

COMMUNITY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE:
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF TEXTUAL COMMUNITY

THESIS

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by

Kristina Barnett, B.A.

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*For my husband,
who keeps me on my toes.*

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ABSTRACT

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SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: BARBARA TREPAGNIER

Some worry that people's connection to each other is declining in contemporary society. I join the chorus of theorists who object to this notion and argue that people's connections are changing instead of disappearing. In this thesis, I qualitatively investigate one new mode of human connection: blogging. Based on 34 online interviews, I describe the experience of blogging from the perspective of bloggers. I find that although the blogosphere may appear to be just another new type of broadcast medium through which people seek fleeting

moments of micro-celebrity, blogs are interactive, and bloggers are community builders. Many are more focused on forming and maintaining rich online relationships than gaining fame. I show how bloggers experience many of the same things that people in offline communities experience. Then again, I also show that community in the blogosphere is deeply affected by the differences between face-to-face interaction and asynchronous, text-based Internet interactions.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, we reached a tipping point at which more people in the world lived in cities than not (British Broadcasting Company 2006). Robert Putnam famously argues in *Bowling Alone* (2000) that community is in decline, despite people being packed physically closer together. *Bowling Alone* was written just before the Internet became what it is today, though Putnam speculated that it might counteract some of the negative effects of people's increased fascination with passive entertainment such as television. In the years since Putnam's book, people's online activity has taken on a distinctly social characteristic with the advent of social networking websites, technological advancements that allow people to share rich content easily, and the proliferation of online journaling, popularly called blogging. While any one of these topics is worthy of sociological research, the focus of the present paper is blogging, because it is a burgeoning social phenomenon with potentially far-reaching consequences for areas as diverse as a modern definition of community, formal versus informal knowledge production, emotional fulfillment, and even some people's identity development. In fact, the data in this research run counter to Putnam's claim. Community is not disappearing. It has simply moved.

Before delving too deeply into the implications of blogging, it is important to first define blogging, and then to step back and have a look at its context in the larger social world. Briefly, the term blog is a contraction of the words web and log, a term that is widely thought to have been coined by an Internet professional named Peter Merholtz. Blogging became popular when various companies began offering free, easy to use software online in the late 1990s (Lenhart 2005). The software allows users to keep some static content, but update the main part of their websites as often as they like and with whatever information they want (Blood 2002). Once published by the blogging software, the information becomes publicly available and available for indexing by search engines. Most blogging software features a site-specific search engine and archiving capabilities that allow visitors to review past information with ease.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project released a report with some summarizing statistics on bloggers. The report estimates that there are approximately 12 million bloggers, which is eight percent of all Internet users (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006). Though this is not a very large number, we will soon see how this group represents a burgeoning form of community in contemporary society.

Setting aside the growth of blogging for a moment, it is worth considering the social context of the phenomenon as well. As the Internet gained popularity in the early 1990s, some characterized it as having an equalizing effect because the source of information online is obscure (see Polly 1992 or Engelman 1996 for

example). The idea is that one cannot react to a message based on race or class of the messenger if one cannot tell what that person's race or class is. Because of this, some have argued that the Internet contributes to a historical trend of liberalization in human society. While many subsequent authors have correctly excoriated utopian views of Internet culture (see for example Ebo 1998; Wolf 1998; Williams, Carr, and Clifton 2006), there are elements of online life that do legitimately reflect movement toward diversity, and blogging is such an element.

The Pew report shows that bloggers are more racially diverse than the larger population of Internet users, and more evenly split between the sexes (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006). Moreover, the population of bloggers is relatively large and growing rapidly. Technorati (2008), the Internet's leading search engine devoted entirely to blogs, claims to be indexing 112,800,000 blogs as of February 2008. This figure has grown rapidly since Technorati began counting blogs in 2002¹. Further, it is worth noting a discrepancy between these data and data mentioned earlier from the Pew Center: Technorati claims there are over 112 million blogs, but the Pew data says there are only 12 million bloggers. Though it is not possible to uncover the exact cause for such a large difference between the number of blogs indexed by Technorati and the actual number of bloggers, one might speculate on a few possibilities. First, Technorati

¹ Periodically David Sifry, the CEO of Technorati, releases data related to the blogs the company tracks under the name "State of the Blogosphere". In April 2007, he changed this name to "State of the Live Web" presumably to account for newly varying types of content. This information can be accessed at (<http://www.sifry.com/stateoftheliveweb>).

has no way of distinguishing between active and inactive blogs, or blogs that have human authors instead of software link-generators that publish content in an automated fashion. A second factor is that one individual can keep any number of blogs, or start and abandon any number of blogs. Thus we can see that although Technorati's data do indicate a trend of public interest in blogging, they do not indicate anything more exact than that. Also, it is clear that bloggers are a more varied group than those who have published publicly available information in the past.

Given that bloggers are a diverse and growing population, some specific questions about blogging are now relevant for social research. The Pew report mentioned above provides a sense of the demographic characteristics of bloggers and quantitative characteristics of the blogging population, but it does not explain why people blog, what they blog about, and what their motivations are from their own perspectives. That is the aim of the present project. I do so by qualitatively examining a small population of bloggers in order to capture details about the experience and process of blogging. Using data from in-depth interviews, I provide a deeper understanding of bloggers' experience and motivations along with a window into a phenomenon that may be difficult to understand for casual observers.

In the years since the Internet has become a part of many American's day-to-day lives, it has evolved from being something like a broadcast medium to being a location as well as a medium. To view it solely as an electronic publishing

medium is to take a narrow, limited view. Although it is not a physical place, it is a site at which people gather. In fact, the social activities online are so diverse that it is unwise to try to analyze all of it at once. By limiting the scope of this project to blogging, I hope to capture the essence of social activity online without attempting to do too much. Indeed, I have found that blogging captures a number of the dimensions of what hipster Internet entrepreneurs call "the social web."

An important note about the literature I present in this paper is that while I reference several disciplines, my overarching viewpoint is sociological. For example, though I may reference a communications theory such as agenda setting, the more general framework is rooted in the synthesis of sociological theories.

Furthermore, blogging and other Internet phenomena change more quickly than other topics of interest to social researchers. Nevertheless, scholars from many disciplines have published papers on the subject in a short span of time. One can find papers on blogging in journals on communications, computer science, political science, information systems, psychology, and sociology. Further, a number of multidisciplinary programs aimed at exploring digital culture have cropped up in prestigious universities such as Harvard University and Northwestern. Also, Pew, a well-known research institution, has a project dedicated entirely to researching the Internet. Thus, there is no shortage of scholarship available on blogging and the Internet in general. This large chorus of voices coupled with the rapidity of changes in technology and norms online make

it difficult to distill the existing knowledge base into a coherent, timely review. Nevertheless, that is my aim, and I do so with the caveat that some of the information herein may become obsolete quickly.

I have a personal interest in blogging since I am a blogger. I believe that all research comes from a particular perspective, whether it is explicitly noted in the text or not. Some argue for an objective voice, while others claim that one cannot escape one's own perspectives and do well to state it up front (Marshall and Rossman 1999). Clearly, I fall into the latter group. Thus, these writings are informed not only by the data I collected but also by my personal experience, and my analyses are rooted in my perspective as a blogger. On the other hand, my mentioning my own blogging is not meant to indicate that I have thrown objectivity out the window. Instead I encourage readers to note that while I make every effort to maintain objectivity, I do not believe anyone can be purely objective, and I am quite sure my blogging experience affects the questions I choose to ask and the way I interpret the answers. However, I make every effort to provide enough information throughout for critical readers to make their own judgments.

In the next chapter, I review the methodology of the present research including the procedure, participants and analytical framework that I use to analyze the data in later chapters. Following that, I introduce the main finding of this research: that blogging is a community activity. In the subsequent sections, I

review the blogosphere² as a landscape for community, and examine the activities that bloggers engage in there: knowledge production, identity performance, and emotional connections. I draw from diverse theoretical sources to analyze each theme, so the literature reviews appear along with the theme analyses in each section. In the final chapter, I discuss and draw conclusions about the findings.

² It is difficult to sort out the origin of this term. Several people used it around the same time, more or less independently of each other. Those people include Brad L. Graham, an early blogger who may have coined the term on his blog in 1999 (http://www.bradlands.com/weblog/comments/september_10_1999/) and William Thomas Quick, a science fiction writer and well-known conservative blogger whose use of the term on his blog probably what led to its becoming common (http://www.iw3p.com/DailyPundit/2001_12_30_dailypundit_archive.php#8315120).

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

I use qualitative methods in this research because they allow researchers to gain a deep and rich understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the people involved (Esterberg 2002). Since blogging is a relatively new social phenomenon, there is a limited amount of specific sociological analysis of it.

There is quantitative data on bloggers that offer a basic description of bloggers and blogging, but the survey methods that produce such data are inherently limited in their capacities to inquire reflexively after individual bloggers' takes on why and how they do what they do.

This research was conducted online. I gathered a sample of 34 participants, and conducted in-depth interviews using an e-interview technique that involved conducting interviews through email (Bampton and Cowton 2002). I chose in-depth interviews in order to explore blogging in detail and in the terms of people who have direct experience with it. Further, I used a semi-standardized interview style (Berg 2007). That is, I asked a set of predetermined questions using words that are familiar to the participants, but I also allowed myself to actively probe participants based on their responses (see Appendix B for the interview guide)

The set of standard questions ensured that the data would be relatively consistent while the free-form probing questions allowed me to gather more in-depth information wherever it was necessary or when unexpected topics arose (Berg 2007; Esterberg 2002). Bampton and Cowton's (2002) e-interview process entails a reflexive exchange of email as needed in order to probe participants' initial email responses of a standard set of questions. I extended this method slightly to include three phases in the standard questions I asked. I did this because I feared that asking all of the standard questions at once would be overwhelming for the participants. Instead, I divided the interview questions into three sets. Following Bampton and Cowton's advice (2002), I told participants to expect an email if I did not receive a response from any one email after five days. However, I rarely had to contact people to remind them to respond. Instead, most participants provided answers within less than a day. In fact, the three phase e-interview technique was so successful that it was almost a full time job to read each email and respond with the next round of questions and any probes about the previous responses. For several days during the time I collected data, I had over twenty email conversations active at one time.

Once each participant had answered all of the questions, I sent a follow-up email thanking them for their participation and asking for permission to ask any further questions if I needed to. I then collated and pasted their answers to a master document and reformatted the text so that it was consistent between participants. Using email to interview respondents, one has less work to do at

this phase of the research than there would be for a method that requires transcription, but others who consider this method should allow plenty of time to reformat the emails. To help stay organized, I used an email program that features tagging with keywords and conversation threading to manage the emails during the data collection process. As respondents moved through each of the three rounds of questions, I changed the tag on the email to “Round One,” “Round Two,” and “Round Three.” I also used tags to indicate whether I had collated and reformatted each email once the email was tagged with “Round Three.”

The decision to conduct the interviews online was due to a variety of considerations. First, it seemed fitting to communicate online regarding people’s online communication. Further, bloggers are comfortable with textually mediated, asynchronous interactions even more than people who regularly email—a category that comprises more and more people as the Internet becomes ubiquitous. Another important consideration is that many people use pseudonyms online, and I wanted to offer those people the ability to participate without connecting their offline identities to their online identities. Indeed, some participants never revealed their offline identities since they had email addresses for their pseudonyms. Most importantly, online communities supersede physical geography, and I had a strong desire to mirror that freedom from the barrier of distance in my sampling.

I gathered respondents using non-probabilistic techniques such as convenience, purposive and snowball sampling (Esterberg 2002). More specifically, I solicited participants by posting public requests on websites and asking bloggers and blog readers in my own online network to participate and to pass along the request. I have a relatively rich and long-standing online presence that helped me to gather a varied sample of bloggers in a surprisingly short time. After a first wave of data collection, I found that my sample was almost completely racially homogeneous. To help combat this problem, I emailed my existing participants and posted a request online asking for help finding bloggers of color. In this way, I gathered more respondents from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds.

I created a web site for this study using blogging software³. The web site contained introductory text about the study and the consent form (see Appendix A for the text of the consent form). I chose a web site over paper in order to spread information about the project more easily online, since a standard way of communicating with someone in the blogosphere is to provide a link with more information. Hence all of my solicitations for people to participate were short and contained a link that people could click if they were interested.

Using a web site also provided potential participants with an added degree of anonymity. Although the data collection was done through email, I gained people's consent using the web site. In order to participate, potential participants

³ The web site is still online at (<http://researchblogs.wordpress.com>).

had to read through the consent form text and then click a link where they were given further instructions. The consent form informed them that their continued involvement implied consent. This allowed me to forgo requiring signatures, which was another measure to allow people to participate with their pseudonyms only.

Participants

Twenty-one of the 34 respondents were female, 12 were male, and one identified as “gender queer.” The average age was 32, with a range of 23 years (from 22 to 64), and a median age of 32. I asked about “race/ethnicity” as an open-ended question, so the categories that emerged were generated by the respondents. Twenty-one percent of the people in the sample identified themselves as nonwhite, including: Australian-born Chinese, Korean American, Latinó, Asian American, African American. The remaining 79 percent identified as white, though 19 percent of those people mentioned being Jewish, European, Eastern European, or Native American in addition to being white. This is less racially diverse than the population of bloggers who are 60 percent white, 11 percent African American, 19 percent English-speaking Hispanic and ten percent another race or ethnicity (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006).

The income range of my respondents was from \$300,000 to \$10,000 with an average of approximately \$50,000. Fifty eight percent of these bloggers write under a pseudonym or their first names without their full last names. Fifty eight percent of the 34 bloggers in my study are affiliated with academia either as

graduate students, professors, lecturers, or researchers in a variety of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and English literature.

There are a few additional comparisons worth noting in the sample. Twenty one of the 34 respondents were female. Also, sixty five percent of the women use a pseudonym compared to 40 percent of the men. The average age of the men in the sample is somewhat older than women (36 compared to 31). However, the average income was approximately equal between the sexes with both near \$50,000.

Analytical Framework

I use a broad range of theoretical perspectives in this research. My research question is somewhat open-ended: given that bloggers are a new population of knowledge producers, who are they and why do they blog? Most prominently, I find that the bloggers in the present study are everyday people participating in a new form of community through their blogs. Hence, I use community theorists to define and describe community in the blogosphere.

Within their communities, bloggers produce knowledge. I tap into the sociology of knowledge and relevant communications theories to analyze this aspect of bloggers' behavior. Bloggers also perform their identities uniquely through their blogs. For this part of the analysis, I use identity theory and the dramaturgical perspective. Finally, bloggers find emotional support in their blogging communities, which falls under the purview of the sociology of emotion

CHAPTER III

COMMUNITY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

On the surface, blogging may seem like an effort on the part of the blogger to produce knowledge since their texts are publicly available. However, that is not the only drive behind blogging. It is true that blog posts are broadcasts, but what makes blogging different from traditional knowledge production efforts is its two-way nature. Because of this interactive quality, bloggers also engage in a form of community. It is from within these sometimes insular communities that bloggers produce knowledge and engage in other activities that might traditionally be associated with offline communities.

About half of the participants in this project mentioned that they were involved in one or more specific communities as a direct result of their blogs. Some have friends in the blogosphere with whom their only contact is online. Others mentioned meeting blog-based friends face-to-face as well. A number of people talked about these relationships as being very important to them, and in some cases people mentioned that the relationships were “more real” or authentic than those they had with people they have regular face-to-face contact. In other cases, people mentioned using their blogs to tighten up loose ties with people who are physically far away or with whom they had lost touch for other reasons.

The issue of community online is somewhat contested among sociologists and other scholars that are concerned with online communication. Researchers and theorists document instances of online community but simultaneously wonder if community is truly possible without face-to-face, real-time interaction. Thus, it is notable that the participants in the present study experience community through their blogs.

In the following sections, I examine the idea that blogging is a form of community and review the characteristics of the blogosphere as a location for community activities. Further, I explore some of the activities of people in blog-based communities. I show that in the blogosphere, knowledge production is more a community activity than in other forums. I also look at bloggers' identity performances and emotional connections staged in the context of the blogosphere.

Strong Connections In Cyberspace

In Robert Putnam's (2000) most famous work, *Bowling Alone*, he argues that "social capital" (Bourdieu 1989:17), a term used to describe people's social networks or interactions, has declined in recent years. Putnam (2000) offers empirical evidence for this theory by showing that participation in civic groups has declined substantially since the 1950s, and he further argues that an important reason for this decline in both social capital and civic engagement is that people spend more time engaged in individualistic leisure activities such as television watching.

Since *Bowling Alone* was published eight years ago, there have already been a number of key changes to the Internet and the way that people use it that directly affect its influence on social capital. Putnam (2000) acknowledged this potential in *Bowling Alone*, but cautions against making strong claims about the Internet's effect on community too early in its development as a social phenomenon. However, he does offer some preliminary statements on the subject. Specifically, he lays out four potential issues for community online. First he points out that access to the Internet is hierarchical. That is, it is not universally available, even though it may seem so since the same marginalized populations who cannot access the Internet are also not commonly represented in the mainstream media. Second, Putnam points out that the Internet is a text-based medium that cannot convey nonverbal cues and is thus inherently limited for the purpose of human interaction. Third, he argues that there is a danger of Internet users tending to flock together with those who share their interests and avoid dissenting views. Finally, Putnam worries that the Internet has the potential to become another passive medium like the television.

Some of Putnam's concerns about digital community replacing face-to-face community are well founded. For instance, research has consistently shown a class-based gap in access to the Internet. Since the early 1990s, a series of government reports put forth by the National Telecommunications Information Administration has documented what has come to be known as the digital divide (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 1995). In short, the

digital divide is a broad term that describes systematic differences in access to the Internet between people of different education levels, races, genders, ages, and incomes. While the Internet is no longer solely or even largely the purview of rich, white elites, it remains inaccessible to the poorest and least educated segments of the population (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 2000).

Another concern that Putnam raises is that people online will avoid dissenting views. In their paper about the linking behaviors of liberal and conservative political bloggers during the 2004 presidential campaign, Adamic and Glance (2005) explore this issue. Their major finding is that liberal bloggers link to each other less frequently and in less dense patterns than conservative bloggers. They argue that it is important to take a meta-view of the political blogosphere because of popular and scholarly claims like Putnam's that the Internet in general and the blogosphere specifically represent a "cyberbalkanization" (p. 37) wherein media consumers can easily pick and choose only information that they agree with. In fact, their findings are consistent with the cyberbalkanization theory in that both liberal and conservative bloggers tend to keep to themselves.

Cyberbalkanization is similar to the well-known and more general theory from communications research called the "uses and gratifications" (U&G) approach (Rosengren 1974:40). The idea behind U&G is that people ignore things in media that are not in line with their existing beliefs or that are not visually appealing to them, and they pay attention to things that support their ideas or

feelings on a subject or are otherwise in line with their personal taste. Further, proponents of this theory argue that people feel gratified if the media they consume confirms beliefs and ideas they already hold.

Despite these negative aspects of Internet life, there are numerous communities online from which people glean some of the same benefits that they get from traditional communities. In fact, Putnam himself provides an example of one in a book he published several years after *Bowling Alone* with Lewis Feldstein (2003). In *Better Together*, the two authors explore a number of cases where modern efforts at community succeed in spite of the decline in social capital as described in Putnam's earlier work. One such case is that of Craig's List, which is an online community that began as a location-specific Internet version of the classified ads in a newspaper. Over time, Craig's List launched new cities and its body of users grew quite large, until now it is one of the most long-standing and well-trafficked websites on the Internet. Putnam and Feldstein examined it as an instance of successful online community in that it offers a sense of locality, the members of the community participate in the definition of its norms, and there is a purpose to the site beyond just that of being together. As I show below, small communities sometimes spring up around blogs that also carry some or all of these characteristics.

For example, one of the participants in this study, Jake, brought up the sense of community he has experienced through blogging:

The communities that can form around weblogs can create relationships that last for years and result in close offline friendships. In fact, I met my wife because of one of my websites -- she was a reader for many years before we began to know each other more personally. I can also think of several examples of people who began dating or became good friends just from being regular commenters on my weblog. That kind of community-building function of weblogs is something I never expected when I started blogging, but which has become a fascinating and gratifying by-product of this activity. I see blogs creating this kind of community by offering ways for visitors, not just to give feedback to the author(s), but also to converse with each other.

Here Jake cites examples of how his experience of community through blogging has spilled over into the rest of his life. He feels more connected when interacting with other bloggers or blog readers than he would if he were broadcasting his ideas. This lends support to the idea that blog-based communities fulfill Putnam's requirement that community members help create norms. By interacting with his readers instead of broadcasting to them, Jake and the people he interacts with generate new norms and reinforce existing ones.

A relevant theorist is Tamotsu Shibutani. Shibutani's (1955) work on reference groups lends theoretical support to the idea that people invent and

reinforce norms from within social groups. At the time of his writing, the theoretical stance on reference groups in sociology was that people used them to compare themselves in their efforts toward selfhood. Shibutani argues that this view was limited, and that the idea of reference groups should be broadened to mean something akin to culture as it was used by anthropologists at the time. He argues that the definition of culture involves a shared perspective that is continually created and reaffirmed by communication among social actors, and that Mead's role-taking of the generalized other was simply another way of saying that one carries with them the perspective of a given culture. Thus, Shibutani combines culture and perspective into one unifying concept of reference groups.

Having established this new understanding of reference groups, Shibutani explores the implications, some of which can be applied to blogging communities. He argues that with mass communication, culture can be transported over great geographical distances allowing people in wide areas to share the same culture and, thus, the same reference groups. On the flip side of this, however, he points out that the effect of the reference group on people is not limited to mass culture since various subcultures crop up and generate their own discrete perspectival frameworks through which members view the world.

Shibutani's work was done well before people began using the Internet as a social context. Now that Internet use, and especially blogging, is widespread, the effect Shibutani outlined over 50 years ago is both more intense and more subtle.

It is intense in that the Internet removes the constraints of time and physical location, thus allowing subcultures to proliferate where they may not have in the past. But the effects of reference groups can also be quite subtle to people who socialize online, because their interactions are sometimes so fleeting that they may not be aware of their own weak ties to numerous subcultures. Whether they are aware or not, though, people's involvement with various online contexts necessarily informs their various perspectives as they learn the rules of engagement within that particular microcosm. The communities that surround bloggers are a unique example of this process of generating subtle new frameworks from which actors—bloggers in this case—interpret and generate the social world.

To explore this idea, consider a comparison between bloggers and journalists, where journalists represent a group of people who produce publicly available texts. Journalists have several nested knowledge contexts. The obvious overarching one is the society in which they live and publish. They also have the knowledge context of their publications, which is likely to have a set of explicit and implicit parameters. Take the New York Times, for example. It is one of the most predominant publications in the United States, and though its authors are expected to maintain a certain level of journalistic objectivity, many people view it as a liberal publication. Articles in the New York Times are expected to be relevant for a large body of people—New Yorkers, surely, but also Americans in general—and some might even say any cosmopolitan citizen of the world.

On the other hand, bloggers might as well be citizens of nowhere, or everywhere. The rules of the physical world do not necessarily apply to them, because so many blogs are not location-based, rooted in any particular ideology, or constrained by any professional standards of accuracy or ethics. Instead, bloggers are citizens of whatever context they create, and they generate rules for that “place” that everyone follows the same way people follow social norms in the physical world. This may not happen the moment someone creates a blog and starts typing, but people who have been blogging for years (or even months) tend to become members of one or more communities, and that membership influences what they write just as anyone’s knowledge context would. In light of this, it is interesting to note that the texts bloggers produce that are influenced by these non-obvious online social contexts are available to the world through search engines just like any article in the New York Times online, but without the relatively well-known knowledge contexts of journalists. In this sense, bloggers who publish texts from such varied sub-cultural perspectives represent a powerful diversification of publicly available information.

Many bloggers do not seem to think about blogging at this level, though. Instead, those in the present research tend to focus on sharing information and participating in various communities. Interestingly, while many said they value the interactions and sense of belonging they experience through blogging, some of the same people expressed a desire to control access to their blogging communities on some level. For example one respondent, Chloe, a 28 year old

adjunct lecturer in English; spoke explicitly about shaping the community around her blog:

I started trying to shape my commentariat a bit, responding encouragingly to commenters I liked who had thoughtful, intelligent things to say, and discouraging or just deleting comments that were unhelpful, off-topic, sexist, stupid, drive-by stuff. Meanwhile, I got somewhat involved with the [large, well-read blog] community, through which I started meeting a lot of wonderful bloggers IRL, some of whom are now among my closest friends. I also told many of my friends from other areas of my life about my blog, so, in the end, I have a space where I'm communicating with a lot of people who know and care about me, and whose opinions I deeply value. It is a great forum for all of us to talk openly and thoughtfully about issues that matter most to us. Every time I think about quitting the blog, I remember the community I've gotten from it---not only those I've met IRL, but also people all over the world.

Chloe used a number of terms in this passage that may be unfamiliar to people who do not blog. Beyond her explicit meaning, which I will address in a moment, the very fact that her words are so riddled with insider language is testimony to her involvement in one or more communities associated with blogging. Chloe not only describes the community she takes part in through her blog, but also

simultaneously reinforces its norms by using these terms. For the sake of clarity, not to mention a more in-depth understanding of the blogosphere, it is worth defining the terms she used.

“Commentariat” was originally used by the traditional media to describe pundits in the United States, but has been co-opted by certain blogging communities and used to describe the people who regularly comment on a blog. Every blog can have a commentariat, though some are more active and well-defined than others. Various people might be part of the commentariat for any number of blogs. Not all bloggers use this term; based on my personal experience, it is more common among intellectual bloggers and their readers.

“Drive-by” is a term commonly used among bloggers to describe comments, usually inflammatory ones, made by people who are not part of the commentariat for a given site. There is a common scenario that leads to drive-by comments: someone Googles a term, discovers a blog post associated with that term, has an emotional reaction to the post, and leaves a comment. Internet users do this quite often, even if they have never been to that blog before, will never come back to see responses, and do not know the blogger who wrote the original post or any of the other commenters. Most bloggers and their readers do not like drive-by comments as evidenced by Chloe lumping drive-by comments in with “unhelpful, off-topic, sexist, stupid” comments. Lastly, “IRL” is an acronym for “in real life,” but is used in many contexts online interchangeably with “face-to-face.”

Using all of these community-specific terms, Chloe talked about “shaping” the community of her blog by encouraging certain behaviors and ignoring others. In this way, she and her commenters participate in the process of generating norms and enforcing them. And by doing that, they are also shaping their own context and the perspective from which their commentaries come. All of this is invisible to “drive-by” readers who surf in from a search engine result or some other random linkage and read the content out of its knowledge context.

By now it is clear that comments are an important part of community in the blogosphere. Without them, blogging is a broadcast medium. In fact, some bloggers believe that blogs without comments do not fit the definition of blogs at all. The excerpt from Chloe above illustrates the importance of comments in blogging communities, as does this one from Mia, a 42 year old attorney:

I will usually comment on someone's blog if they intrigue me. It seems to be blogger etiquette (at least on we non-superstars) to visit your commenter's sites and return comments.

What Mia calls “blogger etiquette” might also be called a loose social norm among bloggers. Mia is exhibiting a way that her blogger reference group influences her, as Shibutani might say. Her commenting behaviors are driven by what she perceives to be the cultural norm of a group that she counts herself a part of. By commenting, she reinforces the norm.

Like Putnam, Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase and Chen (2002) are concerned with social capital and how online communities affect it. They examine the effect

of rising Internet use on social capital and found that it neither hinders nor helps social capital but rather enhances the definition of the term. That is, the Internet may remove people from one type of social capital, but it also creates a new type of social capital and engages people in this new type. Wellman et al. use the term "networked individualism" (p. 11) to describe this effect. That is, individuals use information communication technologies (ICTs) such as computers and cell phones as supplements to existent methods of communication. In this model, they argue, social groups are more diffuse and populated with networked individuals who are simultaneously participating in many other groups.

In a subsequent project, Wellman and Hogan (2005) examine how this rise in networked individualism affects a number of parameters in people's lives. They found that ICTs have become integrated into the at-home social world and facilitate ties with people who are physically close-by as well as communication with close ties that are physically far away. Further, they conclude that the Internet does not cause a decrease in close social ties but rather facilitates delivery of support between networked individuals.

I found support for this idea in the present data. For example, Justin, a sociology graduate student and research assistant, talks about using his blog as a professional networking tool:

I started my academic blog to have a place to put longer academic thoughts where my long distance friends didn't have to skip over them, and where other soc bloggers could see them

and start associating something with my name, as I was already making comments on the major soc blogs.

In this excerpt, Justin touches upon several of the issues I have mentioned so far. First, he talks about other “soc bloggers” (soc is short for sociology) seeing his blog posts and comments and “associating something” with his name, which would benefit his career. In face-to-face networking of this same sort, academics are limited to their day-to-day physical contexts and whichever national or international conferences they attend. On the other hand, blogging allows academics to network with other academics without any geographic constraints, thus facilitating social interaction and participation. Justin also mentions making comments on “the major soc blogs,” referring to some well-read blogs in his knowledge context. It seems from this that he started his blog only after he had already begun participating in a larger network of bloggers and blog readers associated with his discipline.

Another way that blogs may enhance social capital is by helping people do what I call tightening loose ties. About 20 percent of my respondents use blogging to keep friends or family that they do not see every day up to date on their life events. Joss, a 32 year old anthropology graduate student epitomized this effect when he said “It is just a place for me to share what's going on in my life with my close friends and family.” Others made almost identical statements.

This illustrates Wellman and Hogan’s (2005) idea that ICTs can facilitate

interactions between networked individuals like bloggers and their blogs reading friends and family.

Clearly, the evidence I present here is against others' ideas about declining community and in support of theorists such as Wellman who believe that the Internet enhances social ties. Similarly, Spencer and Pahl (2006) argue that claims of declining community or social capital are exaggerated. Based on an extensive qualitative inquiry on the topic of friend networks, these authors argue that community is not in decline nor is social capital shrinking. Rather, they claim that social networks are complex and widely varied, and that these qualities make networks difficult to measure effectively. In fact, it is because of other researchers' difficulty in measuring friend networks or close social ties in a consistent and accurate fashion that the Spencer and Pahl chose a qualitative research design, believing it would allow them to explore their respondents' networks as they define them.

Most interesting to the current research is Spencer and Pahl's finding that physical location was not necessarily an important factor for people's close ties. Although some authors like Putnam (2000) argue that face-to-face interaction is a fundamental part of community, Spencer and Pahl (2006) hold that people have found ways around the shortcomings of mediated communication in order to maintain their social networks regardless of geography. Also, Spencer and Pahl claim that social networks, or "personal communities" (p. 2) as they call it, are so

varied that they can seem hidden from view, sometimes even for the people within the networks.

It is just these sort of location-independent, hidden ties that some of the bloggers in my research have with other bloggers and their readers.

Relationships that people have through blogs are, by nature, location-independent even though some do use the Internet to strengthen offline bonds. Further, they may also be hidden or difficult for social researchers who are not bloggers themselves to detect. Since the general rules of blog-based community are not obvious to casual observers, only people who are intimately familiar with blogs, comments, and perhaps the Internet in general would notice the relationships that exist between people in the blogosphere through comments, blogrolls, and blog posts. Even bloggers use language that casually excludes their blog relationships from other relationships, as Grace demonstrates here:

My blog doesn't get all that much traffic, in large part because it is locked [people have to log in to read her blog], and I like it that way. I'm pretty free with approving new readers who request to be added as long as I can tell they're not people I know in real life. If it is someone I know in real life, there's some anxiety associated with it, like, "Do I really want this person knowing so much about me?" Even if the person is a friend, there's a concern that they might share something personal I wrote about in my blog with another acquaintance with whom I'm not as

close. Goes back to why I'm more open on my blog than in real life.

Note her repeated use of the phrase "in real life" to describe off-blog behavior and relationships. This term came up in Chloe's comments earlier, and many respondents use this phrase to distinguish between their blogging behavior compared to how they act in face-to-face interactions, or to distinguish between people they know through their blogs and those they know face to face. Though there are many ways to interpret Grace and others' use of the IRL phrase, including the relatively non-controversial explanation that it is used interchangeably with "face to face," I read it here with at least a mildly deeper level of meaning. Specifically, respondents who use the phrase seem to simultaneously downplay their blogs relationships even as they celebrate the friendships they have through their blogs. In doing so, they acknowledge that although the relationships from their blogs are important, they are qualitatively different from their other, face-to-face relationships.

That is not to say that the relationships are not as close as face-to-face relationships or that they are of otherwise lesser quality. On the contrary, as Grace implies in the quote above, a number of the participants in this study claimed that they behave in a more authentic and less filtered way during interactions within their blogs communities than they do in other interactions. In fact, this is a theme that arose in the data of the present study. In later chapters, I explore how people use their blogs to gain the same sort of support and platform

in which to articulate their identities as they might get from any community that they are involved with.

To summarize what we have covered so far, I have shown that although any Internet community is subject to the constraints of hierarchical access to computers and the negative effects of cyberbalkanization, bloggers still experience community. In support of research by Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase and Chen (2002) and Wellman and Hogan (2005), the participants in the present study experience enhanced social capital as a result of the communities they participate in through their blogs. Bloggers invent and reinforce "local" norms by interacting with their commenters who become their reference groups and their knowledge contexts.

As bloggers and their commenters experience a sense of community in the blogosphere, it is worth considering the properties of this placeless location. I have shown that individual subcultures crop up around specific blogs, but there is also a wider set of social norms and constraints based on the properties of the Internet in general and blogs as the medium through which these communities are articulated. In the blogosphere, there are no sidewalks on which to walk to neighbors' houses or front porches to sit on while you chat. There is no community bulletin board at the local grocery store or telephone gossip network among neighbors. There are analogous features, though. In the next chapter, I step through the ways that community happens in the blogosphere despite the lack of traditional channel.

The Geography Of The Blogosphere

The Internet is clearly not a physical place, nor is “the blogosphere,” as some call it. Then again, “if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928). Thus perhaps the blogosphere is what one might call a cognitive context, much like the one that people enter when they use their cell phones in public places. In fact, there is empirical support that one’s attention is substantially diverted from one’s physical surroundings during cell phone conversations (Strayer, Drews and Johnston 2003).

Where does our attention go when we interact with people whom we cannot see? I argue that in mediated interactions, one’s awareness resides in whole or in part with that of our fellows’ in an imagined, socially constructed location. I use the word location because, although it is not a physical location, it is a shared construct with mutually agreed upon characteristics that serves a similar purpose as the physical landscape does in face-to-face interaction. Of course, as people interact and experience community within this space, their perceptions of it may differ.

In the case of a cell phone conversation, the constructed cognitive location may be fleeting and dependent upon the topic of conversation or memories that it invokes for the participants. Online, however, the textual record provides the groundwork for a more stable socially constructed place. The blogosphere offers an excellent opportunity to explore such an idea for three reasons: it is consistently archived and time stamped, it is by definition a social activity, and

yet it completely lacks face-to-face interaction. So, if you will grant for the moment that the blogosphere is a very real location for some bloggers and blog readers, let us explore some of the characteristics of this landscape.

The similarity between blogs and broadcast mediums may lead one to mistakenly picture the blogosphere as a place that is populated by individuals standing on soap boxes with a megaphone but no audience. This is hardly the case. As we have seen, blogging is interactive; it is a two-way medium. It is through these interactions brought about by the two-way nature of blogging that many bloggers participate in blog-based communities and experience social effects from their blogging activities.

Lenhart (2005) describes this in her ethnographic look at blogging. Among many other aspects of blogging, she explores the ways that the most recent changes in blogging software technology maximize the level of interactivity between the blogger and her readership. For example, most blogging software allows comments from the public on each blog post. Further, Lenhart details the use of "trackbacks" or "pings" (p. 16), which are automated links to external websites (usually other blogs). Trackbacks occur when other bloggers link to a blog post, and the blogging software of the original blogger lists a link to the referring blog beneath the post in question. Finally, Lenhart discusses unidirectional connections in blogs such as links to outside material within posts and lists of permanent links to other blogs, called a "blogroll" (p. 16).

I will come back to blogrolls and how they affect the blogosphere in a moment, but first I want to elevate the importance of comments. Comments make blogging an interactive activity more than any other element of the blogosphere. On most blogs, anyone can comment, although some blogs require that people create an account and log in to whatever blogging software they use. Requiring that people log in to an account deters people from outside the immediate community from surfing in and making off-topic comments, but it does not prevent it. Thus, some bloggers moderate their comments and post rules or guidelines about what is appropriate on their blogs. Other bloggers "turn off" comments entirely. That is, they disallow visitors from commenting. Although there are certainly blogs without comments on the Internet, they are not the most common type of blog.

Importantly, most blogging software includes a space for the commenter's website address in the comment form. By providing this information, commenters not only make a statement about the material at hand but also provide an identity display. People who leave comments without links to their own sites fail to provide information about their identity to the author of the post and other readers. It is akin, in face-to-face interaction, to someone walking up to an ongoing conversation at a party and saying something based on a tidbit they overheard and then walking away without introducing themselves or waiting for a reply. Interestingly, despite the Internet's reputation as being full of people writing non-sequiturs, it is my experience that it does not happen all that often in the

blogosphere, perhaps for the same reasons that it does not happen all that often at parties.

So, using posts and perhaps most importantly comments, bloggers and blog readers interactively build the norms for their contexts, thus also building each of their corner of this socially constructed online location otherwise known as the blogosphere. These features of the blogosphere are analogous to offline community meetings, newsletters, conversations, telephone calls and the like.

Hence, although there are some differences in method, communication is essentially the same as it is in communities or subcultures that form offline. And, just as in more traditional social contexts, some contexts in the blogosphere are more structured and better established than others. That is, some blogs have more consistent commenters and more rigid norms than others.

By comparing the communicative features of the blogosphere with their offline counterparts, we can conclude that, in the most basic sense, the characteristics of the blogosphere are not terribly different from other social contexts.

Subcultures form within which people create and reinforce norms through social interaction. However, there are a few ways that it is radically different as well. For example, there is no face-to-face interaction. Plus, most interactions are asynchronous, and there is a searchable textual archive of everything that happens. It is this textually archived aspect of blogs that I would like to emphasize next, because it has far-reaching implications for people's experience of community in the blogosphere.

As you might imagine, the archive of social interactions within the blogosphere has grown quickly and become, like any textual archive, meaningless without an interpretive framework. In this case, the tools that people use to make sense of an ever-proliferating body of text in the blogosphere (and everywhere online) are keywords and search engines. Even with these tools, it is sometimes difficult to find information online.

Hindman, Tsioutsoulis and Johnson (2003) argue that most web surfers only have access to a small fraction of the websites online. The authors charted links between thousands of sites on commonly discussed political topics and found that the links were distributed in the shape of the power law, which is a heavily skewed mathematical distribution. The significance of links being distributed this way is that a tiny fraction of the sites have the majority of links, while the majority of sites have a small fraction of the links. Further, those sites at the highest point of the distribution are also the most visited. Hindman et al. argue that this linking effect serves a vetting function much like the peer review process in academic publishing. People link the most to sites or articles that are particularly good, and thus these pages float to the top of search engine results, and more people visit them. Hindman et al. call this effect "googlearchy" (p. 6), which is a mixture of the word hierarchy and the word google, a reference to the popular search engine of the same name.

The idea of googlearchy has important implications for people's ability to retrieve information online, and so it deserves further exploration. Anecdotal

descriptions of the Internet tend to paint a picture of some sort of Wild West of information. Anyone can post anything on the Internet, particularly on blogs, so the argument goes that the Internet is full of unregulated kooks who get attention simply because they are there. However, googlearchy means that even though there are plenty of kooks, they do not get very much attention. Put differently, Hindman et al. (2003) argue that people often conflate the ideas of availability and retrievability of information on the Internet. Just because the information is there does not mean that it is easily retrievable by the average web surfer. In fact, most of the information online is invisible to most Internet users.

There is another factor that contributes to what information is retrievable online. Hargittai (2008) explains it very well by using an analogy:

Imagine a classroom full of students. Each student is liked by some people and each student, in turn, likes some other students. Let us assume that Brigid is the most popular student, because most people in the class like her. There are two students who are also liked by quite a few students: Sam and Jamie both get the affection of several classmates although not as many as Brigid. While Brigid is friends with Sam, Brigid does not care much for Jamie and this is widely known since she rarely socializes with Jamie. If an outsider came into the classroom and asked a student whether she should befriend Sam or Jamie, most students would likely suggest Sam. The

reason is that although Sam and Jamie are liked by the exact same number of people, Sam is also liked by the most

appreciated student in class, Brigid. A vote of confidence from

Brigid plays an important role in the evaluation of the students in the context of a larger group.

Now, let us replace students in this story with Web pages and the sentiment of liking a person with a link going from one page to another. Thus, translating the above story to Web pages and search engine rankings, the main idea is that having many links pointing to you and especially having ones from popular, established and well-regarded sites is valuable (these aspects of a site would, again, be determined based on some of the linking features of the site). (Hargittai 2008, p.6-7).

With this analogy, Hargittai illustrates that it is not only the number of links that affects a site's search engine rank but also the value of those links. This popularity-driven ranking is further evidence for the idea that retrievability of information online is a very different thing than availability.

The implications of goooglearchy and link value for bloggers is that the more they interact with fellow bloggers and blog readers who may link to them on their own sites, the more retrievable their blogs posts are likely to become. If a particularly well-read blogger whose blog has a lot of other sites linking to it puts a link to a smaller blog on his or her blogroll, that person's blog will become

instantly elevated in search results. In this way, getting a link on someone's blogroll is like a politician getting a political endorsement, or a long-term member of a club vouching for a new person.

Further, people who interact in communities a lot but violate the norms of those communities are not likely to get links no matter how active they are. Thus, only pro-social interactions are likely to have a positive impact on how retrievable a blog is through search engines. Interestingly, bloggers interact regularly and share links even though most may only be vaguely aware of link value and the effects of googlearchy. Many of the participants in the present study, for example, talked about getting increased traffic to their blogs after making comments on more well-read blogs than their own but did not seem aware or concerned with the effect on their blogs' visibility. Henry, a 42-year-old Ph.D. student, illustrates this in the following passage:

I've drawn a number of hits whenever I post an infrequent comment on [a large, well-read blog] or on other sites, but I don't think that accounts for much of the overall traffic I get. Most of my readers are either people coming to my site as a part of some search, or long-time readers who observed me on the [large, well-read blog] blogroll, or somewhere, and put me on their feed readers. I've also attracted a few people to my site by just commenting on theirs.

As Henry implicitly does here, many respondents reasoned that they get traffic from comments because most blogging software has a place in the comment form for one's own blog address, and they include it when they comment. While this reasoning is sound, it is incomplete. Henry hints at this when he says he has attracted readers by commenting on their blogs: bloggers' commenting activity can increase their rankings in search engines because each instance is an opportunity to expose others to their blogs. The people who see the comments may link to the comment or the blog either in posts or in blogrolls. They also may start reading the commenter's blog as a result of seeing his or her comments, and then they eventually might add the commenter's blog to their blogrolls or link to a post in one of their own posts. Thus, in a number of ways, commenting can increase the retrievability of all of the information on people's blogs because of the effects of googlearchy.

Henry also draws a distinction in his comment between "hits," "traffic," and "readers." Hits and traffic are roughly synonymous but distinguishing between traffic and readers is important. Part of the reason it is difficult to measure Internet traffic on any website is because there is no way to tell why a person visits a site. Traffic monitoring software can tell how long someone spends with the page loaded on his or her computer, but it cannot tell if the person got up to visit the water cooler and left the site open. So, someone might click a link, glance at the page, and then get distracted without closing the original window. As we all might imagine, this happens a lot. What some people may not know is

that it skews web site's statistics when it does happen. This and other factors make it difficult to measure hits versus readers accurately.

Regardless of whether we can measure it well, there is an important distinction there. People who simply "hit" a website might be analogous to rubberneckerers on a highway, whereas readers are more like regular patrons in a coffee shop. Rubberneckerers glance and move on, maybe mentioning what they saw to a friend later if it was particularly notable and easily summed up. On the other hand, regular coffee shop patrons notice changes in the atmosphere and may consider themselves part of a loose community of shop denizens. Similarly, blogs may get a lot of hits (rubberneckerers), but the readers (coffee shop regulars) are the ones who are aware of the local knowledge context and who engage in community with the blogger and fellow readers.

Whether visitors are rubberneckerers or regulars, in the blogosphere they are more likely to see certain activities performed by certain types of people than others. The 2006 Pew report I mentioned earlier measures what bloggers talk about most. Personal subjects and politics are the two most common blog topics; other topics are far less common. Also, more than half of all bloggers are under thirty years of age, and bloggers are more racially diverse than the general population of Internet users. A last tidbit from the report is that although most bloggers do not consider blogging to be a form of journalism, many spend extra time fact-checking their content and linking back to sources (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006).

As in the Pew survey, I asked the participants in the present study to provide information about what they blog about, how they blog, and about their behavior as related to their blogs. The two most common topics that participants mentioned were politics or current events and cultural topics such as movies, books, and music. This is in keeping with the Pew report (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2006). In the present data, about half of the respondents mentioned writing about events, politics, and culture from a particular perspective.

For example, Claudia, a graduate student from South America, writes about her experience living in the Northeast United States from the perspective of a foreigner. Micah, another graduate student, describes himself as “an extreme reductionist,” and says that his writing is heavily influenced by his belief that everything, including all human activity, can be explained and reduced to fundamental parts. Mona is a self-described political liberal, and said that her writing is colored by her liberal perspective. Each of these people blog from a very specific perspective that influences what they say.

The next most common set of topics in the present data was personal matters, which is also consistent with the national data. Although some respondents expressly stated that they never discuss anything personal on their blogs, 36 percent reported that their blogs are partially or entirely about personal issues. Some of the people who talked about blogging personal topics did so.

occasionally. Grace, for example, said she talks about personal issues less than half the time with the other time being devoted to events, culture, and politics.

Other respondents, like Chloe, talk about discussing their personal lives on their blogs as a significant part of their social support:

I have a space where I'm communicating with a lot of people who know and care about me, and whose opinions I deeply value. It is a great forum for all of us to talk openly and thoughtfully about issues that matter most to us.

Chloe's comments epitomize a larger theme in which a number of bloggers in my study view their writing about personal matters as a vehicle for release of tension, processing of problems and catharsis. This theme has implications in two realms of analysis other than simply chronicling what people blog about: it is a powerful indicator of the sense of community that some bloggers feel, but it is also an interesting window into some people's method of processing the world around them. In fact, the emotional support that people get from their blogging communities arose as a theme in the data of this project, and I discuss it more thoroughly in a later chapter.

A final topic-related theme is that of instruction or modeling behavior. Nearly 50 percent of the respondents in this study mentioned a desire to share knowledge, contribute to knowledge on a particular topic, instruct people, model behaviors they find desirable or inspire people. This is consistent with the Pew report, in which about one third of respondents cited sharing knowledge as a

major reason for their blogging, and another one third cited motivating others to action as a major motivation.

So far, we have established that the blogosphere is a location for bloggers and blog readers in which they perform their identities, sort out their emotions, produce knowledge, and engage in community life. In this landscape, there are several conduits for communication, much like there are in the physical world. Blogosphere conduits include comments, trackbacks, links within posts, and blogroll links. The blogosphere has a running textual archive that is searchable using keywords in search engines, but some content gets lost in the ever-proliferating milieu of textual content on the Internet. Most blogs are publicly accessible, and yet they do not get bombarded by commenters from outside the community. Traffic to blogs includes readers who spend time on the blog reading and commenting and hits, which are people who glance at the content but do not engage in any community building behavior.

In the next three sections, I explore the most prominent activities that the bloggers in my study engage in. The most compelling finding of this research is the level of community that people experience through their blogging. However, there are other interesting themes as well, because the public, community-oriented atmosphere of the blogosphere seems to promote certain types of interactions among its community members. For example, many of the bloggers I interviewed talked about modeling desired characteristics for the public through blogging, or informing others on a particular topic, or describing life through a

particular lens. In short, these bloggers produce knowledge using their blogs, which is an activity that the blogosphere is uniquely qualified to support, because it is public. However, because of its community features, the knowledge that bloggers produce is different from other textual media that people use for the same purpose. I explore this theme in the next section.

Bloggers: Model Netizens

If the blogosphere is a location, then bloggers are its model citizens, or netizens as the case may be. About half of the respondents in the present study talk about hoping that their blogging will teach, inspire, or model behaviors for others. These bloggers usually have an agenda in mind. They explain that they are having a particular experience, and that they want to share their processes with anyone that might be interested in having the same experience.

Alternatively, they chronicle a particular aspect of their lives assuming that someone will eventually search the Internet for advice on that subject. Still others seem to hope their writing will influence like-minded people. Some people have blogs that are dedicated to this behavior, but for most it is just one element of their blogging.

These participants' motivations are interesting for a few reasons. The first and overarching reason is that by writing publicly available texts, bloggers produce knowledge. In doing so, they offer a nuanced example of a fundamental concept in the sociology of knowledge: Karl Mannheim's (1936) idea that all knowledge is a product of the knower's context. It is a nuanced example because in the

blogosphere, authors' community affiliations are often elaborate since it is simple to participate loosely in a large number of groups, which makes their online knowledge context complicated. Further—as we learned earlier—the more bloggers socialize online, the more likely the content of their blog is to turn up in search results and get attention from the mainstream media. In this way, highly social bloggers become part of the larger societal knowledge context. I explore each of these ideas more thoroughly below.

Some might object to calling bloggers knowledge producers, because there are no credentials required to blog. However, I argue that blog posts have a certain level of perceived credibility simply because they are published online. To understand why, consider Flanagin and Metzger's (2000) research on perceived credibility of online content. The authors argue that the Internet poses a problem for people's normal means of verifying publicly available information, which is to rely on established gatekeepers such as media professionals. The problem is that people are so accustomed to relying upon gatekeepers that they do not realize they are doing it. Thus, they continue to behave as though there is a gatekeeper when seeking information online even though there are no gatekeepers on the Internet. What this means is that people tend to perceive online content as credible simply because it is there, much like they would do with information in a newspaper. This is especially notable given that Flanagin and Metzger (2001) later found that people use the Internet to seek information

more than other media. Thus bloggers are, in effect if not truly, knowledge producers.

If bloggers are knowledge producers, then blogging is a double-layered example of Mannheim's (1936) contextualized knowledge. First, the level to which bloggers participate in online communities influences their writing. Yes, bloggers do bring their offline ideas to the computer keyboard with them, but their Internet-based communities are more likely to influence their Internet activities, especially since some people explicitly separate the two by hiding their blogs from offline friends and family.

The second way that blogging exemplifies context-driven knowledge is related to the discussion of perceived credibility above. As bloggers' writings bubble up into the public discourse through search engine results and attention from the mainstream media, their voices become a part of the larger knowledge context of society. But remember, a blog post in the absence of a contextual community might never be noticed. Only posts from blogs that have strong communities end up on mainstream media shows and web sites like CNN, as my blog has several times now. In this sense, bloggers' voices become part of Mannheim's knowledge context (1936) in the larger society.

A last interesting point about the blogosphere and knowledge contexts has to do with the rubberneckerers I mentioned earlier. Just as real rubberneckerers do not know the context of car accidents as they whiz by, people who surf onto a blog from a search engine result, for example, have no idea what the knowledge

context of the blog author is. This means that bloggers' community participation both influences their writing and their search engine rankings, but it is virtually invisible to people who are not a part of the local community—the rubbernecks.

Some of the respondents in the present study explicitly state that they aim to contribute to knowledge on a subject, and others talk about knowledge production on their blogs without characterizing it as such. Those respondents who are explicitly aware of the knowledge production aspect of their blogging provide perspective on blogging as a means of knowledge production. For example, Micah, a 25 year old researcher and graduate student illustrates this:

I feel as though ideas aren't real until they have been communicated, even if no one has been communicated to. Ideas become more concrete, more solid, more rigid, when they're written and shared. I do this because I want to contribute to knowledge. At some point in my undergraduate I felt that was one of the best things I could do for the world - contribute to collective knowledge - that could improve things on a large scale. The blog is tool to help the ideas flourish and survive. It is a way of helping me maintain that mindset and continue with different dreams and goals I have.

Micah explicitly asserts his desire to be a knowledge producer when he says he wants to “contribute to collective knowledge” in order to improve things.

It is difficult to measure the effect of bloggers. One way to view their influence is in terms of their ability as a group to drive what the mainstream media covers. Agenda setting is a communications theory which states that the issues that are covered by the media are the ones that gain public attention, whereas people ignore equally important issues that are not covered (Leighley 2004). Even though bloggers are not considered part of the formal media, various mainstream media outlets dip into the blogosphere as part of their regular programming. As I mentioned earlier, my blog unexpectedly turned up on CNN's web site. In addition, some people use various Internet-based tools to explore the blogosphere on their own. For these reasons, bloggers may have direct and indirect agenda setting powers.

To investigate this issue Daniel Drezner and Henry Farrell (2004) explore how a loose network of largely unprofessional websites might have the effect blogs seem to have on the public political discourse. They analyze a small network of blogs authored by former or presently established journalists, pundits or academics and survey media professionals. The authors argue that certain large, well-known blogs and along with other blogs written by average people are openly read by journalists in the mainstream media, and that they have a direct effect on agenda-setting and framing in some instances.

Drezner and Farrell's (2004) work is relevant to the present research in a few ways. Namely, the authors describe the deliberate process that I mention earlier in which elite journalists tap the blogosphere and use information they find there

to inform their professional work. I argue that this same linkage between nonprofessionals and traditional elites (such as journalists) also happens indirectly. Put differently, I argue that the chatter of the blogosphere is becoming an implicit part of the context of knowledge and discourse in our day. The existence of this relationship further supported by Drezner and Farrell's (2004) argument that, at least in some cases, bloggers and elites blend together online.

Henry, a graduate student, had this to say about his experience interacting with elites through his blog:

I find that blogging is sometimes a vehicle through others 'higher up' can put aside the status considerations that pervade their everyday lives and communicate with others in a manner that they might regard as more congenial to their actual personalities and styles.

He went on to offer an example:

On the basis of some back and forth of occasional commenting on each other's blog, I was invited to lunch by two faculty members who happen to be on my blogroll, and that's how I worked up the courage to ask one of them to be one of my dissertation advisers. I would not have even thought to ask him had I not been a blogger (I doubt that I would have even known who he was), because his interests are quite different from mine; but because we're both bloggers I came to appreciate

him as someone whom I thought had an inquisitive but no-BS sort of mind. Of course, the fact that he happened to be across the street from me was also a precondition for this connection.

Henry provides a good example of how blogging can sometimes bring elites, in his case a professor and student, together with people who might not otherwise have the cultural context to connect with them because of “status considerations,” as Henry puts it.

Some of the participants in the present study illustrated their own explicit or implicit attempts at agenda setting. For example, one participant named Sophie lives in her van by choice and blogs about the experience:

My blog is where I write about politics, economics, and culture from the perspective of someone outside (below) the cultural norm. I am a full-time van dweller, so my perspective is very different from that of most... I write about day-to-day logistics of living in a van and anything of interest that occurs to me - commentary on politics, advertising, economics, products, books, random thoughts, etc.... [My Blog is partially] for other people who may benefit from my writing. I would say that the main purpose is to record my thoughts and make them available for whomever they may be useful to.

As is common among my respondents, Sophie blogs from a particular perspective. In her case, it is a rarified minimalist subculture, something she

might have a difficult time connecting with others about if not for the global reach of the Internet. Writing from this perspective, she hopes to inspire or inform others who may wish to explore the path she has chosen. More interestingly, Sophie's published blog posts bring forward a topic—living minimally—that could easily be totally obscured by lack of exposure.

Another angle from which blogging may influence knowledge has to do with which problems become elevated to public attention. Maratea (2008) examined blogs from this perspective. He found that they offer individuals a new public arena in which to raise issues and argue for their recognition as social problems. Beyond this major finding, the author also offered several other arguments relevant to the present discussion. First, he points to the insight from the communications literature that the Internet offers a new, two-way form of mass media environment whereas previous media always went in only one direction. In this context, he argues, average individuals have a greater ability to influence mainstream media, particularly given that Internet communication happens very rapidly compared to traditional media communication. Maratea points out that “the Web makes it feasible for average citizens to disseminate their own commentaries on mainstream media coverage, political events, or any other issue of relevance” (p. 142).

One example of a blogger doing this is Peyton, a 28 year old financial transcription voice writer, who actively works to influence public sentiment on a particular topic that is meaningful for her:

It bothers me that in the US people who are adopting a black newborn pay half as much as those adopting a white newborn. Even in our state's foster care system, black and biracial children are designated as hard-to-place at age two (!) while white ones are placeable without extra government intervention until age 7. There's also a whole discourse about supposedly dangerous birth parents who "take their babies back" in infant adoptions, meaning they exercise their legal rights to wait until the baby is born and, in some states, they have had enough time to make an informed decision rather than place permanently with another family. Anyway, I think there's an undercurrent in a lot of talk about adoption that frames a certain set of parents as deserving and others as undeserving, which seems awfully hypocritical to me. So I talk directly about those issues and things like how race is considered in adoptive matching.

Here Peyton lays out her ideas about adoption and compares them to the mainstream view. She then points out that she writes about these differences on her blog. From this excerpt and other things she said in the rest of the interview, it is clear that these issues are important to Peyton on a personal level, but here she describes writing about them on a publicly available platform that is indexed by search engines. This suggests that she not only seeks release by writing

about something that is bothering her, but she also is motivated to change it and thinks that she may be able to help do so with her writing. After all, if it was only to vent, she could write in a personal journal. Further, given the fact that search engines index blog posts, and anyone searching on quite general terms such as “adoption” may come across her writing, she may just manage to influence people with her writing.

To conclude, I have shown here that although bloggers spend time participating in sometimes insular communities with other bloggers and blog readers, they also have a public voice. The public-facing element of blogging is an example of Mannheim’s assertion about the import of knowledge contexts, because the perspectives from which bloggers write is not always obvious to readers who are not in their communities. Further, the fact that bloggers’ writing has become a part of the public discourse on a number of topics is a way that they have also become part of the wider cultural knowledge context.

Blogging As Burlesque

As bloggers interact within their communities, they engage in the same sort of identity performances that people in other types of community might display.

However, there are key differences between the blogosphere and other types of community. In offline communities, identity displays are mostly fleeting, verbal acts or larger more memorable actions as when a friend defends you against a bully, for example. There are almost no acts of identity articulation in the offline world that are recorded, archived, and indexed in search engines as everything is

in the blogosphere. This does not stop people from articulating their identities within the blogosphere, but it affects their behavior.

Shanice, a 33 year old graduate student, puts it well: “the process of composing an entry really helps me crystallize my thinking in a way that tells the truth, but doesn’t vomit it. It is like burlesque for me.” When I asked her how it was like burlesque, she said, “burlesque reveals as it teases- never fully nude, and therefore all the more exciting. I choose what I want to reveal, giving an almost total, but never naked, prurient account of my life.”

Shanice’s comments show how blogging is, at its core, a staged performance. Although her comments hint at sexuality, her blog is not devoted to sexual matters. Instead she writes about her life, both professional and private. However, she seems to explicitly recognize that by publishing her writing on her blog, she is implicitly aware of the audience. Further, her comments bring to light the idea that bloggers’ messages are as much about what they do not say as they are about what they do say. Many bloggers in this study said they are “no different” on their blogs than they are “in real life.” However, some of the same people talked about ways that they carefully control what parts of themselves they display on their blogs.

Ralph Turner (1976) describes people’s understanding of their subjectively “true” (p. 989) selves as either stemming from an institutional perspective or an impulse-driven perspective. People who maintain an institutional perspective cultivate values such as loyalty or honesty as expressions of their “true” selves.

The more people control their displayed selves, the more authentic they feel they are being. In contrast, people who are impulse-driven maintain that the true self is something to be discovered from moment to moment based on whatever emerges in a seemingly natural way. Thus, for impulsives, hypocrisy involves falling prey to the pressures of institutional forces rather than allowing these natural impulses to drive behavior. Conversely, for those with an institutional perspective hypocrisy is allowing one's unfettered impulses to drive behavior.

Turner argues that there was a shift toward impulse-driven authenticity in the 1970s when his article was published (1976). The idea of differentiating between these two types of authenticity provides a useful and important lens through which to view blogging. For example, Turner points out that the institutional perspective favors the pursuit of perfection whereas the impulsive perspective favors performances that underscore natural human imperfections. In blogging communities, it is difficult or impossible to display a state of natural imperfection due to the lack of spontaneity in communication. People interacting in the blogosphere always have time to pause and consider their actions, and even to edit their actions after publishing them. Perhaps, then, American culture will experience a shift back to an institutional perspective again with the increase in computer-mediated communication. Many of the participants in the present study felt that they were authentic on their blogs even though they edit and control which aspects of themselves they display.

In Erving Goffman's (1959) seminal book *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*, he describes some of the key elements of people's identity performances. Two of these are relevant here. First, there is idealization, which Goffman argues actors do by hiding certain facts. Such is the case when, for example, the host of a party hastily vacuums before his guests arrive and then hides the vacuum just before they come through the door. In that case, the guests would be left to assume that the host's home is always perfectly clean, and the host will have idealized his role as a homeowner.

Second, Goffman argues that actors control impressions using mystification techniques and by maintaining expressive control. Mystification refers to the phenomenon that occurs between dominant and subordinate roles such as, for example, famous people and the public. A great deal of social distance is kept between these two roles, and this distance generates a sense of mystery and awe in the subordinate group. Maintaining expressive control refers to a more everyday version of mystification. Goffman artfully describes it as "bureaucratization of the spirit" (p. 56), by which he means that people tend to systematically control which of their natural impulses they allow to appear to others. In other words, Goffman argues that whatever comes to mind is filtered through a lens of cultural acceptability and then perhaps another lens of desired traits. For example, upon noticing that a woman has gained weight in her midsection, most people will not ask her if she is pregnant no matter how badly they want to know, because to do so would be to point out her weight gain. Since

there is a cultural stigma on weight gain in the United States, particularly on women, most people control their curiosity in such situations. Also, certain comments might be in line with what one wants others to think of them, while other comments may not be. To go back to the previous example, perhaps the person who notices the weight gain wants others to see her as a blunt person who "tells it like it is." If that were the case, she might indulge her curiosity and ask the woman if she is pregnant despite the cultural taboo on mentioning it.

Garret, a 38-year-old participant, illustrated idealization and maintaining expressive control when he told me about the identity he presents on his blog.

I guess I mainly try to present myself as highly literate / intellectual -- it is primarily a "reading" blog and I'm talking about the books I'm reading, so it follows pretty naturally that I am showing myself as a "reader". "... I am pretty anxious to have people see me in real life as intellectually accomplished.

An important element of this passage is Garret's use of the word "try." Because Garret is explicitly deciding how to behave based on an ideal that he holds, he can be said to fit in with Turner's (1976) conception of institutional authenticity. Then again, his comment might also be seen as a hybrid example of Turner's institutional authenticity and Goffman's (1959) everyday version of identity management. Since Garret's blog is geared toward one particular topic, he presents an idealized aspect of himself in a way that Goffman argues everyone does all the time.

Jake, a 39 year old online bookseller, showed a different angle of this performative element of blogging. He said that he periodically starts new blogs depending on life events such as moving to a new city, and he describes how that affects the way he presents himself on his blog:

So, for me, blogging does affect how I present myself online, in that my identity is sort of filtered through the tone/attitude (or sometimes persona) of the weblog. And since my weblog is kind of the "home" of my online identity, it affects how I present myself elsewhere on the Internet, in that I feel like I'm sort of representing my "self" as manifested by the weblog.

Jake's explicit restructuring of his presented self based on the blog context is another example of both institutional authenticity and idealization.

Jake's comment also highlights the community context of his blog. He offers the analogy of his blog being the "home" of his Internet persona. Although his analogy calls to mind a neighborhood of blog homes at first glance, a careful reading reveals that he uses the word "home" to mean a home base. This suggests that he most strongly articulates his Internet persona through his blog, and it affects the way he presents himself in other contexts online because he wants to maintain consistency with that most prominent identity.

Margaret Somers (1995) argues that along with existing sociological identity theories, a new focus on the narrative component of identity must be considered. She suggests a shift from viewing narratives as representational forms to seeing

them as ontological forms. That is, she argues that in the process of narration, actors place themselves within contexts and, in part, define their identities. This idea is of special relevance to a discussion of the identities people portray on their blogs, since blog-based interactions almost exclusively take the form of written story telling.

Lexie exemplifies this in the following passage:

I think my online identity seems a little more put together than I really am, but it is more or less just me. I don't try to be something I'm not, but I do try to show what I think are the best parts of myself and leave the bad parts behind, where hopefully I can get rid of them in real life too. I almost feel like my blog is a tool to help me become the person I want to be... In order to blog about things that I find interesting, I first have to do those things. Because I have a certain idea of what I'd like to include in my blog, it prods me into trying new things for the sake of sharing them with others. Does that make sense? Basically, I know what I want to write about (in a general way, not specifically) on my blog and it requires me to become the sort of person who is able to write about those things.

In Lexie's account, she compares her true identity with the one she portrays online. She says they are approximately the same, but the focus of her comment is on how the two identities are different. Further, she explicitly uses the act of

writing about her life as a self-improvement tool, and says that by writing about the topics that interest her, she becomes a person that does those things. Thus she demonstrates Sommer's (1995) theory that in writing about one's life, people also influence its shape.

Robert MacDougall (2005) offers a discussion of online identities within the very specific context of news blogs. News blogs are defined here as blogs written by laypeople that focus on the news or political events. In these contexts, MacDougall argues, actors experience the ultimate self-conscious experience. That is, sentiments that would normally be spoken are written and published, thus creating a lasting record. Further, MacDougall invoked Mead to explain the interactions that occur on news blogs. Specifically, he extends Mead's idea of the conversation of gestures to the asynchronous, textual communications of blogs. Also, he applies the concept of role-taking to blog interactions, suggesting that, in blogs, role-taking is a more explicit action than it is in face-to-face interaction due to the mediated nature of computer communication. That is, since people have the opportunity to pause and take time to formulate statements and responses in the blogosphere, they can and do use that time to imagine how readers will receive their statements.

Amelia, a woman who blogs mostly about crafting, offers an example of the sort of role-taking people talked about in the interviews:

Sometimes I like writing about my mistakes and frustrations, just because I see so many people who only want to present

themselves and their crafts as perfect... crafters can be really pretentious about their materials and products, and I like to not be pretentious, or at least try not to be.

Amelia's awareness of how she might be perceived, and her desire to mold others perceptions is noteworthy in this passage. While it is certainly possible to do what Amelia is talking about here in a face-to-face interaction, on a blog it is more deliberate because there is a written record. She wants to avoid seeming pretentious, and she has decided that displaying her mistakes in a public forum will contribute to others' view of her as an unpretentious person.

This example of Amelia's identity performance is also an interesting testimony for how strongly people's online communities can affect them. An experienced crafter who is well versed in the blogosphere might view Amelia's display of her errors as a norm-breaking behavior. However, someone who is not familiar with craft blogs might assume that the norm in the craft blogging community is to be honest about one's errors. Thus, for those with a deeper involvement in a particular blogging community like Amelia, awareness of its norms can influence identity presentation. In fact, the depth of this influence is a form of social capital, because it is evidence of a high degree of personal investment in the community.

Another perspective on this issue is Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" (1974:43). Noelle-Neumann argues that fear of isolation or retribution prevents people from voicing their thoughts if they feel they hold a minority opinion on a moral issue. The author further argues that mass media is a

fundamental tool that people use to assess which opinions might generate disapproval from their peers. The spiral occurs as mass media coverage influences public opinion and increases the impression that that a particular stance is the dominant one. In the blogosphere, this perspective applies on two levels. As bloggers articulate their identities by making textual claims on their blogs, they may be affected by the spiral of silence. In fact, if Amelia influences other bloggers by asserting her desired self-effacing norm, then those bloggers would be affected by the spiral of silence. However, Amelia and other bloggers are also on the other side of the spiral of silence in that they produce a form of mass media content which—as we saw earlier—can contribute to the larger cultural knowledge context and norm definitions.

Bloggers' identity performances are an integral part of their social participation in the blogosphere. Because of the textual archive of all activities in the blogosphere, impulse-driven authenticity is uncommon. Instead, a more perfectionistic, controlled identity performance is the norm. Be that as it may, the identity performances of some of the bloggers in the present study are evidence of a high degree of personal investment in the online communities they participate in.

Emotional Support In The Blogosphere

Throughout this exploration of blogging, the strongest theme has been community and the highly social nature of blogging. This makes sense since blogging is an inescapably social activity. The act of blogging produces publicly

available text that is written in an interactive format. Thus, the experiences that bloggers have are likely to lean toward the social rather than the individualistic. As one respondent, Luke, put it, "Personally, I think that blogging, putting your words on the internet, is pretty much inherently social. I do it to express myself to at least some people anyway." That being said, the themes that arose in the data can be organized in a list that ranges from more socially oriented to less so, and the final theme, emotional support through blogging, is the least socially oriented theme. In fact for some respondents, the cathartic qualities of blogging seemed entirely personal. Nevertheless, even cathartic writing is social when it is published instead of kept private, and the emotional support that people glean from their blogs is fundamentally a product of their involvement in the community that surrounds their blogs.

It is not just the public nature of blogs that makes their cathartic qualities interesting to sociologists, though. Steven Gordon (1981) argues that emotions, though often left out or glossed over in sociological theory, are a crucial element of social life that should not be ignored. He points out that while psychological and biosocial models of emotion tend to cast emotional events as isolated temporally or driven by physical sensation alone, a sociological model includes elements of emotion that are socially constructed and therefore more enduring across time and from person to person. He offers a nuanced view of emotions as social processes that originate from real or imagined interactions with others and that may change over time based on additional interactions. In short, Gordon's

conception of emotions is that they are interactive, fundamentally social and wholly dependent upon cultural context, much like Mannheim's (1936) definition of knowledge.

Catharsis is an element of emotional life in which people relive traumatic events in a more controlled atmosphere, and experience emotional relief from doing so (Scheff 1979). Some bloggers find this type of relief in their blogging communities. Thomas Scheff illuminates an aspect of catharsis that is important for these bloggers: distancing. Part of the definition he offers, which is a sociological take on the original conception from Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, involves the person who is experiencing catharsis having a balance between the emotional danger zone of reliving the trauma and the relative safety of their present circumstances. Blogging offers a uniquely distanced atmosphere in which people can explore traumas, be they large or small. Some of the bloggers in the present study take advantage of it.

For example, Mia, a 42-year-old attorney, uses her blog to release bothersome thoughts:

I like it when I can get something that's bugging me off my chest by writing it down, hitting "publish" and then go back to work. It's like once I publish my thoughts, they are not so much of an issue.

Mia seems to experience a direct feeling of discharging negative emotions through the act of "hitting 'publish.'" Scheff (1979) talks about each of the

fundamental human emotions having a corresponding, reflexive discharging behavior that will happen naturally if people do not self-censor. However, most behavior is self-censored by socialized individuals, because every culture has rules about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Because of this censoring, the reflexive release of negative emotions is interrupted. In the passage above, Mia shows how she uses her blog to relive uncomfortable situations and uses the publishing process as a proxy for releasing them.

Similarly, Chloe uses her blog to work out problems with her online network:

My purpose is to hash out some difficult emotional and professional situations with a large crowd of smart, thoughtful people. I write it for my commenters, but also for myself. I don't want to call it group therapy, exactly, but there is an element of that going on. People tell some pretty personal stories on my blog, and there is a spirit of generous thinking that is maintained there. It is a nice world to be in, most of the time.

In this passage, Chloe refers to “hashing out” troublesome situations with “a large crowd” of others through her blog. In Chloe’s case and others like her in the data, this hashing out involves retelling the story of the disturbing situation to a sympathetic and supportive audience. Since blogging is an asynchronous form of communication, there is always a time lapse between telling stories and receiving support through comments. Further, most of the support Chloe and others receive through their blogs is purely textual. Some may argue that these features

of cathartic blogging make it less effective than the same behaviors in face-to-face interactions. Then again, it is worth considering that asynchronous, textual interactions may provide the right amount of distancing to achieve the balance that Scheff (1979) referred to as crucial in order for catharsis to effectively take place. In the passage above, Chloe indicates that her experience is that her blog's community is a "nice world to be in." This suggests that she usually finds the catharsis she seems to seek through blogging in spite its lack of face-to-face interaction.

Another interesting point that Chloe raises about cathartic blogging is that it is uniquely public. Any act of reliving a traumatic event is most easily done with at least one other person, but by blogging about traumatic experiences, bloggers relive those experiences with a "crowd", as Chloe puts it. This is a complex attribute of cathartic blogging, because it is at odds with Scheff's (1979) requirement that the reliving occur in a safe environment. In many cases, bloggers seem to feel safe on their blogs, and yet blogs are publicly available, something that some might consider unsafe. However, as I discussed earlier, it is a mistake to assume that availability and retrievability are the same. Just because blogs are published to the Internet does not mean that people will see them. Nevertheless, there is still a chance that one or more strangers will stumble

upon a blog, even if it is not well-linked unless the blogger uses software to that has privacy control⁴.

This contradiction may explain why some of the bloggers in this study express discomfort when their traffic grows too large. For example, Jake says that “sometimes traffic will grow quickly and that will actually cause me to post less often, out of a combination of self-consciousness and performance anxiety.” Micah says, “I know a lot of ways I could potentially increase traffic to my blog, but I really do not want to do it. Like I said, I do this blog for me, and if I had a large audience I'd feel as though I would have to be posting for them instead.” Peyton, similarly, states that, “for now, I don't want a lot of traffic because I do not want to feel pressure to write for anyone else.” Finally, Henry says:

Oddly enough, I find myself shying away from wanting to attract too much traffic. I think in an earlier answer I indicated I was preoccupied with traffic, early on in this whole thing, and it hurt my desire to continue blogging, so I don't have a conscious strategy any more for boosting traffic.

Although each of these participants have slightly different reasons for disliking too much traffic to their blogs, it is notable that a number of them feel the same way about increased traffic. On the one hand, they presumably experience benefits from writing in a public forum or else they would stop. On the other hand,

⁴ Some blogging software allows users to lock posts so that only other users of the same software who the blogger selects can see the posts. These types of blogs are closer in nature to social networking profiles than the more common definition of a blog.

there is a certain tension that arises when people who are otherwise not in the public eye feel exposed by what they perceive to be too many readers. This is true in my personal experience as well. There is an inverse relationship between the level of personal content I post and the amount of traffic I have. If I feel that too many people are paying attention, I feel less comfortable exploring certain issues or making certain assertions.

Perhaps, then, Scheff's (1979) conceptualization of catharsis wherein the person relives negative emotions in a relatively safe environment can be extended, in the blogosphere, to apply to personal risk taking in general instead of just to reliving emotional traumas. These bloggers feel that as their traffic increases, the environment becomes less safe, and they become less willing to expose themselves. Although not all of the bloggers in this study write about emotional issues, this same reticence toward emotional riskiness can apply to sharing any type of information about oneself on a blog, because blogging about oneself is very different from saying things about oneself in a face-to-face interaction. It is a more dangerous proposition to take a stand on an issue or even simply reveal one's interests when the act of doing so becomes public record.

Despite the risk, bloggers continue to reveal and discuss personal issues, professional dilemmas, controversial ideas and other themes that can provoke an emotional response in themselves and others. Gordon's (1981) sociological interpretation of emotions explains this. Though emotions may be felt privately,

they are defined publicly just like any other social norm. Where better to explore them, then, than in a public forum like a blog? As the blogosphere grows, and the second most common topic on blogs is personal matters, we see that despite the risks involved, blogging helps people build emotional norms. Further, much like bloggers' more explicit knowledge production efforts, their emotional norm-building activities become part of public discourse by way of goooglearchy, link value, and mainstream media attention to the blogosphere.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The Internet in general is limited as a location for contemporary communities to congregate, because it is inaccessible to the poorest and least educated sectors of society. Even as people overcome this issue by implementing programs that increase accessibility and reduce its cost (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 1995), there is another barrier to community online. Cyberbalkanization (Adamic and Glance 2005) represents a polarizing force among people who spend time socializing online. Despite the digital divide and cyberbalkanization, some people do find community online, including many of the participants in the present research. Indeed, the bloggers in this study have greater social capital⁵ as a result of the communities they participate in through their blogs. Just as they might do in offline communities, bloggers invent and reinforce “local” norms by interacting with the locals. The resulting communities serve as reference groups and knowledge contexts for bloggers

⁵ Putnam applies the term social capital only to groups, whereas other authors (such as Bourdeiu) argue that it can apply to individuals or groups. Here I use it to label individual bloggers’ amassing benefits from participating in their online communities.

As a location, the blogosphere has specific characteristics that affect how people articulate community there. Commenting is an important aspect of community in the blogosphere, as is blogrolling. The use of these features also has a direct impact on the retrievability of the information on any given blog, since all activity in the blogosphere is stored in a running textual archive. Due to this publicly available archive, anyone can view the community activities of micro-communities in the blogosphere. However, I distinguish between regulars and rubberneckerers; regulars participate in local community whereas rubberneckerers only pass through, possibly leaving a comment.

Both regulars and rubberneckerers witness the knowledge production efforts of bloggers, but only regulars are directly aware of the knowledge context from which bloggers write. Still, bloggers' writing sometimes reaches past their individual communities into search engine results of keywords they have written about or because they are featured in the mainstream media. In this fashion, bloggers have some level of agenda-setting power and make their way from their online communities into the wider cultural knowledge context.

Part of bloggers' participation in the blogosphere and in their localized communities entails their identity performances. The public, textual archive of the blogosphere complicates identity performance by making it less spontaneous and more studied than an offline performance might be. The result is a norm in the blogosphere of a perfectionism and controlled identity performance, what Turner calls institutional authenticity (1976). Although this level of control might suggest

a degree of removal, the identity performances of some of the bloggers in the present study are evidence of a high degree of personal investment in the online communities they participate in.

Along these same lines, some bloggers brave the potential public scrutiny of their writing in order to experience the emotional benefits of their blog-based communities. Emotional support in the blogosphere can range from explicit cathartic writing to simply taking a public stand on particular issues in a relatively safe environment. Bloggers build and reproduce emotional norms within their blog-based communities this way, but they also contribute to the wider social construction of emotional norms since their activities are publicly available.

As with any research, the present study has a set of strengths and weaknesses. A strength is that I was able to gather a sample of bloggers who have a reasonably diverse set of blog types, although academic blogs are heavily represented. Further, due to my own blog, I am conscious of “local” customs, norms, and values in the blogosphere. This both helped me to access bloggers to solicit participation and improved my ability to communicate with people effectively about blogging. Using this familiarity, I was able to collect rich, in-depth data because of my use of qualitative methods. That I collected the data online might be considered both a strength and a weakness. As I show throughout this paper, community and rich interaction is certainly possible without face-to-face interaction. Still, there is a tradeoff in both the lack of physical cues and the asynchronous nature of online communication.

There are several weaknesses to the present research as well. Foremost is the size of the sample. Thirty-four out of the millions of bloggers out there is not a representative sample, nor is it enough to truly gauge how community ties are commonly articulated in the blogosphere. Also, the sample is relatively homogeneous. Although I did find a good variety of blog types instead of only working with, say, political blogs or “mommy blogs” (blogs about parenting), the bloggers in the sample are more racially homogeneous than the overall blogging population. Further, while my personal involvement in the blogosphere allows me to understand some of what I see better than I might if I had no blog, it also may bias my perception of the data.

Despite these weaknesses, I offer evidence for community in the blogosphere, and I have at least begun the process of fleshing out what that means. If nothing else, I have added to the growing number of academic voices such as Barry Wellman and his associates who argue that community and social capital are not on the decline as Putnam suggests. Instead, I argue that people are finding new ways to connect with each other. These ways may be obscured from the view of researchers because of their unorthodox channels, but they cannot be discounted for lack of face-to-face interaction. Researchers need to look more carefully at the blogosphere and other Internet locales for a complete understanding of contemporary community.

To understand the types of communities I uncover with this research more deeply, future researchers might use ethnographic techniques to discover more

detail about blogging communities. One important question to explore concerns blog readers more than bloggers. In a seminal work by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet (1944), the researchers introduced the idea that people make political decisions based on interactions with people in their communities that they think of as opinion leaders. Are bloggers the opinion leaders of our contemporary era? If so, how does community participation affect people's view of bloggers as opinion leaders?

Further, quantitative researchers might ask more questions of bloggers and blog readers regarding their participation in blog-based communities. Perhaps most importantly, both qualitative and quantitative researchers would benefit in their efforts to understand contemporary communities by not disqualifying time spent online as something one-sided like watching television. It is sometimes difficult for people who do not socialize on the Internet to fathom others doing so, but in reality the blogosphere is only one of the many ways that people build social capital online.

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study of bloggers: people who keep online journals. My name is Kristina Barnett. I am a graduate student at Texas State University San Marcos in the Department of Sociology. My contact information is 512-300-5082, or kristinab@txstate.edu.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you keep a blog online. You've either volunteered for the study because of a posting online or someone you know referred you to me.

I will ask you questions about your experiences such as why you blog and what you blog about. My goal with this study is to produce a master's thesis in which I will explore blogging as a new form of knowledge production. I may use the information you provide in a published paper or a presentation at a professional conference. Regardless of how it is used, your responses will always be kept confidential.

If you decide to participate, you will take part in an online interview with me that we will conduct through email in three steps. These steps will take place via email exchanges, and should each take approximately 15-30 minutes. To begin, I will send you a brief set of questions. Once you've responded, I will reply with

any clarifications I might need and with a new set of questions. We will repeat this process three times until all of the questions are answered. I expect the exchanges to go on over a period of about three weeks, though it may go faster if we each respond quickly. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain strictly confidential. When I describe the information you provide me in my research paper, aliases will be used for you and anyone you mention. Place names and any other identifying points will also be changed. These measures are meant to reduce any risks you feel are associated with being frank in your answers to the questions in this study and maximize the benefits of your participating for you and for the research. For example, a benefit that you may experience by participating is discussing your blog and the reasons you blog in a way that you may not have done before.

If you decide to take part in this project, you are free to stop the interview at any time. Further, you can withdraw your participation in the study without prejudice or jeopardy to your standing with Texas State University. You do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. If you have any questions, please ask me. I can send you a summary of the study or any resulting papers if you like.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Texas State Institutional Review Board. The reference number is 2008-68916.

You may refer back to these pages any time you like. If you have any questions in the future, please contact me. If you have questions or concerns

about your rights or this research, you may also contact the Institutional Review Board chairperson at Texas State, Dr. Lisa Lloyd (512-245-8358) or the Office of Sponsored Projects administrator, Ms. Becky Northcut (512-245-2102). You may also contact my supervising professor, Dr. Barbara Trepagnier (bt03@txstate.edu).

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Your continued involvement means that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

I'd like to compare your demographic characteristics with those of average bloggers. Please provide the following information:

Your sex:

Your age:

Your race/ethnicity:

Your personal income-level (a range is fine):

Your employment status and the name of your job:

Describe your blog.

What sorts of things do you write about on your blog?

Do you use your real name or a pseudonym?

Describe the identity that you present on your blog and how you present it. How does it compare to your identity offline?

What motivated you to start your blog?

What motivates you to keep blogging?

How would you describe the purpose of your blog? Who are you writing it for?

How do you think people discover your blog?

What, if anything, do you do to affect traffic to your blog?

If you track the traffic to your blog, how do changes in traffic affect you and your behavior? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

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VITA

Kristina Lynn Barnett was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on August 14, 1975 the daughter of Linda Bennett and Todd Wright. After completing her work at Fox Chapel Area High School, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1993, she entered The George Washington University (GWU). She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from GWU in May 1997. During the following years she worked in the technology industry, holding positions in software development, network engineering, and project management. In September 2006, she entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos.