the case study chapter that I am currently writing.

It would be extremely useful if I could find any background information about how the site got started, when initiated, how it progressed to its current form and popularity, etc. Any information you can give is greatly appreciated. In turn, if I can share any of what I discover through my project, I am happy to do so. Also, if you want a copy of the case study chapter, I will certainly provide it.

Finally, may I contact you again as I proceed with this chapter over the next 1-2 weeks? I anticipate that other questions may come up. In the meantime, please know that while I'll be lurking, I will not participate in discussions that I'll use in my study. I want to keep it 'pure' and not skew the discussion through my interaction.

I look forward to hearing from you soon. In the meantime, thanks for a great site!!!!!

Linda Schifino
Ph.D. Candidate in Rhetoric

--------------------------------
Referring Page:
IP Address: 71.240.32.214
User Name: rhetorician
User ID: 5239
Appendix G
A Partial List of Public Discourse Projects and Initiatives
by Public and Private Institutions

America Speaks, a nonprofit organization that develops deliberative tools for citizens and

Center for Deliberative Democracy, a project sponsored by Stanford University and

Center for Digital Democracy, a privately funded non-profit organization.
http://www.democraticmedia.org

Center on Policy Attitudes (COPA), a University of Maryland initiative.
http://www.policyattitudes.org

Institute for Civic Discourse & Democracy, sponsored by Kansas State University
www.k-state.edu/icdd/

Institute for Politics Democracy & the Internet, sponsored by George Washington
University www.ipdi.org

Kettering Foundation, a private foundation sponsoring initiatives on a variety of social
issues, including research on public deliberation. http://www.kettering.org/

Pew Internet and American Life Project, an research initiative sponsored by the Pew

Polling Point, a private initiative managed by Polimetrix, a nonprofit polling
organization.  http://www.pollingpoint.com/

Public Agenda, a public opinion research organization chaired and co-founded by Daniel

Public Conversations Project, an organization offering workshops and other services that
foster constructive conversations among communicators with differing values,

Public Dialogue Consortium, group of educators, consultants, and communication
practitioners who promote discourse on public issues.
http://publicdialogue.org

Public Sphere Project, an initiative of the Computer Professionals for Social
Student Voices, a project sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. http://student-voices.org/

Virtual Agora, a project sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Information Technology & Society at Carnegie Mellon University. www.cmu.edu/cc/vaproject
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