THE EMERGING MEDIA REVOLUTION: CONSIDERING THE INFLUENCE OF NEW MEDIA FORMS ON DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provided an investigation into the reflexive relation between media consolidation and the evolution of new media forms. This study explored both the impact of media consolidation on the social and political landscape in the United States, as well as the influential role that new media have played in re-shaping the dialogue that occurs in the mainstream media. The thesis included an historical examination of the mass media in the United States, framed around the legislative and judicial decisions that have shaped the industry, explored the notion of regulated vs. unregulated forms of governance of the media industry, and considered the potential for true reform in our media system. An important component of this is an analysis of the recent trend of new media and the evolution of the weblog [also referred to as a ‘blog’ a contraction of web and log]. This study explored instances where the “Greek Chorus” nature of weblogs in our national dialogue has impacted social and political movements by re-directing the focus of the mainstream mass media. The principal question of this study is whether or not the evolution of the media brought about by widespread proliferation of the Internet can help promote a more democratic media by enabling citizen participation outside the auspices of commercial mass media, and if so, in what ways?
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Importance of the Study

The concept that an informed electorate is the lifeblood of democracy is enshrined in our national guiding principals. The Founding Fathers believed so firmly that it was the role of the media to keep the public informed that they codified “Freedom of the Press” in the Bill of Rights. Over the course of our national history, the Freedom of the Press doctrine has been interpreted in two fundamentally different ways. The first interpretation is that the role of the media in the United States is to serve the public interest by educating and informing the electorate on key issues. The second and more popularly adopted interpretation of Freedom of the Press is that “Congress shall make no laws” that prohibit the ability of the owners of the media to profit through their enterprise.

The second interpretation of Freedom of the Press, that based on the right of self determination on the part of those corporations that own the media is based partly on the Supreme Court decision handed down in 1886, Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad Company (Nace, 2003). This landmark case, decided in favor of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, was a radical re-interpretation of the U.S. Constitution that extended Bill of Rights protections to corporations. This precedent is commonly referred to as “Corporate Personhood” and has been used to restrict the right of states to intervene in the affairs of business.

The precedent of Corporate Personhood has had an enormous impact on the evolution of mass media in the United States. This study will explore the evolution of
the mass media, which occurred under the auspices of this important legal precedent, which has colored interpretation of “Freedom of the Press” towards the second definition, that of protection of unregulated enterprise, and against the first interpretation, that the mass media should serve the public interest of informing the electorate.

As with several forms of mass media, including radio and television that have evolved over the past hundred years the Internet began by research and infrastructure development that was funded and undertaken by government institutions. Also consistent with all forms of mass media are current attempts by corporations to control that communication medium through legislative action directed in their interests. This study will explore the current legislation being proposed by the media conglomerates that seeks to control the Internet, placing it under their exclusive domain and harnessing its potential to serve the interests of their shareholders.

**Statement of the Problem**

In the light of these potential future restrictions, this study explores the evolution of the Internet as an enabler of a new form of media that has relatively low barriers to entry, and the impact on our national dialogue that has evolved from it. Of particular interest is the evolution of the blog. This study explores the impact that the blog has had on re-shaping national discourse on key issues over the past five years. Additionally, it explores the balance that exists between professional and communitarian journalistic enterprise. Clarity will be sought through an examination of relevant theoretical frameworks, and also through the consideration of key case studies.
Conclusions are drawn relating to the potential impact that weblog and other new media forms may have on reforming media and promoting democracy by producing an active dialogue surrounding the reporting of local and world affairs.

**Definition of Terms Used**

**Mass Media:** Also referred to as ‘mainstream media” or “old media,” the segment of media whose purpose is to reach a very broad audience. This term was first coined in the 1920’s to denote the advent of large radio networks, and the evolution of mass circulation print journalism.

**New Media:** A differentiation of newer forms of media enabled through electronic communications. New media forms include web sites, blogs, email, electronic kiosks, and podcasts. A key advantage of new media is its ability to promote interactivity between its consumers and originators.

**Communitarian Journalistic Enterprise:** Relates to journalistic activity that exists outside of the commercial mass media. Community journalism, while lacking the institutional backing and resources, is also free of many constraints that institutions place on expression.

**Weblogs or Blogs:** Blogs are websites that began as sources for individuals to publish their views along with links to content contained in other websites. Blogs traditionally have a particular topic that serves as a central theme, such as local news, politics, food, sports, etc. As blogs began building readership, they began to adopt characteristics of online communities with dialogue beginning to form among various readers.
Blogosphere: A collective term relating to the totality of blogs. This phrase is often used to refer to moods or sentiments that are reflected in blogs on any given topic given to public discourse.

Online Communities: Also referred to as a virtual community, the online community is a term for a group of people who interact via the Internet. The nature of online communities has been well defined in academic circles as evolving “when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships” (Rheingold, 1993).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis is laid out in five chapters. Chapter Two will review the literature in this field, and set out the research questions that will be the basis of this work. Chapter Three will describe the scope and methodology utilized for the study and set both the philosophical and theoretical frameworks from which this thesis emerges. Chapter Four, The Study, will make up that actual analysis of the thesis. Chapter Five will provide a summary and conclusions and challenges for future work.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Basis

As a theoretical framework for analysis of the potential of virtual communities to 'democratize' the media, the work of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas will be primarily considered. The idea of the Public Sphere, central to Habermas’ work, will be used as a measuring stick to the new media forms that have sprung into existence, mostly in the past decade.

In addition to Jürgen Habermas, the works of Noam Chomsky and Howard Rheingold will be considered as secondary sources in the review of literature related to the field. Chomsky’s work is particularly important as he identifies counter trends, ‘filters,’ that have historically served as obstacles to new advancements in mass communication. Rheingold’s work is relevant to this study as a baseline introduction to online communities which served as predecessors to blogs. Additionally, his journalistic background provides a unique perspective.

Mass Media and the ‘Refuudalization’ of the Public Sphere

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas published his study The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. This work differentiated between a highly idealized period of participative European liberal democracy, and a current state where a small group of elites controlled social consciousness through their monopoly on the mass media. As with much social commentary defining a ‘Utopian’ period, Habermas’ view of European bourgeois café society may contain an over-idealization. Habermas advanced the
potential of societal discourse while warning of the dangers of a pervasive mass media controlled by a few elite members of society. In doing so, he provides a highly relevant model for examining the role of communication advances such as blogs.

Habermas (1989) defined a bourgeois public sphere as evolving from the post-feudal European society around the start of the 18th century. This public sphere existed in the coffee houses and literary salons that were springing up in the newly forming urban middle class cultural milieu. The dialogue of the public sphere existed, for the first time, beyond the traditional control of feudal lords, and manifested through early newspapers, through public political debate, meeting halls, and other public spaces where participative discussion between private citizens was possible. In short, the public sphere was the beginning of a public consciousness.

This public sphere is thus identified by Habermas as a foundation of democracy. He saw that the ability of individuals to band together to conduct public discourse free from the control state power provided a forum to begin to redress arbitrary displays of power. This ability of individuals to organize their communication to overcome oppressive institutions was the start of public participation in state decision making.

After democratic governments were formed, Habermas contends, the public sphere began to become codified and embodied in the founding documents and institutions of the new states. These guarantees of free speech and free press, critical ingredients to the formation of democracy, began to be taken for granted by society. As communication evolved into an industry in its own right, serving to both inform, but also to enrich its owners, the concept of a ‘mass media’ began to take root.
The gradual process of ‘refeudalization’ is described by Habermas as the subtle co-option of the public sphere by the elite forces of state and corporations. This process, which takes place beginning in the 19th century, has, according to Habermas, led to the formation of a mass media that has the appearance of a public sphere, but that provides instead a highly manipulative consensus forming mechanism that both deceives and coerces the public in a manner prescribed by the controlling elites.

**The Literature**

The consolidation of mainstream media outlets has led to a narrowing of opinions and perspectives. A reflexive response to this creation of informational "choke points" has been the recent proliferation of blogs and other Internet-based information resources, where information is widely disseminated and commented upon by a large number of information consumers. In turn, this move towards communitarian journalistic enterprise, originating outside of the mainstream media, has become very influential in the coverage now seen in the mainstream media. This thesis examines the impact of media consolidation on the formation of alternative news sources, and the resulting influence these sources bring to the mainstream media.

To address these issues, a review of literature related to this field was conducted.

The impact of media consolidation has been a reduction in the sources of, and resulting variety in, opinions and commentary on news coverage. When popular
reaction against a proposed easing of standards for media ownership occurred in 2003, then commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission Michael Powell agreed to initiate a study on the impact of media consolidation on local coverage (Columbia Journalism Review Editorial, 2003). It has been recently reported that this study, which demonstrated that media consolidation had a negative impact on local news coverage, was suppressed by the FCC who ordered it destroyed prior to its publication (Dunbar, 2006).

Advances in technology have changed the way that information is disseminated, and have also changed the impact of media consolidation. The ability of large media conglomerates to control both the means of transmitting information as well as its content is a concern that did not exist in the past century, when only the means of information distribution could be centrally controlled, and content was largely created through other channels (Peterson, 2004).

It has been widely noted that when the landmark work on media consolidation, Ben Bagdikian’s “The Media Monopoly” was first published in 1983, about fifty media conglomerates controlled most of the film, television, newspapers, videos, radio, music and publishing resources in the United States (Bagdikian, 2004). This trend, noted with alarm by Bagdikian, has continued since that point so that five multi-national corporations now control major media resources (Wellstone, 2000). This consolidation has greatly reduced the number and source of opinions and perspectives offered in news coverage.

The ability of mainstream media in an era of unprecedented consolidation to remain objective in reporting news is an issue of considerable importance. It has been
widely noted that General Electric’s ownership of NBC News could create serious conflicts of interest (Morton, 2000). In particular, General Electric’s revenues in the defense and energy sectors could lead it to exercise editorial control over its news division relating to any reporting that might jeopardize revenue growth in this area.

The notion of interactivity on the Internet as a relatively new phenomenon has been explored in research by Dr. Paul Bleicher in an article in Applied Clinical Trials entitled "Web 2.0 Revolution: Power to the People" (Bleicher, 2006). In his article, Bleicher defines a first wave of Internet technologies as being largely uni-directional in the sharing of information. He cites as examples personal web pages set up by individuals. He subsequently defines a second generation of Internet technologies, which he dubs "Web 2.0."

This second generation of technologies is largely interactive, and involves the sharing of information between communities of users in a collaborative manner. He offers as examples Wikipedia, LinkedIn, and eBay. The impact of this second generation of Internet technologies has, according to Bleicher "created citizen journalists, armchair political pundits, scientific commentators, and movie critics who are widely read and followed." Bleicher’s study highlights the important evolution of interactivity in Internet technology, and the resultant rise in communitarian enterprise in the field of information technology.

Kevin Finneran (Finneran, 2006) explores the positive and negative contributions of blogs to community-based information dissemination. On the positive, he notes the benefit of news agents beyond the reach of for-profit corporations and their politics:
“Blogs are…independent and democratic. For those who are suspicious of the objectivity of corporate-controlled media, it is reassuring that no suits are looking over bloggers’ shoulders or asking them to consider the reaction of advertisers and stockholders. And with blogs, anyone can express an opinion without having to pass all the tests necessary to capture one of those exceedingly rare sinecures on a newspaper’s op-ed page” (Finneran, 2006).

A study published in 2004 analyzed the perceptions of blog users relating to the credibility of blogs they viewed relative to that of the mainstream media. This study, conducted by Thomas Johnson and Barbara Kaye and published in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, concluded that blog users judged blogs as “highly credible – more credible than traditional sources” (Johnson, Kaye, 2004). They additionally found that blog users considered blogs to be more reliable to report depth of information, rather than fairness or objectiveness.

The impact of blogs on the reporting of issues of war and peace has created an alternative view beyond the possible bias of for-profit corporations, who may in some ways profit from the war industry. Blogs have the ability to not only provide an independent viewpoint on the Internet, but also to provide a personal perspective of people involved in conflict (Oravac, 2004). The “micro-content” provided by the low cost formats of blogs enable the sharing of personal narratives in and around war zones that provides a highly personal view of war not available through the mainstream media. While such reporting via blogs can become inundated with rumors and gossip, it also enables the sharing of personal information in ways that was previously impossible. There also exists a counter-trend to this information sharing. The persistent fear of
participants to blogs of governmental surveillance of blogs has led some to withhold information at the fear of arrest. Oravac notes the case of an Iranian blogger who was arrested based on postings, and a French blogger threatened with arrest after criticizing public officials.

The ability of blogs to become a means of real-time reporting of emerging news items has been noted in recent years. Rheingold (2003) notes the phenomenon of reporting of news events by citizen journalists which he terms “moblogging.” The possibilities for increased reporting of current events outside of the editorial voice of the mainstream media is considered by Rheingold, who sees Internet new media as an enabler, but not as a catalyst in of itself: “The right tools for global, instantaneous, multimedia production and distribution are necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve the goal of democratizing journalism” (Rheingold, 2003).

A highly applicable theoretical framework used to understand and explain the role of blogs is provided by German academic Jürgen Habermas. Focusing on the role of public discourse and the impact of the mass media on society, Habermas hypothesizes that the mass media attempts to invade upon and thus collapse public discourse, forcing a consensus viewpoint. He differentiates this from public discourse in the 18th and 19th centuries, which he believes to have had a distinct separation from public and private discourse. This process of mass media creating a public consensus is referred to by Habermas as ‘Refudalization’ (Habermas, 1997).

Several authors have offered comparisons of the evolution of public discourse within blogs to the theories of Jürgen Habermas. First, Andrew Ó Baoill writes that Habermas’ model of public discourse is the perfect means by which to evaluate the
impact of blogs on society. He identifies that: “inclusivity of access, a disregard for external rank, and the potential for rational debate of any topic until consensus is achieved are necessary criterion for meeting Habermas’ model of an idealized public sphere” (Ó Baoill, 2004).

The ability of news oriented blogs to produce a “real-time virtual feedback loop” (Gallo, 2003) that changes the time-static dissemination of news to the public is another trend noted in academic writing on blogs. Gallo proposes that blogs will permanently alter the journalistic profession by providing groups and individuals unaffiliated with mainstream news organizations the ability to comment upon news items as soon as they are reported on. He juxtaposes this to the older form, which he refers to as “letter to the editor” response mechanism, a means of providing feedback which left much control in the hands of the news organization (i.e., what letters, points of view, etc., would be published).

Gallo (2003) also notes the ability of blogs to create a less centralized news distribution mechanism. His work focuses on the impact of blogs of both affiliated and non-affiliated journalists, and the tension that exists between blogs and traditional media sources, particularly when writers of mainstream publications also choose to publish in blogs.

As with Ó Baoill’s examination of the blog phenomenon, Jason Gallo explores blogs through the lens of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas. In doing so, he considers Habermas’ theory of public discourse as a space where the general public is able to express ideas, thoughts, concerns, criticism, separate from the state and from economic forces. Habermas defined mass media as a means whereby state and or
corporate interests expressed a set of opinions on behalf of the general public, essentially filling the void of public discourse by creating the appearance of public discourse, and, in effect, taking away the voice of the people.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine what role new media forms that are made possible through the advent of the Internet may have on promoting media reform, and in turn, advancement of democratic government. The primary questions motivating this study are:

1) What impact does the widespread proliferation of the Internet have on creating new media forms?

2) In what ways can new media forms, made possible through the Internet, begin to impact the highly consolidated mass media?

3) What counter trends exist that may hinder the potential of new media to promote reform of the mass media?

My research strategy involved collecting and analyzing material on relevant case studies that demonstrated the ability of new media forms to influence the mainstream media. I used several research methods to collect and analyze data useful in answering the proposed research questions. These methods and their application are covered in the next chapter.
The theoretical framework and literature review spans several relevant fields to draw conclusions relative to an understanding of the emerging role of new media. While the new media phenomenon is still in its infancy, theories specific to its means of formation and evolution are similarly nascent. However, long standing theories, widely used by communication theorists to understand the mass media over the past century have strong parallels to the newer forms of media. We will see in the following chapters how the methodology of mass media theory can inform us to the potential trajectories of evolution of newer media forms.
CHAPTER III: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

This study focuses primarily on the role of the new media relative to the established mass media. While it cannot be ignored that the new media and the mass media exist in a global society, the scope of this study is almost entirely restricted to a study of media in the United States. It begins with a survey of key milestones in the history of the mass media, including legislative and policy decisions that have formed our current media system. It then seeks to analyze the role that new media forms play, and how these relate to the institutionalized mass media. Finally, several case studies are examined that help to illustrate the role of new media relative to mass media, and to inform the reader of the potential for reform of the media system through new media.

Methodology of the Study

The research methods for this thesis fall into two categories, archival research, and historical / policy / legal research. The primary goal of this thesis is to study the impact of blogs and other new media forms on society, demonstrating instances where they have fundamentally influenced the coverage of the traditional mass media. In order to properly understand the impact of blogs and other new media in a cultural context, it is critical to understand the historical evolution of mass media in the United States. This thesis will explore relevant and related trends in policy formulation,
demonstrating that the advancement of blogs is a natural and reflexive response to the stultifying impact of media consolidation.

Archival / Documentary Research:

To understand the influence of new media forms, including blogs, on the reporting of the mainstream media, it has been necessary to construct a timeline of news items. Archival or documentary research focuses largely on locating, analyzing and then interpreting messages that were communicated in past times (Rubin, 2005). This means of research is indispensable with any study that relates to the Internet, which is itself an online archive of information.

Online archives have been particularly helpful in this study in understanding the evolution of reportage on a particular subject. These archives exist either as hyperlinked articles in mainstream media, or as archives at blog sites that maintain a record of a given day’s content. These archives are critical to research of Internet-related activity as Rubin describes: “messages that others have created at different points in time…may tell us about communication during a particular period” (p. 220). Such material is readily available, either from the archival logs of the blog itself, re-printed in other sources, or available in general Internet archive sites that catalogue site images for given periods of time. It should be noted that material gathered at Internet archives is ephemeral in nature as hyperlinks point to content that may become unavailable at a future point.

Historical / Legal / Policy Research:
In order to understand the blog evolution in its societal context, it is important to begin with a baseline understanding of the evolving role of mass media in the United States. While the “Freedom of the Press” is a right guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, historical review indicates that there has been a broad array of interpretations of this clause. This thesis will include a cursory overview of historical events and resulting trends that have impacted mass media in the United States, leading to a set of conditions that fostered the rising influence of citizen-published blogs.

Related to the history of mass media in the United States is the official codification of laws interpreting the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. These range from the Alien and Seditious Act of 1798, through the various works of legislation and policy making in the 20th century intended to regulate evolving mass media technologies, through to the recent attempts by the FCC to further consolidate mass media outlets. Additionally, as this thesis is being prepared, it is evident that legal and policy challenges to the blog advancement are currently underway. These recent events will be explored as evidence of a counter-action designed to re-institute the filters and controls on mass media that exist in a system with few outlets and limited competition.
CHAPTER IV: THE STUDY

This study is designed to answer the questions proposed earlier relating to the potential of new media in advancing media reform and promoting democracy. It is divided into sections which help frame the question of the potential for media reform in its historical context, in its current setting, and by analyzing case studies that will provide insight into the potential for new media to play a meaningful and transformative role in the information continuum. In addition to examining information that supports the positive potential for media reform through new media forms, the counter trends are examined, through the lens of Dr. Noam Chomsky’s theory of ‘filters,’ pertaining originally to mainstream media, which this study attempts to apply to new media forms.

Freedom of the Press in Historical Context

*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 the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

- First Amendment to the United States Constitution

Concerned that the original language of the Constitution did not provide adequate protections for civil liberties, the Founding Fathers drafted and ratified the Bill of Rights. Included in this amendment is a provision that prevents government from encroaching on the freedom of the press. It is curious that this document, already containing a provision for freedom of speech, would also delineate freedom of the press as a crucial consideration in the preservation of democracy. As freedom of speech preserves the right of individuals to express their thoughts and opinions free of
governmental encroachment, why did the Founding Fathers further specify freedom of the press? It is quite likely that they understood that the commercial infrastructure supporting the press (as well as its potential impact on society) was quite different from the apparatus of individual expression, and that it therefore required special consideration to ensure its continued liberty (Shiffrin, 1993).

The German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas has discussed in great depth the relationship between freedom of the press and democratic forms of government. Habermas identified an ideal of a “public sphere” (1989). In Habermas’ formulation, the public sphere is a space in which individuals are able to express themselves free from the pressures of state and economic interests. Habermas sees the notion of a mass media as threatening to this idealized public sphere as it attempts to create a public voice, to create the appearance of public discourse, without the necessary step of collaborative dialogue. He ultimately views the mass media as an anti-democratic institution that serves the interests of societal elites.

It is clear that the instrument of mass media has traditionally been out of the reach of the average citizen. The resources required to properly research issues, to formulate coverage of those issues, and to disseminate this coverage widely requires the backing of an institution with considerable resources. This is the fundamental differentiating factor between freedom of speech, which ensures the right to individual expression, and the freedom of the press, which seeks to ensure media enterprise beyond the reach of governmental interference.

Media theorist Robert McChesney identifies two distinct interpretations of the Freedom of the Press clause of the First Amendment (McChesney, 2004). First, he
identifies a commercialistic definition, based on a “free markets” approach to Constitutional interpretation. In this formulation, Freedom of the Press guarantees the right of non-interference with commercial media enterprise. Proponents of this interpretation believe that the market will be the ultimate determinant of media regulation, heaping economic success on media resources that inform the public well, while punishing those media outlets that do not provide accurate and timely information to the consuming public.

McChesney identifies a second predominant interpretation of Freedom of the Press not based on commercialistic assumptions. He cites the ruling of Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black in the 1945 Associated Press vs. U.S. case as a landmark decision in the non-commercial interpretation of the Freedom of the Press clause. In this ruling, Justice Black made the widely quoted assertion that free speech: “rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public…Freedom to publish means freedom for all and not for some” (McChesney, p. 32).

In his 1997 book “Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution,” author Timothy Cook asserts that the media was, at the time of the authoring of the Constitution, a highly partisan actor on the political stage. Cook highlights efforts by the two principal competing interests in the authorship of the Constitution, the Federalists and the Democratic - Republican Party. These efforts to control public opinion through a highly partisan press came to the point of conflict, and the first dispute over the interpretation of the freedom of the press clause with the
passage of the Alien and Seditions Act during the administration of John Adams in 1798. This act made it a crime to publish “false, scandalous and malicious writing” against the government or its officials. The Federalists designed and passed this legislation to curb the power of the Democratic – Republican Party (Humphrey, 1996). This legislation was used at least fourteen times to assail the press outlets that Thomas Jefferson had cultivated to advocate his views in the lead up to the election of 1800. While none of these cases were ever brought to trial, the law was used effectively by the governing administration to muzzle the press outlets of its opponents (Humphrey, p. 59).

The history of the mass media in the United States is inexorably linked to the both the origins and evolution of this country. The recognition that the media plays a pivotal role in the health of a democratic system is clearly acknowledged in the Bill of Rights. The struggle over interpretation of the Freedom of the Press clause of the Bill of Rights continues to the current times. On one side are the “free markets” interpreters, who seek to ensure unimpeded capitalistic enterprise free of government interference. On the other are the “public welfare” contingent who believe that Freedom of the Press exists to ensure that the media not become a propaganda outlet to forces seeking to undermine democratic rule, but rather, that it function as an essential means of informing the public in matters of policy that will enable continuation of democracy.

*Freedom of the Press in Current Times*

As the early showdown between the partisan press of Jefferson’s Democratic-Republican Party and the governmental power apparatus of the ruling Federalist Party
demonstrates, the struggle for control of the press is a long standing and high stakes affair in the history of the United States. When, in June of 2006, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times and Wall Street Journal disclosed in a series of articles a secret government banking surveillance program, the U.S. government was quick to denounce the reports as “disgraceful” and even “treasonous” (Baker, 2006). A Republican member of the House of Representatives, Peter King, further called upon the Justice Department to prosecute the New York Times for treason in retaliation of their published reports of the program. The efforts of the ruling political party to reprimand and impinge the press’ ability to report on its activities, particularly when the legality of these actions was questionable, represents a pattern of coercion designed to intimidate the press out of its traditional role as a form of check and balance.

Governmental attempts to pressure the institutions of the press have been levied both at an institutional level, aimed at the corporate infrastructure supporting the press, as well as at the level of the individual reporter. As the right of reporters to protect their sources (except in instances of evidence relating to capital crimes) has long been considered an important pillar of the Freedom of the Press provision of the Constitution, it has been particularly concerning that this right has also been under attack in recent years. The case of Judith Miller has been well covered by the media. As a reporter for the New York Times, Miller disclosed the identity of Valerie Plame, a non-operative cover agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. Miller was jailed for refusing to disclose the identity of the source of her information (later revealed to be Lewis Libby, then Chief of Staff for Vice President Dick Cheney). Additionally, reporters have also been

While the efforts of all government branches, executive, legislative and judicial, to control the press has been largely aimed at commercial journalistic enterprise, there have recently been efforts to impinge upon the efforts of non-commercial blogs. Joshua Wolf, an independent blogger and cameraman, covered on his site an anarchist rally in San Francisco in July 2005. When authorities sought the full video coverage of the event, beyond the portions he had published, Wolf refused. State authorities, stymied by a strong California law that protects non-disclosure of unpublished content and sources by journalists, turned to Federal authorities, and requested the co-operation of the Federal Bureau of Investigations in their prosecution (Lindlaw, 2006). The FBI claimed jurisdiction in the case on the pretense that a police vehicle torched during the rally had been paid for partially with federal funds. The independent blogger was jailed in August, 2006, for refusing to turn over the complete video coverage of the protest, which he claims did not contain any footage relating to the destruction of the police vehicle (Egelko, 2006). Commenting on the Wolf case, Lucy Daglish of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press stated: “It means they go after everyone – mass media and independent. This is the first time it’s been pretty clear to me the federal government is interested in what bloggers do” (Lindlaw, 2006). The effort of such judicial action against independent journalists has strong impact against individuals who publish beyond the auspices of commercial journalistic institutions and who lack the resources of these institutions to protect them and assist in their legal defense.
It is clear that the role of the media as a source of vital information to the electorate in the United States is currently under attack (McChesney, 2004). This impingement on the traditional freedom of the press to report on affairs of state is largely judicial in nature. It is important to note that both traditional media sources, as well as non-traditional, Internet-based media outlets are being challenged.

The right of mainstream media journalists to keep their sources in secret is being challenged in high profile court cases. By threatening journalists with incarceration for maintaining the confidentiality of their sources, it is possible to prevent future publication of controversial matters. This form of coercion represents a “filter” placed on the media in order to control public access to information.

The story of Joshua Wolf, on the other hand, shows how the same dominant interests are seeking precedent to prevent the free and open publication of information on the Internet. Wolf represents a new line of ‘citizen journalist,’ a freelance blogger who publishes material independent of mainstream media outlets. The efforts to prosecute Wolf, first under statutes in the state of California, then under federal law when it was discovered that California law provided protections for journalists and their sources, demonstrate a coordinated initiative to coerce and intimidate online journalists who lack the backing of institutional resources in their defense.

**Media ‘Filters’**

The concept of “Refeudalization” explored by Habermas is also promulgated linguist Noam Chomsky. In his 1988 work *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky defines mass media as existing primarily to preserve the power base of dominant elites. He
differentiates between the very obvious forms of media manipulation that exist in
dictatorial forms of government, contrasting this with the highly subtle, yet pervasive
propaganda model that exists in democratic societies where media is not owned by the
state and where little formal censorship is practiced:

A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its
multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices…The essential
ingredients of our propaganda model, or set of new “filters,” fall under the
following headings: 1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and
profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; 2) advertising as the primary
income source of the mass media; 3) the reliance of the media on information
provided by government, business, and “experts” funded and approved by these
primary sources and agents of power; 4) “flak” as a means of disciplining the
media; and 5) “anti-communism” as a national religion and control mechanism.
(Chomsky, 1988)

In a study of the potential impact of online communities to promote greater
access to information, it is important to understand the counter trends to this possibility.
The “filters” that Chomsky lays out, while relating largely to a mainstream mass media,
can be seen operating on newly emerging online forms of communication.

In describing his first filter, Chomsky offers a story highly relevant to our
understanding of modern advances in communication brought about by the Internet.
Discussing the evolution of the mass media in the United Kingdom in the early
nineteenth century, Chomsky describes the foundation of an alternative media, a
‘radical press…that reached a national working-class audience” (Chomsky, 1988). This
new form of press, that sought to form a new consciousness among the workers of
Great Britain, was made possible through advances in technology, namely, an
affordable printing press. As this new media gained readership and began to actively
promote organized action by workers to impact change, they were quickly assessed as
a threat by the ruling elites. In response, libel laws were passed and a costly security
bond was required for all publishing concerns. This set of filters on a new form of media
was intended to shut off or at least slow down debate deemed threatening to the
interests of the ruling class.

Much in the same way, one should anticipate how filters can be formed to
prevent the free and open flow of information currently available on the Internet. Much
like the low cost printing press of the early nineteenth century, the Internet represents a
lowering of the barriers to entry involved in publication. Prior to the widespread use of
the Internet, the publication of information to a wide audience was a relatively expensive
and time consuming undertaking. It required creation of content, printing physical
copies of that content and physical distribution of the printed material in some form.
With the Internet, it became possible to easily publish content in a distributed model
where it could be accessed by anyone in the world with a computer and an open
Internet connection. The ability to quickly disseminate material to an audience limited
only by awareness of the content’s location represented a huge advance in
communication practice.
As with the working class press that emerged in the wake of a low-cost printing press in the early nineteenth century, so too have independent media outlets formed through the availability of the Internet to publish content to a broad audience quickly and inexpensively.

As online media forms began publishing as collaborative efforts, loosely journalistic in their formation, they were met with a widespread sense of optimism (Rheingold, 1993). It was believed that advances in communication brought about by widespread use of the Internet could help to promote democratic discourse by allowing geographically dispersed persons to quickly and easily share ideas and concepts with limited intermediation by a highly controlled media system. Vice President Al Gore predicted in 1995 that the Internet would usher in a “new Athenian age of Democracy” (Gore, 1995). While the Internet has in many ways opened up information for dissemination to a wide audience, Chomsky’s theory of “filters,” imposed over time on newly opened communication means, must be considered relative to their impact on online communities.

Chomsky’s first filter relates to the consolidation of media resources. Online media forms, including blogs, can be formed by virtually any person who has access to a computer and access to the Internet. This is contrasted with the very high barriers to entry that exist in the formation of traditional media outlets. Nevertheless, it has been widely noted that, while it is easy to set up an online community forum, such as a blog, the maintenance of a site that would be considered as an “A List” site, that is, a community with a broad membership that both consumes and contributes content, is a time consuming affair (O’Brien, 2004). In fact, the majority of highly trafficked blogs are
run either by academics or media professionals who use their blog as an alternative source to publicize their writings and to promote their material (p. 33). As a result, just as consolidation occurs in mainstream media, resulting in a reduction in the totality of opinions and facts presented to the public for consumption, the same phenomenon occurs among online communities, where those blog authors who are able to devote significant time to gathering, creating, and organizing content for online consumption by their readership.

The second “filter” introduced by Chomsky, advertising, plays a major role in the profit structure of media outlets, thereby exercising a voice in content. Originally, blogs existed largely outside of the “for profit” sector. They were sites where material was contributed by an unpaid audience of writers and commentators, who contributed largely to inform on another, and to promote dialogue on issues of interest. However, as blogs grew in number and prominence, many began to accept advertising dollars as a means of generating revenues to offset the time required to publish them. As online advertising grows year over year, blogs and other online communities become vehicles for advertising revenue. In fact, the ability to easily and accurately determine the demographic as well as the interests and opinions of blog readership, makes online advertising at such sites particularly appealing to organizations looking to market a product to a specific niche. So, while blogs began largely in a cooperative, non-profit manner, many have begun shifting their attention to the generation of revenue through advertising at their sites (Beckerman, 2006). Thus, the ability of advertisers to influence content on these online communities becomes a prevalent determinant in the editorial decisions of the sites’ owners.
The third “filter” relating to a reliance on official sources, is highly relevant to online communities. As has been explored earlier in this study, online communities, lacking the institutional sponsorship required to properly investigate and report upon news items, become highly dependent on the mainstream press for the material that they choose to cover. While they do have some editorial decision making ability on what material is of interest for them to cover, they are rarely in the position of primary creators of original content. As a result, they rely upon both mainstream and alternative media outlets for the materials covered on their sites. While these are often accompanied by significant commentary, sometimes highly skeptical or critical of the original news source, the fact that the material is sourced from traditional distribution leaves online communities in the same predicament as the mainstream media; they are all too often entirely reliant on the mainstream media for the material that comprises their site. While they may reject the conclusions of the mainstream press, they are subject to the boundaries of mainstream media analysis. That is, the mainstream media provides the guidelines for covering news events, and determines the body of evidence to analyze, the witnesses and participants to interview, and has largely “framed” the story, potentially excluding highly relevant (but undesirable from their point of view) points of reference. As a result, the new media become subject to the same restrictions and biases as the providers of material that they cover.

The fourth “filter” examined by Chomsky, relating to “flak” used to discourage critical news coverage in the mainstream media, is highly relevant to newly emerging media sources. While blogs and other new media forms have been largely free of censorship by powerful elite institutions, recent developments indicate that the impact of
blogs and other virtual communities is being recognized by the forces that seek to control media content, who are now turning their attention to online communities. The case of journalist Joshua Wolf is a perfect example of how even bloggers can be highly susceptible to “flak,” and are, in many ways, even more vulnerable that institutional media outlets. As Wolf’s case illustrates, independent journalists who use blogs as vehicles to disseminate their material can be targeted by state and federal powers that are critical of their views. The ability of large institutions to silence unaffiliated independent journalists, through litigation and even by legislation, is considerable.

Lastly, while the threat of spreading international Communism has become largely antiquated since 1988 when Chomsky’s _Manufacturing Consent_ was first published, the practice of dominant elites supporting catalyzing “threats” remains a constant. In our modern age, the threat of “terrorism” or “Islamo-Fascism” is used as a propaganda tool to support both foreign wars as well as to reduce civil rights domestically (Pilger, 2004).

**New Media and the Resurgence of the Public Sphere**

Having considered barriers traditionally erected to silence information critical of societal elites in new media forms, the potential of these new media to impact existing communication infrastructure must also be examined. New media forms have clearly shown an ability to influence the news cycle of traditional mainstream media. They have created a new outlet of information that is more direct, is less restrained by the temporal nature of news cycles, and that exists largely free of commercial conflicts of interest. The net impact of these media forms has been to create a new tier in the
information cycle that ultimately impacts the reporting of news by the mainstream media.

The creation of a new channel of information by online communities impacts both the stories that are reported in the mainstream media, as well as the prioritization of news items, traditionally an editorial function. This phenomenon is noted by communication scholar W. Lance Bennett:

“New media provide alternative communication spaces in which information can develop and circulate widely with fewer conventions or editorial filters than in the mainstream media. The gate-keeping capacity of the traditional press is weakened when information appears on the Internet, presenting new material that may prove irresistible to competitors in the world of 24/7 cable news channels that now occupy important niches in the press ‘food chain’” (Bennett, 2004).

The encroachment of new media on editorial functions is further explored by Bennett in his narrative of an exchange between an online activist and the Nike Corporation. This incident demonstrates the ability of online forms of communication to impact news cycles by operating as a middle tier of information distribution between the public and traditional media.

The interactions between media activist, Jonah Peretti, then a graduate student at M.I.T. and Nike began when Peretti sent an order to Nike’s personalized product website. Peretti requested that Nike produce a pair of shoes emblazoned with the word “Sweatshop” on the body of the shoe. This request was in response to reports that Nike, a U.S.-based corporation, had employed various factories in developing countries
where labor practices and pay scales were far below the standard of the United States. The response from Nike was that the request for a pair of its shoes with the personalized label of “Sweatshop” violated Nike’s terms of sale.

What happened subsequent to Nike’s refusal is an interesting case study in the impact of new media on traditional media. First, the print magazine Harpers, decided not to print the story of the exchange, after originally considering it. On January 17th, 2001, Peretti decided to publish the story himself on his blog, Shey.net. By January 25th, 2001, the story became widely linked at other blogs, including Lot 49 and the Squall, a blog based in the United Kingdom. Up to this point, the story of the exchange between Nike Corporation and the Peretti has been entirely circulated throughout new media channels, through the online communities of blogs, and through personal email distribution lists. On January 30th, 2001, The San Jose Mercury News became the first traditional news outlet to publish the story in an article entitled “Bid to Personalize Sneakers has Nike Sweating” (Lohse, 2001). The story continued to gain wide circulation through online media sources, including Metafilter and Plastic.com. The next appearance in more traditional media occurred in a “middle media” source, online news magazine Salon.com. The article in Salon focused on “protecting the brand from crazed postmodernists” (Chocano, 2001). Next, the story gained broader mainstream reporting in Time Magazine on February 12th, 2001. The international press began picking up on the story with articles published on February 21st and 23rd in The Independent and The Guardian respectively. On February 28th, Peretti was televised in by NBC’s Today Show in a debate with a spokesman from Nike. Also on this day, the Wall Street Journal published an article reporting on the business impact of the viral distribution of
the story. Over time, the story continued to be reported on in increasingly mainstream media outlets, generating tremendous awareness around the incident.

The Peretti / Nike affair demonstrates the ability new forms of media can have on the reporting cycle of mainstream media. In this instance, it demonstrates how stories originally funneled out by the gate keeping instincts of the mainstream media, can be circulated first through online communities, eventually gaining attention and broader media coverage. In this scenario, the online communities provided a third tier to the reporting of news. They provided a forum where the story, rejected initially by Harpers Magazine, was able to formulate and pick up its own momentum, aside from the editorializing filtration of the mainstream media. This case study is also valuable for a broader understanding of the role of new media as it demonstrates an instance where the story itself was generated in the realm of online communities. Often times, stories that pick up broad circulation at web logs are originated in the mainstream press. The role of new media in these instances is to impact the editorial cycle rather than the actual creation of news. In this instance, the story itself was created by new media, was reported on originally by those same media channels, and was later given broad circulation throughout predominant mainstream media outlets.

**The Role of Blogs in the Case of Trent Lott**

Late in 2002, blogs began to demonstrate their ability to impact the news coverage of the mainstream media. The first major incident where blogs began a fury of coverage that became mainstream news can be seen in the incidents leading to the resignation of Senator Trent Lott from his position as Senate Republican Leader.
Attending the 100th birthday of Senator Strom Thurmond, Senator Lott made the following comments regarding his colleague:

"I want to say this about my state: When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either" (Marshall, 2002).

This statement, complimenting a Senatorial colleague's record, does not on its surface seem provocative. In fact, at the time the statement was made, it received scant coverage in the mainstream media. The only notice of it that can be found in archived news items is in a daily political news 'round up' published by ABC News, where it is buried as a blurb deep in the article (Halperin, et al., 2002). It is only when the history behind the statement, referencing Strom Thurmond's 1948 presidential bid on the 'Dixiecrat' ticket, is analyzed that the controversial nature of the statement becomes evident.

The Dixiecrat Party was formed as a third party alternative by Southern Democrats, angry with their party's support for the fledgling Civil Rights movement. The group was formed by thirty five delegates of the Democratic National Convention from the states of Mississippi and Alabama in response to President Truman's efforts to integrate the armed forces of the United States. The group chose as its candidate for president Strom Thurmond, then the governor of South Carolina. The party's platform states in part:

"We stand for the segregation of the races and the racial integrity of each race; the constitutional right to choose one's associates; to accept private employment without governmental interference, and to earn one's living in any lawful way. We
oppose the elimination of segregation, the repeal of miscegenation statutes, the control of private employment by Federal bureaucrats called for by the misnamed civil rights program. We favor home-rule, local self-government and a minimum interference with individual rights.” (The American Presidency Project)

The first blogger to begin coverage on Senator Lott’s statements was Joshua Marshall whose blog Talking Points Memo had begun to receive significant attention. Marshall, who holds a Ph.D. from Princeton University in American History, had a long career as a journalist prior to his publication of Talking Points Memo. He had served as the Associate Editor of The American Prospect from 1998 to 2001. With his background in both American History and Journalism, Joshua Marshall was able to understand the implications and context of Senator Lott’s statement. He began his coverage with a brief note on his blog on December 6th, 2002. The note brought to light Senator Lott’s comments, highlighting the fact that the Dixiecrat ticket had focused on the desired continuation of racial segregation in the United States.

Coverage of Senator Lott in the mainstream media directly after the first posting on Talking Points Memo continued to ignore his comments supporting Senator Thurmond’s past association with the pro-Segregation Dixiecrat party. In a CNN interview on December 6th, 2002, Senator Lott was questioned about his views on the recent resignation of two Bush administration cabinet members and his tenure as Senate Republican Leader (Woodruff, 2002). At this point, the mainstream media had not yet picked up on the controversy associated with Senator Lott’s statements.

As the mainstream media continued to ignore the comments, they began circulating around various blogs. They were commented on by a conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan, as well as conservative pundits William Kristol and Charles
Krauthammer within the course of several days in December, 2002. These comments began to bring Senator Lott’s comments to greater public attention. The first appearance of the story in the mainstream media began in the editorial column of Paul Krugman on December 13th, 2002 (Krugman, 2002). Finally, they were commented on in the news coverage of mainstream media sources, first in the Washington Post on December 16th, 2002 (Kurtz, 2002), then in The New York Times, on December 17th, 2002 (Rutenberg, Barringer, 2002).

After the mainstream media picked up on the story, Senator Lott apologized for the way his comments relating to Senator Thurmond had been interpreted (Cameron, 2002). However, the damage had already been done to the Senator’s reputation, and the media began to retrieve earlier comments made by the Senator, such as a remark he had made in 1981 in a friend of the court brief written for Bob Jones University where he stated the following: “racial discrimination does not always violate the law” (Cameron, 2002). It is notable that the attacks on Senator Lott, that had their beginnings in a center-left blog, began to come from news sources, both non-traditional blogs, as well as the mainstream media, and that they were balanced in emerging from sources spanning all ends of the political spectrum.

Senator Trent Lott announced his resignation as Senate Republican Leader on December 20th, 2002, approximately two weeks after his comments were brought to national attention through the efforts of blog authors and later the mainstream media. While it was widely speculated that the attacks on Senator Lott would not have succeeded if the Bush administration had not sought to enforce its authority over the legislative branch by appointing a more loyal Senate Republican Leader (Senator Bill
Frist was soon appointed to the role), it is remarkable that independent blogs, free of the constraints of the mainstream press, were able to bring this story into the national consciousness.
CHAPTER V: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the media is undergoing a transformation at present time. The very need of this study to differentiate between the terms “mass media” and “new media” is illustrative of this shift in what constitutes media forms.

It is also clear that the mass media has been moving, since the 1980’s, towards contraction through consolidation, towards homogeneity of voice and opinions, and towards a resultant diminishing of its role as a vital source of information to the preservation of free and open democratic forms of government.

This trend in the mass media has been counterbalanced by the rise of “new media” forms. The ability of citizens to reinvigorate a public sphere through the medium of the Internet has given rise to a new capacity to conduct dialogue around matters of public interest. The role of blogs and online communities in a creating a participatory form of media has been well examined in this study.

Jürgen Habermas’ assertion that the public sphere, where citizens participated in a collaborative and interactive dialogue formulating decisions in the public interest, has been co-opted by the rise of the mass media, provides a valuable theoretical framework for this study. The mass media, by providing the appearance of public sphere discourse in a broadly distributed manner, has largely acted as an inhibitor of, rather than as an impetus towards broader citizen participation in public sphere discourse.

This study analyzed several case studies where new media forms, such as blogs and online communities actively and purposefully exercised significant influence, either on mass media outlets, or on public institutions. The role of these new media forms
was significant in creating a space where stories can be either formed directly (as in the case of the Piretti / Nike incident) or re-prioritized in the public sphere (as in the case of the Trent Lott story, originated in the mainstream press, but risen to prominence through by new media).

The first case study, relating the Piretti / Nike affair, illustrates that new media can become an originating source of news content. In this way, they influence the mainstream media by providing the material that is to be covered. The new media, through its use of hyperlinks and viral distribution, becomes a key source of information, a generator of news content in its own right. The conclusion of this case study is that new media will, over time, become a critical source of news content that exists outside of the commercial spectrum that limits ability to provide non-biased coverage of events.

The second case study, relating to the emergence of the Trent Lott story that occurred in late 2002 and early 2003 demonstrates the ability of the new media to play an editorial role. In this case study, the new media took a news item that had been buried in the mainstream media, and elevated that issue to national attention in a very short time. This issue was discussed broadly in new media for several days, where it gained traction and momentum, eventually leading the mainstream media to report on the story. In a media system that lacked the additional layer of coverage and the important element of dialogue, this news item would have gone unnoticed and unreported by the mainstream media.

While it is clear that the new media forms can have significant influence on mainstream media, and can even become a source for the generation of news content, the counter trends to this evolution must also be considered. The ‘propaganda model’
outlined by Chomsky provides a helpful model for understanding the subtle influences that impact media forms in societies that are both democratic and capitalistic in nature. While Chomsky’s model related largely to the influence of capital on mass media, this study has demonstrated that the same “filters” that operate on mainstream media sources have begun to influence “new media” forms. So, while new media provides an avenue for formation and analysis of news content in the public sphere, aspects of commercialization and resulting controls are now being implemented that could either prevent or significantly impede the ability of new media to enhance and invigorate democratic forms of government.

The ability of new media forms to continue in their propagation and to outpace the efforts of the entrenched elite power base that seeks to dominate them will largely determine their ability to influence a resurgence of democratic society. In particular, their ability to shift from centralized ownership and content origination towards the direction of online communities, which are collaborative in nature, where participants become the principal source of content, will be an important factor in their continuing and growing relevance and influence. In this way, this movement will parallel the convergence of centralized mass media forms with the emergence of the Internet, a highly decentralized and collaborative communication modality.

Relating to further study in this area of new media forms, it is a rich field that deserves significant inquiry. Further research into the evolving convergence of blogs with online communities would provide a compelling study. A more detailed analysis of the emerging nature of communities within special interest blogs with a qualitative and quantitative examination of the interactions between community members, perhaps
applying Rheingold’s definitions of online communities, could help determine the impact of this trend.
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