NETWORKED, COLLABORATIVE, AND ACTIVIST NEWS COMMUNITIES ONLINE: A CASE STUDY OF *REDDIT* AND *DAILY KOS*

A Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

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Participatory democracy depends on formations of community and social relations, places and spaces for critical discourse, and the organizational and technical capacity for collective action. This study seeks to better understand how these processes are at work in the virtual realm, and more broadly examine the changing nature of political information and discourse in the online context. Toward this end, I examine two sites that embody different yet highly successful models of user participation, collective content production, and increasingly, political action: the political blogging community of *Daily Kos* and the social news site *Reddit.* This study is based on three broad theoretical frameworks of community, discourse, and action. I use work by Michele Willson (2006) to explore how community exists in the virtual realm. Drawing upon the scholarship of Jurgen Habermas (1991) and more recent adaptations and extensions of Habermasian public sphere theory from Aaron Barlow (2006), I ask can online communities set the foundation for a public spheres, and if so, how do they function as virtual public spheres? Building upon understandings of online community and virtual public sphere(s), I utilize work by Manuel Castells (1997) and Jeffrey Juris (2005) to understand how community and discourse can enable collective action. These lines of analysis provide the structure

through which I examine *Daily Kos* and *Reddit.* Using ethnographic methods, I place the

voices and perspectives of users within this theoretical structure to produce a

comprehensive look at the function of collaborative online political information

communities.

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CHAPTER 1

**AN INTRODUCTION TO COLLABORATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY
ONLINE INFORMATION SPACES**

"Access to information is far less important, politically, than access to conversation"

- Clay Shirky (2011)

The Internet is empowering. That is one of the popular conceptions of the relationship between users and the medium. *Listening* to radio, *watching* TV and movies, *reading* newspapers and magazines are often solitary, what many have decried as passive experiences. This has long been a concern over mass communication media; going back to the turn of the century when elite scientists and psychologists became increasingly concerned with the effect of mass media like radio and film on large, seemingly passive audiences (Charters 1933, cited in Miller 2008).[1] Critical social theorists of the 20th century, including Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, held the view that audiences of mass media, regardless of medium, were merely stupefied and deceived by popular entertainment that was interchangeable, formulaic, and commercial—what they described as the "culture industry" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Marshall McLuhan complicated this view, focusing famously on the medium (not the message). By looking at media as extensions of our senses, he argued some media were more 'hot' or 'cool' than others and that audiences were more passive or interactive depending on the medium (McLuhan,

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[1] Miller is referring to the Payne Fund Studies, a series of studies performed between 1929 and 1932 to examine the effect of mass media on children, in particular movies. Driven by fear of mass media in a period marked by concerns about moral decline, the studies were funded in order to provide scientific proof of the effect that movies had on children, and eventually led to the establishment of the Hays' Code, which set acceptable and unacceptable content for motion pictures produced in the United States.

1964). Writing in the 1970s and 80s, scholars like Stuart Hall (1974, 1986), and David Morley (1980, 1983) gave individuals and groups much more agency as interpreters of texts, as pop culture fans, and even through para-social relationships with "media friends" (Meyrowitz 1985). Thus, the whole notion of the audience member as "passive'" was turned on its head. These scholars viewed mass mediated culture as enabling the working and middle classes to have their own popular culture opposed to the historical dominance of elite or "high culture". Despite this theoretical turn by some, mass mediated culture continues to be seen as largely passive experience, both by scholars and cultural critics.

The Internet provides the *potential* for significantly more active experiences, well beyond what scholars, such as Hall (1974) and Morley (1980) have argued as the active and interpretive experiences of mass media audiences. Internet users can choose to click on interesting links, share favorite sites, post and comment on articles or forums, upload videos and photos, create content like podcasts or blogs, "like" or "recommend" or otherwise have input on a websites' content. These users can transgress their geographical, physical, temporal, and even social limitations to connect with others in ways previously unimaginable. Debate (Dahlberg, 2001), research, conversation, file sharing, therapy (Morrow, 2006), friendship (Turkle, 2001), community (Willson, 2006), news (Horrigan, 2006), entertainment, boredom, education (Simon et al. 2001), addiction (Young, 1998): these are among the many reasons people turn to the web. People can enjoy the content of older media (listening to radio shows, watching TV shows and movies, reading articles or books) with far more access and choice on the Web.

In comparison with older mass media, the Internet offers an increasing capability for users to create their own media channels and produce their own content. This has

fundamentally transformed the mass communication paradigm. Anyone with access and enough technological skill can begin producing and broadcasting content in ways previously unimaginable. In the past, the amount of radio airwaves or TV channels limited amateur broadcasters. To use a printing press or publish written material was extremely expensive, time consuming, and beyond the reach of average citizens. Today, with what's been dubbed "web 2.0", almost anyone can easily create websites, blogs, and micro-blogs, which has enabled people with a vast diversity of interests to share, broadcast, and discover information and each other for free or very little cost. Social media platforms like Facebook enable virtually anyone to share content easily and efficiently, as well as add their voice and commentary to shared links and content. More technologically advanced users who can write HTML, code, or develop software (such as open-source) can go beyond mere website creation to shape interfaces, appearances, and other basic structures of the online experience. Older media may have allowed for some semblance of para-social relationships through late night talk show hosts and other "media friends" (Meyrowitz, 1985), but the Internet enables users to satisfy or at least partially satisfy social desires and communicative relationships through digital experiences by engaging with others who share similar identities and interests (Turkle 1995, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).

Compared with mass communication media, the Internet sounds like an information consuming and producing utopia, and many see it as such, despite the counterarguments concerning the varied nature of users' abilities, access to technology, skills, and interests (Norris, 2001; Van Dijk, 2005; Mossberger et al., 2003). Internet users vary from participants in virtual worlds like Second Life and gamers spending

hours a day on MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) like *World of Warcraft* to those who primarily use the Internet to check email, the weather, or driving directions. Internet-enthusiasts partaking in online gaming, fan, and techie communities most strongly express and exemplify the values scholars and popular commentators attribute to a more utopian conception of the Internet. From this perspective, the Internet is often described and idealized using terms such as: interactive, participatory, democratic, diverse, creative, collaborative, individualized. Toby Miller (2008) refers to these scholars and writers as "cybertarian technophiles," whom he suggests are "struck by the digital sublime" and "attribute magical properties to contemporary communications and cultural technologies that obliterate geography, sovereignty, and hierarchy in an alchemy of truth and beauty" (p. 215).

Participatory Online Information and News Spaces

Information and news spaces, in addition to other communities and types of users, now utilize the Internet's networking, creative, participatory, and other "magical properties" in ways previously utilized by online gaming, technophile, and fan communities. I am not particularly interested in some of the more technophilic online spaces, nor am I much of a gamer, pop music, or subculture fan. Nonetheless, I, like members of those communities and networks, am spending an ever-increasing amount of time on the web as a high volume consumer of news and politics. I am a "news junkie" and have been since I attempted to read my first copy of *Newsweek* in middle school. I turned to reading news online in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, and by the time I was an undergraduate, I had turned to the web full steam. No longer merely for news, the

Internet had become, for me, a space for political discussion and debate regarding the Bush v. Kerry presidential race and other issues at hand. Today, as a graduate student, I have almost no exposure to traditional news media forms, except for the radio during car rides and occasional viewing of cable news.

I have long been interested in the rapidly changing experiences of consuming, discussing, and producing news online as well as the changing relationship between online users and information in today's networked society. While online news lagged far behind traditional news media in the early years of the web, the Internet has now become the third most popular news platform behind only local and national television news (Purcell et. al. 2010, p.2). According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, six in ten (59%) Americans get news from a combination of online and offline sources on a typical day (2010, p.2). The Internet provides fertile ground for new relationships with information consumption, production, distribution, and circulation. The Pew Research Center found that 37% of all Internet users have "contributed to the creation of news" through posting or sharing links through social media, commenting on articles or posts, and other increasingly easy ways to engage in what they define broadly as 'participatory' news (Purcell, et. al. 2010). As many as eight in ten online news consumers engage in participatory news (2010, p. 4). Similarly, 9% of Americans have actually produced their own news material or opinion piece online in the form of a blog post, a video, or other means either in collaboration with or independent of traditional news organizations (2010, p. 4). Furthermore, Pew found that Internet users desire interactivity and personalization; 28% of all users have customized a home page to include news on favorite sources or topics and 40% say customization is an important

features of news websites (2010, p. 5). In addition, 36% say an important feature of news sites is to be able to manipulate and interact with the interface, such as interactive graphics, maps, or online quizzes (2010, p. 5). As professional grade technology becomes more affordable and ubiquitous, along with vastly cheaper and accessible publishing and distribution capabilities of the digital realm, a new news and information paradigm has emerged where journalism can increasingly be seen as trending towards concepts like "participatory journalism" (Bowman and Willis 2002, Purcell et. al. 2010), "open source" (Deuze, 2001) and "citizen journalism" (Goode, 2009). As with the Internet in general, for the world of news and information, old roles and structures are changing and the boundary between consumers, amateurs, and professional journalists has blurred (Goode, 2009).

Yochai Benkler (2006) in his seminal *The Wealth of Networks* lays out a compelling, if idealistic picture, of the Web as democratic, people-powered, and driven by information sharing. He argues that we are beginning to see the early utopian-type modalities of the web to expand across all domains of information and culture production. The open source movement emerged with the growth of the Internet, and, as its name implies, is centered around the idea of making the source code of websites and programs available to others to copy, modify, and enhance in a public and collaborative effort. Similar projects with the same values in mind—collective production, collaboration, and open-sharing of information—have not only become popular, but have even challenged once elite-dominated sets of knowledge and spheres of interaction. Wikipedia, an incredibly popular online encyclopedia has over 19 million articles written

and edited in collaboration by tens of thousands of volunteers from around the world.[2]

Linux open-source software like Ubuntu offers an alternative to Windows or Apple operating systems. Open-copyright movements like Creative Commons allows for remixing and sharing of artists' material for a more collaborative cultural sphere online.

In the world of online news and information, users have more control and choice in in their consumption. We can choose from a large variety of news sources, have personalized aggregations of news through tools like Google News, click through embedded links or use online sources like Wikipedia to learn more about specific details or historical context of a news story, and add commentary that engages with others about a certain news story through comments sections and forums available on most news websites. Users can also read or create blogs and websites to provide additional commentary, contextualization, and dialogue on news topics; some even produce some of the raw bits and pieces of news. Most recently, with social media and Web 2.0 applications, any user can share news links, vote on, "like", "upvote", or otherwise promote links or posts, as well as have the potential for providing some comments or framing for contextualization.

While focused more on fan and pop culture, Henry Jenkins (2006) provides a broader context of an emerging convergence culture, which he argues serves as both a

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[2] Wikipedia was launched in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, and has quickly grown to become the largest reference source on the Internet, with 19 million articles in 282 languages, all written by tens of thousands of volunteer writers and editors. Early on, critics challenged the veracity of its content as well as the writing quality of many entries—criticisms that continue today. Wikipedia makes no guarantee of the validity of its information, given its open structure. Despite the occasional vandalism of posts and inaccuracies, Wikipedia is largely viewed as a success given its unmatched volume of information and general quality. A 2005 study of science entries in Wikipedia by *Nature* magazine found that their accuracy comes close to that of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which has also been noted for inaccuracies and misinformation.

mechanism to increase revenue and further the agenda of industry and simultaneously enable people—in terms of their identities as producers and consumers, professionals as well as amateurs—to enact some kind of agency regarding the content of this new culture. In the new culture of convergence, Jenkins argues that with modern media content (*Survivor*, pop music, etc.) there is a much greater degree of audience participation and contribution to the point where we are seeing a new form of interactive storytelling or generally of interactive and collaborative content production. Convergence culture, he argues, enables people to have greater agency, interactive abilities, and even collaborative creative control over content. While most research on convergence culture looks at pop culture online in terms of music, film, art or gaming, I believe we are seeing the same processes that underlie Jenkin's convergence culture with the cultural production of online news and politics.

With Benkler's network society (2006) and Jenkins' convergence culture (2008) in mind, I look at a phenomena within the world of online news and politics that, while existing from the very early years of the Internet, has only recently begun to emerge as a potential for more mainstream participation. Specifically, I examine online spaces and places where users can participate more actively not only in consuming political news (increased choice and control) but also in filtering, contextualizing, framing, sharing, and even producing news and information. These types of online spaces have been referred to as "newsgroups" (Burnett & Marshall, 2003), "collaborative news networks" (Chan, 2002), "online rhetorical communities" (Castillo 2008) "open news sites" (Bruns, 2005), and "gatewatchers" (Bruns, 2005) among other names. Anita Chan's (2000) "collaborative news networks" and Axel Bruns' (2005) "gatewatchers" provides research

and analysis on a variety of flavors of collaborative and participatory online news and information spaces. In fact, as Bruns pointed out, well-respected news scholar and critic Herbert Gans, although writing in the late 1970s, wrote of the need for a "second tier" journalism with "multiperspectival reporting" of non-professional citizens who would "devote themselves primarily to reanalyzing and reinterpreting news gathered by the central media—and the wire services—for their audiences, adding their own commentary and backing these up with as much original reporting, particularly to support bottom-up, representative, and service news, as would be financially feasible" (Gans, 1980, p. 318 cited in Bruns, 2005). Chan and Bruns have focused primarily on a semi-historical formation of collaborative news sites with Chan focusing on *Slashdot* and Bruns taking a wider look at open-source and other collaborative and participatory information sites such as *Slashdot,* Usenet(s), blogs, and wikis.

Building upon this research in collaborative information spaces online and situated within the Habermasian notion of the public sphere (1989), I examine news information spaces that are beginning to shift from mere spaces for collective discussion, sharing, and production of news and information to incorporating collective social and political activism as part of the process. Again, this is not exactly a new phenomenon, but rather one that I see as beginning to emerge in increasingly mainstream and accessible forms. Aaron Barlow (2008), for example, has argued that blogs and, in particular, discussion communities online constitute a new public sphere. Habermas (1991; 1962) believed that mass communication and the rise of consumerism usurped the potential for a true public sphere where rational-critical debate could take place. Citizens were on the receiving end of political discussions conducted primarily through mass media

mimicking the process in which commodities are sold to consumers. Barlow (2008)

believes that the ability for anyone to take part in discussions and broadcast their opinions

and voice is a profound shift towards the creation of public spheres online; although he is

careful to acknowledge the threat corporate forces pose in their eagerness to commoditize

the web.[3] I largely accept the contention of Barlow and others of the Internet and new

media platforms for providing the *potential* of a new sphere for rational-critical debate.

How this works in practice is the subject of this study.

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[3] A smaller and less vocal group of scholars and critics like Matthew Hindman (2009)
believe that the Internet as a tool for democratizing politics and creating a new public
sphere is largely myth.

CHAPTER 2

COLLABORATIVE & ACTIVIST INFORMATION SPACES:
A BRIEF HISTORY

There is a long history of online collaborative information and news communities beginning tech-oriented sites in the later part of the 1990s. Prominent examples include *Slashdot* (est. 1997), *Kuro5hin*, and *MetaFilter*. Later, personal websites and blogs enabled less-technologically inclined users to create sites where personal opinions and information could be shared. *LiveJournal*, established in 1999, was among the first blogging platforms to go mainstream, enabling users who did not have the technical know-how for website creation to have an online publishing page for written thoughts or opinions, which could be shared and networked. Platforms like *Blogger* and *WordPress* took off around 2003 and 2004 and enabled users to create a hosted webpage similar to independent website with more multimedia options. These provided a similar functionality to professionally built websites of popular writers or political commentators. The emergence of platforms such as these has been called Web 2.0 because they mark a break in the need for professional coding ability to create online content.

I focus on this emergence of easy-to-use platforms as a trend in how online users consume, share, interact with, and even produce information related to news and politics. In fact, on the Internet, users have long been taking part in mashing up and remixing mainstream culture, such as movies, music, or art, as well as producing their own entertainment in the form of user created videos, art, websites, and games (Lessig 2008).

Online fan and gaming communities, often devoted to this kind of active, participatory, and contributory "audience" are massive and often well developed (Jenkins 2006). This same collaborative, participatory relationship between fan communities and their interests, while often confined to young users and popular entertainment, has taken root among the politically oriented in interesting and possibly ground-shifting ways.

User-created News and Early Online Information Communities

One of the early examples of using the Internet to set up activist information networks and organize protests came during the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle. Labor, environmental, and anti-globalization activists led to the organization of between 50,000—100,000 protestors who succeeded in disrupting and shutting down talks. Supporters who could not be physically present at the Seattle protests supported activists on the ground through online networks by keeping up with the user-created web-based reports during the days of protests. Despite this landmark event in the history of the Internet, Jeffrey Juris (2005) notes that the diverse group of activists came together successfully in Seattle for the 1999 anti-WTO protest thanks to the earlier development of global social and economic justice networks that emerged in support of the Zapatistas to counter the North American Free Trade (NAFTA) agreement (Juris, 2005, p. 344). The Zapatistas, an indigenous rights revolution in Mexico, utilized the Internet to gain international support for their small mostly peasant supported movement against the Mexican state. Most significantly, they did so utilizing not only new media technology, but also benefitted from a then-blossoming network of alternative news and online information systems that enabled them to control, in part, their own

media image (Russell 2005, p. 574,). The successful Zapatista movement stands in stark contrast to the 1960s radical student movement Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which some have argued lost control of its message and image due to its portrayal in network television news (2005, p. 560).

The anti-WTO protest movement created its own online news source *IndyMedia* to counter heavily distorted coverage by a news media both owned by and dependent on corporations for their revenue. *IndyMedia* began as a collaborative non-profit news network that allowed anyone to submit news stories through locally produced *IndyMedia* centers; they could be set up anywhere by anyone as long as they fit broadly within *IndyMedia's* anti-capitalist point of view. For those unhappy with a corporate controlled press that portrayed protestors as "anti-everything" troublemakers, *IndyMedia* represented a dramatic potential for alternative news production since all one needed was a computer and an Internet connection to submit stories to local *IndyMedia* centers. *IndyMedia*, as well as websites and list-serves, enabled protesters to both document and report on police brutality as well as cover their reasons for a global movement against free trade and the WTO. This proved how collaborative, participatory online information networks could act as an alternative and even a counter-force to not only neoliberal trade policy, but also a corporate-biased mainstream press.

Collaborative Information Communities

Yet, just as the anti-WTO protest in Seattle was not the first activist movement organized and sustained online but rather the first example to go mainstream, *IndyMedia* was not the first alternative, collaborative, and user-created online news network. Perhaps

one of the earliest forms of user-created news can be found at *Slashdot*, a "virtual meeting grounds for thousands of technology enthusiasts," founded in 1997. Self described as "news for nerds," *Slashdot* provided users with "as much the capacity to produce their own news content as they have had to merely consume it" (Chan, 2002, p.7). Chan (2002), in a study of *Slashdot*, provides this example of the changing roles of online journalism: In 1999, the editor of one of the most prestigious national security and defense journals submitted a controversial article on cyberterrorism to *Slashdot* for feedback because *Slashdot* had become known as a major gathering of technology enthusiasts. Hundreds of readers responded with nearly all respondents widely criticizing what they termed as a misleading and alarmist article; due to this response, the journal rejected publication of the article. Some career journalists who covered the technology beat were appalled at the use of "nerds from *Slashdot*." Others, including *Salon* lauded this "new kind of journalism" that "provided great expertise simply through the aggregation of users" (Chan, p. 7).

From its founding, *Slashdot* grew rapidly in popularity and developed a devoted following of technology-enthusiasts, including many college students, researchers, and IT professionals. On this site, users submitted original stories and commentary to a group of editors who selected stories for the main page. Once selected, stories could be commented on. Users who can rate comments with a "+1" or "-1" moderated this commentary collectively. *Slashdot* itself became a robust online community with featured discussion sections focusing on book reviews, politics, and games while maintaining topics related to science and technology. It became a new form of information and journalism for the techie community through both producing original content and articles

written and submitted by users as well as commenting on and responding to articles from other sources. Today, *Slashdot* receives over five million visitors per month. Chan's (2002) analysis and study of *Slashdot* explains the significance:

> The growth and spread of the Internet have generated new possibilities for public participation with news content, forcing news scholars and makers alike to confront a number of questions about what the nature, role and function of news, journalists, and audiences are in a networked society. If news gathering, reporting, and circulation had existed for generations as a largely centralized process, left to the minds and hands of reporters organized through news rooms across the nation, the environment of the Internet and interactive properties of new media counter such a model, affording users with as much capacity to produce their own news content as they have had to merely consume it (p. 3).

Slashdot continues as a successful, collaborative news community and has been credited with the "Slashdot effect," a term referring to how their beehive swarm-like attention can give a link or website tens of thousands of hits within minutes of being posted on the site. Yet, highly collaborative, participatory and open-source news and information sites like *Slashdot* are not the norm. Many similar sites that incorporate similar elements of participation have emerged. Based on the success of *Slashdot*, *Kuro5hin* emerged, a collaborative news site focused on "technology and culture" where registered users write and post submissions that are voted onto the main page or rejected by users. Around the same time as *Kuro5hin*, a similar site, *MetaFilter* emerged. *MetaFilter* has become a robust community of tens of thousands of registered members who post links on all sorts of topics from the web, providing commentary or "framing" for the story for other users discuss; in 2009, *Time* Magazine named *MetaFilter* one of their "50 Best Websites" (Fischer, 2009). For the most part however, these ultra-collaborative sites have focused on the interests of and thus are typically populated by

well-educated, often single, men in their late 20s and 30s. Chan (2002) pointed out that *Slashdot's* community is about 90% men.

Slashdot, *Kuro5hin* and *MetaFilter* set a standard as a collaborative news and information communities based primarily around technology. More recently, *Reddit*, a relatively new and massively popular site, replicates this model while moving beyond only techie-related news to cover more popular topics. *Reddit* is a collaborative and self-described "social news site" created through open-source software. Since its inception in 2005, *Reddit* has become the most popular collaborative online news and discussion site with millions of unique visitors per day and more than one billion page views per month.[4] *Reddit* users refer to the site as the "internet's homepage," a constantly changing collection of user selected and "upvoted" popular links, posts, and articles. The demographics are slightly broader than the aforementioned sites, but still male dominated and with most users within the 20-40 year age range.[5]

The Blog Revolution

Time magazine's 2006 "Person of the Year" cover was a mirror, suggesting that the Person of the Year was "You" due to the proliferation of user-generated content on blogs, websites, or platforms like *Wikipedia*, *YouTube*, and *Facebook*. "You, yes you. You Control the Information Age. Welcome to your world" exclaimed the cover.[6] *Time*'s

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[4] These statistics come from Erik Martin, who represented *Reddit* at the recent National Conference for Media Reform, speaking on panel titled "Pop Culture Warriors: How Online Fan Communities are Organizing to Save the World." Presented by FreePress, April 2011.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Time's Person of the Year issue; *Time* Magazine for December 25, 2006.

heralding of a new movement of the Internet—what some have termed Web 2.0 to describe how social media, applications, wikis, video and photo sharing sites, and other easy to use platforms—has enabled even the most basic Internet user to participate in production, distribution, and circulation.

The use of the term Web 2.0 is meant to draw a contrast to the early popularization of the Internet during the 1990s, when the web, for most people, was largely a tool for accessing information, email, and other electronic correspondences. Although the early web enabled far more sources of information compared to mass communication media and greater user choice and control through browsers, most users did not have the technical know-how or tools to create their own content. Web 2.0 tools like social networks, blogs, wikis, photo and video sharing sites involve user contribution through uploading, sharing, recommending, and creating content. While some digital literacy is needed to take part in these platforms, popular use of Web 2.0 platforms has had exponential growth, evidenced by the explosion of personal blogging websites, or the hundreds of millions who have joined social networks.

The largest growth in alternative news and information sources came as personal websites and blogs exploded in popularity with some gaining such acclaim that they have become establishment sources and voices in mainstream political debate. With the emergence and growth of easy to publish and free blog software and self-publishing tools, countless people have taken to the Internet to blog about politics and current events. In the political realm, personal websites, blogs, and now micro-blogs like Twitter and similarly accessible media, have opened up the narrow ideological and two-party bound debate that has long dominated mainstream political discourse in America.

Traditionally, news and political discussion through mass communication has tended to depend almost exclusively on "experts," representatives from the two dominant political parties or government officials (Manoff & Shudson 1986). The views expressed and even allowed represent rather narrow and pro-corporate debate and discussion. Commercial news media in the U.S., owned by just a hand-full of multinational media conglomerates, are reluctant to run stories critical of corporations that may be potential advertisers or owned by the same parent company as themselves. As part of a multi-billion dollar media industry, corporate news, while claiming to be "fair and balanced" is broadly biased in favor of the economic and political status quo—what critic Jeff Cohen (1989) has described as "propaganda from the center"—and would be extremely unlikely to make systematic critiques of the current economic system upon which it depends (Cohen 1989). From the early days of blogging and user-created websites and online spaces to the more broadly accessible contemporary Web 2.0 platforms, the Internet has enabled a resurgence of alternative voices and perspectives long shut out by mainstream media.

<u>Purpose of the Study</u>

As a high-volume news consumer and supporter of participatory democracy, I have long been attracted to sites and spaces that reflect the collaborative and participatory capabilities of the Internet. As I have outlined above, there have been incredible and even revolutionary developments in the cyber-realm that enable almost anyone to have a voice online, even if only in a small way. The motivation behind this study is to gain a better understanding of the collaborative and participatory possibilities that have emerged online in the realm of politics and information.

Toward this end, I look at two sites that typically would not be paired together; yet, both are fascinating examples: the collectively written and massively popular blog *Daily Kos*, now a mainstay in the US political blogosphere, and *Reddit*, a hybrid of a collectively run news aggregator and discussion forum on all imaginable topics. These sites are not merely interesting as an academic study, but they extremely popular sites with highly active and dedicated users. Both have (mostly) collective editorial selection by users, are made up of exclusively user created content and user submitted links, and most importantly, are sites with a heavy volume of discussion and debate. There are major differences, too. *Daily Kos* is devoted to politics, is favored by a relatively older population (as this study confirms), and is tied to the specific goal of getting Democratic politicians elected. *Reddit* is by no means focused on politics; rather, it is a platform that incorporates many "subreddits" devoted to a wide diversity of topics, many of them tech-oriented. However *Reddit* has rapidly become a hive of political discussion and appears to be one of the only popular sites with devoted political news and discussion that has decidedly younger active users.

While *DailyKos* and *Reddit* are widely different in the intent of the sites' creators, both have become highly active spheres of dialogue and debate about current events and politics. Not only do they stand out for their volume of political discussion, but both sites have formed dedicated communities that increasingly seek to take part in collective social and political action by leveraging their communities into action regarding topics of interest. In fact, it is my hope that their differences in intent and purpose will be useful in understanding the different potentials for collaborative and participatory online political sites.

<u>Daily Kos</u>

  Daily Kos is perhaps the most famous political blog in U.S. politics. What began

in 2002 as a personal blog of founder Markos Moulitsas quickly transformed into a

powerful voice in Democratic and progressive politics. The site embodies the potential of

collaborative blogging, allowing registered users to write articles and posts, which can be

highlighted and selected for inclusion on the main page. Starting in 2003, *Daily Kos* users

could create their own personal miniblogs within the site called diaries that other users

can comment on and recommend.[7] Today, *Daily Kos* is essentially of a blogging platform

with thousands of active writers whose entries comprise the site's content. The site

enables registered users to easily write original content, respond to others, and

recommend other users' diaries based on their thoughtful or interesting content. Because

of this, there is a very high volume of participation and discussion with some posts

receiving thousands of comments and responses. This kind of participation and user-

powered commentary are what fueled *Daily Kos'* rise to where in 2006 the site was

described as "the world's most popular blog" when it had about 10,000 people blogging

on the site and half a million daily visitors (Cox, 2006). Not only do average users have

the ability to write and publish diary entries, but so do many prominent politicians,

commentators, and other national figures—and many do—yet no contributors are given

preferential treatment. To have influence in editorial selections, users must develop a

reputation of quality and popular writing. *DailyKos* founder Marcos Moulitsas explains:

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[7] A brief history of *Daily* Kos can be found in a diary post written by user "dmsilev"
titled "The Great Leveling", available here:
http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/01/22/438605/-A-Brief-History-of-DailyKos:-The-
Great-Leveling-

> Every person who has risen to a position of prominence in the diaries started with the exact same limitations and challenges. Everyone on the site has equality of opportunity. If your words resonate with enough people, chances are you'll separate from the masses. If not, then you won't. It's like anything else in life. And even if you're not one of the star diarists, opportunities to shine exist and happen all the time (Moulitsas, 2009).

There exists a highly devoted community of contributors on *DailyKos* with hundreds of diaries written daily. They have had significant effect in mainstream politics from contributions and support or condemnation of politicians and issues to organizing the popular "Netroots Nation" convention, a popular annual convention of progressive internet bloggers and activists.

From the 2004 elections and onward, *DailyKos* has situated itself as one of the most vibrant political communities online and a major force in progressive politics that is at the helm of many progressive campaigns, causes, and candidacies. More recently, the site appears to be moving explicitly towards collective political action. Reflecting this, the website's banner includes a large blunt description of the site: "News. Community. Action." Some of their most significant victories revolve around challenging the leadership of the Democratic Party and injecting more progressive voices, such as their championing of Howard Dean and later successfully defeating incumbent conservative Democratic senator Joe Lieberman in the 2006 Connecticut primary (Armstrong & Zuniga, 2006).[8] Most significantly, *Daily Kos* helped popularize the Internet and specifically blogging as a highly effective method for individuals and activists to put pressure on mainstream politicians. Getting petitions signed, encouraging people to write

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[8] The progressive political blogosphere is widely credited with defeating long-time incumbent Joe Lieberman in the 2006 Democratic primary for Senate in Connecticut. Many commentators consider this the first "victory" of the netroots, especially after the failure of Howard Dean in 2004. However, Lieberman went on to run as an Independent, and won the Senate race against Democrat Ned Lamont.

their representatives, fundraising, fact checking, writing critical posts, *Daily Kos*, along

with other progressive sites, has a huge influence in contemporary Democratic politics.

<u>Reddit</u>

 Reddit is a social news site where all the content is submitted by its millions of

registered users. Registered users are able to submit either links to content from around

the web (news articles, videos, photos, etc.) or submit "self" posts, which are essentially

opinion or thought pieces much like a blog post. Other users can then vote the submission

"up" or "down" which ranks the post and determine its position on the site's subreddits

and front page. Instead of having a general site for all topics, *Reddit* is broken up into

subreddits (or just reddits), information communities formed around specific topics.

Popular subreddits (with close to or more than 1 million subscribers) include*: gaming,*

todayilearned, atheism, technology, politics, aww, pics, WTF, IAmA, videos. There are

subreddits from the general to the very specific, and users can create new subreddits if

they do not find one that fits their interests. For example, while the largest politics

subreddit is *r/politics* (subreddits are referenced using an "r/" to indicate the specific web

address), if a user is interested in a more specific topic related to politics, they can choose

from a wide variety of smaller political subreddits, such as *Socialism, Libertarianism,*

Anarchism, Green, Economics, Demsocialist, Progressive, Republican, and others. Users

looking for even more focused information and discussion can find subreddits such as

Ronpaul, Occupywallstreet, Endlesswar, Electionreform, Politicalhumor,

Firstamendment, Leninism, Libertarianleft, NeoProgs, and many others.

There are currently around 87,000 subreddits to choose from on almost any topic imaginable. Like a bottomless pyramid in structure, users can begin by looking for general subreddits and then continue looking for more subject-specific subreddits to match their interests. Most users are active in and subscribe to multiple subreddits, often both those specific and more general to their topics of interest. A high volume of "upvotes" can lead to interesting links or self.posts gain significant ranking that promotes them to *Reddit's* main page. *Reddit* employs an algorithm based on the age of the submission (most posts to hit the front page have only been live for less than 24 hours), the positive/negative vote ratio, and total number of votes. Dozens of different links and posts make it to the front page each day; although it typically takes thousands of positive votes and comments for a submission to reach the front. This constantly changing "best of" system of collective voting based on tens of thousands of votes each day on *Reddit* is why the site claims as its motto "The front page of the Internet."

These two sites have been chosen because, in my opinion, they best embody the collaborative and participatory abilities of collaborative online information spaces. Not only do they provide a robust forum for political information and news where issues are discussed and debated, they have increasingly taken on collective political action based on the interests and values of members. Aside from being strong case studies for my interest in collaborative online information spaces, studying these two sites is also practical and useful based on their popularity with users and influence in news and information online. Focusing on two sites rather than one site in detail allows for a comparison of data and also provides a kind of check against either site being a strong outlier or exception among similar collaborative news and information sites.

CHAPTER 3

THEORIZING COMMUNITY, DISCOURSE, AND ACTION ONLINE

This chapter begins with a series of questions that explore three interrelated lines of inquiry: community, discourse, and action. What do we mean when we talk about something as amorphous and vague as online community? Drawing upon the scholarship of Jurgen Habermas and more recent adaptations and extensions of Habermasian public sphere theory, I ask can these communities function as virtual public spheres and, if so, how do they function as virtual public spheres? Building upon understandings of online community/ies and virtual public sphere(s), I ask is collective action possible, and, if so, what does it look like? To answer these questions, I establish three broad theoretical frameworks. I take the position that participatory democracy depends on formations of community, places and spaces for discourse, the exchange of ideas, and the organizational and technical capacity for collective actions. My hope is to better understand how these processes are at work in the virtual realm.

Understanding Virtual Community

> In an age where people have more opportunity to be interconnected across space and time through technologically aided communication than during any other period in history, the (post)modern individual in contemporary Western society is paradoxically feeling increasingly isolated. New ways to understand and experience togetherness are being sought. (Willson, 1996, p. 1)

Attempts to understand how communities function and, more basically, how individuals interact and communicate with others online has been central to Internet scholarship over the last two decades. This work builds upon previous scholarship that looked at how communication functioned in any mediated context beyond face-to-face

communication. Early scholarship on cyber-communities tended to focus on the liberating and democratic potential of computer-networked interaction. This early excitement is best captured in Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993). Rheingold wrote of the potential for virtual communities to foster increased political discussion and participation and how computers enabled people to interact without the prejudices associated with issues like race, gender, or class. The excitement and proclamations for a new democratic society built upon computer-aided communication has subsided a bit, especially as concerns have grown in popular discourse surrounding the connection between computer and Internet use and what many deem anti-social behavior. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that the Internet has been liberating for many around the globe and the possibilities for interaction and communication between average people has increased phenomenally with the emergence of user-friendly platforms and systems associated with Web 2.0. What's more, no longer are members of "cyber-communities" merely the tech-savvy or computer geeks. Internet use has become ubiquitous among all age groups and interests; with it, increased socializing and formation of web-based groups based often on topics or issues of mutual interests.

No longer is there a question of whether a community can form and sustain itself via computers, but rather, how can we understand virtual forms of community? In her 2006 book, *Technically Together: Rethinking Community within Techno-Society*, Michele Willson attempts to do just that. Bringing together general scholarship on community with that of researchers who have attempted to understand digitally mediated community, she provides a loose but workable framework for understanding online community/ies.

Focusing particularly on the work of Mark Poster, Jean-Luc Nancy and Charles Taylor, Willson maps the theoretical work on digital communities that this study users as a theoretical base.

Although not universally agreed upon, Willson finds it useful to distinguish between what she calls traditional, modern, and postmodern communities within which to later situate virtual communities. Traditional is depicted as the pre-modern village community, where members are born into preexisting social roles and there is little ambiguity surrounding how to act (2006, p.36). Modern communities, most associated with the rise of urban centers, are "communities of choice" where people have the understanding that they could move between various communities and exist in multiple communities simultaneously (p.36). Willson notes that there is some level of ambiguity for individuals over how to behave, their identity, and how they fit within society. Postmodern communities further extend the degree of choice found within modern and traditional communities. This choice includes freedom from both socially prescribed and born-into as well as geography-bound identities. Community boundaries are "extremely flexible" and more open than those of modern communities (p.37). Willson explains:

> The postmodern community organizes itself through mediated and abstract integrative practices, where the primary form of interaction and communication is disembodied—detached from presence and mediated through technology. Time becomes experienced as immediate and compressed, multiple and fragmented, yet easily accessible and traversable (p. 39).

The postmodern community defined by highly flexible identities (and even "identity play"), traversed geographic space, low risk interactions and connections with others (and the ability to break or withdraw connections easily), and a high degree of individual choice helps us best understand the concept of virtual communities.

Willson provides a basic set of conceptual tools that can be used across community types to better analyze what distinguishes a particular community; they are bonding, reciprocity, commonality, and identity. I turn to these tools to understand the daily virtual gatherings on *Daily Kos* and *Reddit*, but first a working definition is in order. Willson defines bonding as "the experience of membership, of sharing something in common—whether it is a role, an interest, or citizenship of a nation" (p. 24). Such connection provides a sense of unity among community members. This connection is maintained and strengthened, often through shared practices, rituals and the use of symbols (p.24). Reciprocity is the process through which bonding is reinforced. Willson contends that it is a process that involves the mutual sharing of something, expressed through language or material goods (p.28). Reciprocity, which also implies recognition, helps solidify long-term attachment for community members. Through the bonding process, community members perceive that they share certain characteristics or commonalities with other members (p. 30). Commonalities range from the born into (traditional) like race, language, place, class or gender to the less embodied (modern and postmodern) ideology, musical taste, sports team, or consumer subculture. Willson explains that communities work to produce, reinforce, and manage commonalities, and it is often these commonalities which enable the necessary imagining of larger communities experienced in modern and postmodern communities (p.30). Finally, these communal processes feed into individual identity, "the sense we hold of ourselves, our perception of who we are and how we present ourselves to those around us (p.34)." Willson argues that the process of identity formation is intersubjective, what we see reflected in the behavior and attitudes of other community members. The firmness of an individual's identity (and

the ability to hold multiple, even contradicting identities) is, as previously mentioned, one

of the signature ways of trying to define a type of community along the spectrum from

traditional to postmodern.

A Virtual Public Sphere?

To understand online political information communities, a fundamental question

to examine is how these communities may (or may not) function as digital public

sphere(s). To answer this, it is useful to look back to Jurgen Habermas's original concept

of the public sphere.[9] One of the most important thinkers in contemporary social theory,

Habermas is best known for his concept of the public sphere. While his concept has

become a common term in popular discourse, Habermas's conception has an important

historical context and trajectory as well as specific criteria and defining characteristics. In

his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in 1967,

Habermas outlines how the public sphere emerged (1989). Under feudalism, he noted,

there was no "public realm" or "public discourse" such as we have today, but rather

aristocratic performances that symbolically represented the public (Goode 2005, p. 5).

With the rise of the mercantilist classes in the 17th and 18th centuries, a private sphere of

interaction among traders and merchants began to formulate a culture of public

discussion which formed a counter-weight to state authority. In cafes, public squares,

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[9] Most of the information presented here is based on the scholarship of Jurgen Habermas
and the public sphere; however, it does not come directly from Habermas. Habermas'
original translated texts are difficult to easily synthesize, and for the purposes of this
study, a more reduced understanding of his concept of the public sphere was needed. I
depend primarily on work by noted Habermas scholar Luke Goode as well as others
including Aaron Barlow, Simon Berdal, and Clary Shirky for their work on the digital
public sphere.

popular publications and other arenas that existed in spaces between private homes and official government institutions, a culture of discussion and debate that valued reason, critical debate, and open discussion emerged. By the 18th century, this bourgeois public sphere flourished in western Europe—from British coffee houses to French salons—where issues of the day could be discusses. The public sphere became a powerful counter-weight to the dominant centers of power, namely, the Church and the State. This social transformation helped foster the cultural movements of scientific and intellectual thought known as the Enlightenment.

Habermas's conception of the existence of a vibrant and egalitarian public sphere declined with the rise of modern capitalism. As capitalism reordered society and blurred the lines between private and public, a professional political class (led by mass media and the press) largely took over debate regarding social and political policy. Habermas laments that the culture of *debate* within the public sphere of the 18th and 19th centuries gave way to a culture of a *consuming* public, in which the public became largely a passive audience to mass media messages and dislocated from the centers of decision making (Goode 2005, p. 17). Regarding Habermas's critique of the effect of modern capitalism on the contemporary public sphere, Luke Goode (2005) explains, "Debate has not been entirely killed off, but like cultural goods themselves, debate has become administered, carried out within the confines of professional media spaces to a set of predefined rules and generic conventions; it serves as a 'tranquilizing substitute for action" (p. 20). Habermas is not claiming that there no longer is any debate; rather that debate is rarely involves the public directly. Political debate has become something to be watched and read, rather than engaged with. Goode provides a useful analogy of the

governing logic of the marketplace: "the educated consumer who, before plucking goods from the supermarket shelf, carefully considers the range of choices on offer and the cases that competing corporations make for their products" (Goode, 2005, p. 24).

Technological innovations impact discourse and social action. In the 16th century, the spread of the printing press, in part, enabled the emergence of the public sphere and civil discourse. Along with face-to-face deliberation in cafes and public gatherings, a robust world of essays and books provided the foundation for intellectual growth and the sharing of ideas over long distances. As Habermas argues, the rise of mass media wedded to the modern capitalist system eroded the vibrancy of the public sphere and led to the professionalization of political discourse, leaving average citizens as mere spectators. Mass mediated communication is uni-directional and uninterrupted, a flow of images and information rather than a discussion within which one can participate. Not to mention that critical discourse and debate on major political, scientific, and philosophical issues does not fit well with the practices and interests of commercial mass media channels. Combined, especially in the U.S., with the social atomization of individuals and breakdown of civil social groups (along with the rise of dispersed families in suburban enclaves), I, along with many others, argue that we lack a functioning public sphere in the Habermasian sense.

The rise of electronic communication via computers and particularly the rise and mainstream adoption of the World Wide Web has re-ignited debates about the potential for a digitally mediated public sphere. From the earliest days of the Internet, users have proclaimed that the Web provided a new forum for discourse that was free of the prejudices, power differences, and other trappings of the non-virtual world. This early

enthusiasm is well captured in John Perry Barlow's 1996 online manifesto *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, which states, "We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity." It is true that the Web has fundamentally transformed communication and information. Unlike mass communication systems which have limited distribution channels, extremely high cost, and are generally available only to commercial entities, the Web along with the widespread adoption of the personal computer have enabled for the formation of networks of distribution and interaction between individuals and organizations. The ability for the Web to potentially provide the structure for a new virtual public sphere has been realized; however, tech-savvy users dominated early websites, forums and discussion groups. Today, with Web 2.0 and the advent of easy to use and mostly free social media platforms, there is an even greater potential for more democratic and accessible forms of dialogue and discussion. Aaron Barlow (2008) and others have argued that the Web and specifically bloggers have provided the foundation for a new public sphere. He supports Habermas's contention that a viable public sphere has long been taken over by commercial interests, yet believes that possibly, the free and easily used platform of blogging as well as other user-driven web phenomena like citizen journalism and crowdsourcing is re-forming a public sphere that challenges the political hegemony of traditional elite media. Temporarily, at least, he argues that this new digital public sphere made up of millions of bloggers and active users acts as a buffer against the domination of political and cultural discourse by commercial forces.[10] Barlow (2008) writes:

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[10] Coming up with a total number of blogs is difficult, and various estimates vary.

> What is happening through the blogs, for both politics and journalism, is the carving out of a new place in the universe of organization and authority. Over the past century and more, both have become increasingly hierarchical, top-down. The blogs, much more egalitarian in focus, are forcing recognition that the old model of organization will no longer suffice, that there needs to be a way of encompassing individual ideas and initiatives while not giving up all control. This is a process that is probably still in its early days, and the tensions between the "grass roots" of the blogs and the established journalists and politicians have yet to be completely resolved—if they will be at all (xi)

In 2011, we saw the increased use of social media and mobile technology to challenge state control and other official channels of information. Most spectacular among these were the "Arab Spring" protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere that led to the fall of authoritarian regimes. However, Clay Shirky (2011) believes that the true potential for social media is not rapid political change or protest, but rather that as a society becomes more networked, individuals gain greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in deliberation, and, increasingly, the ability to engage in collective action. He sees the potential of social media in their ability to foment and support a vibrant civil society in similar fashion to Habermas's public sphere.

How do we understand spaces and sites of political information and discussion online in terms of Habermas's public sphere? While this study only examines two pieces of the political Web, they are two of the most popular and active political information communities online with millions of registered users. One of this study's main intentions is to evaluate both sites in terms of their potential as digital public spheres. I rely on

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Technocrati, a blog tracking company, estimated that in 2009 there were 200 million English language blogs. Given the explosive growth for blogs since then, estimates for 2011 have reached as high as 450 million. If foreign language blogs (in particular Chinese language blogs) are added in the number could be as high as one billion. This does not include social media like Facebook or microblogs like Twitter.

Habermas's conceptual framing of the public sphere in which he lays out three institutional criteria or preconditions for the emergence of a new public sphere. They are:

1. *Disregard of status*. The preservation of "a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. […] Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses, salons, and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realized, it was at least consequential" (Habermas 1989, p. 39 cited in Berdal, 2004).

2. *Domain of common concern*. "... discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned. The domain of 'common concern' which was the object of public critical attention remained a preserve in which church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation. [...] The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority." (loc.cit.).

3. *Inclusivity*. However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who – insofar as they were propertied and educated – as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion. The issues discussed became 'general' not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility: everyone had to be able to participate. [...] Wherever the public established itself institutionally as a stable group of discussants, it did not equate itself with the public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps even as its educator – the new form of bourgeois representation" (loc.cit.).

In short, these institutional criteria provide for a public sphere in which social status is disregarded, where discourse is focused on that of "common concern" for all involved and the public at large, and that members of all levels of society are included.

Since the translation of Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* into English, there has been significant debate and criticism over these institutional criteria. Feminist and labor oriented scholars like Nancy Fraser (1992) point

out that Habermas's vibrant public sphere of the 18th and 19th centuries was not open to women, nor much of the lower strata of society. Despite the reality of the bourgeois public sphere falling far short of Habermas's ideal criteria, they do in fact provide a useful framework for understanding the potential for a virtual public sphere.

Apart from his institutional criteria, Habermas was also concerned about the need for ethical discourse within the public sphere. He believed a public sphere must foster a process of open and reflexive discourse that would lead to consensus; not necessarily an agreed upon decision by all, but that the process enabled all to contribute in an equal enough way as to give it legitimacy. To encourage this, he adopted the "Rules of Reason" proposed by Robert Alexy (1990) as the criteria through which the Ideal Speech Situation (ISS) could be achieved. Simon Berdal (2004) enumerates a summary of Habermas's ISS criteria:

> *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).* (Berdal 2004, p. 36)

As evident from the term Ideal Speech Situation, this is a set of *ideal* rules that are geared towards promoting free and open discourse much like Habermas's original concept of the public sphere. For this study, Habermas's three institutional criteria for the emergence of a public sphere and his rules for achieving an Ideal Speech Situation provide a strong theoretical tool set to utilize in understanding the potential for a virtual public sphere. Aside from the criteria, the important question for this study is, can political information

communities serve as public sphere(s) coming close to Habermas's ideals, while avoided the problems associated with critiques (Fraser et al.). This will be explored in the following chapters.

Collective Action and Online Information Communities

The Web, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), and what is generally referred to as new media provide the potential for dispersed people to come together around interests in virtual communities. The growing ubiquity of participatory functions of Web 2.0 platforms has contributed greatly in enabling discussion, debate, and deliberation throughout virtual spaces. If virtual community can exist in various ways and if formulations of virtual public sphere(s) can spring from within and between, then this leads to the question of the ability for online communities and publics to take part in collective social and political action.

More than a decade after the success of early cyber-activists at the 1999 WTO protests and Zapatista uprising, we continue to see the Internet's potential for political organizing and activism. We have seen cyber-activism enter mainstream politics as major movements of cyber networks (often referred to now as the "netroots") have made significant waves in mainstream party politics. Howard Dean's 2004 campaign was almost driven to victory by young tech savvy supporters and Barack Obama's historic primary and general election campaign saw the culmination more traditional, centralized campaign networks intermeshed with dispersed social networks and organizations of potential supporters. Perhaps even more significantly, we saw for the first time, in the 2008 primary, a major presidential campaign that took place almost entirely online run by

independent cyber movements outside the ideological boundaries of the mainstream press. Libertarian and anti-war Republican Ron Paul's candidacy was driven almost entirely by a dispersed grassroots network of bloggers and other online supporters. He had virtually no traditional campaign infrastructure. Despite being barred from political debates and deemed illegitimate by the mainstream press, Paul's supporters raised tens of millions for him online and sustained his candidacy outside the bounds of the mainstream press (Soha, 2008). Prior to the Internet, the mainstream press and parties held almost complete power over the set of guidelines or logics used to select legitimate candidates for president; this has often been at odds with the public's desire for alternative candidates (Meyrowitz, 1994). I argue, in my earlier research, that the Internet proved its ability for supporters to challenge the narrow ideological boundaries of the two party-media collusion that had until then held almost complete power to decide which candidates are "legitimate" or not and thus has long silenced alternative voices (Soha, 2008).

Today, cyber-activism and online political networks mount serious challenges to the political power of traditional systems and institutions, encouraging a wider and more complex spectrum of political voices, supporting more ideologically diverse candidates, and enabling social and political movements on a global scale. The last year and a half have been witness to an explosion of web-organized and networked social and political movements that most likely would not have been possible in the pre-Internet age. Mobile, social, and participatory media provide the communication tools that helped millions of protesters organize against authoritarian regimes in country after country in what has been dubbed the "Arab Spring." While many of these mass protests succeeded due to the

physical encampments and occupations of public space, new media enabled protestors to organize and plan the initial actions of the movements, and when traditional media sources were banned or censored, social media enabled the protests to tweet, post, and otherwise show the world dramatic texts, images, and videos of police brutality and military crackdowns. Taking from some of the momentum and tactics of Egyptian and other Arab Spring protests, the Occupy Wall Street movement rapidly took root in the U.S. with hundreds of "occupations" in cities and towns around the country. Like the anti-WTO protestors in 1999, "occupiers" had to battle negative portrayals in the mainstream press. They created an impressive (and growing) media network of artists, video editors, and website creators who gave the Occupy movement(s) not only their own broadcast capability, but enabled the rapid growth and sharing of resources between protest groups across the country.

In some ways what we see from these political and social movements is a kind of façade. Wrapped up in stories about Twitter and social media, journalists often suggest that what is happening is some kind of "spontaneous" movement or revolution. In trying understand or "see" these networks in action, Arturo Escobar (2008) considers the possibility of what he has called a stifling "Seattle effect." That is, we do not see the "always on-going swarming" of cyber-activist networks, but instead only see when there is a visible effect, such as the 1999 Seattle anti-WTO movement, which made it seem as if the tens of thousands of activists merely appeared when in reality they had been organizing, planning, and coordinating the protest for months (p. 4). In the case of the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, there were often "sparks" both planned and unplanned that brought people together. While many more traditional political groups

may have been involved, AdBusters came up with the idea for Occupy Wall Street and many student and religious organizations had been organizing and preparing for Arab Spring type protests for years. The ability for people to hear about and support the movements via social networks and mobile media platforms helped quickly amplify the early movements. Without the viral and rapidly shared news of Occupy Wall Street in online networks, most people would have likely never heard of it as there was no mention in the mainstream press of the occupation during its first week. Horizontal networks combined with mobile and participatory media were able to seriously challenge the hegemonic power of the mainstream commercial media.

Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker (2007) lay out a compelling treatise on our transformation into a network-society in *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks.* They describe how there is a changing topology of power globally that reflects the emergence of networked power. First, they argue that there was a "politics of symmetry" where centralized power blocs struggled against each other—institutions vs. institutions, states vs. states, parties vs. parties. The U.S. vs. the Soviet Union during the cold war, the Republican party vs. the Democratic party, Pepsi vs. Coke. Now, we have largely moved into a "politics of asymmetry" where de-centered, insurgent networks struggle against traditional power blocs. The Zapatistas vs. the Mexican state, anti-free trade protestors vs. the World Trade Organization, Al Qaeda vs. the American government. Galloway and Thacker believe that we are increasingly headed towards a second model of symmetry in which networked powers struggle against other networked powers. Power in this new networked sphere go to those actors or nodes that are able to direct and modulate flow,

that can create protocol, that can organize collective action, such as the networked

"swarm" phenomena of online mobile networks.

While Galloway and Thacker are focused on the global context, their insight helps

us understand what we may be looking at in a world defined by information networks.

The power of dispersed networks is clearly evident in the Arab Spring uprisings. It is

evident in the changing sphere of U.S. politics and information, too, as well as in the

politicization of information, and, subsequently, the creation of politicized networks

where users join together for information, context, discussion, and action is changing the

very notion of news and political participation. What began as online political spheres for

information and discussion have turned into networks increasingly oriented towards

collective action. The success of the grassroots Tea Party movement online is one

example as is the pressure put on politicians by the progressive network of bloggers and

net activists during the health care debate. Occupy Wall Street and the recent Internet

blackout against SOPA/PIPA provides another example. We see a new world of

information and political activism driven by a (mostly) decentralized network of

ideological bloggers, websites, and social media that are able to collectively exert

pressure, often rapidly on policy makers.

Traditionally, politics has been based on what Jeffrey Juris (2005) has described

as "command-orientated logic" of traditional institutions (parties, unions, trade groups,

etc.) that worked to recruit new members and develop unified strategies for electoral

victory, influence, and control over policy decisions and governmental regulations.

Political representation functioned through vertical structures and the pursuit of political

hegemony (Juris, 351). Network-based politics involved the creation of "umbrella

spaces" where the whole gamut of diverse groups and networks with often divergent interests had to be marshaled under one big "umbrella" coalition. Juris argues that this cultural logic of networking gave rise to a "new way of doing politics" that is "network-based forms of political organization and practice based on non-hierarchical structures, horizontal coordination among autonomous groups, open access, direct participation, consensus-based decision-making, and the ideal of the free and open circulation of information (Juris, p. 351)." Rather than the recruitment aim of traditional politics (which I consider a passive form of participation), the objective of network-based politics is to create autonomous movements that influence politics and popular opinion.

In Manuel Castells' 1997 book *The Power of Identity*, Castells identified a "networking, de-centered form of organization and intervention, characteristic of the new social movements, mirroring, and counteracting" the networking logic of domination in the information society (1997: 362). Expanding on Castells' work, Juris examines the specific mechanisms through which this de-centered networking logic is actually produced, reproduced, and transformed by concrete activist practice within particular contexts, which is, essentially, the cultural logic of networking. In sum, Juris (2005) argues that this logic involves an "embedded and embodied" set of dispositions that orient actors towards:

1. Building horizontal ties and connections among diverse, autonomous elements

2. The free and open circulation of information

3. Collaboration through decentralized coordination and directly democratic decision-making

4. Self-directed or self-managed networking

This logic reflects much of the cultural logic of the "open source" software movement (like Linux), or the World Wide Web in general. Pekka Himanen (2001) explores the broader "hacker ethic" rooted in the "hacker" values of free and decentralized information, collaboration, recognition of peers (in a form of cyber community), and service for the greater good. In subsequent chapters, I apply this set of dispositions to both *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* to better understand how new networked and participatory configurations on the Internet take part in action and what that might mean both for participants and the political process. Given the differences between the two sites, a comparison should prove generative in understanding different ways of taking action and looking at both sites' motivations and abilities towards collective action should generate an interesting discussion regarding how online groups take part in activism.

The ability for participatory political information communities and networks to discuss, support, and, ultimately, take part in collective actions is paramount to working towards understanding how political power is exerted in the digital age. In fact, both *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* have been major influences in driving media interest and providing support for many recent political movements, in particular the Occupy Wall Street movement. Aside from supporting outside movements, both sites have been active, especially lately, in taking part in collective action on a myriad of topics. *Daily Kos* has made action a core part of its mission statement, and, as a community specifically motivated towards electing Democrats and supporting progressive causes, they have long undertaken actions ranging from petitions, fundraising, and organizing work on behalf of candidates and causes. *Reddit* does not have any explicit goals and is by no means an activism oriented site like *Daily Kos;* however, increasingly *Reddit*, the site as a whole

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and subreddit communities, has become involved in political and social action. Most notably, *Reddit* users hatched the idea for the Internet blackout virtual protest in opposition to anti-piracy legislation known as SOPA/PIPA. The community collectively decided to blackout the site for a day, which generated interest among other sites. Ultimately, thousands of sites from behemoths like Wikipedia, Google, and Craigslist to thousands of smaller sites blacked out or otherwise alerted their users to the dangers of the SOPA/PIPA legislation, encouraging them to contact their elected officials. These actions led to what has been described as the largest virtual protest in history.

CHAPTER 4

CONDUCTING AN ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY: METHODOLOGY

With this study I am contributing to broader questions about the role of the Internet in politics and the changing nature of news and information production and consumption. More specifically, I am driven by a desire to better understand new forms of political information production, discussion, and action online. To do this, I have chosen to focus on two of the most popular and influential online locations for political information, discussion, and action: *Daily Kos* and *Reddit*. The purpose of this research project is to take a deep examination in order to test, challenge, and support my current understandings as well as compare the two sites in terms of their similarities and differences.

The research approach of this study can largely be described as ethnographic, carried out via a mixed method inquiry. The term ethnography is often used loosely by scholars, and lacks a more concrete reference compared with more specific methods used in the social sciences. In the spirit of ethnographic inquiry, this study was designed to draw from many sources. The core of the project is based around a comprehensive mixed method survey, the responses to which were analyzed using historical research, recent scholarship, theory, and more popular written accounts. In addition, I bring to the analysis my own experiences as a critical-observer and sometime participant of these two sites, in addition to my knowledge of political news and information sites online generally.

Ethnography and ethnographic approaches have long been central towards scholarship dealing with the Internet as a technology as well as a location and practice for human relations, socialization, and meaning making. Early on, Christine Hine (1998) noted this trend, explaining:

> On-line ethnographers join their chosen field sites for sustained periods, interacting with their informants and building up a richly detailed picture of the ways in which the medium is used to create and sustain relationships. Some authors argue that on-line contexts provide for the formation of communities detached from the need for physical location or co-presence (Jones, 1995). The ethnographies of on-line communication are thoroughly provocative in the emphasis they place on the complex and creative uses to which computer-mediated communications are put. They make it apparent that the Internet can be viewed as social context(s) in its own right. (1998)

Studying online phenomena can be done in a variety of ways. As Annette Markham (1998) notes, the Internet itself can be seen as tool, place, and a way of being. For this project, the Internet is both a tool for research and a place or "object" of study. While it is appealing to "lurk and observe" examining and interpreting activities in a virtual field or site of study, this project takes more active engagement and examination (Hine 2009, p. 11). This study goes beyond lurking and observing to get a more clear picture of users' experiences and works to provide general information about what types of users are active on these two sites. When users comment, interact, and participate in online information communities, they are often anonymous, at least to outsiders; many questions remain unanswered from mere observation. What group(s) take part here? What are their characteristics? What are their practices both on and offline? What are their social dynamics? What do they have to say about their experiences? To answer these questions, the Internet was used as a tool in the form of a comprehensive online survey to provide

information that is unseen from observation. Hine (2009) points out the "classic" idea of ethnography:

> The key idea is that the researcher should become immersed in the social situation being studied and should use that experience to try to learn how life is lived there, rather than coming in with a particular pre-formed research question or assumptions about the issues that will be of interest. (6)

However, Hine suggests this conception does not do justice to the complexity of the process, that this is an idealistic definition (6). I agree and admit that it is difficult if not impossible to approach the subject without holding such pre-formed assumptions. This is, in part, why I decided to use a comprehensive survey based upon both qualitative and quantitative questions. This information greatly helped me form a more detailed and holistic understanding and enabled me to challenge pre-held beliefs and assumptions about the subject of study. Yet, even the act of placing boundaries on a study—who to survey, what to focus on, how long, what tools to use, when or where—stems from pre-held assumptions that existed to even begin such study.

I view myself as an active researcher who not only observes, but immerses himself within the world and experience of the online users and communities of study. As Boyd (2009) exclaimed, when doing online ethnographic work, as with any cultural or anthropological work, the researcher needs to "get into the field, hang out, observe, document, question, analyze" to take part in "deep hanging out" as she calls it. Not so different from the well-known "thick description" prescribed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). Although I was not originally a member of either site, once I began to formulate this project, I registered as a user and began exploring. As Boyd suggests, I started "hanging out" to get a feel for how the community functions. Going into any well-developed online community is often similar to the experience of finding oneself

immersed in an unfamiliar place or culture. It takes time to understand the interface, the ways of communicating, the inside jokes, the popular references, the ebb and flow of topics and conversations. I believe this immersive process is essential for any researcher who desires to better understand a complex community.

Doing this kind of analytical research relying on primarily qualitative methods necessitates a flexible and changing plan. Reflecting the view of many qualitative researchers is the idea that, "research design should be a reflexive process operating through every stage of the project" (Maxwell 2004, p. 2). This holds true for this project as well. Prior to collecting data, I expected to uncover general understandings, tendencies, and patterns from the responses, which would be intended to help contribute to my larger analysis of collaborative news communities online. I did have very general questions in mind when designing survey questions. I wanted to hear from users about their understandings and experiences in regards to community, the processes and quality of discussion, and collective action and activism. I included many open-ended questions that engaged all three of these broad levels of inquiry, with the intent identifying common themes and ideas from immersion in a large volume of qualitative data.

One of the biggest challenges for my research was the problem of "key informant bias" (Maxwell 2004, p. 91). For qualitative researchers who work with a small number of participants or informants, there is no guarantee that their views are typical of their population. Due to the potential for key informant bias, throughout this analysis when referencing data gleaned from my surveys, I emphasize the high likelihood that the responses are not representative of all site users; rather, they are likely to reflect the views of more active, dedicated users. I do not consider this to be a flaw of the study as it is

these core active users that I am most interested in. In fact, to be sure of this, both surveys were designed to filter out users who were not active, registered members. At the beginning of the survey, users were told that the survey was intended only for registered users of either site. In order to participate in any way on both sites, users must register. Additionally, the first question asked users if they considered themselves "active users" defined as "someone who has registered with the site and does things like comment on links, participate in discussions, and/or submit links." Given the large response pool, I feel confident that the survey respondents provided views that were typical of active, registered users.

Conducting the Surveys

I decided on the use of a comprehensive survey in order to allow users to speak for themselves. I designed each survey to be in-depth with many open-ended response questions to allow users to answer in detail. I created a separate survey for each site and while they varied slightly with wording or references, they were nearly the same in terms of the questions asked.[11] While the quantitative questions were aimed at gleaning important and useful information in order to color distinct categories using ideological and demographic data, the most valuable "data" from these surveys came from the more qualitative, open-ended questions. In order to get a sense of how users felt about the strength of community, the quality of discussion, and the experience of taking collective action, I wanted to hear users describe their experiences in their own voice. The surveys

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[11] The questions asked in each survey are included in the appendix.

were between 32 – 38 questions long, including both multiple choice and open answer questions. I included around 8 – 10 open-ended questions and encouraged respondents to "write as much as you'd like." Many users wrote lengthy and rich responses. While this meant that I ended up with what at first felt like unwieldy piles of qualitative responses, the benefit was in being able to deal with a rich breadth of experiences and perspectives in addition to having access into the complexity and nuance that users wanted to express regarding various issues.

Prior to this project but for a similar study, I ran a pilot survey (in 2011) of users on the political news site *The Huffington Post*. In attempting to solicit users for my survey, I immediately encountered difficulty and could not find a point of entry that allowed me to connect with users. *The Huffington Post* is one of the largest online news sources and has a comparably limited staff. I simply could not connect with any gatekeepers who could allow me to solicit users to take a survey. Site administrators have a very strict policy on solicitation and although I was able to post my survey in forums to limited success, site moderators repeatedly banned me because I broke site rules. Ultimately, after multiple attempts and many days of trying (and having my posts almost immediately deleted by volunteer moderators), I garnered only twenty-five or so respondents.

My biggest worry for this project was that I would end up in the same situation. Like the *The Huffington Post*, both *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* are highly trafficked sites with very limited staff that depend largely on volunteer moderators. Both sites had less strict policies on solicitation, so I hoped I could post my survey with an appeal and explanation

that I was doing non-commercial academic research. I set my target response rate at 100 responses per site, although I worried that this was overly ambitious.

Thankfully, I was very successful with both sites in gaining access to a space to post my solicitation. On *Daily Kos*, I initially tried emailing site administers, asking for permission and help to conduct my survey; however, I received no responses. After trying for a week, I went ahead and posted a diary entry under a newly created user name. Given the constant threat of scams and illicit material that online users face when being solicited with an unknown link, I aimed to be as transparent as possible. In my post, I was upfront with who I was (including my full name), the institution I was coming from, and the details of the project. I included my contact information in case any users had questions or concerns before they began the survey. I also included links to work that I have published that included my name so they could see that I actually was someone who produced academic research. To my luck, users noticed my post and were excited by the project enough to "recommend" it many times, landing it on the front page of the site briefly. In order to try to make sure my survey was available to both weekday and weekend users, I posted the survey once in the middle of the week and again on the weekend. I ultimately received 131 completed responses out of 152 users who began the survey with a completion rate of 86%.

On *Reddit*, I sought out the volunteer moderators who run the r/politics subreddit. With more than a dozen volunteer moderators, it took them almost two weeks to reach consensus but ultimately they decided my project was worthwhile and went as far as posting a "CSS sticky" (basically a semi-permanent link) at the top of both the r/politics and r/politicaldiscussion subreddits. This brought in hundreds of responses over the

course of a day and a half. Ultimately, I received 281 completed surveys out of 424 who initially began it for a completion rate of 66%. I attribute the difference in completion rates to the typical age group and demographics of both sites: *Daily Kos* has an older and higher educated core group of users whom are probably more likely to be willing to finish a long survey.

Given the purpose and scope of this project, I feel that using a comprehensive survey worked well, however, I did find a number of limitations in practice. I would have liked to be able to respond to individual users to ask follow up questions to their survey responses. If this study had been larger in scope, I would have included follow-up interviews in order to create more of a dialogue with users. For example, in trying to understand a complex, subjective topic like "sense of community" online, I think a dialogue would have enabled me to get a better understanding of the many different social experiences of users. I also have some concern over the number and percentage of incomplete surveys. *Daily Kos* had a high completion rate at 86%, but *Reddit* had only a 66% completion rate. This could mean that I may be missing certain types or groups of users, perhaps users who are less active or engaged. Given the length of the questionnaire and the number of open-ended questions, my suspicion is that some users decided mid-way through that they did not have enough time or the interest to finish.

Immersion, Observation

Practitioners of online ethnography like Hine (2000) and Markham (1998) argue that online or virtual ethnographies should maintain the emphasis on immersion and participant observation of more traditional ethnography. They explain that online

ethnographers must work towards developing the ideal of Geertzian "thick description" (1973), a practice that can only be successful through immersive practices. However, there remains concern for the success of this method in the online context. How rich an ethnography can a researcher produce through observation and participation in the virtual world? The answer seems to lie in the length of time, effort, and level of participation that a researcher devotes towards this end much like ethnography practiced in the "real world."

I set out to immerse myself in the world of both *Reddit* and *Daily Kos* with this goal in mind. While I had visited both sites previously and knew about them due to their influence in U.S. politics and news, I was not a regular visitor or user prior to this project. As I began to devote more and more time to this study, I made visiting both sites part of my daily routine. From October 2011 to March 2012, I visited both sites almost daily, reading the popular posts and scanning high-volume discussions. I saved interesting posts, recorded my thoughts on relevant occurrences, and made note of when the site appeared to be particularly active, and why.

One of the interesting aspects of carrying out a digital ethnography is that a researcher can get extremely close to the culture or community being studied, can spend hours a day observing and taking notes without their presence being known by anyone. This has the benefit of avoiding the problem of a researcher's presence in a community being studied affecting how participants act with the idea that they are 'under surveillance' or being scrutinized. I would not call myself exactly a "participant observer" as I specifically avoided taking part in day-to-day discussions or posting material in order to remain anonymous; however, I did actively participate in the site in

that I immersed myself anonymously in the daily on-going discussions, posts, and general experience of users working towards an intimate knowledge of both sites. I also engaged in significant historical research to learn about the transformation and evolution of the two sites. I found that both sites are complex and have changed dramatically over the years. Both were started by total amateurs—*Daily Kos* began as a personal blog of Markos Moulitsas and *Reddit* was hatched by two 22-year old college friends Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian. I relied on a large amount of popular writing on both sites as both have been subjects for numerous articles in both mainstream and amateur publications.

Limitations of the Study

This study did not focus much on the content of either site. As a participant observer, I visited each site daily, often multiple times a day, yet still could only get a sense of a slice of popular content. It would be worthwhile to examine the submitted content to both sites in a more comprehensive way. For *Reddit*, one important question would examine what volume of submitted material was user-created (personal thoughts, opinions), and what was submitted links from outside sources. Furthermore, it would be worth closely examining these two categories in more detail. For self-submissions, what topics received most upvotes/discussion? For outside links, it would be interesting to see which popular links came from traditional news organizations, and which from independent sites or outside user blogs.

The presence of international users is another element overlooked by this study. While there are relatively few international users on *Daily Kos*, given its explicit focus on

American politics, *Reddit* has a very high volume of international users. According to

Alexa, only 46% of redditors are from the United States. The next most popular country

of origin is India, contributing 10% of all visits, followed by Canada at 6.4%, The UK

with 5.3%, and Pakistan, Australia, and Japan all with 2%. There is no way to distinguish

users' nationality or background, other than from context clues in a post or submission.

The presence of an increasingly international user base on *Reddit* has a noticeable effect

on political discussions throughout, and some international users have expressed

frustration at a perceived American-centric focus of many subreddits.

Another limitation has to do with time. Both sites have changed dramatically over

the years, and their activity levels have varied. For example, I ran my survey for *Reddit*

prior to their prominent role in helping spark what many have declared the largest

Internet protest, which erupted over the SOPA/PIPA copyright legislation. Had I

surveyed users post-protest, I imagine there would have been a significant difference in

their responses regarding collective action. *Daily Kos* also changes quite a bit from year

to year. During a presidential or midterm election year, I would imagine the site is far

busier and active than during non-election years. It would have been interesting to look at

Daily Kos during both an election and non-election year, and to see if there are some

users who are highly active only during election time.

Finally, one major limitation of this study is in the political and ideological groups

represented by the two sites. *Daily Kos* is clearly a left/liberal site, and while *Reddit* is a

greater mix of left/liberal, libertarian, social-democratic, and other more marginal

political groups, neither site has a very active right/conservative user base in terms of the

U.S. political spectrum. Republican-supporting, right/conservative groups are largely

absent from both sites. In this U.S., while the political left has been quicker to take to the Web, there has been major growth in the right/conservative blogosphere. The emergence of the Tea Party is due in part to this growth. Because of the limits of the scope of this project and because most of the major conservative sites are top-down and do not function as collaborative information communities, I did not include one of the popular right/conservative sites in this project.

In a recent exhaustive study, Yochai Benkler and Aaron Shaw (2010) examined the relative symmetry between the left and right blogosphere. Based on qualitative coding of the top 155 political blogs, they found that there existed significant variation in discursive production and participation between rightwing and leftwing sites. In comparison with politically rightwing sites they found that:

> Sites on the left adopt more participatory technical platforms; are comprised of significantly fewer sole-authored sites; include user blogs; maintain more fluid boundaries between secondary and primary content; include longer narrative and discussion posts; and (among the top half of the blogs in our sample) more often use blogs as platforms for mobilization as well as discursive production. (Benkler & Shaw 2010, p. 2)

Until this point, the few studies that have tried to map out the political and networked blogosphere had found that the left and right wings of the blogosphere to be largely symmetrical. However, as Benkler and Aaron explain, this is based on faulty "link analysis" which merely looks at sites' linking practices. Benkler and Shaw instead examined and coded discursive practices within each site, rather than just rating them on the extent of their links. Similarly, Bowers & Stoller (2005), on the basis of personal observation and experience, argue that the elite blogs on the right reproduced an integrated, top-down approach to political messaging that reinforced off-line communities and organizations, whereas elite left-wing blogs took a more participatory

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approach to building new political communities of interest and action (Bowers & Stoller,

2005: 4-5, cited in Benkler 2010). These findings reflect my own experience and

understanding of the left and right blogosphere. I'm very familiar with the top right and

leftwing political websites, and I have observed that there appears to be more

participation and less hierarchy on the left than on the right. That being said, there are

two popular conservative sites that could be considered participatory, *Free Republic* or

Red State, which allow for user-written blog posts and some rank-vote systems. With

more time or resources, I would have liked to include one of these two sites to have a

more complete picture of online political information communities in the U.S.

CHAPTER 5

FORMATION AND EXPERIENCE OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

<u>The Daily Kos Community</u>

Over time I have witnessed some remarkable things here at dkos – good, bad and ugly. But it's mostly been good. I've seen people reach out to each other, comfort each other, help each other and support each other in every conceivable way, and I've seen a ton of it. This community has done many remarkable and generous things, more than any other organization or community I have ever known. Examples are too numerous to list. You don't have to look far to find it. Scratch the surface of Daily Kos and you'll find a deep and pure vein of all that is best in humanity. A surprising number of the finest friends I have found in this world, I have found right here.

- from a post by user OnePissedOffLiberal

According to members of *Daily Kos* who participated in the survey, *Daily Kos* is

a strong community with a core group of extremely dedicated members. In answering the

question "do you consider yourself part of [the Daily Kos] community," of the 131

completed survey respondents, 40% answered "Yes very much so;" 52% answered "Yes,

to some degree;" and only 8% answered "No." When asked, "do you consider yourself an

active user," 43% answered, "Yes, very active;" 50% answered, "Yes, moderately

active;" and 8% answered, "No." Just about the same percentage of users who said they

considered themselves "very active" members also answered "Yes very much so" when

asked if they considered themselves part of a *Daily Kos* community. In addition, 88% of

all respondents reported having been a member of *Daily Kos* for more than two years,

while 6% answered between 1-2 years, and 4% for six months or less. The data suggests

that there is core group of dedicated members on *Daily Kos* that not only feel very

strongly about the sense of community on *Daily Kos*, many of them are long term

members, often for many years. Granted, this survey includes only users who were at

least registered with this site; it does not take into account lurkers or casual users. In

addition, users who would be interested in spending time taking a 10-15 minute survey

would likely be those dedicated community members. Active and long-term members of

Daily Kos feel that the site is a strong community and I utilize the conceptual tools put

forth by Michelle Wilson to better examine how *Daily Kos* functions as a virtual

community. She defines community, even in the virtual sense, through the concepts of

bonding, reciprocity, commonality, and identity.

<u>Commonality</u>

Willson points out, while traditional communities were initially preordered by

given commonalities such as race, language, place, class or gender, modern and

postmodern communities often form around less "given" commonalities and

increasingly around commonalities of "choice" like musical genre, artistic taste, or

sports team. The Internet further enables communities to form around very narrow or

specific commonalities of choice. This characteristic of postmodern community fits

Daily Kos. While discussion on the site can be about almost anything, what virtually all

community members (at least those users that consider themselves part of the

community) have in common is liberal/progressive politics. The site bills itself as the

premier online progressive political community, and it is known as a bastion of

liberal/progressive political activists and supporters within the U.S. political system. My

survey results from *Daily* Kos users strongly reflect this. To the statement "I feel that

being a part of *Daily Kos* allows me to interact with others who share similar interests and values," 96% of users answered "strongly agree" or "agree." In answering the question "How would you, in general, describe your political beliefs," 42% of respondents chose "Liberal/Progressive," 37% chose "Very Liberal/Progressive," and 16% chose "Socialist/Social Democratic." Only 2% chose "Moderate/Centrist;" 1% chose "Conservative," and no respondents chose "Very Conservative" or "Libertarian." The ability to discuss issues with likeminded liberal/progressive people is one of the defining elements for *Daily Kos*. When responding to the statement "I prefer to discuss news and politics with like-minded people on *Daily Kos* instead of more general websites," 78% of users answered, "Strongly agree" or "agree."

While the *Daily Kos* is a community based around and defined by progressive politics, users share other important commonalities. *Daily Kos* is known as a robust discussion forum with well-educated users, and my survey reflects this. 30% of users reported holding a four-year college degree, and 43% of users reported holding a graduate degree. Another 21% reported having completed "some college" while 2.3% had completed only high school. In terms of gender, the survey found a dead even split with 49% male, 49% female, and 2% other. This is atypical of many political discussion sites and online forums in general, which often have significantly higher numbers of male participants than female. Internet tracking and analytic site *Alexa* has similar findings for *Daily Kos*, showing a relatively equal share of male/female visitors.[12] While gender has always played a role in the formulation of communities, clearly within the online context it matters much less due in part to the inability to identify easily a user's

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[12] Alexa analytics for *Daily Kos* can be found at:
http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/dailykos.com

gender when communicating through user handles and written text. Perhaps the most significant demographic commonality shared by *Daily Kos* users is age—active users tend to be much older. My survey found the highest percentage of users fell within 50-59 year old range, with 24% in the 40 – 49 range, and 24% aged 60 or older. In comparison, only 7% of respondents fell within the 30-39 range, 2% between 21-29, and 1% age 20 or younger. Again, although *Alexa* does not provide exact age information, their analytics reflect the survey's findings, noting that age groups 45-54, 55-64, and 65+ are all overrepresented on *Daily Kos* compared to the general Internet population; age groups younger than 45 are underrepresented. The age range suggests that the "baby boomer" generation is heavily represented. Many college educated baby boomers who were part of the politically active 1960s and 70s seem to have found a home and a new place for activism on *Daily Kos*.

<u>Reciprocity-bonding process</u>

Not merely connected based on political views or interests, members of the *Daily Kos* are involved in a regular—for some daily—ritual of taking part in the site's discussion. This daily interaction and communication is the glue that bonds the community together. Unlike many news sites or blogs, active users not only visit *Daily Kos* regularly, but spend quite a bit of time there once they do. 63% of survey takers reported that on an average week they go onto *Daily Kos* "many times throughout the day" while 33% reported visiting "at least once per day." In total, 96% of users report being at least daily users. During those visits, 30% of users reported spending between 15 and 30 minutes per visit, 31% reported spending between 30 minutes and 1 hour per trip,

19% reported spending between 1 – 2 hours per visit, and 8% reported 3 or more hours

per visit. For many, *Daily Kos* is a place where they unwind in the evening, discussing

politics but also their daily lives with likeminded others. For some *Daily Kos* is a place

they are connected to throughout the day, a core part of their daily existence.

The format of the site encourages various forms of reciprocity, a key element of

Willson's concept of community. The feeling of community that exists, often powerfully

for active users, springs from the discursive and reciprocal communication that is the core

function of the site. The writing of diaries and the ability to comment in response to

others forms the basis for the community. As one user noted in the survey:

> Opening up the site to reader comments and diaries was what opened up the
> possibilities of community.

The high quality of the commenting capabilities on *Daily Kos*, which is known for its

ease of use and quick response, enables single posts to have hundreds of responses within

hours of being posted. Users are able to easily follow a conversation thread within the

comments section of a diary, and are alerted when others respond to what they have

posted, allowing for an efficient and reciprocal system of dialogue. One user described it

this way:

> What I value about it is it gives the feeling of a dialog, not just one (or a small
> group) opinions. Watching the dialog take shape in a sort of "call and response"
> on the new diaries list is fascinating. I expect I'll be called to respond again
> sometime soon. So it goes...

Another user wrote:

> I think the platform has a lot to do with it. I have spent time on Salon and Open
> Salon. I like them but the platform makes true interaction difficult. (at least until
> recently, salon upgraded it's platform) At Dkos, the commenting and replying is
> threaded but more importantly you can check replies to your comments
> independently of whether the diary is still displayed. This allows you to have

meaningful exchanges with others long after the diary is "dead". For me, that's one of the biggest things I like about *Daily Kos* that I haven't found in any other political site. And it leads to greater interaction which leads to greater sense of community. I'd put that as the primary reason and a BIG part of why I prefer Dkos over other sites. On other sites you make a comment and that's it. Maybe someone replies, maybe they don't. You have to scour the thread to find out. So it ends up being people talking at each other, spitting out opinions and walking away. But at Dkos there's discussion. Live, active discussion.

Daily Kos provides tools for users to go beyond commenting to connect with others and promote each others' work. Beyond commenting and writing praise, users can recommend diary entries. Not only does this allow for positive feedback to the author, but the more a diary is recommended the more attention it can receive from the wider community, even being promoted to the front page of the site. This process enables users to develop a reputation among the larger community and encourages familiarity and connection with one another. To encourage participation, users accrue "mojo" points, which are displayed next to their user name. Users gain higher mojo based on a formula that rewards "good citizenry," engagement, and diaries. Users gain points for: commenting on other people's diaries, recommending diaries, recommending comments, running group blogs, writing diaries, having their comments and diaries recommended, engaging in special site projects, following other users, having other users follow them, and the length of time one has been a user. Aside from the good feeling from the public display of high mojo, users who gain enough mojo points are given "Trusted User" status, which enables them special site moderation rights. Trusted Users are able to "troll-rate" comments that they believe are spam or from "trolls" who are deliberately trying to start fights, hiding their comments from view. Trusted Users also have more sway when recommending a diary and make it more likely the diary will end up on the main page. These features encourage the establishment of long-term users who not only feel a strong

connection to the *Daily Kos* community, but also feel increasingly valued for their input through recognition, special status, and heightened responsibility.

While there are thousands of diarists on *Daily Kos*, the vast majority of users and even active members are not regular diary writers. Of those users that took part in the survey, 64% reported that they write diaries at least some of the time. Of those users, 4% reported writing a diary "usually daily," with 7% "a few times per week," 10% "once a week or so," 24% "once a month or so," and 55% "rarely or sporadically." Given that this survey is only of self-described "active members," this means that a small percentage of *Daily Kos* users create the bulk of the site's content.

The site functions as a kind of social network, allowing registered users to connect with one another through following users or saving favorite diarists. Users can also create social groups based around topics of interest and there are many on *Daily Kos*. In addition to progressive politics as the core unifying common interest, users often spend time on *Daily Kos* discussing other topics and interests, many not necessarily related to politics. Describing this, one user wrote:

> I'm part of a small science group at dKos, where I'm able to share my observations and independent research efforts with others who share similar interests. It's a place where I can write in detail about things that generally cause most people's eyes to glaze over after 2 minutes, and have those observations questioned, applauded, argued and enjoyed. The group is a godsend. I've also found the act of writing a fine challenge; though often difficult, it brings me great pleasure.

Groups on *Daily Kos* include: Readers and Book Lovers, Science Matters, Occupy Wall Street, SciTech, Single Payer, *Daily Kos* Labor, Eyes on Egypt, Cranky Users, Living Simply, Native American Netroots, Geneology and Family History, and many others. Groups range in size with the largest having around 850 members. Like much of what is

considered "Internet culture," there is an active group of *Daily Kos* community members devoted to posting and sharing cute dog and cat photos, called PWB Peeps, which stands for "pooties, woozles, and birdies people" (pooties and woozles referring to cats and dogs respectively).

Perhaps in one of the signs of the strength of the *Daily Kos* community, users regularly band together to not only give virtual gifts, but also financial gifts and donations to other users who write diaries describing personal hardships, especially when dealing with unaffordable medical costs. One can imagine this topic is salient and emotionally moving in particular for a community such as this with many users nearing or within retirement age. There have also been notable community drives to gather and donate resources to needy groups, such as sending money and resources like camping gear to Occupy encampments. Another major campaign raised money to buy heaters and fuel for Lakota tribe members and other Native Americans struggling with winter weather. There are many stories of giving on *Daily Kos*, and users recount them with pride. Gift giving is ubiquitous throughout cultures and has long been a subject of study by anthropologists seeking to understand communities and cultures. The act of exchanging resources has long been a primary method of strengthening personal bonds and reinforcing communal ties. Even in the virtual space, forms of gift giving are rampant.

Perhaps the best example and expression of the strength of community on *Daily Kos* is the gifting of subscriptions. In order to raise funds for the site, users are able to buy annual subscriptions for $40, which enables the user to have an enhanced experience on the site (no advertisements, faster loading). For a limited time, however, there was an

offer to buy a lifetime subscription for $100, and it sparked a flurry of gift-subscriptions. One survey respondent echoed the feeling of many when describing the gifting of subscriptions:

> I would not have believed that an online community was a real, true community before I saw this place in action. Are you seeing this gift-subscription thing going on? Kos announced he was discontinuing lifetime subscriptions and set out to sell them to more users before they became unavailable. Instead, or in addition, that sales drive turned into a gift-giving bonanza, with users organizing on their own to buy $100 lifetime subscriptions for other users who can't afford them. ::shakes head in amazement:: That's what I'm talking about.

Giving the $100 lifetime subscription allowed for many users to express their gratitude for those users whose words and commentary they have read and appreciated. Sometimes, subscriptions have been given anonymously.

One of the open ended questions on the survey asked: "Why do you like using and/or being a part of *Daily Kos* when there are many other political websites and online political communities on the web?" This question aimed to allow users to express what, to them, makes *Daily Kos* worth staying with. Many respondents wrote detailed and emphatic responses. Some wrote that *Daily Kos* had a more efficient and interactive comment system, others focused on the quality of the community moderation that kept the dialogue (mostly) civil compared with other sites. Almost every user wrote that they enjoyed being part of the community. A few responses:

> DailyKos became more than a cool place to hang out, it became a family, a community. I didn't realize how much I missed having a community, a place to belong. Community is one of those things that had been eroding for so long, yet one more thing deemed unnecessary by the 1%. The more time I spent at Daily Kos the more it came to mean to me.

> Because on Daily Kos, it's not just about the politics. It's about family and community. It's about caring for each other, helping each other, engaging each other, educating each other. It's about the most intimate intersections of the personal with the political."

> "Partly because of the structure of the site itself (it's user friendly), Partly because it's community moderated (obnoxious behavior is frowned upon and truly outrageous behavior leads to being banned). Partly because there are extremely smart, very experienced staffers and community members. Partly because it's just a nice place to "hang out" at the end of the day.

A site like *Daily Kos* gets hundreds of thousands of hits per day. The people who read through *Daily Kos* each day are not necessarily active community participants. However, there is clearly a core group of committed daily community participants who spend a large part of their leisure time engaging with others on *Daily Kos*. For some, it is a daily ritual, while for others it is more of a casual experience. While some come for the intellectual back and forth, others express how *Daily Kos* is provides them with a missing sense of community. There is a saying among *Daily Kos* users that just about sums up the pervasive sense of community that the site has for long-term members: "I came here for the politics, but stayed for the community".

Community and Politics on Reddit

Reddit is a dramatically different site than *Daily Kos*. To begin with, *Reddit* is not explicitly a political site; in fact, it is not considered a political site at all in the typical sense. *Reddit* emerged as part of a long trail of sites created by science and tech-savvy cyberculture enthusiasts. *Reddit* is considered a "social news site," part of a lineage of sites like *Slashdot* and *Fark* (both established in 1997) that allowed users to submit news and other interesting links. When it was established in 2005, *Reddit* resembled social news site *Digg*, which included a voting system for users to upvote interesting stories while downvoting others. Unlike *Daily Kos*, which began as a political blog, *Reddit* was not created for any particular issue or cause. In fact, the majority of the content on *Reddit*

is not political. As described previously, *Reddit* is made up of many subreddits (also called reddits), which are user created communities that can be based around any subject or topic. The most popular (in terms of subscriptions) subreddit is r/funny followed by others like r/pics, r/AskReddit, or r/gaming. The largest political subreddit, r/politics, is the eighth largest subreddit on *Reddit* with around 1,100,000 subscribers (as of February 2012). In contrast with *Daily Kos*, *Reddit* is a general social news site for all subjects that just happened to become a major forum for discussing politics and news. While this study is focused on looking specifically at *Reddit* users interested in politics and largely confined to the subreddits r/politics and r/politicaldiscussion, it is difficult to separate politics from the larger *Reddit* experience.

In general, there is less of a strong sense of community among users who answered my survey on *Reddit* than on *Daily Kos*. When asked if they felt part of a community on *Reddit*, 21% answered, "Yes, very much so," 56% answered, "Yes, to some degree," and 23% answered with "No, not really." Like *Daily Kos*, users who answered this survey are highly active on the site. When asked if they considered themselves "active users" (meaning they post links and/or comment regularly), 41% answered, "Yes, very active," 45% "Yes, moderately active," and just 15% responded, "No, I'm just a lurker." In contrast with *Daily Kos*, many members are relatively new to the site. In the survey, 6% had been a registered user for less than one month, 24% between 1 – 6 months, 20% between 6 months and 1 year, 24% between 1-2 years, and 26% longer than 2 years. However, this may be because *Reddit* has not been around as long as *Daily Kos*. That roughly half of respondents have been registered users for at least one year or more suggests that there is a growing group of dedicated redditors.

Looking specifically at the r/politics subreddit, users' concepts of community are mixed; they seem to depend on the interests and needs of individual users. In an open-ended question in which users were asked if they felt a sense of community on r/politics, users responded with contrasting views. Some felt that while there are similarities in interest in r/politics, it was simply too large for a cohesive sense of community among users. They described the difficulty of creating community in such a large subreddit:

> r/politics is quite large so it's hard to get a sense of community there. There are a lot of like minded people but the real sense of community is found in the more specific political subreddits.

> r/politics is too populated to feel like a community, but other, smaller political subreddits have a sense of community.

> A community, no. An assemblage of warring tribes, yes.

Despite many users suggesting r/politics was too large for a feeling of community and too overwhelmed by "warring factions" of politically or ideologically opposed groups and individuals, many users do feel that despite the chaos and size r/politics still functions as a community. Albeit one where users go to debate and argue but ultimately do find important places to come together. Users explained:

> There is a very strong sense of community in r/politics. Healthy debate and reasoning reign and are helping me become a more educated citizen.

> Like anything there are popular and dissenting opinions. I feel the r/politics has a unique community that respects both sides of the equation and helps filter out poor information with links/citations and many other outlets to better fill out a readers scope on a particular issue.

There did seem to be a general consensus that while there may be some sense of community on r/politics, smaller subreddits with more focused political topics or ideologies had a stronger sense of community. For example, for users of r/politicaldiscussion, a much smaller subreddit with about 6,000 subscribed members,

users expressed that there was a strong feeling of community among users who came regularly for debate and discussion. One member wrote:

> I am part of r/PoliticalDiscussion. It is a small sub-reddit, but we are proud of it. Redditors from various leanings poke around, but the ones that stay try to follow good Reddiquette. People craving attention best look somewhere else. We have never hit the front page, and I think, that is the way we like it. I want r/PoliticalDiscussion to grow, but growth may make it a clone of r/politics, loss of Reddiquette, and the sadness that ensues.

Many users referenced small but highly active subreddits, which have reputations for a strong sense of community:

> Yes, I definitely believe there is a sense of community in subreddits that focus on subjects people are passionate about. Two examples would be r/atheism and r/occupywallstreet. Both seem to function as support groups as well as discussion forums.

Subreddits like r/Atheism, r/OccupyWallStreet, and r/RonPaul are well known as very active and supportive communities. That being said, they are often unwelcoming or downright hostile to users who try to bring up dissenting views within. r/RonPaul in particular has gained notoriety throughout all of *Reddit* for their almost militant activity on the site, vigorously upvoting any pro-RonPaul links and just as vigorously downvoting links that are critical of the candidate. Some in the larger *Reddit* community have developed such animosity towards these "Ron Bots" that they created a subreddit called r/EnoughPaulSpam for users to vent their frustration with rabid Paul Fans.[13]

    While there appears to be a consensus that smaller, more focused subreddits tend to have stronger communities, some users prefer the larger subreddits like r/politics

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[13] To give an anecdote illustrating the extent of Ron Paul hysteria for some redditors, even my survey was slightly spammed by the "Ron Bots". A few survey respondents took the time to go through my entire survey and write "Ron Paul Ron Paul Ron Paul Ron Paul…" or "Ron Paul 2012" into every single open-ended question. Their responses were deleted.

because they lack the constriction of ideological purity and the inability for smaller more

politically specific subreddits to foster critical debate. One user explained:

> To me there this a huge sense of community in r/politics. I love that if I find a
> topic that I find interesting, but maybe don't understand 100%, I can ask a
> question and not be chastised (usually). r/politics is where I go to read the news
> everyday. r/worldnews has a sense of community as well, but I steer clear of
> subreddits like r/ronpaul because of the simple fact that if you disagree with
> someone, you'll be ripped apart. I tend to stick with the larger subreddits, they're
> usually much less biased and much more welcoming.

Many users maintained that r/politics *does* function as some semblance of community

perhaps more like a neighborhood with different factions and groups than a close-knit

community of people. On *Reddit*, like in non-virtual life, there exists a tension between

the desire for debate, diversity, and inclusiveness with the desire for like-minded

viewpoints and the camaraderie of the "you're one of us" feeling. Even in an anonymous

and amorphous space like *Reddit*, groups do form and enforce community norms and

values whether it be loving Ron Paul or debating the practicalities of socialism in

r/Marxism.

Commonality

When you consider that *Reddit* is a more general and an extremely popular site

with over a billion page views per month, it is remarkable that some redditors do feel a

sense of community given the large volume of users and greater anonymity and

transience. While *Reddit* is more diverse in terms of politics than sites like *Daily Kos*,

like all assemblages, groups, or communities, there are various commonalities that users

share that help foster a sense of community.

Redditors share many commonalities in line with Willson's concept of traditional communities, especially along the lines of age, gender, and education. Compared with *Daily Kos*, the typical age groups found on *Reddit* are significantly younger. 21% reported being 20 or younger, 42% ages 21-29, 20% ages 30-39, 8% ages 40-49, and 9% age 50 or above. The most typical age group is in the 20s and a full 63% of redditors in the survey reported being under the age of 30. Compared with *Daily Kos*, which had ages that tended to reflect mostly 40s, 50s, and older, *Reddit* attracts a much younger audience. The two sites also differ strongly in terms of gender. While *Daily Kos* was split evenly, *Reddit* is overwhelming male with 83% of respondents selecting male compared with 16% female. This gender gap is reflective of many "cyberculture" and technology related sites that historically have been heavily male. The gender difference is well known among *Reddit* users, who regularly bemoan the lack of female users, especially in subreddits and discussion threads related to sex and dating. Like *Daily Kos*, *Reddit* users tend to be well educated: 36% reported "some college but no degree," 26% reported holding a Bachelor's degree, 14% held a graduate degree, 8% an Associates degree, and 16% reported a high school education or less. The education statistics are not entirely useful given that many redditors are either about to enter or are currently in college. Even those who answered "high school" or "less than high school degree" are likely still in high school rather than being unable to finish or attend college. On *Reddit*, many users suggest that the stereotypical *Reddit* user is young, male, in college, and studying in one of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) fields.

While there are many political viewpoints represented throughout *Reddit*, there are particular political tendencies among redditors. *Reddit*, in general, is known for young

users with left/liberal or libertarian politics. My survey clearly reflects this: 44% of all

users identify as either "Liberal/Progressive" or "Very Liberal/Progressive," 18% identify

as Libertarian, 13% as "Socialist/Social Democratic,"[14] 11% identify as

"Centrist/Moderate," and 11% "Other." Only 3% identifies as either "Conservative" or

"Very Conservative." In contrast to *Daily Kos*, however, redditors are typically skeptical

if not outright hostile to party-oriented politics. When asked if they identified with or

supported a particular political party, many simply answered "no" or said they considered

themselves independent. Those who did say they support a political party typically

supported Democrats, however begrudgingly and with caveats, as the following users

expressed:

> Technically democrat, but I would support a third party if there were a viable option.

> Probably democrats, if only because the GOP is fucking nuts.

> Democrats for lack of a better option.

> As there is only two, it would be the democrats.

There were also quite a few who answered third-party choices like "Green Party,"

"Libertarian," and even "Socialist." Many users felt jaded and let down by the current

state of party politics even if they had supported them in the past. They explained:

> Former Democrat who has no faith in either main party.

> I have been a registered Republican for many years but I no longer feel that I can identify with their goals.

> Not anymore. They're both corporate clubs with different mascots.

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[14] *Reddit* has many international, particularly European, users, many of whom may hold similar views as "Liberal" or "Very Liberal" American users but prefer to identify with the category of "Socialist/Social Democratic" which is how much of the European (and global) left identifies.

Among the minority of Europeans and other non-Americans who took the survey, some responded along the lines of "if I was an American I'd probably vote Democratic," but many felt that the two American political parties did not represent or reflect their political views.

Many respondents begrudgingly support or at least take part in party politics. In these case, they supported the Democratic more often than Republican Party, but only because the system is so dominated by two-parties that it is a necessary evil. Users were asked in an open question how they felt about the two-party dominated system in the U.S. and they almost unanimously responded that they believe it is a failed system and needs reform towards a multiplicity of parties and views. Users wrote:

> It's a sham. There is no real difference in the parties no discussions or trying to find a middle ground. There should be more than 2 parties so there's more than 2 viewpoints and people can find the candidate they really want instead of settling

> It's horrible. Most people disagree with both parties and have no real alternatives to them.

> I consider the two-party system a "lesser-evil" situation. I would like to see more parties develop and gain power and votes. I feel like it's the only way to see change in this country.

> It's all a facade. Similar policies and bills are pushed regardless of who's in control, even if it runs opposite to what they promised before getting into office.

> Terrible. The parties are really just the same thing with slight variations that do not have the people's interests in mind, just corporations, imperialism, and their own gain.

> It's a sham, both parties are essentially the same (i.e. bought-out by the same interests). If real progress is to be made, then the false dichotomy embodied by these two parties needs to be thoroughly destroyed.

> It needs to go. A multi-party system would allow for more competition and hopefully a more transparent electoral process.

Not a single respondent reported support for the two-party dominated system in the U.S. The closest to "support" that was voiced was that it was an outdated system that might have worked in the past:

> It was great. Its time has passed. We seriously need proportional representation, and a number of parties that all have to work together and compromise.

> Might've worked for the first so many times such a system was needed. It's now past its novelty.

> It is what we have and we need to support the party closest to our own goals and force that party into achieving them. I wish we had an IRV [instant runoff voting] system so voting for a third party is not so dangerous.

Dislike of the two-party system in the U.S. and a strong desire for more diversity in political choice is perhaps the strongest political commonality among redditors.

Redditors not only agree that the U.S. political system needs to be reformed, but there are other political issues that most users feel passionate about and hold in common. When asked to list what political issues were most important for themselves, there were many common and repeated patterns. To get a sense of the political issues redditors care about, all of their responses were used to generate a "word cloud" which provides a useful visual representation based on the frequency with which words were used (the larger the word the more often it was used).

Figure 1: Wordcloud of redditors' responses to the question "What political issues are most important to you?" Created using http://www.wordle.net/

Topics that immediately jump out as important to redditors include: rights & freedoms (social, civil, individual), education, healthcare, money (influence in politics), corruption, equality, corporate influence, and more specific issues like SOPA/PIPA and the 2012 NDAA. Reading through their responses shows a strong emphasis placed on freedom of speech and individual and civil rights/liberties. Many expressed a desire to "get money out of politics" and there was also a widespread agreement that more democratic participation free from corporate interests is necessary. Healthcare, typically referenced in calling for free and or universal access, was a major topic that perhaps is not surprising given the younger age groups on *Reddit*.

There are major disagreements when it comes to economics and the role of government among redditors with large contingents of strong leftwing and socialist as well as libertarian and even anarchists voices. Yet, these groups regularly agree when it comes to the importance of freedom from government and corporate surveillance, civil liberties and rights, the need for efficient and better governance, and the desire for a

political system more responsive to the needs of everyone rather than the wealthy and influential. There appears to be strong agreement against state power, specifically issues like the 2012 NDAA (National Defense Authorization Act) and the Patriot Act which users believe threaten civil liberties. There also seems to be quite a bit of agreement on foreign policy, especially in questioning the military-industrial complex. Areas where virtually all redditors agree have to do with freedom and the Internet, copyright, and, to a slightly lesser extent, social issues. Many redditors are fans of science and technology and tend to be suspicious of religion. Most redditors support LGBT equality and rights, legalization of marijuana, and place a high importance on international human rights and justice. Specifically, they are passionate about issues that threaten free speech on the Internet, like the recent U.S. legislation SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) & PIPA (Protecting IP Act), Net Neutrality, or any legislation that threatens what users view as the free and democratic foundations of the Web.

Redditors represent a large variety of political views and interests and despite the large population of the site, users nonetheless do feel a sense that they are among likeminded people; they often refer to this feeling as "the hivemind" mentality of redditors. The hivemind is a reference to the tendency for redditors to agree, often with strong collective passion resembling a buzzing beehive of drones. The term functions as both an affirmative expression commonality as well as a means of self-criticism. Perhaps the most important commonality amongst redditors is a general respect for well-reasoned arguments and debate. One user summarized this sentiment:

> While other reddits are more community spirited, I think the greatest
> commonality of r/politics is respect for political thought and insight… it's political
> discussions are a lot "wonkier" than typical internet forums. Interestingly, despite

an apparent lack of much aggressive moderation, reddit is not infested by trolls, astroturf or traffic gaming to the same degree as other forums.

Reciprocity-bonding process

Going onto *Reddit* is a daily ritual for many active users as is engaging with other redditors. When asked, "How often do you go onto Reddit?" 72% of users responded, "Daily, many times throughout the day," 24% responded, "Daily, at least once a day" while just 4% answered, "Every other day or so." No users answered "Once or twice a week" or "Once a week or less often." Taken together, the overwhelming majority of active users surveyed, 96%, reported going onto *Reddit* at least daily and most multiple times per day. Surprisingly, this is the exact same percent as *Daily Kos* users. Once on *Reddit*, most users report an average visit to last longer than 15 minutes but less than one hour. More specifically, 7% reported their average visit to be 15 minutes or less, 30% between 15 – 30 minutes, 32% between 30 minutes and one hour, 20% reported between 1 – 2 hours, and 13% reported 3 hours or more. Again, these numbers are very similar to those answered by *Daily Kos* users, suggesting that the typical active user of either site is having similar experiences in terms of the frequency of visit and length of average visit. Like active *Daily Kos* users, visiting and spending considerable time on *Reddit* is a core part of the daily routine of active redditors.

For many redditors, what keeps them coming to the site so often in addition to the news and entertainment content is the robust discussion, both silly and serious, that the site is known for. *Reddit* is not primarily a blogging platform, as *Daily Kos* is, but rather the focus is more on aggregating and voting on interesting links from around the Web. Most of the interaction and discussion that takes place occurs within the comments

section, which for even a single post can receive hundreds and even thousands of comments within hours. While news links, videos, and images are often the focus, users do have the ability to write "self" posts, which are essentially written blog posts much like diaries on *Daily Kos*. These are often very popular on *Reddit*, especially when someone has a provocative thought or story. One popular form of self posts are known as "AMAs" (Ask Me Anything), where users with interesting jobs, stories, dis/abilities, and perspectives take questions from users. National political candidates have begun to hold AMAs to help generate interest in their campaigns.

One of the biggest differences between the two sites is that *Daily Kos* is better structured towards more personal connections than *Reddit.* On *Daily Kos*, users can friend and follow one another as well as set up a profile, which enables a good degree of social connection. On *Reddit* users cannot set up a profile. In fact, you cannot include any information about yourself other than what you put in your user name, which keeps *Reddit* highly anonymous. You are able to save other users as "friends" and can see a stream of posts they make as well as send private messages to other users. While both sites do provide ways to connect, the focus on anonymity on *Reddit* seems to make more personal social connections more difficult than on *Daily Kos*. This, as well as the more general scope of *Reddit*, its international popularity, and its sheer size and volume of content (more than a billion page views per month) makes *Reddit* less of a place for intimate social bonds to be formed among users. In small subreddits users are more likely to be able to find and connect with others, and this is common. Yet, even outside of the close-connections made in smaller subreddits, there is still a strong feeling of camaraderie amongst redditors in general, as evident in the fact that anonymous redditors

across the globe often get together in person organized through Meetup or at events of mutual interests.

While the ability to bond with specific users may be more difficult on *Reddit*, there are similar mechanisms of reciprocity. The entire site is built around a very basic up or down vote system. Each submitted link or self post may be up or downvoted as can each individual comment in the comments thread. Like the "mojo" system on *Daily Kos*, users on *Reddit* gain "karma" both for posting links and commenting. If a user's link or comment receives many upvotes, they accumulate karma points. However, this system has a less personal feel to it. On *Daily Kos*, the names of users who recommend posts are publicly visible, enabling the author and community at large to see who supports what. On *Reddit*, all voting is anonymous and only counts towards the up/down vote average. While *Reddit* users do seem to crave gaining "karma" points, it does not carry as much value. Users who accrue high "mojo" on *Daily Kos* are able to attain the status of "Trusted User" which enables them to have enhanced moderation power, while giving them the public recognition as an important member of the community. Unlike *Daily Kos*, there is no additional benefit to gaining "karma" besides simply gaining "karma."

The act of gift giving going on among members on *Daily Kos* has also taken off on *Reddit*. Like subscriptions on *Daily Kos*, *Reddit* offers users the ability to purchase "Reddit Gold" that enables a similarly enhanced experience; like *Daily Kos* users, redditors have taken to gifting other members a month or more of Reddit Gold. This is done both anonymously and from friend to friend. In fact, the act of gift giving on *Reddit* really took off in 2009 when *Reddit* held its first community-wide "secret santa" gift exchange, which today has turned into what is perhaps the largest gift exchange program

in the world. Last year alone, more than 39,000 redditors anonymously exchanged gifts with one another, spending $1,073,939 in gifts with an average cost of $25.68 (Tynski, 2012). There are countless examples of redditors coming together to make altruistic gifts as well, such as donating hundreds of thousands to Haiti Relief, helping pay for a child's organ transplant operation, donating books to schools, and raising close to a million dollars for the Donors Choose charity.[15] Both *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* have a reputation for gift giving among members as well as coming together to make major philanthropic gifts to people and causes that move members emotionally. While *Reddit* may not have the same level of member-to-member bonding and recognition that can be fond on *Daily Kos*, certainly there is a major sense of the need to take part in collective acts of giving among active members.

Many redditors feel camaraderie with one another in general, and in smaller more intimate subreddits personal connections and friendships can be made. However, having so many interests and sub-interests located at the same site does make creating community difficult, as one user explained:

> There is a community, but they [redditors] also move themselves into groups of similarities, left or right leaning perspectives, anarchists, etc. Overall, I think that they are united as highly active internet uber geek types, but then lines start to be drawn. Having people from many different backgrounds helps to make it less of a shouting match. In other words, kinda like life (or perhaps public soap box style discussions), except people that are too shy to talk in public will discuss things here.

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[15] A good list of noteworthy acts of altruism and charity on *Reddit* through the years can be seen at: http://www.reddit.com/help/noteworthy

In addition, some active users simply do not feel much of a sense of community. As one user expressed:

> No, I do not feel a sense of community on reddit. It's more of an Internet metropolis than a small close knit community.

While there are many similarities between *Reddit* and *Daily Kos*, it seems that a distinction can be made in terms of how users perceive the sense of community. Feelings regarding the quality and strength of community on *Reddit* are not as emphatic nor as universally shared as *Daily Kos* users, at least according to survey responses. The majority of *Daily Kos* users believe there is a strong sense of community, many of whom suggested that *Daily Kos* is an incredibly important and central piece of their daily social experience. While many redditors feel passionately about the value of the site, users simply did not describe their experience on *Reddit* in the same glowing terms. Experiences are more mixed. For redditors, it seems the content, discussions, and more general experience is what draws them to the site.

CHAPTER 6

TOWARDS THE IDEAL OF A (DIGITAL) PUBLIC SPHERE

There are many reasons I decided to look at *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* in this study rather than other sites. Both sites are popular with millions (and, in the case of *Reddit*, a billion or more) of page views each month, and both sites are influential and well known. Many consider *Daily Kos* the premier American political blog site; *Reddit* has grown to be the largest and most vibrant social news site. Yet, what really drew me to both sites was not their size or their influence, but rather the volume and quality of discourse that I routinely observed when visiting each site. As a long-time 'online politics' junkie, I have been to hundreds of online political blogs and websites. The ones I routinely peruse are those with vibrant discussion forums. Time and again when turning to either site, I have been surprised at the quality and variety of discussion on both sites. *Daily Kos* is impressive for the sheer volume of writers with thousands of active bloggers and many posts getting dozens and hundreds of comments. On *Reddit*, politically oriented posts routinely receive thousands of upvotes, and comment threads regularly stretch into the thousands as discussions continue for hours and even days. There is a rise of scholarship proclaiming that the Internet and Web 2.0 platforms are enabling a re-formation of Habermasian-style public sphere(s), and both *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* are worthy case studies based on both their size and influence as well as their discussions. In this chapter, I examine how each site functions as a digital public sphere, according to the two major areas of Habermasian theory outlined previously.

A Public Sphere In Form?

Disregard of Status

The first of Habermas's institutional criteria for the realization of a public sphere is "*Disregard of status*." He argued that, at least ideally, social status must be disregarded altogether in the pursuit of equality amongst participants. As Habermas allowed, in the coffee houses and salons of the 18th century, this was not achieved in practice as hierarchies and status remained incredibly important demarcations of social value and power; yet, having the disregard of status as an ideal was an important break from a social formation defined by a rigid hierarchy. For our purposes, we can think of this in more contemporary terms. While much of the modern world is without the same rigid class, occupation, and other social structures of the past, political discourse remains the domain of a tiny minority with significant enough social status for their voice to be considered valuable; this includes journalists, politicians, business leaders, and other civic and institutional leaders. Especially within a political information system dominated by mass media, political discourse, especially on topics at the national level, is defined by and selected by a tiny institutional and increasingly corporate elite. In fact for mainstream commercial political journalism, the vast majority of information is provided by or gleaned from persons at the very top of the institutional structure: presidential press conferences, Pentagon officials, party spokespersons, experts from think tanks, corporate public relations and communications personnel to name a few. As documented by Robert Manoff and Michael Shudson (1986), this is prevalent at local and state level functions as

well with journalists regularly turning to authoritative sources such as police and local government.

Political information and discourse on the Internet has taken a significant change in course, allowing non-traditional actors without typical status and credentials to emerge, a trend that has dramatically expanded with the rise of user-friendly social media, blogging and micro-blogging tools. The general anonymity of much of the web as well as an increased acceptance of information from non-"authoritative" sources has made social status much less relevant. On the web, many sites become popular as a result of content and are often divorced from the status or credentials of the source. Matt Drudge, who runs the politically influential *Drudge Report* built his online media empire entirely outside the mainstream media establishment and came from a dramatically different background than most journalists or media persons. He graduated at the bottom of his high school class and was an aimless young adult living with his parents and working at a 7-11 and a gift shop when he started an online gossip site on *Usenet*. Over time it grew, and by the late 1990s became a major political force, breaking major stories like the announcement of Bob Dole's running mate and the Monica Lewinski scandal. The *Drudge Report* continues to have a big impact on the news cycle today. There are countless similar stories. While traditional institutions still dominate many of the important sources for online information, the ability for almost anyone to have the *potential* for including their voice in public discourse presents a paradigmatic change. For user-driven sites like *Daily Kos* and *Reddit*, traditional social status is virtually invisible as are general social indicators like gender, race, age, and so on. Both sites retain a largely non-hierarchical structure; yet, there are some important differences.

Anyone can register with *Daily Kos*, and most users post under non-identifiable user names similar to many online forums. There are no special privileges for people of traditional "real world" high status who write diaries on *Daily Kos*, although many do, including national politicians. While most users do post under user names, the national figures that write diaries do use their real names. This is understandable given that the writers seek to bring attention to their candidacies or causes, but it does disrupt an otherwise status-less environment. Regular users on *Daily Kos* do acquire community-oriented social status through the system of mojo and their general reputation amongst the *Daily Kos* community. This site is not entirely without the influence of social status (primarily through the inclusion of named national figures) and the given power of the site owner Markos and his staff. In fact, there does exist a hierarchy on *Daily Kos*. Markos, who owns the site and servers, has ultimate say and direct control over the site. Beneath him are about a dozen paid staff plus a handful of diarists chosen each year who can post on the main page. Beneath them are longtime "trusted" users with enough mojo who are given the ability to moderate via hiding others' comments. Finally there are regular registered users who can post diaries, comment, and recommend the work of others. Despite this, *Daily Kos*, nonetheless, remains a space where users can enter into discussion free from the trappings of social status or indicators. Posts are largely treated according to merit and content rather than the identify of the writer (again minus the posts from national figures).

On *Reddit*, the use of personal, identifiable information is virtually nonexistent. In fact, redditors pride themselves on their anonymity, which helps foster a safe public place for discussions of often difficult and serious issues. Enabled by this anonymity, intense

personal experiences and taboo topics are found throughout *Reddit* (examples include a highly active anti-suicide subreddit, users recovering from living in highly restrictive religious families, and many confessional and therapy based reddits). Unlike *Daily Kos*, which does allow for "featured" writers as well as the featured posts by the owner, Markos, *Reddit* is free from a privileged group of users. While *Reddit* adminstrators are able to get their posts in a privileged position, they do so for the sake of site updates, interesting community milestones, and other site information. They do not use it to help guide the ideological boundaries of the site; the sole exception of this practice being the SOPA/PIPA blackout, which was decided upon with nearly unanimous support from redditors. *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* to a greater degree provide a space and forum for individuals to interact regardless of social status. The anonymity allows for the focus to be on content rather than the individual making the post or comment. This generates a high level of debate (at least within serious posts), much of it free from personal comments or attacks, appeals to authority, or other trappings of face-to-face debate.

Domain of Common Concern

Habermas provided that the functions of a public sphere must be centered around the "domain of common concern." Participants must be free to create meaning and interpretation through the process of rational critical communication free from state, religious, and other institutional authority. Political information and debate through mass mediated communication is controlled by institutional actors who not only set the agenda for discussion, but provide the interpretive frameworks through which the public is to understand these issues and events. Many institutional actors from politicians to

journalists have professed to represent or be concerned with concerns of the public; yet, critics have long argued that this is not really the case. The rising influence of money and lobbying in government and political campaigns and the increasing commercialization of news via giant corporate conglomerates suggest that our political information arena is geared towards the concerns of corporations, profits, and share-holders. Many believe this process is complicit in allowing for the deregulatory atmosphere favorable to the financial and corporate interests that led to both the economic crisis, taxpayer funded bailouts, and the failure of commercial media to provide a systematic critique of modern American capitalism. The Occupy movements, both nationally and worldwide, appear to reflect a widespread concern that "the system" is only responsive to the needs of the "1%" and often at the expense of the larger populace.

The Internet provides a challenge to the mass media model of a more passive audience as spectator to the debate and discussion among political elite and commentators. Instead of having an elite-controlled mass media set the political agenda and boundaries of debate, users on the Internet have more input and control. Some sites and spaces, like *Daily Kos* and *Reddit*, are designed not only to provide a space for users' voices, but to have their content driven by the common concern of all participants.

Because every post and every comment on *Reddit* is subject to a simple up/down vote system, redditors control the domain of discussion via direct democratic voting. Each user is allowed to vote once on any and all posts on the site. In addition, because of their list-ranking formula, a post needs more than a mere majority of votes to rise to the top of a subreddit: the greater the volume and the greater the ratio of up votes to downvotes, the more likely the post will end up visible to more people. It is a radically

simple system that enables users to have complete control over what is featured for consumption and discussion.

One of the problems with "consensus" systems in general is that minority views are unable to receive much attention (like third party candidates in the U.S.). *Reddit* solves this problem, in that if any user feels like their issue, topic, ideology, etc. is not getting enough attention within a subreddit, they can create an entirely new subreddit based around that topic. This system works particularly well with something as personal and complex as political views and thus it is no surprise that there is an ever-growing list of politically diverse subreddits. This system enables users to engage in smaller, more specific subreddits (r/Austrianeconomics, etc.), while simultaneously engage with larger, more general, subreddits like r/politics or r/worldnews.

In fact, *Reddit* remains one of the more radical sites online in so far as it goes out of its way to allow for not only obscure and dissenting viewpoints and issues, but even highly unpopular and what some would consider grotesque, offensive, and even illegal. This is in line with the *Reddit* ethos of 'no censorship' from the top (but rather collective control), but some problems have arisen, especially in terms of illicit images and NSFW subreddits. While there are many subreddits devoted towards all tastes and types of pornographic and other sexual content, *Reddit* was forced to draw a line when it came to subreddits that appeared to be promoting child pornography, which they have recently banned.[16] This turned into a small scandal for the site through which a fascinating debate on balancing the limits of having a censorship free site and the need to appeal to a growing and increasingly mainstream user base.

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[16] http://gawker.com/5884619/reddit-reluctantly-bans-child-porn

Daily Kos does allow for the expression of common concern in so far as it allows

community members to provide their own understandings and interpretations of events

and issues. However, users are not permitted to challenge the Democratic Party in so far

as suggesting alternative candidates or parties; users must be in agreement on working

towards electoral success for Democrats (although they are allowed to criticize individual

candidates or positions). This structures discussions towards points of view that are

friendly towards party politics in general and Democrats in particular. Compared with

Reddit, political discussion is restricted on *Daily Kos*. There are clear rules for discussion,

and the site allows for moderation by Trusted Users and site administrators. While

political discussion is generated from users, it is guided and structured by the site. Users

that disregard the rules are banned. While the rules were put in place to keep the site

oriented towards Democratic politics and keep constant "flame-wars" and fights from

erupting in the discussion threads, users on *Daily Kos* do not have collective authority

over creating the rules. Markos is clear in stating that he owns the site and sets the rules.

By joining, users agree to what he lays out. For example, from time to time, Markos has

"purged" the site of users who he feels are being too critical of Democrats or who take

part in discussion he feels are not representative of the community at large. Markos

decided to ban all users who had been taking part in "9/11 conspiracies" and, in 2011, in

response to increasing "flame-wars" between those too critical of Obama and those who

were too supportive, declaring it the "Great Purge of 2011," he wrote:

> […]So being a dick is sometimes okay, within reason, which is why I've never
> concerned myself with it. But of course, the year-long Obama-rox/Obama-sux
> flamewar has now dragged me into community moderation, and my patience has
> run dry. I'm now itching the ban the fuck out of the biggest dicks on the site.

[…]If you accuse someone of being racist just because they criticize Obama? Zap! If you actually say something that is even borderline racist? Zap! If you advocate for third party? Zap! This is a Democratic site. Advocating primaries is okay. Advocating third party is not. If I see ratings pack behavior or messed up uprates or hides, I won't zap, but I'll pull ratings abilities. Hell, depending on my mood at that moment, I may zap anyway.

[…]I can't begin to care who started what. And in fact, if two sides are engaged in battle, I'll act the same way I parent -- both sides will get punished. So those are some guidelines, but they are not all inclusive. A lot of my actions will be arbitrary, inconsistent, and sometimes might even seem capricious. I don't care.

While this post may make Markos seem like a heavy-handed moderator (and he can be), there did appear to be genuine frustration among most users at the level of vitriol on the site. That being said, the ability for the site owners and staff to, as he notes "arbitrarily," ban users makes clear the limited freedom that users have in the forum. The need to cleanse online forums of users who "flame" or who intentionally start fights is a regular problem for virtually all online forums. This makes *Reddit's* approach all the more fascinating since they, at least for the time being, seem to have found a system that does not result in the need to ban users or have periodic "purges." Users collectively moderate all content using the up/down vote system, and if a user feels shut out, they can create their own separate forum.

Inclusivity

A true public sphere for Habermas is predicated upon inclusivity. In order to be able to provide for the domain and interests of common people, a public sphere must be fully inclusive. Although Habermas admitted that the public sphere he described of the 18th and 19th centuries were not inclusive in practice but rather in ideals, as women, non-citizens and many of lower social strata were not included easily, he does believe that

inclusivity as expressed at the time as an ideal was still a revolutionary break from the exclusionary structure of the political and authoritative class. Still, scholars, in particular feminist scholar Nancy Fraser, emphasize the exclusionary practices of the public sphere at the time (and even today), arguing that due to the exclusion of women and non-bourgeois social class, the public sphere functioned more through a process of hegemony because it appeared to speak for all despite its domination by the male bourgeois class.

The Internet as a site for postmodern identities that are not necessarily attached or linked to gender, class, race, and other group identifying elements provides, at least on sites where anonymity is practiced, is a space for discussion where marginalization and exclusion based on these identity markers is not automatically enabled. While it may be possible to learn of a users' gender, race, age, or class identity, users often decide how much of their identity they wish to divulge (through profiles, user names, or discussion). Along these lines, *Daily Kos*, based in part on its posture as an egalitarian progressive site, is highly inclusive as long as users are in broad political agreement. This is notable in terms of gender because many sites tend to be male dominated. In contrast, *Reddit* is extremely inclusive based on content, speech, topics, political beliefs, etc., but, in form, is overwhelmingly male, college educated and young. Despite the widespread anonymity on the site, women users often express frustration when they reveal their gender identity and many choose not to. One user wrote:

> I do like that it [discussion] remains focused on the subjects at hand rather than personal details. In other words, I want to discuss issues, not personal lives, etc. I can discuss personal issues elsewhere. Also, being a woman on *Reddit* is very difficult. I do not reveal my gender. This allows my discussion to be treated seriously without the sexual comments that I see other women endure on Reddit.

Especially given the high number of young adult and teen males on the site, *Reddit* has a reputation for sophomoric jokes, some of which may make female users uncomfortable or attacked as the aforementioned user describes. Yet, given the strong social progressive leanings of the site, at least in ideals, egalitarianism is expressed strongly on *Reddit*. A notable example is the recent political debates over contraception sparked by the 2012 GOP primary.

While my survey did not address questions of race or ethnicity, both sites, especially *Daily Kos*, has a reputation for being largely "white." *Reddit* does appear to have a more international user base. While race is largely invisible on both sites, some users choose to divulge their race in order to discuss related issues or to have a discussion about the need for more inclusivity or diversity on both sites. There is a good argument to be made that there is not full inclusivity due to factors like discursive practices which users find exclusionary (such as female redditors). Yet, the anonymity of both sites and the understanding that the identity of users is not known during discussion does create an atmosphere of inclusion.

A Public Sphere in Practice?

Ideal Speech Situation

Apart from his institutional criteria, Habermas was also concerned with the need for ethical discourse within the public sphere. He believed a public sphere must foster a process of open and reflexive discourse that would lead to consensus. To delineate the necessary conditions for the success of a public sphere in practice, he outlined the rules

through with an "ideal speech situation" (ISI) could be achieved. To begin with,

Habermas believed that:

1. *Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.*

In practice, anyone who has taken part in group deliberation, discussion, or public

political discourse knows that it is often extremely difficult for everyone to have a chance

to take part. There are many variables in face-to-face communication that limit

participation such as group size, time available, space, group dynamics among much else.

The added benefit of online communication is that people that otherwise would have

trouble asserting their voice in group face-to-face communication may be able to better

do so in an online, text-based forum. One of the biggest challenges in face-to-face is that

only in relatively small groups can each member have the ability to take part. This is a

challenge that teachers may experience when teaching in a large lecture hall rather than a

small classroom. Internet forums enable hundreds of users to engage with one another,

and on sites like *Reddit* with well-designed interface, thousands can (and often do). Face-

to-face discussions demand physical presence, transportation, procurement of space, and

can often only last a short amount of time in accordance with people's daily routine.

Online, discussions can continue for many hours and even days as long as users continue

taking part. In addition, many users (including some in this survey) report that they are

more comfortable taking part in discussions online, especially those who struggle with

speech disabilities, social anxiety, and other communication limiting situations.

Discussions on *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* are both highly accommodating for any registered

user provided that they have a computer and Internet access.

Habermas' ideal speech situation also calls for absolute freedom to take part in discussion to include one's interests and values. Specifically:

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.

As I have explained, *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* have significant differences in this regard. *Daily Kos* regularly bans users and makes a strong effort to keep its community free of "trolls" and strongly dissenting opinions. Right-wing users who try to stir up fights as well as left-wing critics who propose abandoning the Democratic Party or suggest that users support independent or third-party (non-Democratic) candidates are often stripped of privileges or outright banned. Users do take part in vigorous debate over tactics, candidates, issues, strategies, and all multitudes of politics, but they cannot question the core goal of electing Democrats. There is limited freedom of expression and questioning of others' assertions on *Daily Kos*, which functions to keep the site orientated as a support structure of the Democratic Party.

The structure of *Reddit* is based around a notion with striking similarity to Habermas's ideal speech situation—absolute freedom of expression, debate, and critique. In fact, the site has an almost notorious reputation for fact checking and debate, often criticizing each other for lazy research or faulty logic. Unlike *Daily Kos*, there are no rules over content, aside from some basic "Reddiquette," which encourages users not to post spam, stay on topic, and promote more civil discussion. Users *can* be banned on *Reddit*; however, this is limited to pursuing individuals and companies that repeatedly spam the site in their attempts to get free exposure in such a highly trafficked site. The

allowance for any and all topics on *Reddit* is one of its draws. Politically, users can easily find robust discussions and topics that are entirely avoided by mainstream media, like popular subreddits on Anarchism or Communism.

On *Reddit*, both content and discussion is given legitimacy through group consensus. Through their ubiquitous voting system, every post, discussion thread, or comment is in a constant up/down vote flux, and those posts and comments with enough of a positive trend will remain more visible, lending the discussion legitimacy. As I have explained, users can submit virtually anything to *Reddit*, and all users are able to have input via voting and commenting on all content. This gives *Reddit* its trademark "beehive" reputation as there is ever constant voting, posting, commenting and discussion activity on the site; the changing ranking of posts is a result of the time/voting formula. On *Daily Kos*, there is no function for this. Posts are given legitimacy through recommends, but this has *much* more to do with the system of follow/friending and reputation: popular users with enough mojo and connections are consistently able to get their posts to the main page.

Finally, in order to achieve Habermas's ideal speech situation, users must be free to participate and debate without fear of reprisal. He explains:

> *3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).* (Berdal 2004, p. 36)

Again, users on *Daily Kos* can be banned or lose privileges for stepping outside the bounds of allowable debate. *Reddit* operates with a far less heavy hand, leaving the moderation of discussion up to the volunteer moderators of each individual subreddit. Due to its restrictive practices and bounded debate, *Daily Kos* does not achieve an ideal speech situation as Habermas prescribes. *Reddit*, on the other hand, is founded on the

very same ideals of freedom of expression and freedom to question others while remaining free of reprimand and thus it appears to embody the ideals of Habermas's ideal speech situation.

Quality of Discourse

Aside from theoretical questions of how *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* may or may not function as public sphere, I am also interested in how users perceive the quality of discussion on each site. My experience has shown both sites to have a very high volume of discussion, which tends to be of a much higher quality than typical online political forums. To get a sense of this, I asked a series of open-ended questions in the survey that sought to provide a space for users to write about their experiences debating and discussion political topics.

Daily Kos: Highly Satisfied, Likeminded Users

In response to the quality of discussion and debate on *Daily Kos*, users were virtually unanimous in their opinions. To get a sense of what users had to say, I have compiled a selection of representative comments:

> High quality of content here; there's really no match in terms of the mix of high quality writing, cogent analysis, and an intelligent readership that actively comments.

> The users are overwhelmingly very civil and polite, even in disagreement. There are many very intelligent people here in many different areas of knowledge and expertise. Very little hierarchy of name and title. I very much like that I don't know if users are black/white, male/female, old/young. It's only the ideas expressed that count. I also like the format of the comments where individual comments can be replied to. forming threads and discussions.

There are many intelligent, thoughtful writers on Kos that I rely on for balanced, well informed dialog. Many are extremely committed.

Having been a member since its origination in 2002, I am familiar with its scars, skeletons and weak spots, as well as its strengths. The level of engagement and the breadth of issues and topics covered here is far wider than anything I've seen elsewhere.
It [discussion] is freewheeling, alive and vibrant. I find many interesting links to many different subjects.

I learn about things here that I never even see stories about elsewhere, and I like the depth and variety of viewpoints. I love the recent diaries list, I like being able to sample anyone's thoughts...a brand new diarist or an old pro.

News travels very fast on this site, so if there is breaking news, I can find it here first, along with quality analysis, explanation and criticism. When I see something on the news, my first reaction is to check the site to see how accurate the news report was, and to see what everyone thinks this means. The site has increased my confidence in real life political discussion, by giving me facts and explanations I wouldn't otherwise have had.

There was not a single user who described discussion as low quality or in negative terms.

The only criticism was of the presence of occasional trolls; however, users described this

as an inevitable phenomena online and believe that the moderation system of *Daily Kos* is

highly effective as keeping the forums free from troublemakers. While users describe the

quality of discussion in the highest terms, they admit that a strong reason for this is that

users are having discussions and debates amongst likeminded people. As one user

explained:

As a "raging" liberal, my views are mirrored by equally likeminded folks I've not found anywhere else. I've also had some of my core beliefs evolve by the diverse theories given voice here. This is good and what makes me enriched here.

Most users suggested that while clearly the site is a forum for likeminded individuals,

specifically those in support of Democratic candidates and liberal/progressive causes,

there is sufficient diversity and opinions that keep debate lively and open.

Reddit: Best Forum on the Internet—or Just a "Circlejerk"?

To begin with, we need to start with a necessary, if slightly uncomfortable definition. *Reddit* provides for constant discussion of any and all topics and subtopics and sub-sub topics (and so on). While this enables a never-ending possibility for diversity of subjects and topics, many users express a concern that in some subreddits, there can exist too much of a "hivemind" mentality. The concern is over collective bias. Through the up/down vote system, only those posts and comments that match or confirm the group's bias are promoted. Users often speak of there being a general "hivemind" on *Reddit*, both as an awareness of the collective preferences as well as in more positive terms, suggesting the sum of all users is more intelligent and productive than individuals alone. Redditors, many of whom pride themselves on critical thought, are acutely sensitive to the potential for "hivemind" activity to devolve into shared navel-gazing and self-reinforcing discussion. To deal with this, redditors popularized the use of the term "circle-jerk" as a way to describe discussions where users are simply agreeing with one another and reinforcing each others' worldview and perspective. The term, which refers literally to a graphic image of a group of people sitting in a circle masturbating together, is ubiquitous on *Reddit*. It is often used in similar Internet forums to decry the tendency for forums to turn into uncritical, mutual affirmation sessions. There is even a popular subreddit, "r/circlejerk" (67,000 members) which parodies and makes fun of other subreddits and topics that users believe have become "circlejerks." For example, the r/RonPaul subreddit is regularly targeted for their mass down-voting of posts critical of Ron Paul as is r/Atheism, which has a similar fervor in promoting atheism. The concern over subreddits becoming "circle-jerks" suggests the tension between the necessity (and

desire) of having likeminded people to talk with while wanting to avoid discussions that

devolve into spirals of uncritical mutual agreement—or as users put it, "circle-jerking."

Unlike *Daily Kos*, which was virtually unanimous in expressing satisfaction in the

high quality of debate, asking users about their experience with discussion on *Reddit*

elicited a far more mixed response. Describing their experience users were split into three

camps. Most felt that r/politics is either 1) One of the best (or the best) forums on the

Internet for political discussion or 2) That while there are often excellent discussions on

r/politics, just as often discussions devolve into jokes, "inane comments," or

"circlejerking." A third, much smaller minority of users flatly dismissed discussion in

r/politics as typically being little more than a big "circle-jerk." Users who felt that

discussion in r/politics was of generally high quality wrote comments such as:

> Excellent, occasionally deviants but those are probably just trolls.

> Infinitely better than meatspace [real life] political discussions. /r/Politics subscribers seem to have or quickly acquire a minimum amount of knowledge about current mainstream politics. This instills trust that I can go to /r/Politics to catch up on the latest news and be confident in the sources of information presented. Compared to other sub-reddits, I find /r/Politics lacking when it comes to broader knowledge of political history, theory, and terminology.

> Generally good - the voting system seems to cull a lot of the garbage out. Though I note that I get downvoted a lot if I say anything negative about Congressman Ron Paul :)"
> "Better than any other political discussion outlet on the Internet.

> Refreshingly thoughtful (compared to other sites), healthily skeptical (critical thinking), can always dive deeper.

> I consider it extremely high quality because from what I've seen, the more thoughtful and reasonably comments are upvoted toward the top for easy reading. Of course, I know there are many valuable comments that just disappear in the more popular topics, but I think in general the upvote/downvote system keeps the discussion high quality.

Because they are "open" to anyone (and not just someone likeminded), i learn a lot of differing perspectives. that in turn makes me a better person...or i should say a learned person.

Most discussions have participants that cite sources and actually create an intellectual discussion. The occasional "No you're just stupid" comment does happen, but it gets downvoted into oblivion.

Very good. Many people complain that it's very one sided but I find that not to be the case. There is definitely more "liberal" views than conservatives, but both sides still exist and are usually able to have intelligent discussions with one another.

Generally these users felt the high quality of political discussion was largely due to the well-informed and highly critical nature of most users, and that the voting system worked to promote the best and most thoughtful comments and critiques. In addition, many users felt that as an "open" forum, there was a surprisingly high quality of discussion compared with their experiences in other open forums that often are overtaken by "trolls" and flamewars.

However, just as often as users wrote of high quality discussion an equal number of users expressed that discussion is much more mixed in terms of quality. These users wrote comments such as:

Highly varied. I have seen both thought provoking and meaningful discussions as well as rag tag personal jokes and general idiocy.

Mostly the discussion is interesting and thoughtful, but it can devolve into arguments over radical politics from time to time.

Sometimes it's really good, sometimes it's a giant circlejerk, and sometimes I am shocked by how misinformed the hivemind is.

Decent, but it tends to either descend into mindless Ron Paul support (when I say mindless, I mean supporting him purely for some of his actions and disregarding his other actions) and liberal circlejerking (which I tend to be a part of). There are multiple-sided discussions, and those are excellent.

Runs the gamut from amazing to terrible.

Sometimes it's a total circlejerk. Sometimes it's very stimulating.

It can vary, but in general I find it one of the most consistently thoughtful places to discuss politics online.

Many times good comments are low on the totem pole due to their time of submission in relation to when a post was originally made. Oftentimes jokes or puns end up as the most discussed part of the news piece. Other times, insightful comments enhance or correct the news or steer the discussion in a properly defined new direction.

They can go either way. You can sometimes find unbiased discussions where people have rational disagreements in ideology and actually learn something, but many times it devolves into mudslinging and propaganda attacks between the progressive and libertarian sects.

Sometimes the quality of discussion can be amazing. Sometimes it can be terrible. Since I've been a member of reddit for a long time, you can notice that as days go by users become better informed and obviously mature politically. I sure have.

Many of the participants come across as being young and idealistic. Many are very well informed, but still naive. I try to take a "mentor" role as best I can at these times.

I don't think you can assess this without some context. I'd say that the discussions on r/politics are self-congratulatory and "circlejerky", but compared to discussions that take place on other forums/news sources/whatever, we're pretty thorough in our analysis.

As is evidenced by these comments, many users expressed the feeling that discussion could be both excellent and terrible, which I think is a sentiment with which most Redditors would agree. What I found interesting was how almost all users seemed to reflect a concern about the quality of debate and a desire to keep it from eroding into the poor quality of many general Internet forums. The constant critique that discussions can too easily turn into "circlejerks" seems to reflect a surprising collective mindfulness about the need to constantly work towards maintaining at least some level of quality amidst the volume of jokes and flaming that goes on between users. Finally, a third, much

smaller minority group of users responded by flatly saying discussion was nothing more than a "circle jerk crapshoot" or full of "redundancy, non-substantive content, and general circle-jerking."

Because *Reddit* has large, general subreddits like r/politics and smaller, more specific, politically oriented subreddits, my survey asked users how they felt about the quality of discussion in smaller subreddits. The general belief on *Reddit* is that smaller subreddits have better, more focused conversations due to the smaller group of people and more focused topic, while larger subreddits make it more difficult to have focused conversations due to their size. Many users felt that discussion tended to be better in smaller reddits, commenting:

The quality of discussion tends to be better on the smaller subreddits.

Highly informed and much better developed.

The quality is higher because the subreddit is smaller.

Yet, many users also believed that the smaller subreddits stifle open debate and too easily turn into "circlejerks." Of smaller subreddits, users expressed:

Certainly more charged. The narrower the topic of the subreddit, the more self-selecting the population, the more echo-chamber like it becomes.

VERY one sided. I just monitor them for stories when nothing good is on r/politics.

But because these are small subreddits they tend to circlejerk and just try to show how they are superior to the other side.

The less general subs (sub-reddits) tend to be even more one tracked and allow less dissent than r/Politics.

For redditors, there are dangers and problems associated with both the large subreddits, which can be too big for detailed or focused discussion and smaller subreddits, which can

stifle debate and not allow enough dissent. Having both big open forums for broad

political discussion and smaller more focused spaces does work well together. One user

expressed:

> Most smaller subreddits are full of like-minded people. It's not always good for
> thinking or discussion. However, I feel a lot of information circulates through
> smaller subreddits and makes its way up to larger reddits, like r/politics,
> r/worldpolitics, etc.

This ecosystem of political discourse strikes the right balance between the conflicting

needs of feeling affirmed by likeminded individuals while also providing the space to be

challenged in larger, more diverse subreddits. Additionally, while there was significant

expression of concern over the tenuous quality of debate in r/politics, it is surprising that

the strong majority of users surveyed still believed discussion in the biggest politically

oriented subreddit, r/politics to be worthwhile even with well over a million subscribers.

<u>Bound and Open Public Sphere</u>

While *Daily Kos* certainly provides a space that embodies much of the ideals of a

public sphere, it does so only within a strongly bound debate. It is not inclusive of the

wider spectrum of political views. In this sense, *Daily Kos* is perhaps best viewed as an

ideologically and party-bound public sphere. The site is open to anyone and provides a

status-less environment with a high quality of respectful debate; yet, discussion and posts

must remain within the boundaries set out by the owner, Markos Moulitsas Many users of

Daily Kos based on their experience on other less regulated forums would argue that they

would not be able to have the same quality of discussion without these measures. Given

the experience of many on more general online political discussion forums, this is likely

true. As is evident from this survey, active users on *Daily Kos* unanimously feel that discussion and debate is of a very high quality for users' needs and expectations.

Reddit, more so than *Daily Kos*, appears to match the ideals Hambermas put forth in his concept of a public sphere. Status is virtually non-existent, discussion is collectively controlled and guided, and discussions forums are inclusive, allowing users to create new spaces if they feel excluded. All users can take part and criticize one another without fear of reprisal. The quality of discussion, at least expressed by users, was not as high or unanimous as with *Daily Kos*. This seemed to confirm the idea that in order to have very high quality of political discussion, users do need to be likeminded and perhaps even in agreement in ideological terms. Yet, while it is true that on *Reddit* responses regarding the quality of discussion were more mixed than *Daily Kos*, users' experiences do seem to provide a compelling case that with the right structure in place, political discussion forums can be massive, general, and entirely open while retaining a high caliber of discussion—at least some of the time. On the other hand, while there are many political views on *Reddit*, redditors are by no means representative of a general population. They may be more politically diverse, but they, like users on *Daily Kos*, still depend on a level of 'likemindedness' for success since typical users are younger, male, and share common interests. As *Reddit* becomes more popular and the largest subreddits grow ever larger and more diverse, it will be interesting to see how this will affect users' perceptions of the quality of discussion in spaces like r/politics.

CHAPTER 7

ORGANIZING AND ENACTING VIRTUAL COLLECTIVE ACTION

<u>Reddit: From Charity To Rising Political Power</u>

On Tuesday, January 10th 2012, the small administrative staff that runs *Reddit* posted a blog post titled, "Stopped they must be; on this all depends," in which they declared the site would go black for 12 hours on January 18th to protest the copyright legislation SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (Protect IP) coming up for debate in the House and Senate. After months of increasingly furious discussion and hundreds of related posts on *Reddit* and calls for action from users, *Reddit* administrators decided that enough collective support had emerged that they could announce the blackout protest. While other major sites had mentioned the possibility of blackouts or other protest actions, *Reddit's* declaration was the first announcement from a major website to go black, and it helped spark what became a widespread protest online. Following *Reddit's* lead, *Google*, *Craigslist*, *Wikipedia*, *Mozilla, Boing Boing*, *Tumblr*, *Wordpress*, *Flickr*, *Wired*, and hundreds of other sites went black or put up a censored banner to protest SOPA and PIPA. In addition to shutting down, these sites provided links to learn more about SOPA/PIPA in addition to re-directing links where users could look up and contact their representatives. According to *Wikipedia*, which compiled data on the protest: 8 million peoples looked up their representatives through *Wikipedia*, 3 million people emailed Congress, *The Electronic Frontier Foundation* generated 1 million messages, a petition through Google recorded over 4.5 million, *Twitter* reported at least 2.4 million SOPA-related tweets, and lawmakers reported collecting 14 million names who contacted

them to protest the bills.[17] Within two days, political support for both bills evaporated, and they were shelved indefinitely. Many news organizations heralded the January 18th Internet black out as the "web flexing it's muscle" (*New York Times*) and the anti-SOPA/PIPA protest have been called the largest digital protest in history. As Senator Ron Wyden, co-author of an alternative bill noted, "The way citizens communicate with their government is never going to be the same" (Weisman, 2012).

While Internet heavyweights like *Google*, *Wikipedia*, and *Craigslist* took part in the protest, *Reddit* was arguably the most active leader in the online protest. Not only were they the firs to announce a full site blackout for January 18th, but redditors and subreddit communities generated much of the organizing around SOPA/PIPA, including targeting bill co-sponsors and going after companies that publicly supported the bills. When it came out that *Go Daddy*, the largest popular domain name registrar and web hosting company, publicly supported SOPA, redditor "selfprodigy" posted "GoDaddy supports SOPA, I'm transferring 51 domains & suggesting a move your domain day" to r/politics. The post received over 36,000 upvotes, over 3,000 comments and sparked a "Move your Domain Day." As redditors piled on in support, many of whom threatened to move their websites to another domain service, other sites noticed. They, too, started tweeting and announcing that they too were threatening leave *Go Daddy*, including sites like *Wikipedia* and the *ICanHasCheezBurger* network. Faced with the protest, within 48 hours, *Go Daddy* publicly retracted their support of SOPA. Redditors created other SOPA/PIPA-related campaigns, including campaigns to support rival candidates to those who supported SOPA/PIPA and spreading word about the European equivalent ACTA.

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[17] Data and numbers on the SOPA/PIPA protest have been compiled by Wikipedia, available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_against_SOPA_and_PIPA

While the anti-SOPA/PIPA blackout can be seen in some respects as *Reddit's* arrival in terms of collective political action, the site has over the years taken on more and more types of activism. Perhaps the most famous example was *Reddit's* role in launching the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Keep Fear Alive," the satirical rally led by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert held on the national mall in Washington D.C. On August 31st, 2010 redditor "mrsammercer" submitted a post titled "I've had a vision and I can't shake it: Colbert needs to hold a satirical rally in DC."[18] Mrsammercer went on to write:

> Think about it. It'll be just like Colbert's mockery of GW Bush at the 2006 White House Correspondent's Dinner, but 500,000 people will be able to participate with him. We'll all stay totally in character as teabaggers… This would be the high water mark of American satire. Half a million people pretending to suspend all rational thought in unison. Perfect harmony. It'll feel like San Francisco in the late 60s, only we won't be able to get any acid.

Within hours, the post had reached the front page and top slot on *Reddit* with over 13,000 upvotes. Users quickly began organizing, sending mass emails to Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's shows, setting up Facebook groups, and even creating a website within 24 hours. Hoping to draw even more attention and try to persuade Colbert, users found out that he sat on the board of the charity "Donors Choose" and began a "charity bomb" to get his attention, donating more than $200,000 in a 48 hour period. Their efforts and momentum clearly caught the attention of Stewart and Colbert, who announced they would hold a rally at the end of October, which ultimately brought an unprecedented 200,000 people to the national mall for a satirical-yet-serious rally against fearmongering and sensationalism in the media and political discourse.

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[18] The original post is available:
http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/d7ntl/ive_had_a_vision_and_i_cant_shake_it_colbert/

While these are the two of the largest examples of redditors taking part in popular collective action, there has been a high volume of political activism throughout *Reddit*, especially within smaller more focused subreddits. While *Reddit* was not actively involved in the initial organizing behind Occupy Wall Street, many redditors actively supported the movement, and a subreddit, r/occupywallstreet, was set up to disseminate video and photos from protestors to challenge bias from corporate media sources. Although there was palpable support for Barack Obama's candidacy in 2008, *Reddit* is not typically known as a community that supports specific political candidates or even parties. More recently, many redditors have taken to the cause of supporting and promoting libtertarian-Republican Ron Paul. The r/ronpaul subreddit has over 20,000 members and is one of the more active political subreddits. Users raise money, fact check the mainstream media bias against Paul, and help drum up 'boots on the ground' volunteers at major primary votes. Although, as described previously, the larger *Reddit* community has became wary of the constant and mindless upvoting of all things Ron Paul, and set up subreddits to counter-act the "Ron Paul circlejerk behavior."

How Effective?

When asked about their effectiveness in taking part in collective action, redditors gave mixed responses with some feeling that users were effective while others suggesting that there was not enough support for major actions. Many felt that the site could be highly effective when it wanted to, while others felt that redditors were only willing to take part in "slacktivism" type efforts, which means easy actions like signing an online petition. When asked about their collective effectiveness, their responses fell within a few

broad categories. Some users felt that *Reddit* was generally effective and has had a

growing influence. They wrote:

> I think it's great. I don't think OWS would have taken off the way it did without reddit. I joined reddit because it had the best collective of OWS information. I think if the reddit community really wanted too, we could have a HUGE impact on any political or social action.

> Pretty good. We've done some great things for charities, individuals, and the community. I think we are also good at educating and informing people about what's going on right now with SOPA, etc.

Others felt that *Reddit* was only moderately effective and was limited to relatively easy

and effortless actions:

> Moderately active. I think there's a lot of "slacktivism" where people are willing to complain about issues but not necessarily take action.

> More effective than average, so long as whatever action they take doesn't involve much more than opening another browser tab and signing a petition or similar minor action.

As with most open responses on *Reddit*, some users expressed cynicism of *Reddit's*

potential to take part in action:

> Not as effective as they could or should be. Too many armchair contributors.

> Useless. Reddit is primarily people wasting time at the office.

Perhaps the area where most users were in agreement was that *Reddit* was effective at

raising awareness about under-reported issues, especially those dealing with economic

injustice, civil liberties, or topics related to Internet freedom:

> Extremely effective. Reddit is great for generating awareness of issues.

> At the very least I think the reddit community is extremely effective at bringing awareness to issues that otherwise would be ignored. Like SOPA and Protect-IP. The reddit community is awesome at getting together and contacting elected officials, telling their friends, and getting other media organizations to notice these issues.

Spreading awareness on issues is very important, and Reddit does that well.

Reddit has been more effective than I could have expected on NDAA, SOPA, PIPA and others. The NDAA vote did not go well, but Reddit's purpose is informational. I fear SOPA and PIPA will also go poorly, but there are at least attempts at a defense of the nation and Constitution.

Very effective. Reddit gets conversations started.

In addition, given the real-time up/down vote system of *Reddit* that governs post submissions and discussions, users noted that *Reddit* could be very effective as long as it the issue can reach enough consensus:

When it's something we can all agree on, quite effective indeed.

It has proven itself to be very effective when the hivemind is determined.

Given the typically non-political nature of charitable giving, *Reddit* has been effective at coming together to help others in need, especially people suffering from terminal illnesses or donating to charities. As one user explained:

Reddit has come together for a few pretty amazing "flash fundraisers" just a couple weeks ago, r/atheism donated thousands of dollars to doctors without borders or some such organization. Reddit secret santa has been a wonderful thing for those on christmas, and Reddit has even donated tons of money to help a 3 year old get a bone marrow transplant. When you find a cause that hits home to the lurkers of reddit, you can expect very heavy collective action.

The most effective collective action *Reddit* undertook was its organizing and actions to protest SOPA and PIPA. It is important to note that this survey was administered in mid-December 2011 about a month before the anti-SOPA/PIPA Internet blackout. If this survey had been administered after the phenomenally successful blackout, users would have most likely had a stronger impression of the ability for the community to take on political and social issues. Despite the survey coming before the protest, it is evident from responses that redditors had long been generating discussion and activism against SOPA,

PIPA, and other equally threatening legislation. The two bills were often mentioned in user responses:

> Reddit was a key part of getting 25k signatures on the recent petition to veto SOPA in under 48hrs. That's pretty amazing.

> Reddit has been more effective than I could have expected on NDAA, SOPA, PIPA and others. The NDAA vote did not go well, but Reddit's purpose is informational. I fear SOPA and PIPA will also go poorly, but there are at least attempts at a defense of the nation and Constitution.

One user had a particularly prophetic response:

> We haven't figured out how to do it yet. We will. I'm fairly certain shit's gonna hit the fan for the establishment in the next calendar year. And I think reddit r/politics will help form that movement. We just haven't sorted it out yet.

Figure it out they did given that s/he was writing a month before *Reddit* would help spark and lead the largest digital protest in history.

Daily Kos: Influential, Consistent, if Partisan, Political Action

Daily Kos included the concept of collective action as part of their self-description stated in the site's banner that reads "News. Community. Action." As the site gained popularity, its involvement in political activism increased; *Daily Kos* is now cemented its reputation as an important and influential progressive community that works to raise awareness of progressive ideas and causes and from which many Democratic candidates seek out support. While *Daily Kos* is not necessarily well known by the general population, the site is most influential within the Democratic Party. Most users on *Daily Kos* appear to be from the more leftwing or progressive perspective, and the site as a whole is often involved in supporting the candidacies more progressive Democrats over "Blue Dog" and other moderate Democrats.

Daily Kos along with other popular progressive blogs like MyDD and Internet-based organizations like MoveOn.org were central to what some consider one of the first successful electoral victories for the "netroots." In 2006, with rising discontent over then-Democratic Senator Joe Liberman's support for many of President George W. Bush's policies including support for the Iraq war, progressive bloggers, many of whom were active on *Daily Kos*, set out to push Lieberman out of office by challenging him with a more progressive candidate in a primary election. Bloggers from around the country rallied and organized in support of the challenger, Ned Lamont, who ultimately won the Democratic senate primary—a feat seen as the first successful Internet-driven candidacy. Ari Melber, writing for *The Nation*, described Ned Lamont's victory as a victory for the netroots. He wrote, "While famous bloggers deflect their own hype, it is clear that the netroots played an indispensable role in turning a quixotic, symbolic challenge into a decisive victory" (2006). Ultimately, Joe Liberman won his senate seat by running as an Independent, which enabled him to gain the help of Republican voters. Yet, the power of the netroots in challenging mainstream party politics had been demonstrated.

One of the most successful organizing initiatives of *Daily Kos* has been to organize the "Netroots Nation," an annual conference that has become the major yearly gathering for the progressive "netroots" bloggers, digital activists, and Democrat politicians looking to court favor with influential digital supporters. The conference was first held and organized by *Daily Kos* in 2006, then called "YearlyKos." They changed the name to Netroots Nation in 2008 to better reflect the growing influence and diversity of the progressive blogosphere. Today, Netroots Nation has become one of the premier stopping places for Democratic candidates and policymakers. Virtually every major

player in Democratic politics in recent years has attended, including then-candidates

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, Senate majority leader Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi,

Bill Clinton, and other major prospective and current national Democratic politicians.

The New York Times described the first annual YearlyKos convention as a "coming out"

of sorts for political bloggers (Nagourney, 2006):

> They may think of themselves as rebels, separate from mainstream politics and media. But by the end of a day on which the convention halls were shoulder to shoulder with bloggers, Democratic operatives, candidates and Washington reporters, it seemed that bloggers were well on the way to becoming — dare we say it? — part of the American political establishment. Indeed, the convention, the first of what organizers said would become an annual event, seems on the way to becoming as much a part of the Democratic political circuit as the Iowa State Fair.

Six year later, not only has Netroots Nation become a premier gathering of the

progressive political establishment, bloggers and *Daily Kos* have themselves become

very much a part of the Democratic establishment.

How Effective?

When *Daily Kos* users were asked how effective the site is in taking part in

collective action, a strong majority of users responded that the site is very effective,

especially in terms of electoral politics. While many redditors felt that their site and

community had lots of potential for activism, *Daily Kos* users broadly agree that the site

is consistently effective in raising awareness of progressive causes, promoting and

supporting progressive candidates, and taking part in other actions outside of party

politics. The following is a small sample of the typical responses users gave in the open-

ended survey question:

I have seen a variety of petition drives, donation drives and organizing occur on Dkos, as well as information dissemination so I would say they are very effective in taking part in political actions.

They have clearly made the difference in multiple elections. (Donna Edwards, possibly Nick Lampson, etc) It is interesting to see actual elected officials post there, and gives a very strong feeling that at least some of the attitudes of the commentary are influencing policy.

It provides a 'home base' forum for a very large number of like-minded (mostly) and passionate activists to discuss, rant, bemoan and analyze (often in depth) political issues. And for all those who actively discuss there are many who merely read -- but are the activist base that votes, that volunteers for campaigns, and that donates to causes and political figures that espouse their own values. Democratic members of Congress, Senators post here; at the YearlyKos convention in 2007, we had all eight Democratic presidential candidates participate in a debate and meet with supporters. If you want to communicate with (and hear from) the most politically active members of the liberal/progressive/Democratic base -- DailyKos has become one of the best places to do that.

Very effective. I have been a registered user since 2004 and I have watched the development of the DK community move from simply a discussion site to one where political action can be effectively conceived and implemented. The NETROOTS conference is just one example.

Better than most online communities -- it raises money, coordinates protests and petitions, gets word out about lesser known candidates, etc.

Extremely effective. Bother through encouraging progressive causes and by providing community funding of progressive candidates.

I think we're continually growing more effective, as more of us take the first steps into political activism. I find the community valuable in the ways they encourage and support the activism of members; I had never been active in a political campaign before 2008, and the continual encouragement (okay, nagging) on the site made me take the first step of donating money and making a phone call to offer my time. Further, the site provides a relatively easy way to hook up with people in the same area with the same interests, which fosters meat space activism.

I believe that the DK community is most effective when it pairs with other progressive causes and organizations. Collectively they spread the word, bring in new information, provide mechanisms for progressives to join forces in common causes and generate support, both political and financial for progressive causes." "Very effective. It's the closest thing we little people have to a voice in the public sphere -- including with elected officials.

As shown above, users feel that *Daily Kos* can be very effective in many areas, from

raising awareness to issues or supporting lesser-known candidates. One area in particular,

campaign fundraises, was frequently noted by the *Daily Kos* community as active and

effective:

> Very effective -- we do massive fundraising for candidates and many reps have
> written diaries, inviting the community to comment on ongoing initiatives.

> Yes, especially for directing fundraising activities for candidates. I think that it is
> a great place to gather ideas and put them into action.

> I think it is a leader in raising money for progressive candidates, calling and
> writing Congresscritters & influencing local & state politics.

> In several instances, extremely effective. Like raising money for specific causes
> or candidates.

In fact this appears to be a bit of a stereotype of *Daily Kos*, as a few members noted the

site's reputation as a progressive "ATM" (expressed with some disdain):

> So far, we're very good at raising money for existing, progressive politicians,
> though many of us aspire to becoming more than an ATM. My guess is that we're
> better than nothing at matching volunteers with political campaigns.
> Demonstrations tend to be organized outside of *Daily Kos*.

> The main contribution of *Daily Kos* remains as an ATM for progressive
> politicians. Not many of us run for office and even fewer are successful, though
> then-Senator Barack Obama and many other existing politicians established
> accounts to communicate with us.

While many users focused on *Daily Kos* success in promoting candidates and

fundraising, others pointed to successful initiatives beyond ballot success. In particular,

many users claim that *Daily Kos* was one of the most vociferous supporters of the

Occupy Wall Street movement, both helping to raise funding and awareness of the

protests that were largely marginalized by the mainstream media. Users wrote:

The site is a great crossroads to draw attention to actions; the users in many cases are very active on the ground. In the instance of the Occupy movement, *Daily Kos* may be the most significant news outlet aside from Occupy's own twitter feeds and livestreams. Certainly Occupy has benefited from the exposure, defenses of its tactics, and contacts that have happened through the site.

Very active! I almost feel as if the 99% movement this fall was in part triggered by the community here or at the least publicly bullhorned to a sleepy nation. A leading spokesmen for the movement "Ministry of Truth" is big here.

Some users on *Daily Kos* did express some small level of cynicism about the effectiveness of the online community:

More talkers/writers than actual doers.

Highly effective, but if I have one small criticism, it would be that D'Kos needs more activists and less keyboardists.

These comments were exceptions however. In comparison with *Reddit*, members of *Daily Kos* feel strongly that their community has an important impact on U.S. politics and can be very effective depending on the issue and type of action.

Less Hierarchy, More Grassroots Activism

One of the most intriguing questions about the ability for technology to help enable social and political movements and actions is this: can technology allow for less-hierarchical and more democratic action, a goal that has plagued so many movements? Strongly grassroots, non-hierarchical movements have emerged in the past, but inevitably end up with the necessity of leadership, hierarchy, and centralized messaging in order to appear attractive and gain support from non-supporters. Occupy Wall Street presents a fruitful example in this regard as it professes to be a completely "leaderless" movement, and it has been largely successful at avoiding the presence of a "leader" or "spokesperson." However, the movement has suffered from being able to present a

unified platform or message to the public (although this criticism largely came from the press, which has trouble covering leaderless movements).

We can see that both *Daily Kos* and *Reddit* engage in collective political and social activism with *Daily Kos* further transforming itself into a progressive political influencer and *Reddit* taking on larger and more politically oriented campaigns. As I outlined in Chapter Two, Jeffrey Juris (2005) described a new way of political activism via more network-based communication and action: "network-based forms of political organization and practice based on non-hierarchical structures, horizontal coordination among autonomous groups, open access, direct participation, consensus-based decision-making, and the ideal of the free and open circulation of information (Juris, p. 351)." In the past, Juris explained that political action was governed through "command-oriented logic," that is, through traditional hierarchical institutions like parties, unions, trade groups, etc. The rise of the Internet has allowed for actors to challenge traditional institutional hierarchies of power and representation.

Daily Kos and *Reddit* provide different examples of how more collaborative and collective political action can occur. *Daily Kos* does this by providing a blogging platform and discussion forum for all enables users to easily share information and organize together towards actions independently of political parties or campaigns. *Reddit* goes further by creating its entire system of information sharing based on consensus voting and user participation. However, both sites also provide evidence that some large-scale, effective campaigns to still seem to be dependent on a form of "command-oriented logic." While *Daily Kos* users can organize actions with other users, they may only do so within the ideological bounds and political goals of the site much of which is shaped by

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owner Moulitsas. On *Reddit*, most political and social action is largely, or entirely, user led. With little to no hierarchy among users and a "one user, one vote" system, the actions and campaigns that make it to the front page only do so with enough consensus support. Yet, in the case of *Reddit's* most successful political action—the blackout of the site—the administrators of *Reddit* did feel the need to step in and make the final decision after months of discussion and users support. Without the authority of an official *Reddit* spokesperson, it is unlikely that *Reddit's* actions could have had the ripple-effect that it did online, nor could *Reddit* have been seen as acting as a collective whole. In addition, Alexis Ohanian, co-founder of *Reddit*, went to Congress to speak at a congressional hearing against the proposed SOPA and PIPA legislation, providing a single voice speaking on behalf of the *Reddit* community.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: CONVERSATION IS THE FOUNDATION

As Clary Shirky (2011) has argued, the *real* transformative power of the Internet and in particular networked, social media is not the ability to take down dictators or rapidly organize flash mobs. Rather, it is the more mundane daily communication and interaction enabled by and through new communication technology—the daily discussion, debate, and the sharing of ideas and concerns by average people. This is true even for the Egyptian occupation of Tahrir square, that most iconic image of new media power. Well before the massive protests, average Egyptians engaged in months of increasingly vigorous debate and sharing of grievances against the regime that ultimately laid the foundation for a popular uprising. As Shirky has pointed out, when we saw the protests in Egypt or Tunisia, we were seeing the end product of years worth of critical discussions—much of which took place in the anonymous digital world. While technology greatly enhanced the ability to quickly organize protests, as well as broadcast images of oppression and violence to the outside world, Shirky believes the most important impact of new technology is in the formation of a digital public sphere, which provides not only a space for critical discussions, but for a sense of shared awareness necessary for solidarity and political change.

Early proponents of the Internet marveled at the ability to access information from a single computer, and this is still much of the focus in talk about the incredible potential for the Internet. "The world at your finger tips", so to speak. With smart phones and mobile data devices, one can literally have a world of information in their pockets

(whether or not they access it, rather than play Angry Birds, is another question). While having access to an incredible amount of information, the ability for the Internet to provide a structure and forum for conversation and social interaction is equally important. Even in the early days of the Internet, users not only shared information, articles, or ideas: they talked about them, and many virtual discussion communities formed, such as the popular Usenet communities. Online as in offline life, it turns out people really like to talk with other people about things they care about, or that they think are important.

If the Web 2.0 transformation has proved anything, it is that there is a seemingly insatiable eagerness to talk, to discuss, and interact with others. Even just to broadcast one's opinion or thoughts into the virtual abyss. In modern, capitalist (some would say neoliberal) societies, particularly the U.S., there has been a steady decline in participation and support in traditional civic institutions (such as town meetings or clubs), as downtowns and city centers were abandoned for urban and suburban sprawl (Putnam, 2000). It should perhaps come as no surprise that individuals living in suburbia, or gentrified cities with few if any places to meet new people and discuss interests and events would take to the Internet to satisfy desires once met typically through face-to-face social interaction in town and city commons.

We can see how this need for social interaction and community manifests itself in both sites in this case study. I've previously outlined the extent to which users feel a sense of community, and what shape it takes. Users on both sites clearly desire more than just discussing news or politics. From casual readers to users who visit for hours a day, it appears that almost all users to either site come for some level of social interaction and engagement, even if, as a lurker, they come only to observe the discussions between

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others. *Reddit* sticks out in this regard. Most of the content on *Reddit* is not about politics, but rather; video games, technology, cute animal photos, comics, movies, or life advice. Most redditors use the site to talk about their daily interests, and on occasion will engage in discussions about politics or news. Politics has become threaded throughout the culture of the site, and wedded to these topics in various ways that make it a normalized part of the experience. Similarly on *Daily Kos*, despite its explicit focus on politics, much of the daily conversations are about non-political topics: family, pets, gardening, or recipes and the like.

Having a sense of community is essential to having a functioning, participatory democracy. If individuals do not feel connected to others, they will not likely be interested in taking part in the sharing of resources and energy that is necessary to create shared opportunities and success. If they do not feel a sense of camaraderie, shared experience, and empathy, they will be unwilling to sacrifice when necessary for the greater good. Being part of a strong community is also essential for learning. As a graduate student, I'm part of both an immediate and larger academic community with many shared values, where we incubate our ideas, test out our hypotheses, and learn the language of the academic profession in a safe and (hopefully) supportive environment. With a strong sense of community, one can be in support and solidarity with others, and collectively work towards mutually beneficial goals and interests.

While it is important to have strong sense of community, a place for inclusive discussion and support, and the ability to take part in collective action, there is conflict between these needs. There is often a tension between the closeness of a community, and the need for openness, inclusivity, and diversity necessary for the formation of a public

sphere. *Daily Kos* has a very strong sense of community and is highly effective in acting collectively towards mutually desired ends. The quality of discussion on *Daily Kos* is very high by Internet standards. Much of the day-to-day discussion is thoughtful, critical, and well-informed. Users are constantly critiquing and debating one another's thoughts and beliefs. Because of this, *Daily Kos* is viewed by many as a kind of incubator of progressive ideas. Yet, *Daily Kos* is not open to anyone—only users who explicitly support Democratic Party ideals and candidates are welcome. While it may function as part of the larger digital public sphere, *Daily Kos* itself is not provide for the inclusiveness necessary the kind of diverse discussions and critical dialogue necessary for a public sphere.

   Reddit too, has problems with inclusivity. However, I think it's worth pointing out that while not everybody is welcome on *Reddit*—meaning unpopular opinions and beliefs of some can be down-voted by others—political discussions on *Reddit* do tend to have a diverse ideological make up. *Reddit* comes closer than many sites in creating an atmosphere near to that prescribed by Jurgen Habermas. While the large subreddits can be exclusive depending on consensus, there is a place for virtually any user's beliefs. If none exist, the space can be created. From the perspective of the needs of a public sphere, *Reddit* strikes the right balance between having large, open forums in larger subreddits, and more community-oriented and topic-specific discussion in smaller, more exclusive subreddits. Interestingly the more openness of *Reddit* does not preclude collective action. While they are not as organized as a site like *Daily Kos*, redditors have increasingly taken part in widespread collective action along issues that most users care about—Internet

freedoms, individual liberties, and fighting corruption and corporate influence in government.

For the first time in many years, two major non-party aligned grassroots political movements emerged out of this political-information environment. The Tea Party, at least in its initial form, was driven by local grassroots activists, many of them conservative and libertarian bloggers upset with the mainstream of their party and the political system at large. Although the Tea Party has been largely co-opted by the Republican Party, and as such has lost much of its initial fervor and energy. In similar fashion, Occupy Wall Street movements emerged opposed to the two-party system and unaligned with any major institutions. Occupy has been very resistant to having any kind of "official" hierarchy, however does have some "non-official" leading groups. When I learned about the many subcommittees of that have become a core part of the daily Occupy movement(s), I noticed they had a similar form and function as subreddits on *Reddit*. Participants can create a subcommittee, spokes council, or working group on a variety topics (according to their interest/expertise), and there was a system of group moderation using hand signals similar to the upvote/downvote consensus system of *Reddit*. Like *Reddit*, discussions in Occupy subcommittees are freewheeling, open to anyone, and collectively moderated and governed (at least in theory). I don't mean to suggest that *Reddit* directly inspired the structure of Occupy, but rather, that given tech-saturated experience of many of Occupy's younger members, the open, leaderless, democratic-discussion based, and even egalitarian structure of the movement, at least in ideals, seems to reflect the culture of the Internet in a general way. As media theorist Paul Levison recently described, "The 'Occupy Wall Street' and related movements represent a resurgence of direct

democracy—not really known since ancient times" (Wood & Goodale, 2011). It seems that, perhaps, the non-hierarchy, lack of individual identifications and appeals to authority, increasing capacity of user participation, and the ability to "vote", "like", or otherwise has sparked a desire for similar ways of acting in the offline world of political engagement.

For democratic participation to flourish online, like in offline life, there must be places for both incubated, supportive community, as well as more critical and diverse discussion and debate. There must be enough shared understanding, language, and awareness that individuals are willing to engage with one another, as well as a strong enough feeling of community to make collective action possible. While the tension between the need for community and the need for diversity and inclusivity is a constant tension online, in offline life, these problems can be far more intractable. Strong and homogenous communities in offline life can be too limiting for minority and oppressed voices, and can be downright dangerous for political discourse. History is chock full of examples of communities (and societies) that came to believe in their own superiority through a belief in other groups of people as inferior, stupid, or at the worst, sub-human. Many of the worst examples of this came during an era of highly centralized, state controlled media and communication systems that helped support and inflame extreme nationalism, racism, and other totalizing identities.

The Internet as a medium stands in contrast to these past centralized media environments and the resulting nationalism. Yet the danger remains. Many commentators have warned of the bubble effect of information online, how aggregators, ideologically aligned sources of information, and even advertisements based on data-mined

information about users creates a formation or network that provides a user with information that confirms and supports his/her values, interests, and beliefs.

At its best, the Internet enables people to satisfy both the need for close-knit community as well as engagement with opposing viewpoints and groups. Ideally, people online can find social interaction with likeminded individuals and be able to take part in collective action, but also avoid the dangerous spiral into ideological purity, groupthink, or feelings of superiority that make such homogeneity dangerous. This process works best on the Internet when it brings people together from different experiences, ideologies, and groups in a way that allows for civil discussion. The challenge in fostering digital public sphere is to be able to provide spaces and structures for both communal and inclusive discussion and debate.

ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR *REDDIT*

1. How long have you been a registered user of reddit?
[Less than one month] [Between 1-6 months] [Between 6 months and 1 year] [Between 1-2 years] [Longer than 2 years]

2. Do you consider yourself an active user? (active being defined as someone who has registered with the site and does things like comment on links, participate in discussions, and/or submit links)
[Yes, very active] [Yes, moderately active] [No, I'm just a lurker]

3. Many redditors talk about there being a sense community on reddit. Do you consider yourself part of this community?
[Yes, very much so] [Yes, to some degree] [No, not really]

4. What about in r/politics or other politically oriented subreddits? Do you feel that there exists community among the politically oriented subreddits you are a part of?
[this is an open ended question, write as much as you want]

5. Do you ever submit links to r/politics?
[Yes, usually daily] [Yes, a few times per week] [Yes, once a month or so] [Yes, but only sporadically] [No]

6. Do you submit "self" posts to r/politics? If yes, what has been your experience doing so?
[open ended]

7. If you answered yes to either of the above questions, have you ever had one of your entries promoted to the r/politics mainpage?
[Yes, regularly] [Yes, many times] [Yes, but just a few times] [Yes, once or twice] [No, never]

8. How do you feel about the moderators/moderation system of r/politics?
[open ended]

9. Are you active in other politically oriented subreddits? If yes, which?
[Open question]

10. If you are active in other politically oriented subreddits (especially those that are smaller and more focused than r/politics), how would you describe the quality of discussion?
[Open ended]

11. Please choose that which best represents how you feel about the following statements
[Strongly Agree] [Agree] [Neutral] [Disagree] [Strongly Disagree]

a.   I feel that being part of r/politics allows me to interact with others who share similar interests with me
b.   I feel like part of a community on r/politics
c.   I look forward to coming online to discuss the day's news on r/politics
d.   I discuss politics and current affairs more often in online forums like reddit than offline, such as at work or with friends or family
e.   I feel better informed about the world because of my time spent on reddit
f.   I prefer to discuss news and politics with like-minded people on reddit instead of general websites or forums
g.   I consider myself friends with other users on reddit
h.   I feel like part of the collaborative effort that supports reddit

12. How would you describe the quality of discussions in r/politics?
[open ended]

13. What about the quality of discussions on reddit in general?

14. How would you describe your own political views or ideology?
[open ended]

15. What political issues are most important to you?
[open ended]

16. If you had to apply a typical political label to yourself, which of the following best matches your own political beliefs?
[Liberal/Progressive(left-leaning)] [Very Liberal/Progressive (solidly left)] [Conservative (right-leaning)] [Very Conservative (solidly right)] [Libertarian] [Centrist/Moderate] [Socialist/Social Democrat] [Other]

17. Do you identify with or support a particular political party? If so, which one?
[Open question]

18. What do you think about the two-party dominated system that exists in the U.S.?
[open ended]

19. While clearly there are disagreements on reddit, there does seem to be some common values or political views among most redditors. How would you describe these common values or political views?
[open ended]

20. Do you consider yourself politically active?
[Yes, very active] [Yes, somewhat active] [No, not really] [Not at all]

21. Redditors have at times come together to take collective action; such as donating to charities or supporting legislation on issues like Internet freedom. How effective do you think the reddit community is at taking part in political or social actions?
[open ended]

22. Why do you like using and/or being part of r/politics or reddit in general when there are so many other political websites and forums on the web?
[open ended]

23. How often do you go onto reddit?
[Daily, many times throughout the day] [Daily, at least once a day] [Every other day or so] [Once or twice a week] [Once a week or less often]

24. When you do go onto reddit, how much time would you say you spend on an average visit?
[15 minutes or less] [Between 15-30 minutes] [30 minutes to 1 hour] [Between 1-2 hours] [Between 3-4 hours] [More than 4 hours]

25. On an average day, how much time do you spend online?
[30 minutes or less] [About an hour] [About two hours] [Between 3-5 hours] [Between 5-10 hours] [I'm online pretty much all day, in and out]

26. Do you regularly visit and/or participate in other similar web-based news sites or similar discussion forums?
[Yes, many others] [Yes, but just 1 or 2 others] [No, mostly just reddit]

27. If yes, please list the other sites or forums that you participate in regularly
[open question]

28. How would you rate your knowledge of news and current events?

29. Please list your major sources of news
[open ended]

30. What would you say best reflects your consumption of news?
[I consume news almost entirely online] [The majority of my news consumption is online] [It's about an equal mix of online and offline news] [I still get most of my news from print, radio, or TV]

31. What country do you live in?

32. If in the U.S., what state do you live in?

33. Which category below includes your age?
[17 or younger] [18-20] [21-29] [30-39] [40-49] [50-59] [60 or older]

34. What is your gender?
[Male] [Female] [Other] [Prefer not to answer]

35. Approximately how much total combined income did all members of your household earn in 2010?
[Less than $20,000] [$20,000 to $34,999] [$35,000 to $49,999] [$50,000 to $74,999] [$75,000 to $99,999] [$100,000 to $149,999] [$150,000 or more]

36. What type of place would you say you live in?
[Urban (city)] [Suburban] [Rural]

37. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
[Less than high school degree] [High school degree or equivalent] [Some college but no degree] [Associates degree] [Bachelors degree] [Graduate degree]

ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR *DAILY KOS*

1. How long have you been a registered user of Daily Kos?
[Less than one month] [Between 1-6 months] [Between 6 months and 1 year] [Between 1-2 years] [Longer than 2 years]

2. Do you consider yourself an active user? (active being defined as someone who has registered with the site and does things like comment on articles and participate in online discussions)
[Yes, very active] [Yes, moderately active] [No]

3. Daily Kos is noted for having a robust online community. Do you consider yourself part of this community?
[Yes, very much so] [Yes, to some degree] [No, not really] [No, not at all]

4. Daily Kos enables users to write their own blogs, called diaries. Do you write diary entries using this blogging platform?
[Yes] [No]

5. If yes, how often would you say you write diary posts?
[Usually daily] [A few times per week] [Once a week or so] [Once a month or so] [Rarely or sporadically]

6. If yes, have you ever had one of your entries promoted to the main page, such as those featured in the "recommended" sidebar?
[Yes, often] [Yes, a few times] [Once or twice] [No]

7. If you write diaries, what are your thoughts on the ability to write and share yoru diary entries as part of a community on Daily Kos?.
[This is an open ended question. Feel free to write as much as you'd like]

8. Have you ever had a diary post gain attention beyond Daily Kos? If so, please explain.
[open ended question]

9. Please choose that which best represents how you feel about the following statements
[Strongly Agree] [Agree] [Neutral] [Disagree] [Strongly Disagree]

    a. I feel that being part of Daily Kois allows me to interact with others who share similar interests and values
    b. I feel like part of a community at Daily Kos
    c. I look forward to coming online to discuss the day's news with others on Daily Kos
    d. I discuss politics and current affairs more often in online forums like Daily Kos than offline, such as at work or with friends/family
    e. I feel better informed about the world because of my time spent on Daily Kos
    f. I prefer to discuss news and politics with like-minded people on Daily Kos instead of more general websites
    g. I consider myself friends with other users on Daily Kos
    h. I feel like part of the collaborative effort of Daily Kos

10. Do you consider yourself politically active?
[Yes, very active] [Yes, moderately active] [No, not really]

11. How effective do you think the Daily Kos community is, collectively, at taking part in political actions?
[open ended]

12. Why do you like using and/or being part of Daily Kos, when there are so many political websites and online political communities on the web?
[open ended]

13. How would you describe the influence of Daily Kos in the realm of U.S. politics?
[open ended]

14. Do you have a disability, medical condition, or other condition that makes it difficult to take part in "traditional" political activism (such as attending town hall meetings, going to rallies, etc.)? If yes, does being part of a site like Daily Kos help overcome barriers to traditional political participation?
[open ended]

15. In an average week, how often do you go onto Daily Kos?
[Daily; many times throughout the day] [Daily; at least once a day] [Every other day or so] [Once or twice a week] [Once a week or less] [Only when there is a major news story or event]

16. When you do go onto Daily Kos, how much time would you say you spend on an average visit?
[15 minutes or less] [Between 15-30 minutes] [30 minutes to 1 hour] [Between 1-2 hours] [Between 3-4 hours] [More than 4 hours]

17. On an average day, how much time do you spend online?
[30 minutes or less] [About an hour] [About two hours] [Between 3-5 hours] [Between 5-10 hours] [I'm online pretty much all day, in and out]

18. Are you an active member of other, similar web-based news sites, political sites, or similar discussion forums?
[Yes, many others] []Yes, but just 1 or 2 others] [No, I'm mainly just active on Daily Kos]

19. If yes, please list the political sites that you are active on:
[open question]

20. What would you say best reflects your consumption of news?
[I consume news almost entirely online] [The majority of my news consumption is online] [I still get most of my news from print, radio, or TV]

21. Please list your major sources of news:
[open question]

22. What would you say best describes the types of news sources you regularly access?
[Mostly mainstream news sources (like CNN, BBC, New York Times, etc.)] [Mostly alternative or non-mainstream sources (blogs, independent websites, ratio or TV shows like DemocracyNow!] [About an equal mix of mainstream and non-mainstream sources]

23. How would you, in general, describe your political beliefs?
[Liberal/Progressive (or left-leaning)] [Very Liberal/Progressive (or far left)] [Conservative (or right-leaning)] [Very Conservative (or far right)] [Moderate/Centrist] [Libertarian] [Socialist/Social Democrat] [Other]

24. What country do you live in?
[open question]

25. If in the U.S., in what state or U.S. territory do you live?
[open question]

26. Which category below includes your age?
[17 or younger] [18-20] [21-29] [30-39] [40-49] [50-59] [60 or older]

27. What is your gender?
[Male] [Female] [Other] [Prefer not to answer]

28. Are you retired?
[Yes] [Semi-retired] [No]

29. Approximately how much total combined income did all members of your household earn in 2010?
[Less than $20,000] [$20,000 to $34,999] [$35,000 to $49,999] [$50,000 to $74,999] [$75,000 to $99,999] [$100,000 to $149,999] [$150,000 or more]

30. What type of place would you say you live in?
[Urban (city)] [Suburban] [Rural]

31. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
[Less than high school degree] [High school degree or equivalent] [Some college but no degree] [Associates degree] [Bachelors degree] [Graduate degree]

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