WEBLOGS AND ACTIVISM:
A SOCIAL MOVEMENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE BLOGOSPHERE

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This study explores the intersections between technology and public discourse, considering the effects of new media technologies on the character of democratic deliberation through an examination of the use of weblogs for social activism. The project consists of case studies of three different perspectives on social movements and weblogs: social movement organization weblogs, individual activist weblogs, and viral weblog movements. I consider whether the blogosphere is becoming a venue for robust democratic deliberation, empowering more citizens to participate in public discussions and providing an important “check” on more traditional media—or, whether it has degraded and diminished our public talk, encouraging still more polarization and division in our already troubled deliberative democracy. At this point, as I will suggest, the evidence remains mixed and it is difficult to offer definitive answers to that and many other questions about blogging’s implications for democratic deliberation. Nevertheless, there is cause for optimism about blogging’s potential to be a powerful tool of democratic empowerment, especially for individuals whose voices might not otherwise be heard.

The study contributes to scholarly understanding of the changing nature of social movement rhetoric in an age of new media technologies and to larger conversations about the Internet’s impact on democracy.
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Chapter One: Weblogs, Social Movements, and Democratic Deliberation

In 2004, *Time* magazine writer Lev Grossman declared, “We may be in the golden age of blogging, a quirky Camelot moment in Internet history when some guy in his underwear with too much free time can take down a Washington politician.”¹ This, perhaps, is the dream of the Internet: ordinary citizens, free from the constraints of political office or organizational affiliation, connecting with one another to bring about social or political change. Yet with the dream come considerable dangers. Bloggers are also free from the code of journalistic ethics; there is no gatekeeping process in the blogosphere. In addition, there is the danger that bloggers, by linking only to news items and other weblogs with whom they agree, could contribute to political fragmentation and social isolation. As Grossman concludes, “Blogs can be a great way of communicating, but they can keep people apart too. If I read only those of my choice, precisely tuned to my political biases and you read only yours, we could end up a nation of political solipsists, vacuum sealed in our private feedback loops, never exposed to new arguments, never having to listen to a single word we disagree with.”²

The promise of blogging—every weblog a site of civic engagement, every blogger an activist—is also its peril: weblogs can serve to polarize and divide rather than unify and promote deliberation across differences. That, then, leads to the central questions of this dissertation: Is the blogosphere, as its proponents claim, becoming a venue for robust democratic deliberation, empowering more citizens to participate in public discussions and providing an important “check” on more traditional media? Or, as
its detractors warn, has the blogosphere degraded and diminished our public talk, encouraging still more polarization and division in our already troubled deliberative democracy? In short, is blogging good or bad for democracy? To begin to answer this question, this dissertation examines the role of blogs in political and social advocacy, with a specific focus on the intersections between blogging and social movement rhetoric. I hope to offer new insight into social movement activism in the blogosphere at this point in the evolution of the World Wide Web. I also will assess the implications of blogging for ongoing debates over the character and quality of democratic deliberation in America.

I begin this study with a discussion of weblogs, blogging, and their place in the World Wide Web. I next consider some of the broad implications of blogging for democratic deliberation. I then outline the theoretical perspectives that guide my analysis and shape my research questions. Finally, I provide an outline of the study’s chapters and discuss my anticipated contributions.

(Re)Defining Weblogs, Blogging, and the Blogosphere

On an average day, bloggers post 1.5 million entries to some 70 million weblogs around the world—about 17 posts per second. They post in Japanese (37% of all weblogs), English (36%), Chinese (8%), and countless other languages. They post about their lives, their hobbies, their communities, their passions, their struggles, and their beliefs about the worlds around them, seen and unseen. They link to others who share their views, or to those whose views they are critiquing. They write on behalf of the
social and political organizations to which they belong.

Although the reasons for blogging and the subjects of weblog posts vary widely, bloggers share a passion for sharing their views with others, for reaching out to an audience beyond their own computer screen. In posts to their weblogs—whether scathing political commentary, self-reflective musings, technical advice, or simple descriptions of their favorite movies or books—bloggers document their lives and the world around them in ways that reveal the rhetorical in everyday life. Weblogs can thus serve as a window into twenty-first century life, at least for that segment of the population that is online. They can be personal journals, yet they also can become forums for a wide range of concerns that transcend home, work, or family and connect the blogger to a larger public discourse about issues of social or political importance. This dissertation is, in part, about those moments of transcendence.

The word “weblog” was coined in December 1997 by Jorn Barger to describe Web pages with “logs” of links the author thought were interesting. These weblogs were at first cumbersome to develop and update, as early bloggers had to code pages by hand in HTML (hypertext markup language, the coding language for Web pages). However, the advent of Pitas and Blogger—easy-to-use blogging platforms—in 1999 meant that nearly anyone with an Internet connection could start and maintain a weblog. Other blogging platforms, such as Movable Type (2001) and WordPress (2003), gave even more bloggers an easy way to publish their words, pictures, and even audio and video to the web. Consequently, the number of weblogs increased dramatically. Dave Sifry, the founder of the blog-tracking Web site Technorati, noted in October 2004 that the number of weblogs tracked by Technorati had doubled three times over the previous eighteen
months, from around 200,000 to more than four million (see Figure 1.1).

![Graph showing the increase in weblogs from March 2003 to October 2004](image)

Figure 1.1. Weblogs tracked, March 2003-October 2004

The face of blogging also changed. Now no longer restricted to a handful of technically adept users, blogging became a way for nearly anyone to maintain a presence on the web. Not surprisingly, this resulted in a wider variety of blogs, serving a variety of different purposes. Early weblogs were mainly successors to the personal webpage, and as such performed many of the same functions: personal representation, link aggregation, and public journal. However, many bloggers quickly began to see their weblogs as spaces for more than the documentation of minutiae or a collection of neat links. Thus, people began creating weblogs to share technical expertise, to serve as hubs for virtual communities, to supplement existing organizational structures, to share views on popular culture, or to provide commentary and critique on political issues or the mainstream media.

Definitions of the word “weblog” now vary almost as widely as do weblogs themselves. Most, however, focus on two major characteristics: the personal journal style
and reverse chronological posting. For example, FeedForAll.com, a syndication Web site,\(^6\) refers to a weblog as “an online journal or diary that is frequently updated (also referred to as a blog).”\(^7\) Anita Blanchard states that weblogs are “interactive webpages in which the blog owner, or author, posts regular updates. Blogs can be about a particular topic, current events, or personal thoughts and expressions, much like a personal journal. As information is updated, it is added to the “top” of the blog.”\(^8\) The format, not the content, defines a weblog, as Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd note: “Most commentators define blogs on the basis of their reverse chronology, frequent updating, and combination of links with personal commentary.”\(^9\) Blogger.com, a popular weblog hosting service, refuses to specifically define the content of a weblog, preferring instead to leave it to the individual blogger to decide:

A blog is a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world. Your blog is whatever you want it to be. There are millions of them, in all shapes and sizes, and there are no real rules. In simple terms, a blog is a Web site, where you write stuff on an ongoing basis. New stuff shows up at the top, so your visitors can read what’s new. Then they comment on it or link to it or email you. Or not.\(^10\) Similarly, Laura Gurak and her co-authors define weblogs broadly in terms of content. They instead argue that weblogs are primarily characterized in terms of their reverse chronological postings:

The content of blogs combine musings, memories, jokes, reflections on research, photographs, rants, and essays, though we would argue that it is
not the nature of the content that defines it. Blogs can be devoted to only one topic, or they can reflect what the author is interested in at any given time. They can have one author—authors of blogs are known as “bloggers”—or multiple authors. What characterizes blogs are their form and function: all posts to the blog are time-stamped with the most recent post at the top, creating a reverse chronological structure governed by spontaneity and novelty. Instantaneity contributes to the “spontaneous and novel” nature of blogging; in as little time as it takes to type a link into a browser window and click a button, bloggers can update their weblogs with the latest news, Internet trends, or commentary on a particular event.

A “blogger,” then, is someone who blogs—who posts, frequently or infrequently, on a weblog. We may wonder, then, whether “blogging” differs from other sorts of writing—aside from the fact that it takes place online. As writing professors Kevin Brooks, Cindy Nichols, and Sybil Priebe note, “Weblogging seems like such a potentially rich set of online writing activities because it is relatively low-tech compared to producing hypertext or Web sites, and it incorporates familiar writing skills like summary, paraphrases, and the development of voice. The mix of generic, technical, and psychological factors clearly grabs and compels some people to weblog extensively.” However, although it shares many characteristics with ordinary writing, blogging also reflects a way of communicating that is based not entirely on original composition, but on “remixing” other sources into new compositions. Stuart Selber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola call this variation upon ordinary composition “assemblage” and argue that it is a
valuable new way to understand writing: the value of blogging arises from creative juxtaposition just as much as from “original” composition. In 1990, Michael Calvin McGee argued that we live in a time of “fragmentation” in which auditors (and critics)—not speakers or writers—assemble texts. In blogging, both rhetors and audiences may be seen assembling “fragments” to make meaning. Bloggers and their readers thus become artists in an online world of linking, counter-linking, commenting, excerpting, critiquing, and responding. To analyze these works, the critic must pay careful attention to the ongoing conversation in which the weblog post is situated.

Just as the content of weblogs is “remixed,” so too are traditional conceptions of speaker and audience complicated by blogging. In blogging, individuals become authors, posters, bloggers, readers, commenters, lurkers, and other new forms of communicative agents—all at once. Therefore, the relationship between bloggers and their readers is complicated. As Lester Faigley notes, electronic texts allow the reader to participate in the construction of the text, creating a very different relation between author and reader than printed texts, which typically have a linear structure. Specifically, the addition of comments to weblog entries means that the page is never static, but is in a constant state of creation and development. Commenting also opens up a new space for weblog readers to communicate with one another, creating, as Anita Blanchard writes, “two opportunities for interaction on the blog for the readers: one with the blog author and one with other readers.” These conversations are not entirely equal: bloggers have the power to ignore, moderate, edit, or delete comments at will. They may even choose to delete an entire entry and its attendant comments. This complicates the matter even further for the scholar of weblogs. As the text is never entirely fixed, it is difficult to focus on it as an
object for rhetorical analysis, and the line between blogger and audience often becomes blurred.

Together, the seventy million or so weblogs on the Internet form what is generally referred to as “the blogosphere.” Although it is tempting to lump all weblogs together based on their technological similarities, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that there are, in fact, many different blogospheres: personal, communal, and political, overlapping and intersecting at various points. We might therefore think of the blogosphere as a public space with its own vernacular discourse and multiple “publics.” Gerard Hauser and Carole Blair argue that a public is a social entity, grounded in discourse and manifested through rhetorical experience. Hauser theorizes a “rhetorical public sphere” composed of many different publics, each a discursive arena arising out of its own vernacular discourse. In Hauser’s rhetorical public sphere, public opinion does not exist in the minds of the public as a whole, but rather arises out of the discursive interactions among a variety of publics. “Public opinion” is therefore not a monolithic conception, but a varied (and varying) reflection of the concerns of social actors that is evident in actual discourse—in this case, in weblog design, posts, and comments.

Therefore, we can look to the blogosphere for at least one type of public opinion. Yet, as Hauser suggests, public opinion is not a static or easily measurable phenomenon. Rather, the public opinion manifested in the blogosphere is a diverse and constantly evolving phenomenon reflected in vernacular discourse.

Studies of single weblogs tend to miss one of the most salient features of blogging—that is, the internetworked nature of weblog writing. The weblogs examined in this study do not exist in isolation: they link to other weblogs; they respond to posts in
other weblogs; they begin, continue, and contribute to conversations about a wide variety of issues. James Porter has defined internetworked writing as “the creation, design, organization, storage, and distribution of electronic information via wide-area networks.” Porter argues that the set of rhetorical ethics we have developed for print media “do not quite correspond to the new medium we find ourselves in, a medium that is not print and not conversation, not the library or the telephone, but some new ecology, some new space for which we have not yet developed an ethical paradigm.” Likewise, the set of critical apparatuses we have evolved for examining print and visual texts is not quite sufficient for the analysis of internetworked writing texts such as weblogs. Much of the unique value of blogging as a rhetorical form lies in the ways weblogs link with one another to create rich rhetorical texts that are not based in any one weblog, but networked across many of them.

This internetworking necessitates studying the whole ecology of a weblog: where it links, which sites/blogs link to it, the comments, trackbacks, the blogroll, and the visual look-and-feel of the site. As Bonnie A. Nardi and Vicki L. O’Day write, an information ecology is “a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment. In information ecologies, the spotlight is not on technology, but on human activities that are served by technology.” The single weblog, disconnected from its Web of links, cannot be the single unit of analysis; it is “marked by strong interrelationships and dependencies among its different parts.” Therefore, in the process of critiquing particular weblogs, we must examine their whole ecology: their text-based entries, their comments, their visual look-and-feel, their location on the domain, their interlinking, and so forth. By doing so, we are able to paint a richer picture of the interconnected blogosphere
and better grasp its potential for changing the nature of democratic deliberation and
promoting social change.

**Weblogs and Democratic Deliberation**

Weblogs have the potential to affect democratic deliberation in both positive and
negative ways. Champions of blogging contend that blogging is positive because it
destabilizes news media gatekeeping, promotes grassroots deliberation, opens up spaces
for alternate voices, and provides more avenues for public discourse. They also argue
that the blogosphere’s decentralized nature means that control or censorship by any one
institution is difficult, leading to more freedom of speech. Critics counter that that
weblogs and the news media feed on one another in ways that discourage original
reporting, and that weblogs foster isolation and fragmentation rather than genuine
deliberation. They argue that offline power structures are simply replicated in weblogs,
and that more discourse is not necessarily better discourse. The debate over blogging’s
power to enhance or erode public debate is ongoing; I have tried to represent the major
arguments below.

*Fifth Estate or Same Old Story?*

One of the most widely praised functions of blogging has been its role as a sort of
“fifth estate” which serves as a check on the traditional news media. The success of
“Rathergate,” in particular, is cited as a demonstration of the power of weblogs to
challenge “old media” strictures on news reporting. In 2004, several weblogs began
investigating what they saw as a failure on the part of CBS News and Dan Rather to
verify documents which called into question President George W. Bush’s service in the
Texas Air National Guard in 1972-1973. The resulting debate spread over hundreds of
political and non-political weblogs, culminating in the determination that the documents
were indeed false and that CBS had failed in its role as an investigative news agency.
CBS and “60 Minutes” lost credibility, Dan Rather resigned in disgrace, and the
blogosphere’s reputation as media watchdog was cemented. Indeed, political weblogs
often critique mainstream media’s coverage of political events as much as they comment
on the events themselves.

However, this very characteristic of blogging—the fact that anyone with a
computer and something to say can do it—means that it is ill-suited to completely replace
mainstream media news outlets. The lack of journalistic ethics among bloggers is a
concern for many scholars of the mass media.\textsuperscript{23} Although data suggest that many
bloggers support a code of ethics for blogging similar to that of journalists—and may
already implicitly follow one—no such code has formally been adopted, which means
that weblogs are still perceived to be less trustworthy than the mainstream media.\textsuperscript{24}

Nevertheless, weblogs are increasingly being recognized by the mainstream
media as valid news sources. Marcus Messner and Marcia Watson Distaso performed a
content analysis of 120 weblogs and over two thousand articles from the \textit{New York Times}
and the \textit{Washington Post} over a six-year period, finding not only that the weblogs used
the newspapers as sources, but that the newspapers increasingly relied on weblogs as
credible sources during that time. They call this interreliance a “news source cycle,” in
which news content is passed back and forth between media.\textsuperscript{25} This, too, casts doubt on
the utility of weblogs as a check on the news media, if indeed they are becoming an
integral part of the overall news cycle. Stephen D. Reese, Lou Rutigliano, Hyun Kideuk, and Jeong Jaekwan similarly find that the relationship between weblogs and traditional journalism is more complementary than it is confrontational, noting that for all its opposition to the mainstream media, the blogosphere relies heavily on professional news reports for its sources. Although they may be performing a valuable service in critiquing the news media, then, weblogs may also be part of the very system they purport to critique.

_Agora or Echo Chamber?_  

Blogging’s ability to foster debate is another promising aspect of the blogosphere. Bloggers do not merely report the news; they raise and discuss issues, link to other discussions of the same issues, and encourage readers to raise their own concerns and objections in the comments section. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported in 2006 that 87 percent of bloggers allow comments on their weblogs, indicating that for most bloggers feedback is an important component of the whole blogging process. Political blogging, especially, seems to bear out the promise of democratic deliberation on the Internet. No longer are political debates the exclusive domain of Washington insiders and newspapers’ editorial pages. Rather, issues circulate and recirculate in the blogosphere, sparking debate and opinions from all sides.

Blogging’s detractors, however, contend that bloggers tend to link only to voices that complement their own, creating “echo chambers” in which opinions are rarely debated but instead merely restated and reaffirmed. The concern, then, is that rather than leading to robust political discourse, weblogs instead fragment us into communities of like-minded people, focused on single issues rather than on interconnected political
matters. It indeed appears to be true that political bloggers tend to divide into ideological camps and that weblogs often represent only a single point of view. However, evidence from the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggests that although a weblog may represent only one side of an issue, that does not mean that its readers are not exposed to alternate viewpoints elsewhere. According to a 2006 Pew survey, nearly half of Internet users (45%) prefer getting news from sources that do not have a particular political point of view. Some 24 percent of bloggers even claimed to prefer news from sources that challenge their viewpoint. Only 18 percent admitted that they preferred to get their political news from sources that shared their political viewpoint. Therefore, political parochialism is a valid concern in terms of the texts being produced, but it is not necessarily the case that readers browse strictly along ideological lines.

Diversity or Digital Divide?

Supporters of blogging also point out that the medium has the potential to bring attention to neglected issues or historically silenced voices. Freed from the gatekeeping of mainstream media, academia, or sociocultural norms, they argue, bloggers can use their “virtual soapboxes” to champion causes which may be otherwise ignored. Todd McDorman, for example, describes the ways counterpublics can use the Internet to circulate their own messages in opposition to mainstream media and the state. Weblogs, with their ease of set-up and their vernacular style, would seem to be perfect avenues for such counter-discourses. Social and political causes aside, blogging has the potential to air a broader diversity of voices than are heard in traditional public discourse. Indeed, according to the Pew Internet and American Life project, bloggers already are more racially diverse than Internet users in general, with only 60% of bloggers
identifying themselves as white, compared to 74% of the broader Internet-using population.\textsuperscript{30}

Questions of access, though, still prevail. For example, as of 2006 bloggers were still disproportionately male in comparison to the general Internet-using population.\textsuperscript{31} In addition, according to Gilbert Rodman, there are still hierarchies of access built into the very hardware and software that make up the Internet. Rodman argues that we must be aware of the material conditions which shape and constrain political discourse on the Web, such as the ability of Internet users to purchase computer equipment and to acquire the education necessary to use it.\textsuperscript{32} Zizi Papacharissi argues that the Internet is a new public sphere with great potential for revitalizing democratic discourse, but warns that the Internet still replicates the power structures we see in offline life. Until marginalized voices are fully represented on the Internet, Papacharissi concludes, it will not be a true public sphere.\textsuperscript{33} Although weblogs are cheaper and easier to set up and maintain than some other forms of Internet communication, they are still subject to these concerns.

\textit{Signal or Noise?}

Some celebrate the blogosphere as a “digital public sphere,” arguing that it opens up possibilities for democratic deliberation by giving Internet users opportunities to speak out in a variety of ways. With roots in both the “freedom of speech” clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the “information wants to be free” mantra of the Internet, the idea that speech is a public good has been one of blogging’s driving forces. Weblogs are spaces in which seemingly anyone can take a stand on the issues of the day—or help to raise new issues and controversies. Peter Dahlgren, for example, celebrates the fact that the Internet offers many avenues for political communication,
including the ability to quickly access large amounts of information which had previously been unavailable to the general population. Weblogs have also provided a way to spread information widely and rapidly, potentially expanding the public’s exposure to critical knowledge and encouraging action.

However, an increase in the quantity of discourse does not necessarily result in higher quality deliberations. For every carefully thought-out, well-reasoned critique of President Obama’s economic stimulus plan, there are a thousand weblog entries dismissing him as a socialist or railing against imaginary conspiracies. David Shenk points out that one of the consequences of the information age is “data smog”—the idea that there is so much information available that it is nearly impossible to distinguish reliable and useful information from inaccurate or deceptive misinformation. The ease of starting and maintaining weblogs can lead to a glut of opinions, many of which only serve to obfuscate and confuse rather than illuminate the issues. Certainly, passionate and vigorous dissent is a valuable part of our democratic heritage, as social movement scholars have been arguing since the 1960s. Agonistic discourse, as Robert L. Ivie has argued, is part of the “idiom of democracy,” and “agonistic pluralism” is a natural condition in a diverse democratic society. Yet the sheer number of weblogs and the relatively unchecked nature of their discourse can create misleading impressions. If one were to gauge public opinion regarding gun control simply by examining weblogs, for example, one might easily conclude that the vast majority of Americans favor repealing all gun control laws, since there are thousands more weblogs devoted to criticizing than to advocating stricter gun control. Weblogs may bring more diversity to public opinion—or even constitute multiple publics with differing opinions—but it is difficult to claim that
they are in any way representative of “the” public’s opinion on any given issue.

Decentralization or Diffusion?

Because blogging is so widespread and lacks truly centralized controls, there is no way to regulate or control the messages to which bloggers link. This is generally viewed as a positive aspect of blogging; if online discourse is uncontrollable, it cannot be censored or restricted by powerful governmental or corporate forces. One example is the blogosphere’s response to an April 2007 demand by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) that weblogs and Web sites take down the hexadecimal number “09 F9 11 02 9D 74 E3 5B D8 41 56 C5 63 56 88 C0,” which was one of the cryptographic keys allowing for duplication of protected High Definition DVDs and Blu-Ray discs. Many bloggers defied the MPAA’s demand by leaving up the key but taking down information about its purpose, insisting that the MPAA had no right to censor a random string of numbers and letters. One popular Web site, Digg.com, complied with the demand, but many others ignored it, posting the key over and over again in protest. Widespread online news coverage led to more and more bloggers posting the key (or a graphical representation of it, which they called a “Free Speech Flag”). Eventually, mainstream media picked up the story—and further distributed the key in its coverage. Because of the blogosphere’s decentralized nature, efforts to constrain such discourse proved futile.

However, decentralization can lead to diffusion. Because of the distributed and reactionary nature of online discussion, it is sometimes difficult to reach a high level of debate before the blogosphere moves on to the next topic at hand. Thus, issues might simply peter out of the public consciousness rather than be subjected to real debate. The blogosphere is also not entirely decentralized. Like any public discourse, blogging has its
opinion leaders: a few dozen weblogs account for much of the daily weblog readership. In the example above, the pressure put on Digg.com may have led other bloggers to take down the key from their own sites in the belief that they might be targeted next. And, of course, online content is edited, suppressed, and censored every day. For example, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act gives organizations and individuals the power (in the United States) to threaten bloggers with legal action if they post or even link to proprietary content. Decentralization does not thwart all efforts to suppress or censor online content, even if it does make them more difficult.

The prospects for weblogs enhancing democratic deliberation are thus mixed, and the issues are even far more complex than I have suggested in this brief discussion. As we consider the blogosphere’s role in our democracy, we must take into account not only the issues outlined above but also many others, some of which are still emerging. In particular, the increasing use of weblogs for social activism illustrates the importance of understanding the relationship between digital media and democratic deliberation. In the next section of this chapter, I outline a social movement approach to the study of blogging, which I hope will prove a useful way of shedding new light on the potential of weblogs to enhance democratic deliberation, as well as some of the dangers and pitfalls of deliberation in the blogosphere.

A Social Movement Perspective on Blogging: Activism In, On, and Through Weblogs

To take a social movement perspective on blogging means to consider the ways
weblogs serve as sites of social movement discourse—a challenging task given the wide-ranging definitions of weblogs noted earlier, but even more so given the historical difficulties social movement scholars have faced when defining the object of their study. For example, sociologist Mario Diani writes of the difficulty in defining what a social movement is; in fact, he notes, scholars have at times equated social movements with “revolutions, religious sects, political organisations, [and] single-issue campaigns.”

Diani attempts to shed some light on the matter by defining social movements as “consisting in networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups, and/or organisations, engaged in a political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity.” Identity is key to this definition: movement members must identify as such to act collectively. Another sociologist, Sidney Tarrow, uses the term “social movement” to refer to “those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents.”

Tarrow further argues that at the heart of all social movements is “contentious collective action,” which occurs when people who lack regular access to institutions” act collectively “in the name of new or unaccepted claims” and “behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities.” Tarrow’s definition emphasizes the “outsider” status of the movement; the movement is situated in opposition to some institutionalized establishment or sociocultural norm.

Rhetorical scholars have also debated how to define “social movements.” In his landmark essay proposing the study of movements, Leland Griffin defines an “historical movement” (what would later be referred to as a social movement) in three parts: people
“have become dissatisfied with some aspect of their environment; they desire change—social, economic, political, religious, intellectual, or otherwise—and desiring change, they make efforts to alter their environment; and eventually, their efforts result in some degree of success or failure; the desired change is, or is not, effected; and we may say that the historical movement has come to its termination.” Griffin also specifies that movements may be “pro,” in which “the rhetorical attempt is to arouse public opinion to the creation or acceptance of an institution or idea,” or “anti,” in which “the rhetorical attempt is to arouse public opinion to the destruction or rejection of an existing institution or idea.”

Herbert W. Simons defines a social movement “an uninstitutionalized collectivity that mobilizes for action to implement a program for the reconstitution of social norms or values.” Similarly, Charles Stewart, Craig R. Smith, and Robert Denton define a social movement as an “organized, uninstitutionalized, and significantly large collectivity that emerges to bring about or to resist a program for change in societal norms and values, operates primarily through persuasive strategies, and encounters opposition in what becomes a moral struggle.” These definitions focus on social movements as discrete sociological phenomena, with defined goals, tactics, and leadership.

However, social movements may also constituted through their rhetoric. The historical or sociological approach, Cathcart contends, “has not produced a definition which will tell us, reliably, when a movement is a movement.” Cathcart suggests instead that movements be defined in terms of the “dialectical tension growing out of moral conflict.” This “dialectical tension” occurs between two agents: the movement (or “agitator rhetors”) and the establishment (or “counter rhetors”). The agitators
perceive some injustice in the established system and demand an “immediate corrective.”

The establishment perceives these demands “not as calls for correction or re-righting the prevailing order, but as direct attacks on the foundations of the established order.”

Rather than defining social movements as discrete phenomena, Cathcart locates social movements in their meaning; the social movement is its discourse. Similarly, Michael Calvin McGee has defined social movements as “meaning,” not “phenomena,” insisting that what really defines a “movement” is not the physical existence of a group of protestors, but rather an oppositional rhetoric that a large number of people identify with and embrace.

Clearly, weblogs can be a powerful rhetorical tool for already existing social movements with specific concerns: the environmental movement, for example, or bloggers resisting totalitarian governments. Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner examine some of the different uses to which social movement organizations are putting new technologies, including wardriving (searching for open wireless networks), blogging, global positioning satellites, and others. Kahn and Kellner are enthusiastic about the possibilities of new technologies for social movements, but a closer look at the advantages and disadvantages of those technologies is warranted. Brett Lunceford has also examined the relationship between technology and social movements, arguing in his 2005 dissertation that the so-called hacker movement’s use of technology reflected a distinctive brand of democratic theory. Studies such as these indicate the need to consider the ideological implications of a movement’s use of particular technologies for specific rhetorical functions. Stewart argues that rhetoric is the primary vehicle through which movement actors can perform a variety of necessary functions, such as
transforming perceptions of social reality, altering the self-perceptions of protestors, legitimizing the movement, prescribing courses of action, mobilizing for action, and sustaining the movement. In recent years, a variety of existing social movements have used blogging to perform many of these functions. Thus, the question arises: Is blogging uniquely suited for certain rhetorical functions necessary to create and sustain a social movement, or can blogs perform some functions more effectively or more efficiently than alternative means of communication?

At the same time, blogging also invites analysis from the perspective of those who define “movements” as the product of shared “meaning.” Blogging, in and of itself, creates a kind of “dialectical tension” with the established order and can be seen as constituting movements consisting entirely of the “meaning” generated by bloggers online. Indeed, the very act of blogging (while often driven by vanity or self-indulgence) can be seen as part of a global movement of self-expression, community-building, and social commentary—a social movement defined entirely by words and images, not by a particular collectivity of people. This dissertation is concerned not only with how existing social movements use weblogs, but also with how personal weblogs sometimes engage in movement rhetoric or coalesce to constitute new movements, including a movement to reform American politics through blogging itself. By considering social movements both as phenomena and as meaning, we are better able to understand how blogging is changing the character and quality of social movement rhetoric.
Preview of Chapters

In selecting movements and weblogs for study, I hope to shed light on some of the unique properties of blogging as they relate to social movement discourse specifically and public deliberation more generally. I therefore analyze weblogs and movements which serve as rich examples of each of the various dimensions of social movement blogging and democratic deliberation I have described in this chapter. There are no specific criteria for overall selection; I have instead, for each chapter, chosen weblogs (or clusters of weblogs) which engage in ongoing conversations about matters of social importance. Therefore, weblogs subjected to analysis generally participate in internetworked linking, allow (and/or encourage) commenting and trackbacks, quote and critique posts on other weblogs or news stories about the topic in question, and otherwise display signs of being engaged in interactive public discourse. My hope is that by examining the questions posed in this chapter from many angles and using many texts, I will be better able to illuminate blogging’s potential for enhancing or deterring from democratic deliberation.

In Chapter 2, I analyze the use of weblogs by three existing social movement organizations (SMOs) representing three very different causes: the pro-life movement, animal rights, and environmentalism. Through an analysis of NARAL Pro-Choice America’s Blog for Choice, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals’ The PETA Files, and Greenpeace’s Campaign, Grassroots, and Community weblogs, I hope to illustrate how blogging can complement and extend SMO rhetoric and tactics. I am especially interested in whether blogging fulfills some of these functions better than others, and
whether organizations are taking full advantage of the opportunities that weblogs afford for building and sustaining both their particular SMO and the larger social movements they represent.

In Chapter 3, I examine the ways personal blogs have become identified with larger social movements, focusing on two personal blogs identified with the larger environmental movement: *No Impact Man* and *Living Plastic Free*. These personal weblogs are particularly important because they represent individuals who joined social movements on their own initiative, under their own terms, and in their own online spaces. These weblogs give us a unique look at the role of vernacular voices in social movement activism on the World Wide Web.

In Chapter 4, I shift from an examination of particular weblogs to an analysis of viral movements which span multiple weblogs. In this chapter, I examine two quite different examples of viral movements: Anonymous, a diffuse group of anonymous activists who targeted the Church of Scientology with both online and offline tactics, and RaceFail ’09, a group of bloggers struggling for understanding and identity in the face of institutionalized racism. In these movements, bloggers who may not have identified at all with a movement or any particular issue (or indeed, who may not have been politically active at all) turned their weblogs into sites for political discussion and action. In this chapter, I will look at the unique rhetorical features of such exchanges, noting the sorts of issues that seem to spark dialogue, the ways bloggers join the conversations, and whether and how they identify themselves in their rhetoric as members of a particular social movement or discursive community.

In Chapter 5, I offer some conclusions about the nature of public discourse in the
“golden age of blogging.” To frame this discussion, I analyze a single—and ongoing—movement, the so-called Tea Party movement, from each of the three perspectives described above, examining the potential for conflict between vernacular and sanctioned rhetorics. In doing so, I also consider the potential for phony or so-called “astroturf” movements to establish a presence in the blogosphere and to influence the development and propagation of movement rhetoric. I then return to the central questions of the whole study, reflecting upon the lessons learned from my case studies. Is criticism of blogging as an insular or polarizing form of discourse justified? Are weblogs empowering citizens and promoting democratic deliberation, or are they contributing to the degradation of public discourse, as some critics claim? What can we learn by studying the intersections of blogging and social movement rhetoric? In the end, I hope to be able to offer at least preliminary answers to these questions and other questions that have formed the core of this study, contribute to our understanding of weblogs, and suggest avenues for further research on the role of weblogs in social activism.

Conclusion

“Blogs are a rapidly moving target,” write Dawn Shepherd and Carolyn R. Miller.53 It’s true—just as we think we’ve pinned them down long enough to define and classify them, we find that people are using weblogs in ways we never dreamed. The physical protest goes digital; the housewife becomes an environmental activist; the systems administrator turns into a citizen journalist; the author becomes a political pundit. These transformations are at the heart of celebrations of the blogosphere as a site
for civic engagement and democratic deliberation.

In this study, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the weblog and its potential to promote social change. What does blogging do for social movements? And what do social movements bring to the act of blogging? In our increasingly fragmented political culture, do weblogs promote still more division and polarization, or can they bring people together to work for the common good? These questions drive this research and my overall project. In the end, I hope at least to begin to help answer a simple but important question: Is blogging good for our democracy?
Notes


6 FeedForAll.com publishes software that allows users to easily create RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds and podcasts. These features allow website creators to easily publish their content in ways that are external to their own websites – other users may “subscribe” to the feed or podcast and receive the content in their RSS reader or as a series of headlines on their own web pages.


15 Lester Faigley, Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 228.


18 Gerard Hauser, Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres
(Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).


20 Porter, *Rhetorical Ethics*, xii.


23 Mark Cenite et al found in a survey of bloggers that most supported a code of ethics, though there was some division as to what that code might contain. Likewise, David D. Perlmutter and Mary Schoen found general support for a code of ethics but little agreement among bloggers as to how to operationalize it. Mark Cenite, Benjamin H. Detenber, Andy W.K. Hoh, Alvin L.H. Lee, and Ng Ee Soon, “Doing the Right Thing Online: A Survey of Bloggers’ Ethical Beliefs and Practices,” *New Media & Society* 11 (2009): 575-97; David D. Perlmutter and Mary Schoen, “‘If I Break A Rule, What do I Do, Fire Myself?’ Ethics Codes of Independent Blogs,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 22 (2007): 37-48.


26 Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, “Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet’s New


30 Lenhart and Fox, “Bloggers,” 2.

31 Lenhart and Fox, “Bloggers,” 2. No more recent data are available.


41 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 3.


53 Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd, “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis
Chapter Two: Social Movement Organizations and Weblogs

The study of the rhetoric of social movements has never been simple. For example, in 1970, Herbert W. Simons wrote:

It is frequently impossible to separate detractors from supporters of a social movement, let alone to discern rhetorical intentions, to distinguish between rhetorical acts and coercive acts, or to estimate the effects of messages on the many audiences to which they must inevitably be addressed. Actions that may succeed with one audience . . . may alienate others. . . . For similar reasons, actions that may seem productive over the short run may fail over the long run (the reverse is also true).¹

New media in the form of the Internet and the World Wide Web further complicate the study of movements. Authorship of online messages is frequently unknown; audiences are nebulous and ever-changing; the technological terms under which rhetorical transactions are conducted are constantly shifting. Although the Web may have made it easier for social movement organizations (SMOs) to distribute their messages to wider audiences, it has created new challenges for scholars of social movements. Nevertheless, it is important to rise to those challenges and engage the new methods and strategies social movements are using to carry out their persuasive campaigns.

In this chapter, I examine the ways SMOs have adapted, for good or ill, to the new rhetorical environment of the World Wide Web. In particular, I look at the use of weblogs by three SMOs—NARAL Pro-Choice America, People for the Ethical Treatment of
Animals (PETA), and Greenpeace—to perform a variety of functions once performed through speeches, demonstrations, teach-ins, posters and flyers, direct mail, and various other media. NARAL Pro-Choice America is perhaps less well-known than the other two organizations but represents one side in the hotly contested abortion debate in the United States. PETA has staked out its rhetorical ground on provocative, high-visibility campaigns revolving around images of animal abuse, whereas Greenpeace has become known the world over for its publicity stunts involving small boatloads of activists confronting large whaling ships, among other tactics. Abortion, animal rights, and environmentalism are issues which generate a great deal of discussion and emotion, and these organizations are at the center of many of these debates.

Perhaps just as importantly, each of these organizations has a fairly visible weblog as part of its online presence. By “fairly visible,” I mean that the weblog is featured in some way on the organization’s main Web site, either as a prominently labeled link or as a “box” somewhere on the main site, with the latest posts and links to the weblog proper. Although it is impossible to speculate about each SMO’s specific motivations, each of them must have deemed a weblog a worthy investment at some level, given that each is professionally designed and regularly updated by the SMO’s staff. Additionally, each uses its weblog for important press releases and other critical announcements and information, including, in at least one case, the first announcement of a major political endorsement. Although there are similarities across the three sites, each organization puts its weblog to different uses, which in general are consistent with the organization’s overall rhetorical strategies. However, as I will demonstrate, these strategies are not
always well-suited to the weblog format, nor are the organizations making full use of weblogs’ potential for fostering activism.

I begin by outlining my theoretical perspective for the purposes of this analysis, focusing on the move toward professionalization in social movements as a guiding concept for understanding SMO weblogs. I then analyze the three different SMO weblogs: NARAL Pro-Choice America’s Blog for Choice; The PETA Files, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals’ weblog; and Greenpeace’s network of weblogs, including its Campaign, Grassroots, and Community weblogs. Finally, I discuss the role of weblogs in the continuing professionalization of social movements and offer some conclusions as to the future of SMO blogging.

**Social Movements Organizations Defined and Redefined**

Whereas a social movement may be only informally organized around a particular issue or set of issues, a social movement organization is a formal organization within a social movement. Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy define an SMO as “a complex, or formal, organization that identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals.” SMOs thus have the communicative hallmarks of organizations, including leadership, an internal hierarchy and power structure, organizational culture, and procedures for communication with external constituencies. SMOs are often the most visible components of social movements; for example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is practically synonymous with the animal rights movement, as the National Organization
for Women (NOW) is with second-wave feminism.

Although it is certainly possible to participate in a social movement without joining a SMO, it is often the most visible and straightforward way to do so. The very act of joining PETA signals one’s allegiance to the animal rights movement, for example, or one might show one’s support for women’s reproductive rights by purchasing a supporting membership in NARAL Pro-Choice America. SMOs also make it easy to support more than one cause. Kevin Djo Everett argues that as the number of SMOs has increased, interorganizational relations have become denser, leading to the solidification of social movement “sectors” in which multiple organizations promote different yet ideologically related causes. Many people are members of multiple SMOs, showing support for a whole platform of reform through their monetary donations, personal actions, or other means.

Professionalization of Social Movements

SMOs reflect a continuing trend in social movements toward professionalization, which has been documented and theorized primarily by sociologists John D. McCarthy and Mayer Zald. The functions historically served by a social movement’s grassroots members, they argue, have increasingly been taken over by paid professional agents, including organizers, strategists, and fund-raisers. Some movements have even become institutionalized in non-profit associations and philanthropic foundations. In some cases, McCarthy and Zald note, this has led to competition between SMOs for control over resources and even “the message”—the symbolic meaning of the movement and its goals. Indeed, they suggest, the professionalization of social movements might be leading to a
situation in which SMOs create rather than respond to exigences for social action in order to continue to justify their own existence. Another concern is that the growth of SMOs might “dilute” their movements’ ideological purity or moderate their demands and strategies in order to appeal to a wider audience, as Everett suggests.  

These concerns are hardly new to scholars of social movements. As Simons noted nearly forty years ago, movement leaders have always been caught between the demands of movement followers and outside audiences and institutions. Typically, movement leaders must placate the membership with clear demands and strident devotion to the cause, while more moderate strategies and a willingness to compromise might prove more effective with outside audiences. Thus, movement leaders must negotiate tensions between ideological purity and political respectability: they must know when to appear “reasonable” and when to “stick to their guns.” According to Simons, the internal demands of most social movements are typically met with more “militant” rhetorical strategies, while “moderation” tends to work better when dealing with external constituencies and the institutions or agents of the “establishment,” thus creating dilemmas for movement leaders as they negotiate between the two. These sorts of issues complicate the roles of SMOs in social movements, particularly as they “professionalize.” What happens, for example, when the need for a “professional” SMO to broaden its base of support and enhance its resources becomes no longer compatible with the needs and desires of the movement’s membership as a whole?

Despite these concerns, SMOs serve extremely valuable functions for the larger movements they represent. They are often the most visible, most well-funded, and most
organized elements of those movements, and they carry out tasks necessary for the survival of the movement and the realization of its goals: raising awareness, recruiting new members, fund-raising, mobilization, lobbying, and negotiating with “establishment” figures. SMOs can organize picket lines and demonstrations, make phone calls, canvass homes, write letters to newspapers—and increasingly, blog about their cause. Simons, building on organizational communication theory, outlines three requirements for social movements: they must attract, maintain, and mold workers (i.e., followers) into an efficiently organized unit; they must secure adoption of their product (which Simons defines, in social movements, as ideology) by the larger structure (i.e., the external system, the established order); and they must react to resistance generated by that larger structure. While SMOs use weblogs primarily to meet the first of these requirements, they can be used—with greater or lesser success—to help the movement meet all three requirements. Unfortunately, as Simons suggests, those requirements often create conflicting demands or “dilemmas” for the leaders who speak for a movement.

*SMOs and the Media*

One goal of nearly every SMO is to put their chosen issue on the public agenda and to control (as much as possible) the terms and tone of public debate over that issue. Michael Francis Smith has noted four “issue management strategies” that SMOs typically use to keep their issue in the public eye and shape the discussion. The first of these strategies is definition: SMOs must define not only the issue, but the preferred resolution to the issue. This strategy places limits on discussion and directs actors toward a delimited set of resolutions to the issue. The second is legitimation: as an issue is
legitimized, it moves further into public awareness and public discussion. Third is polarization: advocates of movements try to force people to “choose up sides” in the public debate. Polarization is a tactic which can cause an issue to become more visible in the media; however, as an issue becomes current in the media, the media itself will often contribute to further polarization. The last strategy is identification, in which arguments are aimed toward persuading segments of the public to identify with the cause and support a particular policy position. As we will see later in the analysis, organizations can use weblogs to all of these ends, although they seem to work better for enacting some strategies than others.

Media exploitation and manipulation is an important goal of many SMOs. Bernadette Barker-Plummer examines two paradigms of media strategies used by the U.S. women’s movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She defines “media pragmatism” as using the news media to “mobilize new members and to win public approval, while also giving the public an ‘honest’ picture of the movement.”¹¹ Media pragmatists used the system as it already existed, exploiting the existing conventions of mainstream news media to advance the movement. “Media subversives,” on the other hand, tried to change the way the news media worked, challenging the conventions of mainstream news media or actually trying to subvert or undermine those conventions. During the women’s movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, for example, some feminists would speak only to women reporters and had specific demands that their discourse would be represented in ways consistent with their ideology.¹² Weblogs can provide SMOs with more avenues for media exploitation, in both pragmatic and subversive ways:
SMOs can use their weblog both to engage the mainstream media (as noted in Chapter 1 of this study) or circumvent them if they feel their agenda is not being met.

SMOs and Weblogs

Weblogs can both simplify and complicate the task of the social movement leader. Weblogs are relatively easy to set up and maintain, so communicating multiple messages to multiple audiences becomes much easier. At the same time, however, the potential for a weblog to go “off-message” or for the social movement leader to lose control of the message entirely is amplified. Those who employ weblogs must choose whether to allow a variety of others—other movement leaders, movement followers, and “outsiders”—to contribute content and comments. And they must decide what level of access to allow to these other voices. The distributed nature of Web communication makes it easier to allow many other people to participate in constructing the message of the SMO, but the danger in that is that it may fragment that message or render the SMO incapable of presenting a coherent message.

Technological expertise and familiarity with the media of movement rhetorics can also complicate the use of weblogs by SMOs to communicate to their membership. As Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart write, media grammar (those rules and conventions based upon the properties which constitute media) and the acquisition of media literacy (the ability to meaningfully process mediated data) depend on both social and technological constructs. They argue that people “develop particular media consciousnesses because media have different framing conventions and time orientations. That is, people are influenced by the conventions and orientations peculiar to the media
process first acquired and related more readily to others with a similar media set.” The “media gap” that Gumpert and Cathcart identify is a pressing concern for SMOs, who often speak with and for groups that are excluded from access to other media.

Conversely, new media such as weblogs can provide spaces for SMOs to engage with audiences outside of traditional, mainstream media channels: movement members, potential members, anti-movement advocates, neutral observers, and mass audiences. As this analysis will show, movement bloggers nearly always address several of these audiences simultaneously; it is almost impossible to deliver a message which will only be received by one particular audience. In an age of cell phone cameras and YouTube, even “members-only” communications can become fodder for the Internet masses (as several political leaders have discovered, to their dismay).

Since SMOs depend, in part, on the strategic and savvy use of new media to get their message out and establish their relevance in the court of public opinion, it stands to reason that many of them would embrace weblogs as a new venue for movement rhetoric. This analysis, then, is concerned with the ways SMOs are making use of weblogs and their efficacy as sites of social movement rhetoric. I am here interested in how each SMO’s weblog reflects—or fails to reflect—the organization’s agenda and performs the rhetorical functions necessary for SMOs to succeed, as well as the extent to which the SMOs made full use of the potential of weblog technology. In short, I intend to assess the value and qualities—functionally, artistically, and ethically—of SMO weblog rhetoric.
NARAL Pro-Choice America: The Blog for Choice

NARAL Pro-Choice America was founded in 1969 as the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws. The organization was dedicated to the elimination of all laws and practices that would compel any woman to bear a child against her will. Through social protest and political lobbying, NARAL set out to raise awareness of abortion rights. The organization also mounted a series of legal challenges to state laws which limited or outlawed abortion. After the 1973 Roe v. Wade court decision that legalized abortion nationwide, NARAL changed its name to the National Abortion Rights Action League and later to the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. In 2003, the organization changed names again, to NARAL Pro-Choice America (hereafter NARAL PCA), which uses a variety of tactics to keep the political spotlight on women’s reproductive health. Though it does occasionally stage large protest marches, such as the 2004 March for Women’s Lives, most of its activities involve lobbying Congress and the White House in support of abortion and reproductive rights and encouraging its members to vote for pro-choice candidates. Electronic media have enabled the organization to perform this function more efficiently: NARAL PCA members can log on to the Web site to learn about issues, sign up for email newsletters, set up monthly donations, and read the Blog for Choice, NARAL PCA’s official weblog.

The Blog for Choice was launched in July 2004 as BushVChoice.com, a weblog intended to showcase President George W. Bush’s anti-choice agenda. The four bloggers who launched the site were the founders of Feministing, a feminist online community. In the early days of BushVChoice, one or more of the four bloggers posted nearly every day,
mostly on women’s issues as they related to the ongoing presidential campaign. One such entry, dated August 20, 2004, was titled “W stands for Women? Uh, yeah... sure” and began, “The Bush campaign celebrated the 84th anniversary of women's right to vote on Wednesday by touting their ‘W Stands for Women’ slogan. I know, don’t laugh. First lady Laura Bush used the opportunity to speak out in Colorado on Pres. Bush’s fantastic record on women. Again, don't laugh.”20 The style of the post was sarcastic, lampooning the “W is for Women” slogan by pointing out the disparity between Bush’s campaign rhetoric and his record on women’s political issues. Although not all early entries were this explicitly partisan, most targeted either the Bush administration or Washington political establishment in general.

After the 2004 election, NARAL PCA continued to use BushVChoice as a platform for women’s advocacy. Entries mostly linked to and critiqued news articles about the Bush administration’s policies regarding abortion, abstinence-only education, the global “gag rule” (an executive order which forbade overseas clinics that received U.S. aid to discuss or provide abortions), and other issues related to women’s health. On April 14, 2008, NARAL PCA officially launched the Blog for Choice, copying over old entries from BushVChoice and using a URL redirect to automatically bring BushVChoice visitors to the new weblog.21 NARAL PCA president Nancy Keenan also recorded a video message welcoming supporters to the new weblog. The founding BushVChoice bloggers resigned from their duties at the end of April, turning the weblog over entirely to in-house NARAL PCA staff.
The new weblog’s design features a fairly simple two-column layout, with main weblog entries appearing on the left and supplementary material, including an “action center” box, list of archived posts, and blogroll, appearing on the right. The graphical header at the top of the page includes two items of note: a photo of the Statue of Liberty—a stylized version of which appears in the NARAL PCA logo—and the Blog for Choice logo, which is a “speech balloon” containing the Blog for Choice name and the motto “Community, Connection, Change.” The main color theme of the page is patriotic red, white, and blue, although the Action Center box appears in orange, presumably so that it will grab readers’ eyes first and perhaps spur them to donate or sign up for one of NARAL PCA’s campaigns.

The focus of the weblog shifted somewhat after the turnover. Although staffers still posted news articles which related to women’s health, more posts focused on NARAL PCA’s efforts in the lobbying and judicial arenas. Some of these posts contained
calls to action, urging supporters to contact their legislator about upcoming votes or add their names to pro-choice petitions. Most, however, simply reported on issues related to NARAL PCA’s mission, sometimes providing a statement for the press to excerpt. For example, a May 6, 2008 post targeted John McCain, then the presumptive Republican nominee for president. The entry contained a list of links to news articles about a McCain speech on appointing federal judges and concluded with a statement from Keenan: “John McCain’s voting record reads like a Who's Who List of right-wing activist judges who are hostile to the constitutional right to privacy and want to allow politicians to interfere in our most personal, private medical decisions. . . . McCain’s support of anti-choice judges will be one of many reasons voters, especially pro-choice Independent and Republican women, will not cast their ballots for him in the fall.”22 Rather than being addressed to either loyal abortion rights supporters or undecided readers, this entry contained a “sound bite” directed at political journalists along with a list of other sources they could consult as they wrote their story. In this entry and many others like it, NARAL PCA demonstrated what Barker-Plummer calls “media pragmatism” and the issue management strategy Smith labels “definition.” By providing a ready-made quotation and linking to other sources which supported its argument, NARAL PCA deliberately made it easy for reporters to write stories sympathetic to its cause.

NARAL PCA may have been good at “definition,” but its efforts at “identification” as an issue management strategy backfired when it endorsed Barack Obama for President of the United States.23 Although Hillary Clinton, whom NARAL PCA had “steadfastly backed . . . throughout her political career”24 was still in the race
for the Democratic nomination, on May 14, 2008, NARAL PCA posted an entry on the Blog for Choice endorsing Obama instead. Keegan stated, “I believe that Sen. Obama is going to be the Democratic nominee. He leads in pledged delegates, superdelegates, the popular vote, and cash-on-hand.” Knowing the decision to endorse Obama over Clinton would be controversial, Keenan argued, “for the sake of the reproductive-rights movement, we need to put any perceived difference behind us, and get to work putting Sen. Obama in the White House.”

The announcement, which came only three weeks before the final primaries, was indeed controversial. Although most posts to the Blog for Choice or its predecessor typically garnered only a handful of comments (if any) from readers, NARAL PCA supporters were quick to chime in with their opinion of the endorsement. The first commenter, “N Miller,” registered strong disapproval: “I have never been so disgusted. How dare you claim to represent pro-choice women and then turn your back on one of the most influential women's right advocates in recent history? I am a lifelong activist and I will never, never forgive you for this.” The next ten comments, including another from “N Miller,” also displayed their anger over the announcement and its timing. One supporter wrote, “I am outraged. This is absolutely ridiculous. I will never give money or support to NARAL again. Shame on you, NARAL, for selling out to the left wing of the Democratic Party.” Another declared, “I am insulted, as all pro-choice Democratic women should be, that Naral would endorse Senator Obama.” Disappointment in NARAL was an ongoing theme, as was anger over the timing of the endorsement. For example, “Ali” wrote, “I am extremely disappointed in NARAL. You waited this long,
why would you not wait another two weeks until we have a nominee? You are counting Hillary out before everyone has spoken. You announce this endorsement the morning after she swept EVERY SINGLE county in WV. The morning after she defeated Obama by 41 points! The morning after the possibility of her winning the popular vote was raised.” Another supporter stated, “What timing. What a terrible endorsement. What a grave disappointment. I have been working for many years in the US Women's Movement and this just makes me so upset. If you had/have issues - you should have just waited to endorse the final nominee.” Not until the twelfth comment did any reader express support for the decision, writing, “Thank you NARAL for seeing that this is not just a womens issue. It's an issue that concerns men and women. To think that Hillary Clinton is the only voice for women is sexist. I am voting for the candidate that believes in bringing people together, not segregating them by sex, race or religion.” The next fourteen, though, again expressed outraged. By the end of the day, some two thousand comments had been posted. Although some supported the decision, most were outraged at what they saw as a betrayal of a women’s rights champion. All in all, 3733 comments were posted in response to the announcement—well more than on all previous posts combined. Simons’ concern about the dilemmas movement leaders face seems well-founded here: by making a choice that was unpopular with movement members, Keenan sparked a previously unseen level of debate among Blog for Choice readers, many of whom declared that they could no longer support the organization.

NARAL PCA staffers worked quickly to try to contain the damage. Later that day, NARAL PCA blogger Molly posted a follow-up to the Blog for Choice assuring
readers that NARAL PCA staffers were “reading each and every comment” and asking all commenters to “keep it civil.” She noted that the “incredible outpouring of comments has put the blogosphere on notice.” The next day, Keenan also posted, assuring those who had posted that their comments were being read and once again calling for “respectful debate.” On May 16, Keenan and NARAL PCA political director Elizabeth Shipp hosted a webchat in which they responded to questions about the endorsement. The transcript was posted on the Blog for Choice and garnered another 205 comments. The furor continued to attract comments to the next few posts, but by May 22 commenting had died back down to pre-endorsement levels: generally zero to ten comments per post.

NARAL PCA’s media pragmatism backfired in the announcement of the Obama endorsement. Although Clinton was still in the race, it was virtually certain by the time of the announcement that Obama would win the nomination. NARAL PCA’s endorsement ensured that the organization would benefit from Obama’s media coverage, but did so at the expense of much of its support from members, who were quite willing to register their displeasure in comments. Perhaps NARAL PCA thought that announcing the endorsement on the Blog for Choice was a safe choice, given that entries usually attracted little active feedback in terms of comments or linking from other weblogs. As noted above, NARAL PCA’s blog posts rarely attracted more than a dozen comments. Since the weblog does not show trackbacks, it is difficult to track interlinking, but searches using Google Blogsearch, a division of the Google search engine which indexes only weblogs, revealed almost no links to NARAL PCA posts from other weblogs. It
took an extremely controversial decision on the part of the organization to spark much
debate as to its mission and activities. Otherwise, NARAL PCA weblog posts seemed to
have little effect on public discourse in the blogosphere.

The low level of reader involvement overall and the polarization caused by the
endorsement announcement suggested that the Blog for Choice’s true audience was not
NARAL PCA supporters, but outside observers, especially the news media. As noted
earlier, the Blog for Choice could be seen as an extension of NARAL PCA’s public
relations office, targeting the media rather than working to recruit or motivate supporters.
Blog for Choice entries mostly reported on NARAL PCA’s activities, and the occasional
calls to action embedded in Blog for Choice posts elicited little response from readers.
For example, a July 1, 2009 post urged readers to “forward this blogpost to all your
friends, call your senator . . . [and] get the word out” on Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter
about the Senate’s “attempts to ban reproductive-health services from being covered in
the new health-care system.”  Again, it is impossible to determine exactly how many of
those calls to action were heeded, but, again, there were no comments at all posted to the
entry—a sign, perhaps, of lackluster interest in the blog’s messages to supporters.

Weblogs, with their interpersonal and interactive style, would seem to be useful
tools for rallying supporters to such a high-profile cause as abortion rights, yet there is
little to suggest that the Blog for Choice fulfills this function. Historically, NARAL
PCA’s primary battles have been fought in venues which do not lend themselves to
vociferous public debate: the back halls of Capitol Hill, and the chambers and courtrooms
of the judicial system. NARAL PCA’s biggest victories have been won in the courts and
in legislative arenas, not by goading the public to protest. In this case, the appearance of interactivity with a larger public may have been more useful to the organization than the actuality of such interactivity—perhaps not the most compelling use of a weblog, but one which fit with the organization’s strategies and goals. The perception that NARAL PCA was rallying its troops through its weblog may have helped create the appearance of grass-roots activism, yet the reality appears to have been something quite different. Indeed, in the one instance when the Blog for Choice inspired a significant public response—the one time commenters did raise their voices—it was to disagree profoundly and loudly with NARAL PCA’s endorsement decision, distracting from what the organization likely hoped would be a positive news story. If NARAL PCA could find a ways to channel the kind of energy its supporters displayed in the wake of the Obama announcement in directions more supportive of the SMO’s goals, it might find the Blog for Choice to be a more useful and powerful tool for pro-choice activism.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals: The PETA Files

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, was founded in 1980 and claims to be the largest animal rights organization in the world with more than two million “members and supporters.” According to the organization’s Web site, PETA “focuses its attention on the four areas in which the largest numbers of animals suffer the most intensely for the longest periods of time: on factory farms, in laboratories, in the clothing trade, and in the entertainment industry.” PETA also claims an interest in a variety of other issues, including “the cruel killing of beavers, birds and other ‘pests,’ and
the abuse of backyard dogs.” PETA works through “public education, cruelty investigations, research, animal rescue, legislation, special events, celebrity involvement, and protest campaigns” to address these issues.\textsuperscript{31} The organization is known for its confrontational protests, such as throwing blood or paint on celebrities wearing fur coats, and its creative ad campaigns, such as the “I’d Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur,” which featured celebrities and activists posing naked for billboard and magazine ads. PETA also maintains dozens of Web sites, including FurIsDead.com, GoVeg.com, StopAnimalTests.com, and others aimed at non-US audiences. Some of these Web sites syndicate related headlines from PETA’s weblog, \textit{The PETA Files}. For example, the GoVeg.com Web site includes a box which links to the most recent three vegetarianism-related entries on \textit{The PETA Files}. For the purposes of this analysis, I will be focusing on \textit{The PETA Files} rather than other sites which syndicate its content, but it is worth mentioning to place the weblog in the context of PETA’s network of Web sites and to note that part of PETA’s online strategy is to link all of its Web sites together.

Figure 2-2 shows the “professional” theme of \textit{The PETA Files’} design. The graphic at the top of the page suggests an office—perhaps a play on the name of the weblog, or a representation of PETA “working hard” for animal rights. The dates of entries are displayed using icons which suggest a desk calendar, supporting the “office” theme. Consistent with the goals of the organization, animals feature prominently: a chicken in the header graphic and a duck in a box at the side of the page. An award for “Best Charity Blog” is displayed proudly at the side, next to a list of recent entries. The award demonstrates \textit{The PETA Files’} connection to the blogosphere at large and reflects
its status as a well-regarded weblog (at least in the eyes of one set of award voters). The front page displays the ten most recent entries. A box labeled “Recent Entries” also displays direct links to each entry so that readers do not have to scroll down the page to catch up on the latest news.

Figure 2-2. Screenshot of The PETA Files

Most The PETA Files entries took one of two forms: reports on offline activism such as anti-fur protests, or links to news articles about animal rights violations. Although one might expect the majority of entries to include a call to action, most merely directed readers to click a link or view a video. Only a handful of entries actually urged readers to perform a specific action, such as signing a petition or sending a letter.

Instead, most entries included photos and/or video, encouraging the reader to stay in place and continue reading. This type of multimedia interactivity increases the weblog’s
“stickiness” (the degree to which readers stay on a particular Web page for an extended period of time). Many entries also included one or more links to another of PETA’s network of Web sites. For example, a June 27, 2008 entry about pet Bengal tigers, for example, linked to WildlifePimps.com, a PETA Web site decrying zoos and the keeping of exotic animals as pets. The weblog also frequently featured brief profiles of celebrities who publicly identify as vegetarians or vegans. Each entry of this type included at least one link to GoVeg.com, PETA’s Web site espousing vegetarian diets. Therefore, even if readers didn’t stay for very long on The PETA Files, they were presented with many PETA-related options for further reading. And since many of those Web sites linked back to The PETA Files, readers were encouraged to remain in PETA’s network.

Like its outrageous offline tactics, which often relied upon shame and titillation, PETA’s online rhetoric made heavy use of pathos as a means of persuasion. Photographs and videos of cruelty tugged at viewers’ heartstrings or turned their stomachs, while reports of protest actions were meant to spark pride in the organization’s efforts. Figure 2-3 shows a typical The PETA Files entry which documented an offline protest called “Circus Animals: Shackled, Lonely, Beaten.” In it, a woman wearing only underwear and made up to look as if she was bruised lay chained in front of a sign proclaiming the protest’s message. Other PETA activists held signs declaring “Ringling Beats Animals” and directing viewers to another of PETA’s websites, Circuses.com. The entry praised the activists for braving the January cold and called attention to the woman’s nakedness, noting that the “attention garnered by [her] loveliness was directed at the ugly circus industry.” The entry, like the protest itself, was meant to provoke emotional responses:
titillation at the woman’s near-nakedness, anger at her “bruises,” respect for her dedication—and, of course, interest in more information about PETA’s mission.

Figure 2-3. Screenshot of a single weblog entry on The PETA Files. Most entries included at least one photograph, often documenting their offline protest activity.

The PETA Files’ archives date back to October 2006, but in the early days the site
did not always sustain a consistent protest message. One early entry, for example,
displayed a photo of a cartoonishly menacing Colonel Sanders (the Kentucky Fried
Chicken spokesperson) burning in effigy with a woman carrying a “Boycott KFC” sign
standing nearby. The accompanying text read, “In the course of negotiations with a
company like KFC—which refuses to make even minimal improvements in the lives of
the billions of chickens it uses for profit—there is a time for subtlety and there’s a time
for burning their corporate logo in effigy. This past week turned out to be of the latter
sort.”

Despite the shock value of the photo, it attracted only four unique comments, not
all of them supportive. Commenter “david patrick harden” wrote, “I hope everyone joins
PETA in boycotting the KFC. It is a terrible thing KFC is doing and this should be stopped. Good
job PETA.” Yet another commenter, “Kentucky Hick,” had a very different perspective,
replying: “Man, I have to say that every time I see a KFC protest, I get really hungry for a
bucket of the stuff. This sort of stuff just doesn't work.” Although the dissent came from
a commenter who self-identified as a “hick,” the comment still distracted from PETA’s
overall message.

Later entries reflected a more sophisticated awareness of the potentials of the
weblog form, especially for media engagement. For example, although most entries had
about ten comments by readers attached to them, an entry dated January 27, “NBC’s
Sexually-Explicit Super Bowl Ad Rejection Makes Us Blush,” garnered nearly three
hundred comments. PETA had tried to purchase ad time for a commercial during the
2009 Super Bowl, but NBC rejected their commercial, saying it was “too racy.”

Although their objective was stymied, PETA took to its weblog to counterattack, posting
not only a video of the advertisement in question, but NBC’s letter explaining—in graphic detail—which portions of the ad the broadcast company found too “racy” for family viewing. Included were objections to scenes of a woman “licking pumpkin,” “touching her breast with her hand while eating broccoli,” and “rubbing asparagus on breast.” As The PETA Files said, “Wow, that list even made us blush!” Consistent with PETA’s strategy of driving traffic to their other Web sites, the entry also included links to GoVeg.com, which alleged that a diet too high in meat causes impotence, and LettuceLadies.com, which featured models wearing lingerie made from lettuce leaves. By linking to these sites from a weblog entry that was sure to get a great deal of attention, PETA took advantage of the situation to drive traffic to its other sites, all of which support the position the Super Bowl ad endorsed. PETA also created a graphic using an image from the commercial to provide readers with a taste of what they could see by watching the video (see Figure 2-4).

Figure 2-4. “Veggie Love” graphic from The PETA Files

The “Veggie Love” entry was indeed linked to from many mainstream media sites and other weblogs, including the front page of CNN.com—perhaps ensuring more
viewers than if the ad had actually aired during the Super Bowl (and for a fraction of the cost). This incident demonstrates PETA’s strategy of provoking controversy to attract media attention—and to promote what Smith refers to as “polarization.” PETA’s stated goal of airing a commercial during the Super Bowl, one of television’s most-watched events, was not met, but by exploiting the moment on its weblog and playfully critiquing NBC’s letter, PETA was able to capitalize both in terms of increased media coverage and weblog readership (at least according to the higher-than-usual number of comments).

Again, however, the comments reflected a mixed response to the tactic. Many commenters expressed disapproval of the sexual content of the ad, although others cheered PETA on and derided NBC for declining to air the commercial. For example, the first comment, by “Mr. Y,” read, “Arguably the greatest advert that has ever been :) ... Oh to be a Broccolli spear ...” The eighth comment, by “Kurt K,” however, voiced a common complaint against the ad: “Not to sound old fashioned, but I don't think that is something kids need to see. We all know that millions of kids will be watching the Super Bowl and this is something I wouldn't want my kids to see.” PETA’s tactic of capitalizing on the ad’s scandalous nature seemed to amuse some supporters but may have alienated others.

The PETA Files engage multiple audiences simultaneously. For the curious-but-uncommitted reader, The PETA Files provides “education” by linking to other PETA websites, where readers can learn about cruelty-free lifestyle choices. These Web sites, however, are informational rather than interactive—there are no spaces for comments. Readers who already support PETA’s mission are targeted with more militant rhetoric,
such as entries which expose animal rights abuses in graphic detail or showcase high-profile protests. These allow supporters to keep up with PETA’s offline activities even if they cannot participate themselves, creating a more direct connection to the movement (and organization) than might otherwise be possible. By documenting these offline tactics in *The PETA Files*, PETA encourages its supporters to virtually join the protest by adding their comments. As these comments demonstrate, however, PETA cannot always keep all of their readers satisfied. In the KFC and “Veggie Love” entries, for example, some commenters praised PETA’s efforts while others critiqued their protest tactics as ineffectual or unethical. Supporters and dissenters used the same space to celebrate or to critique PETA’s tactics.

Despite the occasional protest, however, PETA’s weblog generally worked well to attract the spotlight to PETA’s tactics and provide guidance and inspiration to animal rights activists. Most *The PETA Files* entries served as a sort of news feed of offline PETA activities, providing reports and photos of “real-world” PETA protests and continuing PETA’s strategy of publicly confronting those it sees as opposed to its mission. Although *The PETA Files* encouraged more interactivity than the *Blog for Choice*—more comments, more multimedia, more opportunities to click through to other sites, and more calls to action—PETA, like NARAL PCA, operated within a fairly limited political sphere. Since its strategy is based largely on extreme tactics designed to attract attention, it is unsurprising to see this sensibility reflected in its weblog. Thus, *The PETA Files* performs valuable functions for the organization, but it does not contribute as much as it might to the substantive public debate over the issues raised by the larger
animal rights movement.

**Greenpeace: Campaign, Grassroots, and Community**

Greenpeace is an international organization dedicated to the protection of the environment. With roots in the peace movement of the late 1960s, Greenpeace began as the anti-nuclear “Don’t Make a Wave Committee.” “Greenpeace” was the name of that committee’s first expedition to protest nuclear testing in Amchitka, Alaska. The group changed its name to the Greenpeace Foundation in 1972. Since then, Greenpeace has “borne witness” to environmental destruction “in a peaceful, non-violent manner.”

Greenpeace is most well-known for its high-profile and confrontational tactics, such as blockading commercial whaling boats, protesting against nuclear testing, and occupying coal-burning power plants. Although Greenpeace members have occasionally taken more drastic actions, such as vandalism and theft, they have largely avoided the more violent and illegal tactics of groups like the Earth Liberation Front. Currently, Greenpeace focuses on raising awareness of global warming, protecting the oceans and forests, stopping nuclear power, and removing toxic chemicals from everyday life. Notably, they raise all their organizational funds through individual donations, refusing to accept donations from corporations or special interest groups. Greenpeace also does not endorse political candidates, preferring to work through direct action rather than electoral politics.

Greenpeace’s Web site, unsurprisingly for an environmental organization, uses various shades of green throughout, with orange as a highlight color. The organization’s weblog follows this color scheme, though the design is somewhat simpler. Of particular
note is a page on the main Greenpeace Web site called the “Bloggers’ Center,” where bloggers from other sites can sign up to receive news updates or just browse to see the latest videos and photos Greenpeace distributes to the mainstream media. Figure 2-5 shows this page, which includes graphics from blogging and social networking sites to encourage readers to promote Greenpeace on those sites. As we will see shortly, this effort to reach out to bloggers is part of Greenpeace’s overall social media strategy. Weblogs are not an incidental part of Greenpeace’s media strategy, but central to it.

Figure 2-5. Screenshot of Greenpeace’s “Bloggers’ Center”

Rather than set their weblog apart from the main content of the Web site, Greenpeace integrates weblog content into nearly every level of the site. Like PETA, Greenpeace syndicates content from its weblogs onto the front page of its main Web site. However, rather than relegate this content to a list of headlines off to the side, excerpts from Greenpeace’s weblogs appear in the center of the front page, as seen in Figure 2-6.
Greenpeace once maintained several “official” weblogs, including *Making Waves*, a weblog about Greenpeace’s worldwide environmental activism, and *Nuclear Reaction*, which specifically addressed Greenpeace’s efforts to halt nuclear testing and nuclear power. However, in early 2010 all official Greenpeace weblogs were combined into the *Campaign* weblog, which is maintained by Greenpeace staffers. The weblog still features entries about nuclear testing and environmental activism, of course, but they are now part of Greenpeace’s official weblog rather than being separated out into different spaces.

Like the *Blog for Choice*, some of these weblog entries describe upcoming lobbying efforts (for example, discussions of climate change at the G-8 and G-20 meetings); like *The PETA Files*, other entries provide details of offline activism, such as photos of Greenpeace demonstrators dressed as whales protesting in front of the White House in support of whaling bans. Other posts contain calls to action, links to news stories about
Greenpeace’s issues, or other “standard” weblog topics. By simply reading the *Campaign* weblog, one would get a detailed picture of Greenpeace’s efforts to raise awareness of their various issues, but little would appear to distinguish it rhetorically from the other SMO weblogs analyzed in this chapter.

Greenpeace’s *Campaign* weblog posts typically do not garner very many comments, but the organization provides other means of joining the conversation. As shown in Figure 2-7, each entry also has a Facebook “Share” button and a button which posts a link to the user’s Twitter page. These features allow readers to help “push” Greenpeace’s message out to audiences on other social networking sites. They also provide an additional measure of reader involvement, since one can see how many times each entry has been shared or “tweeted.”

![Figure 2-7. Screenshot of Greenpeace’s Campaign weblog.](Image)

Movement participants are also invited to create weblogs in Greenpeace’s network and
contribute to Greenpeace’s overall blogging effort. For example, if Greenpeace member “jessicas” posts to their Greenpeace blog, the entry appears on the user’s individual weblog page (http://members.greenpeace.org/blog/jessicas/), in the Community weblog (http://members.greenpeace.org/blog/community), and, if Greenpeace staffers approve it, in the Grassroots weblog (http://members.greenpeace.org/blog/grassroots/). Thus, users can see their personal environmental discourse become part of Greenpeace’s rhetoric, perhaps reaching a wider audience than would a single weblog.

Greenpeace bloggers can also invite each other to join their “Personal Activist Networks,” which means that when they log in to Greenpeace’s Web site, they see each other’s latest weblog posts. Greenpeace urges users of its Grassroots weblog page to get involved: “Join the conversation here! Start your own blog and connect with our staff organizers as well as other bloggers and activists in the Greenpeace online community. Network with fellow activists, share your stories, discuss latest news and trends, and trade tips on organizing and living green. This is your forum to help build the movement by engaging with the Greenpeace community and other environmental activists.”

Nearly all of the verbs in this passage involve creating and maintaining connections: connect, network, share, discuss, trade, engage. These words reflect an understanding of the internetworked nature of blogging.

Of course, this signup process produces tangible benefits for the organization as well. As shown in Figure 2-8, in signing up for Greenpeace’s blogging service, users are asked to describe themselves, their topics of interest, and their skills that might be of use to Greenpeace’s activist efforts. Responses to these questions are not mandatory, but if
enough Greenpeace bloggers provide answers, the organization can build a robust picture of its most ardent supporters and target its rhetoric (and fundraising efforts) more specifically to them.

Figure 2-8. Screenshot of the signup page for Greenpeace’s blogging site

After logging in, members are taken to the “Action Center,” where they can write a weblog entry, contribute to a forum discussion, see what their friends have posted, join one of the ongoing Greenpeace campaigns, or update their profile. Figure 2-9 shows that the buttons for each are large and well-labeled—even someone who has never blogged before would likely find the interface easy to use. Users simply click the “Blog” button, type their entry into the box, and click the “Publish” button for their entry to appear on their personal weblog and the Community weblog. Although all three SMOs profiled in this chapter encourage supporters to “sign up,” only Greenpeace offers its supporters something more than daily email updates and newsletters: a space within Greenpeace’s network to contribute directly to the organization’s public rhetoric.
Entries are not moderated on individuals’ weblogs, meaning that bloggers can write about anything they wish without fear that their entries will be censored or edited. In the wake of the May 2010 Deepwater Horizon rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, popular topics included the resulting oil geyser and the nation’s dependence on petroleum. Some bloggers were angry. One wrote, “Looking at the amount of suffering in the oil spill I feel ashamed too be of the same species as those greedy and stupid people of BP!” Another, posting as “barbaraboxerlover321,” took President Obama to task, stating, “Obama needed to push the Senate to pass a green energy expansion package with better and more efficient regulation of the oil, coal, and natural gas industry. Also, he needs to eliminate the tax breaks that the 4 most profitable oil companies in the world get. Why on earth should Exxon Mobil get a tax rebate of 140 million dollars when it earns 40 billion dollars in profit?” 

Blogger “big_bang_ensemble” used even more direct language, declaring, “Stop all off shore drilling now. Prevent the possibility of another catastrophe. Save our beautiful wildlife from a horrible death.” Reflecting
several different views of the same environmental catastrophe, these posts could all be found on the same archive page of the *Community* weblog, as well as in each blogger’s individual weblog. However, none of them were “promoted” to the *Grassroots* weblog.

*Campaign*, *Grassroots*, and *Community*, along with the “Bloggers’ Center” page discussed earlier, reflect Greenpeace’s more sophisticated understanding of the nature of blogging. Greenpeace does not limit their supporters’ interaction with the organization to comments and trackbacks, nor do they commit all their blogging resources to one rhetorical form. Rather, supporters may become partners in Greenpeace’s blogosphere through individual Greenpeace weblogs or by signing up their external weblogs in the Bloggers’ Center—though, of course, reading, commenting on, and sharing *Campaign* weblog entries remain options as well. *Community* appears to be a fairly new and, unfortunately, rather underused part of Greenpeace’s weblog network. For example, although members can comment on each others’ weblog entries, few people seem to be doing so—and many members seem to have signed up, posted one entry, then disappeared. Although Greenpeace’s weblog network has great potential for fostering deliberation in the environmental movement, as an organizational tool it seems to be underperforming. However, given that one of Greenpeace’s stated goals is “to raise the level and quality of public debate” on environmental issues, it is hardly surprising—though still gratifying—to see the extent to which this is reflected in their approach to blogging.44 As we will see in the next chapter, such blogging is not at all uncommon in the environmental movement, so Greenpeace is wise to keep such supporters “in the fold.”
Of the three SMO blogging efforts examined in this chapter, Greenpeace’s network of weblogs makes the best use of the medium’s unique affordances. Only Greenpeace makes an effort to foster not only official weblogs, but vernacular supporter weblogs in its network. However, centralizing supporters under the Greenpeace umbrella both aids and hinders their contribution to public deliberation. It provides a “safe” space for people who might not wish (or know how) to create a weblog on their own initiative, but accords Greenpeace some level of control over the nature of weblog posts. It offers “instant community” to its bloggers, but amplifies the potential for the conversation to degenerate into merely positive feedback due to the fact that the conversants largely share the same environmental views. In short, Greenpeace’s network of official and supporter weblogs is, in many ways, a microcosm of the overall blogosphere, representing many of the same potentials and perils outlined in chapter one of this study.

Conclusion

Social movement organizations’ media awareness must evolve with the changing media landscape. Successful social movements in the past have been those which were able to use various new media, from newspapers to radio to television, to their best advantage. However, history has taught us that “media movements” are not necessarily effective at securing policy changes. For example, as J. Michael Hogan has argued, the nuclear freeze campaign of the 1980s enjoyed great success as a media phenomenon but did not have a long-term effect on the political landscape. SMOs must therefore be carefully strategic in their use of new media, using it to perform necessary functions.
rather than becoming defined by it. As McCarthy and Zald argue, there is the danger that successful, professional SMOs will invent or fabricate reasons to exist, rather than emerge in response to real social problems or real injustices. Weblogs certainly have the potential to amplify this danger. Like the 24-hour news cycle, weblogs rely on a constant stream of news to remain relevant, and if there is no news to post, SMOs must create a “crisis” or run the risk of becoming stale with nothing to write about. We see hints of this possibility in NARAL PCA’s announcement of its endorsement of Hillary Clinton and in PETA’s attempt to stir up more controversy over its Super Bowl ad. Although NARAL PCA found itself on the defensive, its announcement did seem to generate more traffic on the site, and PETA clearly reveled in the attention mainstream media paid to the controversy over its ad and tried to exploit that attention to promote its larger goals.

The three SMO weblogs analyzed in this chapter are by no means representative of all SMO blogging efforts. However, they do represent three distinct approaches to social media by SMOs, each of which reflect that SMO’s overall rhetorical strategy. NARAL Pro-Choice America approaches its weblog as a branch of its public relations office, writing posts that sound like press releases and only occasionally engaging their audience directly. PETA’s weblog is an extension of its overall media strategy, supporting and supplementing the organization’s goal of gaining media coverage of its protest tactics. Greenpeace works to get its audience more directly involved in its activist blogging, providing a space for people to “bear witness” to their own environmental activism and connect to others. Each SMO uses its weblog in ways which support the
organization, but which may not serve the best interests of the movement or the public as a whole.

Weblogs perform some rhetorical functions better than others. For example, PETA’s use of its weblog to document its offline protest activities makes those activities available to a much larger audience, including supporters who cannot be physically present for the protests. NARAL PCA’s Blog for Choice is an excellent resource for journalists looking to write stories about the organization’s lobbying actions. Greenpeace’s Community weblog network is a useful recruiting tool, as it invites supporters to join their voices with Greenpeace’s and provides the organization with valuable data about its membership. However, none of the weblogs analyzed in this chapter seem to sustain interactive public debate about the issues the SMOs address. With the exception of the occasional controversial entry, there was little feedback from movement members to the organizations and even less linking from weblogs elsewhere in the blogosphere. This may not be an issue for NARAL PCA and PETA, whose weblogs serve more pragmatic functions for the organizations, but it should be cause for concern for Greenpeace, which professes to want to raise the level and quality of public debate about environmental issues. And, given that all three organizations post direct appeals for action in their weblogs, the lack of enthusiasm on the part of their readers should be troubling to the SMOs’ leadership. Although weblogs can be useful SMO tools, it appears that organizations have not yet found the best ways to exploit their full potential as tools for constituting and mobilizing vibrant activist communities.
Notes


5 Everett, “Professionalization and Protest.”


8 See, for example, Jessica Sheffield, “A Rhetorical Analysis of the Dean for America E-Campaign” (Masters thesis, The Pennsylvania State University, 2006). Howard Dean’s presidential campaign made particularly effective use of the Web to recruit and mobilize volunteers; the campaign weblog was one of the primary tools used by the campaign.


10 Smith is here utilizing public relations scholar W. Timothy Coombs’ typology of issue management strategies. Michael Francis Smith, “Issue Status and Social Movement Organization Maintenance: Two Case Studies in Rhetorical Diversification” (Ph.D. Diss., Purdue University,
1996).


12 Barker-Plummer, “News as a Political Resource.”


15 For example, Trent Lott’s political career was destroyed by segregationist remarks he made at a “private” dinner honoring Strom Thurmond, which later made their way onto the Web.

16 It is perhaps more surprising that many of them still do not, or do so badly. The National Organization for Women, for example, does not maintain a weblog although their “NOW Read This” is structured similarly, whereas the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People does maintain a weblog, but updates it irregularly and infrequently.


18 NARAL Pro-Choice America, “Key Moments.”


21 A URL (Uniform Resource Locator) redirect means that when users access the old Web
address, their Web browser is automatically taken to the new Web address.


31 People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, “PETA’s Mission Statement.”


35 Smith, “Issue Status and Social Movement Organization Maintenance.”

36 People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, “NBC’s Sexually-Explicit Super Bowl Ad Rejection Makes Us Blush.”


keeps-promise-on-wh_1 (accessed July 24, 2010).


44 Greenpeace, “About Us.”


46 McCarthy and Zald, “The Trend of Social Movements in America.”
Chapter Three: Ethos and Ego-Function in Activist Blogging

To some, becoming part of a social movement means writing a check to a social movement organization, joining with others in a protest or boycott, canvassing in support of a particular initiative, or other collective actions. These actions help sustain social movements as political phenomena, with identifiable leaders, political ambitions, and organizational strategies and tactics. As I discussed in chapter one, however, we also might think of a social movement as a set of shared meanings created by the rhetoric of both those who identify with the movement and others outside of the movement. Historically, establishment figures, the news media, and other opinion leaders have had considerable control over the “meaning” of social movements. The rise of the information age and the spread of Internet access, however, have given ordinary citizens more chances to speak out and shape the “meaning” of social movements, without others mediating or interpreting their ideas and emotions.

In this chapter, I analyze the rhetoric of individual activist blogging—that is, attempts by ordinary citizens to constitute social movements online. I argue that these weblogs serve as rich sites of social movement discourse, even as they reconfigure our notion of what a social movement is or can be. Activist bloggers create opportunities for identification with a movement through their weblogs. Leaving behind the often-divisive political stances of SMOs, individual activist bloggers instead focus attention on discrete aspects of movements and showcase their own personal efforts. Additionally, by linking to other, similarly-minded activists through weblog entries and blogrolls, these bloggers
create complex movement networks. In this chapter, I focus mainly on individual movement weblogs, though the “network” function will play a role in the analysis. I will return to the idea of social movement networks in Chapter Four.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of Richard B. Gregg’s conception of “the ego-function of the rhetoric of protest,” noting both ways it helps us to understand the purposes and functions of these activist blogs, and how Gregg’s theory must be revised and updated to account for the discourse of these weblogs. I next move to a consideration of ethos as it pertains to blogging, exploring some of the ways in which individual activist weblogs become sites for social movement identification. I then deploy these concepts in a critical analysis of two environmental weblogs created by individual activist bloggers, No Impact Man and EnviroWoman. These two sites, as I will show, constitute unique social movements revolving around the personal crusades and personae of their creators. Finally, I discuss the implications for social movement rhetoric when, as Gregg puts it, “programmatic concerns become incidental to more personal functions.”

**Weblogs: Vernacular Spaces for Activism and Identification**

Writing in 1977 about the Black Power, student, and womens’ movements, Richard B. Gregg argued that “one of the major aspects of protest rhetoric is its concern for the ego,” a concern which is “revealed both in the way the symbolic motif of personal confrontation is developed in rhetoric and in the emphasis on style.” The ego-function of protest rhetoric, Gregg contends, is a rich concept for rhetorical analysis because it
sheds light on some of the contradictory and “cacophonous” dimensions of social movement rhetoric. Gregg argues that, in some cases, “the primary appeal of the rhetoric of protest is to the protestors themselves, who feel the need for psychological refurbishing and affirmation. . . . the rhetoric is basically self-directed.”3 By examining how protest rhetoric serves the psychological needs of protestors—needs which may, in fact, be opposed to the stated goals of the movement—we can begin to understand the protest rhetoric that, at first glance, seems counterproductive or otherwise makes little strategic sense.4

Although activist weblogs fall far outside the purview of traditional social movement theory, Gregg’s discussion of the ego-function of the rhetoric of protest is still useful for understanding these weblogs. Gregg states that the key to understanding the ego-function is to note that protesters typically orient themselves away from the establishment, in some cases banding together around a group identity rather than truly seeking to redress grievances. As Gregg notes, “It is easy to understand how individuals perceiving themselves, their life styles, their values threatened by an intensifying rhetoric of counter-identification become frightened by behaviors which disrupt their hitherto predictable world and sense the need to reassure themselves and to defend their own ego-identifications. Such persons would find comfort in knowing that they were not alone and powerless and insignificant in the face of what they view to be threatening situations.”5 Taken one step further, this might help us understand how individual activist weblogs function to constitute social movements: a barbaric yawp, perhaps, to join with others against the establishment. Indeed, this reflects one of the fears about the viability
of the blogosphere as a space for true democratic deliberation—that bloggers will seek out only the “yawps” with which they agree, creating enclaves of like-minded activists who rarely challenge their own (or each others’) belief systems.

Why create one’s own spaces for movement action, rather than simply joining an existing social movement organization? The answer, perhaps, lies in the ways identification is created and managed in SMOs versus in social movements that consist of collectively shared meanings. SMOs, through their online and offline rhetoric, provide opportunities for identification with the organization itself, or with the movement through the organization. Individual weblogs, on the other hand, allow for the creation and maintenance of a movement-related identity that does not depend on any external organization. Instead, one’s identity in such movements is bound up in a shared vernacular language and a set of common beliefs, values, and ideas.

**Vernacular Spaces: The Everyday-ness of Blogging**

Most weblogs are vernacular, separate from and opposed to the more “official” discourses of organized or institutionalized political organizations. Yet weblog discourse is anything but monolithic; indeed, we often see the weblogs of individual activists disparage the more institutionalized discourse of bloggers who identify with particular social movement organizations. While they may share common priorities and goals with the institutionalized bloggers, the more individualistic bloggers often find the rhetoric of existing social movement organizations too “official” for their tastes. By studying vernacular rhetoric, as Gerard Hauser notes, we can better understand what is really important to social actors, without the mediating effects of some larger organization’s
agenda or a reporter’s account.\textsuperscript{6}

Vernacular rhetoric, according to Kent Ono and John Sloop, is both speech and culture. It includes both the ways members of a community speak to one another, and the art, music, architecture, and other markers of culture that they share.\textsuperscript{7} Ono and Sloop argue that the study of vernacular rhetoric provides a valuable way to gain understanding of marginalized or oppressed groups—\textemdash\textemdash and of their attitudes toward established institutions. Studying vernacular rhetoric allows us to begin to make visible the power relations among actors in the public realm. Vernacular discourse, as Ono and Sloop conclude, is both counterhegemonic, undermining the dominant modes of discussion and debate, and affirmative, as it builds and sustains new communities.

Robert Glenn Howard has written widely about the vernacular discourse of the World Wide Web, which he describes as both spontaneous and strategic. He examines vernacular Web discourses that represent naturally arising opposition to institutionalism, yet that also seem designed to perform certain community-building and persuasive functions.\textsuperscript{8} In his analyses of Christian and even pet-oriented personal Web sites, Howard identifies vernacular rhetorics that work to constitute counterpublics in opposition to the mainstream Church and the established pet-care industry. The rapid corporatization of the Web in the early 2000s, he argues, might have undermined such sites by establishing higher standards of design and performance, much as commercial radio stations undermined amateur ham radio. Instead, he argues, the vernacular discourse of the World Wide Web survived, even as flashier commercial sites increased on the Web. Invoking Ono and Sloop’s theory of vernacular discourse, Howard shows
how such sites performed both counter-institutional and affirmative functions, resisting dominant discourses at the same time that they affirmed a commitment to some newly emerging discursive community.

For several reasons, weblogs are a particularly rich domain for the examination of vernacular discourse. First, they are selective: bloggers choose the official (and unofficial) discourses they wish to respond to on their own weblogs. This selectivity allows the critic to view the multiple discourses and publics with which a blogger chooses to identify. Second, blogging is dynamic and reactive: responses to current events are often posted within minutes of their occurrence, allowing the critic to track the spread of a conversation about some particular event over time across the Web. Finally, blogging is internetworked: conversations among bloggers can be traced by following links between entries, allowing the critic to view changes in the nature and character of public debates over time. The particular affordances and restraints unique to weblogs mean that they are spaces in which the identities of the blogger, readers, commentators, and even that of the social movement itself are negotiated and renegotiated with each entry. This means we must consider the importance of character—the character of the blogger, of the movement, and of the weblog itself—in understanding the rhetorical dimensions of activist blogging.

*Ethos, Identification, and Community*

The Aristotelian notion of *ethos* is commonly understood to refer to a speaker’s character as manifested in his or her speech. However, scholars such as Kami Day and Michelle Eodice have contended that ethos has to do with both character and place.9
According to William Sattler, *ethos* is derived from the Greek word for custom, habit, or usage, while S. Michael Halloran notes that one Greek meaning for *ethos* is “a habitual gathering place.” Halloran evokes images of “people gathering together in a … place, sharing experiences and ideas… to have ethos is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks.”\(^\text{10}\) Michael Hyde also notes that we can understand *ethos* in its more primordial sense, as a “place of living” or “dwelling place.” He argues that “the *ethos* of rhetoric” can “refer to the way discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’ where people can deliberate about and ‘know together’ (*con-scientia*) some matters of interest. Such dwelling places define the grounds, the abodes or habitats, where a person’s ethics and moral character take form and develop.”\(^\text{11}\) These definitions suggest that *ethos* is social, spatial, and rhetorically determined.

This notion of *ethos* as a “dwelling place” provides a useful lens for examining weblogs. Rather than thinking of weblogs as documents, we can think of them as spaces where people “know together” online.\(^\text{12}\) Even the term “blogosphere,” often used to refer to the internetworking among weblogs (in its own way, a sort of meta-Internet based on semantic relationships among content), evokes this idea of *space*: a defined and definite area in which blogging *is* civic participation. Through writing, reading, and commenting on weblogs, people find and create places online to speak, gather, work, and play—in short, to live (*habitas*), or, as Howard Rheingold might put it, to “homestead.”\(^\text{13}\)

The *ethos* of rhetoric, Hyde argues, “would have one appreciate how the *premises* and other materials of arguments are not only tools of logic but also mark out the
boundaries and domains of thought that, depending on how their specific discourses are designed and arranged, may be particularly inviting and moving for some audience.”

This way of thinking of ethos presents us with a way of understanding some of the distinctive rhetorical features of electronic texts in general and weblogs in particular. Notably, the relationship between weblog “authors” and their “readers” is confounded: as Lester Faigley notes, electronic texts allow the reader to participate in the construction of the text, creating a very different relationship between author and reader than exists with printed texts, which have a linear structure. Specifically, the addition of comments to weblog entries means that the page is never static, but is in a constant state of creation and development. Commenting also opens up a new space for weblog readers to communicate with one another, creating “two opportunities for interaction on the blog for the readers: one with the blog author and one with other readers.”

Thus, communal identity is linked to the identity of the activist blogger. As Gregg notes, we must be aware that at the same time an individual is engaged in a rhetorical act for the purpose of establishing their own identity, that individual “may also, acting as surrogate, aid in the establishment of identities for others. Sometimes interacting affirmations accomplish the egoidentification of a number of selves.” Similarly, Mike T. Hübler and Diana Calhoun Bell argue that group formation, from a rhetorical perspective, is “partly a process of situating individual ethos appeals in relation to each other, so that a common, group ethos emerges.” According to Kenneth Burke, Aristotle’s “commonplaces” can be sites of identification. Burke writes, “The so-called ‘commonplaces’ or ‘topics’ in Aristotle’s Art of Rhetoric . . . are a quick survey of
‘opinion’ in this sense. . . . the important thing, for our purposes, is to note that such types are derived from the principles of persuasion, in that they are but a survey of the things that people generally consider persuasive, and of methods that have persuasive effects.”

In other words, by creating and utilizing common places, activist bloggers develop “dwelling places” for identification with social movements.

Activist “Journals”

Weblogs, as noted before, trace their beginnings to the personal Web page. Long a site for personal expression, the personal Web page was, for many, too static to fully represent their changing daily lives. The weblog was born as a way for active Web users to rapidly update their Web pages with the latest news about their lives, links to online content, thoughts about the world, and anything else the weblog author found interesting. Rebecca Blood observes that although weblogs share a common form and many similar characteristics, each blogger creates a “personal version of the weblog format, dictated by purpose, interest, and whim.”

This is particularly evident in the personal or “journal” style weblog, popularized by weblog design and hosting services like Blogger.com and LiveJournal.com. Blood calls these “short-form journal” weblogs—quick, short updates on events in the blogger’s life. Some bloggers explicitly adopt the “diary” or “journal” format, yet these “diaries” are posted in public and may be read by thousands of visitors, unlike (for the most part) their physical counterparts, which are hidden away in drawers or under beds. A more apt comparison might be those Christmas “newsletters” that many people send (“What a great year for the Smiths! We started off January with a bang by visiting Disneyworld . . .”), repeated on a massive scale. The format invites
communication in an interpersonal style, even if the mode of delivery is one-to-many.

Style is of particular importance in individual activist blogging. As Gregg notes, “[o]ne’s style is what one is, in a publicly demonstrable sense,”22 But activist bloggers must often negotiate among multiple styles, sometimes in a single post: enthusiastic praise for the activism, logical argument for its need, emotional descriptions or stories, exhortations for the readership to take action, and so forth. Additionally, the graphic design of the weblog itself contributes to the weblog’s stylistic expression. Weblog designs vary nearly as widely as does the content they frame. Although each major blogging service offers stock design templates from which bloggers can choose, many bloggers customize the look-and-feel of their weblogs to exhibit portions of their personality, present a certain online persona, support and reinforce the weblog content in a visual way, or conform to some sort of community norm. (For example, a weblog devoted to discussion of a television show might use a scene from the show as a background image, whereas a general-topic weblog might use a more generic background.) In the case of weblogs devoted to social or political activism, we might expect that the design of the weblog would be connected to the persuasive message being presented—that is, the weblog’s design, rather than distract from the content, would be an integral part of it.

In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze two different examples of bloggers “joining” the environmental movement through their weblogs. The first, No Impact Man, documents the effort of a New York City writer and his family to live without impacting the Earth. The second, Living Plastic Free, tackles a project similar in purpose though
less ambitious in scope; it chronicles a blogger called “EnviroWoman’s” efforts to reduce her plastic usage to zero. These two weblogs are especially useful to this project because they engage the same basic topic and discuss many of the same issues and controversies, yet they do so in rhetorically divergent ways. By examining these two weblogs next to one another, we can get a sense of how bloggers use particular stylistic choices to “rewrite” movements at an individual, vernacular level.

_No Impact Man_

Colin Beavan, a professional writer living in New York City, maintained a weblog called _No Impact Man_, in which he documented his family’s efforts to live without having any net impact on the Earth: “In other words, no trash, no carbon emissions, no toxins in the water, no elevators, no subway, no products in packaging, no plastics, no air conditioning, no TV, no toilets…” He has been profiled by, among others, the _New York Times_, ABC News, BBC News, and Stephen Colbert of _The Colbert Report_ (who satirically used an energy-wasting microwave to keep time during Beavan’s on-air interview). Although the initial year-long experiment concluded in early 2008, Beavan’s efforts led to book and film deals, and he continues to blog about sustainability and reducing one’s impact on the environment.

The design of the weblog is minimalist: a subtle background, neutral color scheme, and simple fonts underscore the author’s “no impact” message. As Figure 3-1 shows, the logo at the top shows one green skyscraper among several dull grey ones, with a man standing next to two trees growing on top of the green skyscraper. Birds share the
sky with clouds. Since Beavan lives in New York City, the logo conveys the message that one can be low- or no-impact even in a large city. The hand-drawn appearance of the scene also lends credence to the “simplicity” theme Beavan espouses: rather than a photo manipulation or a high-tech computer illustration, the hand-drawn logo evokes a handcrafted ethos—perfect for someone choosing to live a simpler life.

Although the design is meaningful, however, it does not seem to be essential to the message, as Beavan highlights several other methods readers can use to receive the weblog’s content. In addition to reading No Impact Man, readers can subscribe to have new posts emailed to them, add the weblog’s RSS feed to their reader, get news by email, or follow Beavan on Twitter or Facebook. These alternate reading options are often built into weblogs, but Beavan’s design foregrounds them on the first screen and on the left side of the page where readers tend to look first. Further down the left side of the page, Beavan adds information about the book and film versions of his message, offering yet
more options for readers interested in either the blogger or the overall No Impact project. Thus, although the design does support the content on this weblog, Beavan’s efforts to get his message out do not necessarily depend on readers accessing the weblog directly. For those readers who do visit No Impact Man, they can still choose to instead have future messages delivered to them via email or RSS syndication; they need not come back to the weblog to access Beavan’s message.

As with all weblogs, Beavan’s most recent posts are displayed in reverse chronological order on the front page of the site. Yet readers can also read through archives of past posts by date or topic. Each entry is categorized into one or more of nineteen categories, including “Activism,” “Food and Drink,” “Getting around,” “Real thoughts,” “The philosophical side,” and “Waste not, want not.” These categories are listed down the right side of the page so that visitors can browse the weblog by the topics that interest them.

Beavan began blogging about his and his family’s efforts to live a sustainable life in early 2007, although they first changed their lifestyle in November 2006. He explained that they are trying to reduce their net impact on the Earth to zero by reducing consumption and engaging in activities that have a positive effect on the environment:

*No Impact Man* is my experiment with researching, developing and adopting a way of life for me and my little family—one wife, one toddler, one dog—to live in the heart of New York City while causing no net environmental impact. To do this, we will decrease the things we do that hurt the earth—make trash, cause carbon dioxide emissions, for example—
and increase the things we do that help the earth—clean up the banks of the Hudson River, give money to charity, rescue sea birds, say. In mathematical terms, in case you are an engineer or just a geek who likes math, we are trying to achieve an equilibrium that looks something like this: Negative Impact + Positive Impact = Zero. No net impact. Get it?  

Beavan stated that he is “no eco-expert,” just a “liberal schlub” who decided to put his environmental principles into practice. He reinforced this self-deprecating ethos in later posts, where he referred to his “so-called liberal self.” He wrote, “In a way, the whole project is a protest against my highly-principled, lowly-actioned former self. I’m fumbling through, trying to do my best and doing the research as I go along. This blog is my attempt to tell you how it’s going.” Again, Beavan cultivated a self-effacing ethos, using words like “fumbling,” “trying,” and “attempt” to describe both his environmental efforts and his weblog. By doing so, Beavan created a persona as an “average person” with whom his presumed audience of ordinary citizens could identify.  

Beavan’s entries mixed the political with personal, using stories from his and his family’s life to illustrate his views on sustainability and inspire others to action. Writing about a preliminary week-long No Impact project in the middle of the August 2006 heat wave, Beavan stated, “Our sweat-soaked tempers frayed immediately. We argued about who would take our 18-month-old daughter, Isabella, to the babysitter since both our schedules now had to accommodate a lot of walking. We had tense discussions about who would be in charge of picking up Isabella’s milk from the only New York dairy farmer who uses reusable glass bottles. We both pretended not to notice the mounting pile of
dirty dishes resulting from the dishwasher being out of bounds.” These descriptions of his and his wife’s struggles with the project, even at the outset, underscored the seriousness of their efforts. Readers were shown that the No Impact project was not easily embraced, and that such an effort required sacrifice and commitment. But despite the physical and emotional toll, Beavan and his wife showed that they were determined to continue to set an example.

Demonstration and Inspiration

The No Impact Man weblog was not only a journal documenting the Beavan family’s struggle to live a sustainable life in New York, but a type of motivational rhetoric designed to convince others to make their own sustainable choices. Although he did occasionally post specific calls to action, Beavan more often simply posted the steps he and his family took to address a particular problem, leaving it to his readers to draw their own inspiration from the posts. These entries were often framed in a problem-solution structure, outlining an issue and listing the ways Beavan tried to address that problem in practice.

Two months into the project, Beavan posted about the volume of junk mail and catalogs he received, remarking, “Do I ever look at these bundles of the coagulated flesh of dead trees? Uh, no. Do you?” He provided some statistics about junk mail—for example, that one hundred million trees are “ground up each year” just to make junk mail, that forty-four percent of junk mail “gets trashed without ever being opened,” and that junk mail “adds up to 40% of the solid waste in our landfills.” So, Beavan wrote, he took steps to “stop the tree killers and keep their trash out of my bin: 1. All the junk mail,
including that with plastic windows in the envelopes, goes in the recycling bin. . . . 2. I got my name off the credit card and insurance offer lists by going to the credit bureaus’ centralized service for opting out. 3. I spent a dollar—swear to God, that’s the price—to sign onto the Direct Marketing Association’s Mail Preference Service, which reportedly will reduce my junk mail by 75%. 4. I began calling the 800 number on the catalogs and asking them to take me off their lists.” The entry thus followed a fairly simple problem-solution format: statement of a problem, evidence of that problem, and steps that one can take to address it. Beavan acknowledged that his steps were not the only ones readers could take; for example, he suggested that they could follow the link he provided to another weblog to learn about how to make their own paper from junk mail. But, grumpily, he stated that he did not have time to take his project that far, as he was “too busy baking bread from local wheat and washing Isabella’s locally-grown, organic cotton diapers. God save me, please, from myself and this crazy project.” Showing his readers this moment of frustration humanized Beavan; even as he detailed the steps he was taking to reduce his impact, he provided a glimpse of the personal toll those steps took. In doing so, he provided an opportunity for readers to identify with him as they struggled through their own sustainable choices.

The comments in response to this entry were mostly positive. For example, “Tracy” wrote, “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I’ve really been struggling with how to reduce the amount of waste coming from our home.” Similarly, “Dan” commented, “way to go noimpactman - i’m going to try to cut my junk mail. even if i din't care about the earth, it would be sweet to not have to go through so much of the stuff.” Some
commenters used the space to detail their own actions, such as “Sarah P” who wrote, “I spent my $1 and I greatly look forward to a reduction in my junk mail! Yay! Thanks for doing this project! It’s inspiring!” However, not every commenter provided positive feedback. “Klong” wrote, “You guys make me want to throw up. If you want to make a difference and make a statement, why don’t you tell your wife to stop working for Business Week, a publication that promotes the corporate consumerist ethos? Plus it sends out a junkload of mailings to me to subscribe.” Klong also called Beavan and his family hypocrites for wanting to remain in New York for its media connections, rather than pursue a sustainable life elsewhere. This comment is particularly interesting, as it castigated Beavan not for the lapse in faith he humorously tosses in at the end of his weblog entry, but for aspects of his and his wife’s lives that were not discussed in the entry at all. The ad hominem attack did not sit well with some of the other commenters. For example, “Angela” responded to Klong by writing, “The blog seems inspiring to people to learn new ways to reduce waste. Is that a bad thing? Setting an example is a wonderful way to change the world, even if nobody is perfect.” Angela’s response bolstered Beavan’s persuasive message: although no one can be expected to live with absolutely no impact on the Earth, one can make choices which can lessen that impact—and every little bit helps.

Beavan occasionally stepped beyond inspiration-by-example to issue more direct calls to action. For example, he invited readers to participate in a “No Impact Week,” which he described as a “one-week carbon cleanse” which would give participants a chance to “see what a difference no-impact living can have on your quality of life.”
The word “cleanse” here evoked imagery of a fast, in which one eats nothing in order to “cleanse” the body of toxins. Like a fast, Beavan’s “No Impact Week” involved sacrifice, but it was ultimately rewarded by better health. Beavan argued that sustainability is “a question that must be taken up in the cultural arena” as well as legislatively, reflecting the emphasis in vernacular rhetoric on everyday life.\textsuperscript{31} Beavan’s “No Impact Weeks” also spoke to his audience’s desire to do more than just read about sustainability, but to take action in their own lives. Although large-scale change was necessary, Beavan argued, individual choices could make a big difference—not just for the environmental movement, but for the individuals who comprise it.

\textit{Introspection and Expression}

Not all of Beavan’s posts were instrumental. Many forwent direct calls-to-action or even descriptions of actions to focus on more thoughtful, inwardly-directed rhetoric. These entries showed Beavan considering what it \textit{meant} to be an environmentalist, rather than what one could \textit{do} to become one. He often invited his readers to share their own thoughts on the matter, creating an ongoing conversation about the personal and philosophical underpinnings of the sustainability movement.

In a September 2007 entry titled “Living in gratitude instead of desire,” Beavan mused on the connection he saw between the decline of religious life in American culture and a “decline in gratitude.”\textsuperscript{32} Although he insisted that he was not “laying some sort of a religious trip on everyone” and that he was “not even religious,” Beavan contended that “we (and I include me) have come to worship desire.” Having laid out the problem, Beavan suggested that the answer might be found in gratitude: “Here is what I think: that
being grateful for what I have makes me want less. Wanting less makes me consume less. Consuming less makes me treat the planet more kindly. The equation goes, therefore, gratitude equals kindness.” Beavan went on to cite a study, reported in Time magazine, which advocated keeping a “gratitude journal” as a way to cultivate happiness. Beavan used most of the rest of this entry as his own “gratitude journal,” listing some fourteen items he was grateful for, including his daughter Isabella, his wife Michelle, dog Frankie, “a middle birth, which means I’m not so poor as to have to struggle and not so rich as to be put to sleep by luxuries,” water (“because I, unlike a billion people on this planet, have easy access to it”), his bicycles, his health, and “you readers, since, like a tree in the woods, I’m never sure I exist if no one is there to hear me.” Beavan presented these things he was grateful for in a bulleted list, a common formatting choice in his posts. Stylistically, then, the second half of the post resembled the more instrumental posts described in the previous section—a list of items readers could use as a beginning point for their own gratitude lists. But the main point of the entry was philosophical, which readers responding to this entry seemed to understand. While a couple of commenters used the space to list the things for which they were grateful, most commenters instead discussed the larger philosophical point, bringing in references to Buddhism, scientific studies of happiness, critiques of capitalism, and personal anecdotes to make some point about gratitude and desire. The result was a surprisingly intellectual discussion of the meaning of gratitude as it pertains to desire and consumption.

Beavan’s entry on gratitude did little to suggest itself as a call to join the environmental movement. As manifestos go, it was subdued and thoughtful, providing
little in the way of direction. In fact, Beavan did not even argue that his readers should keep their own “gratitude journals,” nor that they should seek to reduce their consumption by increasing their gratitude. He merely “thought out loud” on the subject. Indeed, in another context—on another weblog—it might have passed entirely without notice as yet another blogger philosophizing into the wind. However, on a widely-read weblog devoted entirely to environmentalism, Beavan’s musings carried a certain weight. A Google search shows over one hundred weblogs and Web sites which linked to the entry. Most of these trackbacks were from fellow “green” bloggers, but several Christian and other spiritual bloggers picked up on it as well.

One blogger who read and linked to Beavan’s gratitude entry was Australian blogger Gala Darling. In a May 21, 2008 entry, titled “Sustainable living as practice rather than morality lesson,” Beavan wrote about having coffee with Gala during her visit to New York.\(^{33}\) Noting that he had “never met her before except by email,” he reported that they “connected some time ago because my blog software told me she had linked to No Impact Man and I wrote her to thank her.” Beavan here blended the technological and the social: they “met” by email when his software “told” him she had linked to him, a common occurrence in the blogosphere. It is interesting that Beavan emailed her to thank her, as crosslinking is an everyday rhetorical transaction among bloggers. Gala Darling is a high-traffic weblog, so perhaps he wanted to thank her for the additional traffic to his weblog.

Beavan also used his encounter with Gala to prompt a discussion of the *ethos* of sustainable living and its relationship to blogging. He argued that Gala’s “popular”
weblog was successful “first, because of her incredible personality (I mean, just look at her) but, second, because it acknowledges people's complex nature. . . . Gala told me that her blog is ultimately about personal development but that she mixes it up because she believes people are mixed bags just like her.” Gala’s ethos prompted Beavan to think about his own motivations for blogging and his audience’s motivations for reading. He wrote, “This gets me thinking. I am just the sum of the experiences that have fashioned my personality into the type of person who has to make a big deal about being sustainable. . . . if I can understand the human motivations and values that underpin everyone's actions, even if I don’t necessarily agree with them, I have a chance of meeting people on common ground and talking to them, not as a person who is morally superior, but as a friend. And people listen more openly to their friends.” Beavan here seemed aware of his own ego needs, noting his tendency to “make a big deal” about his sustainable actions. On another page on his Web site, he even stated that he was “by profession a writer and by temperament a megalomaniac.” However, he also wanted others to “listen” to his words because he wished to find “common ground” and serve humanity. Beavan stated that one of the goals of his writing was “to encourage us all to take care of each other (yes, I’m soppy).” Thus, Beavan positioned No Impact Man as a space not only where he could fulfill his own ego needs, but also help others learn about and from each other—a dwelling place or “common place” for identification.

Of course, Beavan is a professional writer whose livelihood depends on connecting with his readers, so one might expect him to be cognizant of the opportunities afforded by his weblog. Yet even as a professional writer, he sometimes appeared to have
difficulty getting his message across in the weblog format. In a February 6, 2009 post titled “Brainwashing, I mean, teaching kids about sustainability,” Beavan talked about discussing vegetarianism with his three-year-old daughter. He wrote that she decided she wanted to try meat for the first time, but when he finally relented and allowed her to try some turkey at a friend’s Thanksgiving dinner, she was turned off by the smell and announced that she no longer wanted to eat meat. Beavan concluded his post with, “I guess she's old enough to make decisions for herself after all. ;)” Written in a direct, somewhat ironic tone, the subtleties of the entry were lost on the commenters, who responded either with earnest praise or criticism. The comments alternated between complimenting him and his family for their vegetarian lifestyle and castigating him for trying to “brainwash” his daughter. One commenter, “Vicky,” asked wryly, “If she would have said ‘Daddy, I want to eat meat’, done it & liked it, would you still be saying she's old enough to make her own decisions? Just a thought.....” Beavan later edited the entry, adding: “This post was meant to be a funny story about me and Isabella--filled with irony. Judging by the comments, my writing didn't make that clear. The idea that she is old enough to make her own decisions--based on the fact that she agrees with me--is intended as a joke. The idea that a parent wants their kid to agree with them--ie brainwash them--is also supposed to be a joke. My bad. Poor writing.”

This entry illustrates a number of interesting dimensions of individual activist blogs. First, as a personal story about Beavan’s daughter, it stands in stark contrast to the “official” rhetoric discussed in the previous chapter. In fact, Beavan opened the entry by writing, “OK, I admit, the title is just a bad excuse to tell a story about my daughter
Isabella. What can I say? This whole blog is one great excuse to tell stories about Isabella.” By setting such a personal tone, Beavan created a vernacular space in which readers could glimpse his family life. Second, by making the entry about his own beliefs regarding vegetarianism (rather than a more dispassionate entry about the benefits of becoming a vegetarian), Beavan offered readers an opportunity for identification—assuming, of course, that they agreed with the “lesson” of his daughter’s choice. And finally, given Beavan’s failure to adequately signal the ironic tone of his entry, it underscores the importance of style in blogging generally and activist blogging in particular. When the goal of one’s weblog is to be persuasive, such barriers to persuasion are worthy of rhetorical analysis.

EnviroWoman: Living Plastic Free

“EnviroWoman” is a blogger from Vancouver, Canada who posts to a weblog called Living Plastic Free. Her online project was to live the entire year 2007 without consuming any new plastic. One of a handful of online “garbloggers,” or people who blog about the environmental impacts of trash, she was concerned that “almost every piece of plastic ever made still exists and will for who knows how long. We assume it just ends up in landfills… ‘so hey, no big deal’. But it doesn’t. Often it ends up in our wild areas…and in our oceans where it can have disastrous effects.” EnviroWoman’s weblog depicted, through both text and images, her efforts to rid her life of plastic. At the end of 2007, she posted a photograph of all the plastic she used in the entire year—a stack smaller than another pile of plastic that she discarded in a single day before she
began her crusade (Figure 3-2). Boasting of her accomplishment, she vowed to continue her plastic-free life in 2008, proving that everyday decisions by ordinary people could have a significant impact.

Figure 3-2. Photo from Living Plastic Free showing a comparison between the blogger’s 2006 and 2007 plastic usage

EnviroWoman used a stock Blogger template for Living Plastic Free, but she chose one which uses varying shades of green along with a plant photo in the header to convey her environmentalist message. The template, called “Rounders,” used a simple two-column design to present weblog entries on the left and navigational aids, such as a search box, archived posts, and blogroll, in boxes on the right (Figure 3-3). Also located in a right-side box was an “About Me” section which declared that EnviroWoman was located in Vancouver, Canada, and was “plastic free, cruelty free, vegetarian, [and a] chocoholic.” This box was a slightly brighter green than the rest of the page, drawing one’s eye to this declaration of identity. The box below the “About Me” box contained navigational aids, including links to archived posts and email and RSS subscription
options. Again, then, the design supported the content but did not seem material to it, as readers could receive posts by email or by subscribing to a RSS feed.

Figure 3-3. Screenshot of Living Plastic Free

Unlik Beavan, EnviroWoman did not identify herself as a professional writer. She was somewhat vague about the details of her personal life, preferring to use pseudonyms to refer to her pet (TheBeast) and car (MyLittleCar) as well as to herself. She discussed her work at an abstract level, noting that she shifted to taking public transit when she could and strove to be plastic-free in her workplace as well as her home, but her audience got little sense of what her work actually involved. However, she was extremely detailed in her descriptions of her struggles to remove plastic from her everyday life. For example, the self-identified “chocoholic” noted mournfully that it was extremely difficult to find chocolate that is not wrapped in plastic (“Chocolate, chocolate everywhere but look at all of those plastic wrappers!!! . . . Had I known this I would have never thrown my gauntlet into this plastic challenge”\textsuperscript{40}) and “this GirlyGirl” had to give up nail polish
(“Yuppers, it’s made of plastic.”\textsuperscript{41}). These sacrifices brought a humorous pathos to her posts. EnviroWoman’s readers were encouraged to sympathize with the sacrifices she made to honor her pledge.

EnviroWoman also shifted back and forth between first and third person in her posts, sometimes within a single paragraph, as in this example: “I have to thank my friends and family for being so supportive. Most have really jumped on the EnviroWoman bandwagon, put up with my EcoEccentricies (no plastic, no leather, no fur, no meat and now no car) and played along. And I especially want to thank all the retailers I’ve dealt with who very happily catered to my ‘No Plastic Please’ requests. Everyone has been grand. EnviroWoman sends big kisses out to all of them. It would have been much harder if they hadn’t been willing to honour the pledge.”\textsuperscript{42} EnviroWoman seemed in these instances a deliberately artificial persona, something created for dramatic effect. The blogger could have simply used “I” throughout the weblog, but calling herself “EnviroWoman” evoked a superhero ethos—someone doing Good Deeds for the planet and inspiring others to follow in her footsteps. Her commenters often responded to this ethos with encouraging comments about how they were influenced by EnviroWoman’s actions. In one post, for example, commenter “Kate” wrote of her decision to spend more on a metal tin for her deodorant: “It felt really good to say outloud that I am trying to avoid plastics and to have them help me meet the goal. The lady [at the store] was impressed and seemed somewhat inspired. So, EnviroWoman: there is a ripple effect to your resolutions!”\textsuperscript{43} Thus, EnviroWoman and her commenters forged a common ethos out of their individual choices.
Sinners and Saints

EnviroWoman framed much of her rhetoric in humorous pseudo-religious terms. She referred to the pile of plastic in her living room as a “shrine” in most of her posts and classified products as “saints” or “sinners” based on whether or not they contained plastic. She called her buying decisions can be “major” or “minor” sins, depending on whether they involve deliberately or inadvertently purchasing something with plastic in it. In an early entry, EnviroWoman defined these terms:

“SAINT = non-plastic based/packaged product that makes the earth a better place to live. Bravo. Kudos. Pats on the back.

SINNER = a previously-used product (or any product) that contains plastic or is packaged in plastic. SINNERS are banished from no-plastic land.

MINOR SIN = when EnviroWoman buys a SAINT product that (gasp) have wee bits of plastic parasitically implanted in them (like those Octopus-like-larvae in Aliens, that jump on your face, implant a tentacle into your guts and suck the life-blood right outta ya). . . . MINOR SINs will [be] added to the plastic shrine.

MAJOR SIN = when EnviroWoman falls right offf [sic] the bandwagon and buys or uses new plastic, flagrantly throwing her morals (and resolution) to the wind and thereby putting the future of Mother Earth in jeopardy. This may occur when a cruelty-free (first priority) non-plastic (second priority) replacement cannot be found in EnviroWoman’s realm. Or it may occur because the allure of the pretty plastic thingy reduces
EnviroWoman’s will power to that of a lima bean. MAJOR SINS will added to the plastic shrine.44

As in so many of her posts, the style here was personal and conversational. Words like “outta” and “offa” gave the entry the sense of being spoken, and the “gasp” in the third paragraph brought in a nonverbal cue. The reference to Aliens was descriptive, a pop-culture callback and analogical all at once. In the last paragraph, she waxed dramatic, describing “flagrantly throwing her morals (and resolution) to the wind” and having her willpower reduced “to that of a lima bean.” This figurative (if somewhat flowery) language lent personality to her post, which otherwise might have seemed like a simple, dry list of habits to avoid.

Many of EnviroWoman’s entries came in the form of her humorous “confessions” of occasionally choosing to buy plastic. For example, she posted about trying to find a deodorant that was not packaged in plastic and being disappointed in the product she purchased. After finally resorting to her “usual deodorant, Doves Cool Essentials,” which “comes packaged in a big wad of plastic that’s not even recyclable,” she “confessed” her sin to a fictional “Father” (and, of course, to her readership). Playing the role of both the penitent and the priest, EnviroWoman detailed her decision-making process and castigated herself for her weakness:

I feel terrible. But at least I don’t stink or sweat anymore. All is dry on the armpit front, finally.

My child, this is a serious MAJOR SIN indeed. I am deeply shocked. You have fallen right off your high and mighty polyethylene pulpit.
Yes Father, I know. I hang my head in shame. I know my credibility and conviction appear to be melting like a snow cone in Hell.

_Have you fallen off your no-plastic pledge completely, then?_

No Father. I continue to live my life plastic-free. Failure will not stop me. It just makes me stronger. In fact Father, initially I thought I would only make the plastic-free pledge for the first 90 days of 2007, but now I have decided to do it for the full year.

_That is good my child. It is true, both you and I are only human. But it is also true, that through the pledges we both have made, we aspire to be Higher Humans and set the example for others. So your penitence today is to say 5 Hail-David-Suzukis, and 5 Hail-Al-Gores. And you must kiss my rosary._

I can’t Father, it’s made of plastic….

_Oh, you’re right. Okay then, just go forth and continue to preach the Gospel of Plastic-Free._

Here, EnviroWoman served up a little piece of environmental melodrama, using comedy and pathos to articulate her moral dilemma. She made rhetorical use of the environmental movement’s evangelical overtones even as she mocked them. She invoked two “gods” (or saints, or church elders) of the movement: Al Gore of _An Inconvenient Truth_, a documentary about anthropogenic climate change, and David Suzuki of _The Nature Of Things_, a Canadian television program about science and nature.
By framing this and other discussions in pseudo-religious terms (in this case, pseudo-Catholic terms, as a “confession” to a holy “father” is involved), EnviroWoman was able to present her no-plastic pledge not just as a personal quest, but as a crusade inspired by a higher power—one that required that she “preach the gospel” of living plastic free to others.

Concrete Choices

The majority of EnviroWoman’s posts dealt with a single specific issue or product and how she came to address it. Like No Impact Man, she often used a problem-solution structure. Among the topics EnviroWoman addressed are shampoo, dishwashing liquid, DVDs, airplane food, pasta, highlighters, and toilet paper. The posts followed a uniform format: a narrative introduction, usually humorous; a section called “So here’s how things add up” with subheadings for “category,” “saint” (specific brands or alternatives which do not contain plastic), “price,” “quality,” and “sinner” (specific brands or examples to avoid); and a section called “Lessons Learned” with bullet points listing the insights EnviroWoman gained from the experience. By formatting each post in the same way, EnviroWoman utilized text-based interactivity, which Barbara Warnick and her coauthors define as “rhetorical techniques and features of the Web site text itself that communicate a sense of engaging presence to site visitors.” This approach imparted a sense of continuity and familiarity to her regular readers.

Among the products EnviroWoman critiqued were compact fluorescent lightbulbs, or CFLs. Although they are more energy efficient and last longer than incandescent bulbs, EnviroWoman argued that they are not environmentally friendly
because they are not only packaged in plastic, but contain plastic at the base of the bulb. She described her agony at not being able to buy something so widely believed to be good for the environment, writing, “I know, I know…you’re thinking…EnviroWoman this is a no-brainer. Of course you’re buying Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs. They use 60% less energy. They last up to 15 times longer. Every Green Guide on the planet evangelizes them as being an energy saver. And energy saviour. I think they may even be able to walk on water.’ Well, life is full of ironies. And this is one of them.”

Again, EnviroWoman humorously used religious imagery to frame her discussion: though CFLs are “evangelized” as energy “saviours” (and may even be able to “walk on water”), they are in fact sinners. Her verdict: CFLs were “A SAINT dressed as a SINNER,” and “Sometimes the greenies get it wrong. They try to enlighten us, but sometimes we have to enlighten them. [CFL manufacturers] Philips, Duramax, Globe…you’re gonna hear from EnviroWoman.” EnviroWoman here separated herself from other environmental activists, whom she labeled “greenies,” instead painting herself as someone who makes choices based on her own convictions rather than what she was told.

In general, EnviroWoman’s audience appeared to react positively to this approach. On the entry about highlighters, commenter “thegreenpuppy” wrote, “Your site is always filled with cute little stories to help hammer down tough lessons.”

Often, the commenters provided recommendations or more information about the profiled products—sometimes to EnviroWoman’s dismay, as she discovered in an entry about buying soda in aluminum cans as opposed to plastic bottles. An anonymous commenter responded to this post with the revelation that aluminum cans are lined with a thin layer
of plastic to prevent the soda from corroding the can. EnviroWoman replied with a photo of a hand holding a wooden stake and the comment, “Anonymous, you really know how to drive a plastic stake through a girl’s heart, don’t ya. Man, this plastic stuff is really insidious.” She followed up with a post several weeks later which included a photo of a can’s plastic lining and her new pledge to not drink soda at all. Once she learned the truth, she wrote, she had “to make a choice. Do you continue to commit sin or change your ways?” EnviroWoman chose to change her ways. “After all, this is what this year is all about…giving up plastic and seeing how it transforms my life.” Although there were many examples of commenters sharing personal testimonies of plastic-reducing actions they learned from EnviroWoman, here the roles were reversed: EnviroWoman learned from her readers, demonstrating that her blogging was not a one-way communication but a shared ethos for environmental change.

One of the key difficulties the environmental movement faces is the sentiment that one person’s individual actions cannot possibly overcome the vast effects of anthropogenic climate change. EnviroWoman’s plastic-free pledge, taken on its own, was an infinitesimal action: one woman living for one year (or even a lifetime) without consuming plastic products is unlikely to halt global climate change all on her own. However, EnviroWoman’s efforts were notable for their rhetorical effect. By documenting her efforts and showing good cheer throughout her no-plastic journey, EnviroWoman gave her readers a sense of agency to make changes in their own lives. Even if no one followed her lead, EnviroWoman’s weblog still stood as a model for those who wished to get involved in the movement at a personal level. In telling the story of
how she “lived plastic free,” EnviroWoman showed others that they could define activism on their own terms—and in doing so, could rewrite the rules for social movement participation.

**Conclusion**

The environmental movement has always been one that people could “join” by making small changes in their everyday lives, yet weblogs allow these “everyday activists” the opportunity to make public their personal efforts to save the environment. In doing so, they both join and help constitute the larger community of online environmentalists, demonstrating their commitment to the cause even as they inspire others to make their own sustainable choices. Colin Beavan’s *No Impact Man* and EnviroWoman’s *Living Plastic Free*, among the thousands of other individual environmental weblogs, functioned epideictically to promote both individualism through personal choices and community through validation by others. As EnviroWoman wrote, “I’m proof positive it can be done. And if I can do it, so can everyone else.”

Neither Beavan, the “No Impact Man,” nor EnviroWoman were accidental activists. Both made quite specific choices both to engage in sustainable practices and to share those practices with a wider audience through their weblogs. On Beavan’s “biography” page, for example, he stated that the point of the *No Impact Man* project was to “experiment with ways of living that might both improve quality of life and be less harmful to the planet” and to provide “a narrative vehicle by which to attract broad public attention to the range of pressing environmental crises including: food system
sustainability, climate change, water scarcity, and materials and energy resource depletion.” Similarly, EnviroWoman’s stated desire to “preach the gospel” of a plastic-free life demonstrated her commitment to a larger cause. It was not enough for either of these bloggers to change only their own lives; they both felt compelled to reach out to others as well.

Both bloggers certainly seemed aware that they were part of the larger environmental movement—and that they may have helped write its next chapter. In describing the first No Impact Week, Beavan wrote, “What I didn't initially realize while exploring these themes was that thousands of other Americans had already begun experimenting with their own lifestyles. I had unwittingly joined a movement. These thousands of Americans were tired of waiting for the government to do something about the crisis in our climate and other environmental systems. They decided, rather than simply waiting for elected officials to catch up, to take matters into their own hands. They decided, in other words, that they would make a difference. They decided, as I've said, to lead.” Though Beavan may have been an “unwitting” activist at first, his weblog quickly became a hub for a certain type of activism: the low-impact life. (It is somewhat ironic, of course, that Beavan used a highly technological means of communication to get his message out, though he did claim to power his laptop with a solar panel so that he didn’t use electricity from the grid.) EnviroWoman also seemed to be caught up in the public aspect of her activism. She wrote that one of the positive outcomes of her weblog was to “see others follow in [her] footsteps. I think I was the first to go plastic-free, but now there are other fellow bloggers that have taken the pledge in the past couple of
months. That’s kind of exciting. The start of a new wave of consumerism – begun right here in LaLaLand.”

Indeed, the woman behind another environmental weblog, Fake Plastic Fish, blogged that she was inspired to begin her weblog when she “heard an interview with Colin Beavan, the No Impact Man, on NPR. . . . His story intrigued me, so I visited his site, where I was led to that of EnviroWoman, a Canadian woman who’d decided to live plastic-free for a year. And it was from her site that I stumbled upon the article, ‘Plastic Ocean,’ and its devastating photo of a dead albatross filled with pieces of plastic. That image is now burned into my brain. . . . A few days later, Fake Plastic Fish was born.”

This story shows the “network effect” of activist blogging, which I will examine in more detail in the next chapter.

*No Impact Man* and EnviroWoman, of course, may not actually be more sustainable in their choices than any other environmental activist. But the very fact that they publicly documented their successes and failures served both to fulfill their own ego-functions and to create spaces for identification with others. In doing so, they blurred the line between what has traditionally been considered private—affairs of the home—and public. This is a defining characteristic of the personal weblog. Weblogs, as Torill Elvira Mortensen notes, “are part of a public arena, but exist between the personal diary and professional publishing.” As such, weblogs exist in a liminal space between the private and public spheres, sometimes containing intensely personal information, yet at the same time making that information available to complete strangers. Negotiating the boundary between public and private is increasingly difficult in the modern world of information technology and mass media—if, indeed, anything may be said to be “private”
on the Internet. As Peter Dahlgren argues, the public/private boundary must be understood as “a product both of discursive practices within everyday life, and of larger, macroinstitutional arrangements. It derives both from political, economic, and legal conditions and from socio-cultural practices. Moreover, the distinction is never fully clear-cut; it is always untidy and at times contested.” The Internet has made this distinction especially “untidy.” Spaces like weblogs, which can function at multiple levels simultaneously, are almost impossible to categorize as either private or public domains. The encroachment of electronic technologies into what was previously considered private space has rapidly increased over the last few decades, Lester Faigley notes, with computers becoming more and more “the medium for literate activities.” It is hardly a surprise, then, that activism has increasingly moved online—and that it has assumed an increasingly personal, diary-like tone.
Notes


4 Gregg is not suggesting a psychoanalytical approach, but rather a functional analysis of the public discourse of social movements which takes into account the ways protest rhetoric might address the needs of social movement members as well as—or perhaps instead of—strategic goals.


24 The site design is credited to Mary K. Elkins, a professional Web site/weblog designer who, according to her online portfolio at http://www.missmaryk.com/people.html (accessed July 24, 2010) has designed sites for many other professional authors.

25 Western readers, that is.


27 Colin Beavan, “The No Impact Experiment.”


35 Colin Beavan, “There’s Going to be a Book!”


37 From her URL at ChangeEverything.ca, we can infer that her real name is likely Leslie Ann, but since she does not identify herself as such anywhere on her weblog, I will use her pseudonym to refer to her throughout this analysis.


39 As of July 2010, EnviroWoman has copied her weblog entries and comments over to ChangeEverything.ca, a social networking site based on individual activism or “change,” and closed the BlogSpot version of her weblog to “invited readers only.” I have updated the links in the notes to reflect the new address, but since she no longer posts new entries to either address, I view the BlogSpot version as the original (since that is where people were reading it when it was active) and thus am analyzing that design.

40 EnviroWoman, “Chocolate,” *Living Plastic Free*, January 5, 2007,


45 EnviroWoman, “Deodorant.”


47 By “evangelical” here I do not mean based in any one church or spiritual belief system, but rather the way some activists are seen to “preach” environmentalism with an religious fervor.


53 EnviroWoman, “Year Two: 2008 Progress Report.”


60 Faigley, Fragments of Rationality, 228.
Chapter Four: Viral Movements

In the previous two chapters of this dissertation, I have shown how organizations and individuals have adapted the weblog to their activist purposes. In this chapter, I explore how the weblog adapts us—that is, how our sociopolitical tactics, strategies, and goals have changed in the face of an interconnected, partially anonymous, distributed set of overlapping publics. In fact, as I will argue, weblogs allow for—perhaps even encourage—the spontaneous emergence of viral movements. As Nicholas Packwood argues, the blogosphere “is a potential context for advancing perspectives that are otherwise marginalized or forgotten in mainstream media.”¹ Like their antecedents—pamphlets, newsletters, flyers, and underground newspapers, for example—weblogs can be valuable sites for alternative discourses and the formation of counterpublics. In addition, through meta-analysis of other weblogs (summarizing and adding commentary), weblogs contribute to the “viral” nature of news online by quickly perpetuating messages across sites.

In this chapter, I analyze two viral movements. First, I look at the efforts by an online group called “Anonymous” to protest what they see as unethical actions by the Church of Scientology—a viral movement that took on new life when it moved from closed chatrooms to the blogosphere. I then critique a movement known colloquially as “RaceFail 09,” which consists of a series of online responses to a post by a science fiction author about her difficulty with writing about characters of color. In the ensuing discussion, bloggers and commenters analyzed issues of racism, white privilege, and
tokenism often relegated to academic discourse. Thus, the movement opened the subject up to a broader “public.” In particular, this example shows both the power and the peril of viral movements, as its discourse spread so rapidly that it was difficult for many to keep up with the conversation.

These examples are illuminating for several reasons. First, the fact that they became movements at all, rather than fizzling out after one or two weblog posts, sheds light on the origins and nature of viral movements. Is it the subject matter, the efforts of “opinion leaders,” or some other factors that account for the emergence and spread of viral movements? Second, in both of these cases, many people who wound up writing about the issues at hand were not initially invested in the topic; that is, they were not necessarily political bloggers or civil rights activists, but “ordinary people” who found themselves compelled to speak out. The implications for democratic deliberation and for re-energizing an increasingly apathetic population are significant. Finally, both engaged serious matters inductively, grounding discussions of topics generally seen as abstract and politically remote in the actual experiences and observations of bloggers, thereby making them more “real” to many of the movement’s participants.

To frame my analysis, I first define what a viral movement is and how it spreads through networks. I then analyze the two viral movements, Anonymous and RaceFail, describing their genesis, their spread through the blogosphere, and their rhetorical features and significance. Finally, I discuss some of the implications of viral movements for online activism, most notably their potential for empowering citizens to speak out.
Viral Movements and Memes

I use the term “viral movement” to refer to a decentralized, vernacular expression of political and/or social activism, spread across networks by reference and linking. The term “viral” is commonly used in conjunction with “marketing,” which suggests a singular driving force behind a message’s propagation. Viral marketing campaigns have been used to promote products, movies, television shows, and the like. Coining the term “viral marketing,” Jeffrey Rayport, a Harvard Business School professor and writer for the business magazine Fast Company, wrote in 1996, “Think of a virus as the ultimate marketing program. . . . Every marketer aims to have a dramatic impact on thinking and behavior in a target market; every successful virus does exactly that.”

Rayport goes on to offer advice to marketers as to how to control their viral message. However, the decentralized nature of viral movements means that there is no one person, company, or organization coordinating the movement’s messages. Although there may be a particular blogger who first identifies or catalyzes an issue, this blogger merely starts the ball rolling rather than guiding it. As other bloggers pick up the issue in their own weblog posts, the movement can grow exponentially and in directions never imagined by the blogger who started it.

Viral movements are novel because they use already-existing weblog networks to grow and spread. As Rayport writes, viruses “do not spread by chance. They let the high-frequency behaviors of their hosts—social interaction, email, websurfing—carrying them into new territories.” A blogger “joining” a viral movement may do so by contributing original thoughts on the matter, by paraphrasing others’ thoughts, or simply by linking to
other weblog posts and voicing agreement. Therefore, someone who normally blogs about their garden, or about nothing in particular, may yet become part of a viral movement simply by devoting one or two blog posts to the subject. Their readers are then exposed to the message, and some of them may write about it in their own weblogs. Viral movements are thus not confined to any existing social network or specific group of activists, but can jump rapidly between groups even as they spread through them. This is perhaps one of the most promising examples of the potential for democratic deliberation in the blogosphere, for it illustrates the way the interlinking of weblogs can foster political discourse: one blogger reads a post on a friend’s site, which spurs her to post a response in her own site, which is then linked to and commented on by another blogger, and so forth.

Viral movements spread in part through memes—cultural units such as values, concepts, or catchphrases which are transmitted through human behavior. Richard Dawkins, who coined the term “meme,” argues that just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves by “leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.” Some examples of memes, according to Dawkins, are melodies, religious beliefs, and fashion. Dawkins suggests that these memes evolve through a process which resembles natural selection: those that are most interesting, entertaining, or thought-provoking are the most likely to spread.

Meme shares a root with mimesis. According to Aristotle, humans are mimetic beings, driven to create texts that reflect and represent reality for intellectual pleasure. Kenneth Burke argues that we do so through terministic screens: symbol systems which
reflect a certain reality by selecting some aspects and deflecting others through language. We can think of blogging as a “symbol system” which screens—and shapes—information on the Web. By selecting certain materials from mainstream media, alternative media, and other weblogs to highlight and discuss on their own weblogs, bloggers reflect a certain perspective on reality, in the process deflecting other perspectives. This process is crucial to the formation of viral movements: by reading about an issue on someone’s weblog and responding to it in one’s own weblog, one is joining a larger conversation in a very particular way.

Such a “screening” process has both potentials and pitfalls. It creates continuity among bloggers and weblog readers, binding them together into vibrant virtual communities. As Graham Lampa writes, “By facilitating the entrance of laypersons into online discussions regarding national and international events, issues, and ideas, the process of blogging has a democratizing effect that can evoke feelings of shared experience.” Indeed, blogging has the power to assist in the creation and maintenance of what Nancy Fraser calls counter-public spheres, where members of subordinated social groups “invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.” Yet, as we have seen in earlier discussions, it also can create discontinuity, isolating Web users into “echo chambers” where political and social opinions are rehearsed and repeated but rarely questioned—thus cutting them off from larger conversations. By studying viral movements, we can examine weblogs’ potential for creating both community and fragmentation through memetic replication.
Memetic criticism also gives us a way to account for the fact that some cultural
and political trends seem to take on a life of their own, apart from the human actors
behind them. Davi Johnson argues that “memetics shifts the linguistic and theoretical
resources of agency from human agents to discursive entities.”¹² Sometimes, as Johnson
writes, “humans do not use memes to create culture. Instead, memes create culture via
humans by engaging in behaviors (or producing effects) that are most likely to enhance
their survival or chances of being selected for.”¹³ Johnson argues that memetic criticism
is particularly suitable for analyzing what she terms “the political effects of cultural
currents.” Memetic criticism focuses on “superficial” cultural discourses, investigating
“the ways in which cultural change alters the ‘micropolitical’ worlds of identity,
relationships, and consumption.”¹⁴ In a media-saturated “infotainment” society, memetic
criticism helps us understand the effects of culture on all sorts of public discourse. In
short, it focuses on what Ono and Sloop call vernacular rhetoric.¹⁵

Memetic criticism is of particular use to this project for three reasons. First, as
Johnson argues, it helps us account for the network effect of viral movements—that is,
the extent to which people move in and out of movements based on their connections to
others. Second, memetic criticism, situated in a geographical understanding of rhetoric,
emphasizes “materiality, speed, and surface movement,” which are good ways of thinking
about the ways discourse spreads across the blogosphere.¹⁶ Finally, memetic criticism
helps us understand how discussion about a viral movement might feed the movement
itself. For example, in her explanation of the metrosexual meme, Johnson writes, “The
metrosexual meme is successful because it [is] a good replicator. The metrosexual meme
replicates, not because it has a perceived universal meaning that commands our assent or
refusal; far from it. What metrosexual, as a term and a trend, means is the matter of considerable dispute, and indeed, this dispute over its meaning contributes to, rather than stymies, the speed of its replication and dispersal.” Given that large numbers of weblogs are devoted to aggregating and commenting on content from other weblogs—as opposed to generating their own original content—this aspect of memetic criticism makes it particularly useful for understanding how viral movements function.

Memes of all kinds can spread rapidly through and across blogging networks, but I am here particularly concerned with those which have a sociopolitical dimension. For example, although they can be considered memes, I do not consider the spread of funny cat pictures to constitute a viral movement unless they also carry some sort of sociopolitical message or promote some sort of activism. Viral movements may use memes to replicate, but they represent more than participation in some sort of fashionable cultural trend. They reflect a shift in thinking among those who subscribe (however briefly or ephemerally) to the movement’s rhetoric. Such rhetoric is flexible—growing, contracting, and changing as movement members contribute to the ongoing discussion. In short, the movement is the rhetoric; in a viral movement, online discourse about issues of social or political importance forms the substance of the movement, even if no “action” (other than the discussion itself) results.

The two viral movements I analyze in the rest of this chapter demonstrate this rhetorical flexibility in different ways. In the first example, a group of anonymous activists write their movement by assembling fragments of culture into a new form of activism which blends online and offline action. In the second, participants in an online discussion about race and representation constitute a movement out of a desire for
understanding and common ground. Both Anonymous and RaceFail reflect a perspective on social movement rhetoric which takes into account how shared identity and community can be constituted through self-expression.

**Anonymous vs. Church of Scientology**

In 2004, actor Tom Cruise accepted the International Association of Scientologists’ “Freedom Medal of Valor.” A member of the Church of Scientology since 1990, Cruise was one of its most visible adherents. In his acceptance speech, he praised the religion, leveling criticisms at psychiatry (long regarded by Scientologists as fake science and harmful to its doctrine of “auditing”), and arguing that only Scientology had the answers to the world’s ills. The speech was later edited by the Church of Scientology into a nine-and-a-half minute video meant only to circulate within the organization. On January 13, 2008, however, it was leaked and uploaded to the popular video-sharing site YouTube. In the video, Cruise made what many considered outlandish statements, such as: “I think it’s a privilege to call yourself a Scientologist, and it’s something that you have to earn,” and ”Being a Scientologist, when you drive past an accident, it’s not like anyone else—as you drive past, you know you have to do something about it, because you know you’re the only one that can really help.” The hyper-serious tone of the video—supported by the low, rhythmic theme from “Mission Impossible” which played on a loop in the background—made the video instant fodder for online mockery. The Church of Scientology immediately sent out cease-and-desist notices, demanding that the video be taken down. Some bloggers complied, but Gawker, a well-known and widely
read gossip blogger, refused, saying, “Gawker is now hosting a copy of the video; it's newsworthy; and we will not be removing it.”

Figure 4-1. Screenshot of Tom Cruise Scientology video

In the wake of Gawker’s defiance, a group calling itself “Anonymous” posted a response video to YouTube on January 21, 2008. Over a background of clouds moving rapidly across the sky, a computer-generated voice declared that Scientology’s tactics of litigation and intimidation amounted to Internet censorship and announced that the group intended to “expel the church from the Internet.” This effort, dubbed “Project Chanology” or “Operation Chanology” (the names derived from two of the online communities involved, 711chan.org and 4chan.org), was initially confined to harassment tactics of questionable legality, mostly coordinated online. Those tactics included prank calls to Scientology centers, “black faxes” (faxes of entirely black pages, meant to use up the recipient’s ink or toner), and distributed denial-of-service attacks, in which Anonymous members flooded Scientology Web sites with so much traffic that they were
knocked offline.\textsuperscript{19} Several such attacks occurred in the weeks following Anonymous’ video declaration of war, rendering several high-profile Scientology Web sites, including Scientology.org, inoperable for days.

Anonymous quickly realized that hacking alone would not serve their purposes, however. In Anonymous’ video, the computerized voice declared, “For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind, for the laughs, we shall expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form.” Although online tactics such as denial-of-service attacks and Web site vandalism were good for “laughs” and, for a short time, did knock Scientology Web sites offline, the larger goal of “dismantling” the Church required more than online pranks. Anonymous needed to gain support from a larger audience if they truly wished to effect change. Thus, Anonymous went beyond “hacktivism” and took a page out of the strategy book of a traditional social movement, calling for in-person protests outside Scientology centers worldwide on February 10.\textsuperscript{20} The call was linked across many widely-read weblogs and social media

![Anonymous video screenshot](image-url)
sites, including *Gawker, The Huffington Post*, and others.\textsuperscript{21} Reports vary as to the number of participants, but it has been estimated that more than seven thousand people turned up to protest in ninety cities.\textsuperscript{22} Wearing masks—many of them Guy Fawkes masks in a tribute to the comic and film *V for Vendetta*—and carrying signs referring to the alleged crimes of Scientology and to television and Internet memes, protesters descended on Scientology centers in a somewhat bizarre manifestation of both the power and the silliness of the Internet. For example, Figure 4-3 shows one group of protesters carrying signs reading “Down with this sort of thing” and “Careful now,” which are references to a popular British sitcom of the late 1990s called *Father Ted*. Given the relatively small number of people involved in coordinating Anonymous’ tactics (again, because they are anonymous, it is difficult to get even an approximate count, but it does not appear to be more than several hundred), this turnout speaks to the power of an idea which spread virally through the blogosphere.

Figure 4-3. Anonymous protesters wearing Guy Fawkes masks at a protest in London.
Affirmation and Dissent

Much of the planning of the Anonymous attacks on Scientology took place in private Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels, well out of the public eye. However, some coordination took place on public wikis, which anyone could edit (anonymously, of course), and many bloggers celebrated Anonymous’ efforts. Of course, few bloggers publicly identified themselves as members of Anonymous, although many, like Sean Bonner of blogging.la, were clearly sympathetic to its cause. One blogger who did identify with Anonymous was “raincoaster,” who posted an invitation to the London protest and copies of the Anonymous video. Comments to the entry were varied, with some commenters declaring the video “creepy,” to which raincoaster replied, “Ah, but I’m all about the creepy. It’s not Big Brother; it’s Little Brother!” Later, several pro-Scientology comments were posted, although as one commenter pointed out they all came from the same IP number, indicating they were all posted by the same person.

Elsewhere, blogger “Axinar” wrote, “It will be interesting to see if this Anonymous group has any luck. If they do, I'm wondering if they might be able to stop some of the even WORSE forces on this planet.” Similarly, blogger Jared Moya wrote on ZeroPaid.com, “I’m glad to see that more and more people are willing to stand up to the ‘Church’ of Scientology and its heavy handed anti-free speech tactics. Hollywood seems to be running scared of Tom Cruise and company and so its nice to see at least one group of people, anonymous or not, has dared to fight back.”

Some bloggers, such as Jim Lippard, disapproved of Anonymous’ strategy. He wrote, “I completely disagree with the tactics being used here--Scientology has as much
right to free speech and protection of their copyrights as anyone else, though I also condemn Scientology's habitual misuse of copyright to try to suppress fair use of information. To the extent this is a prank designed to get media attention, well done. To the extent it gets taken seriously, though, it's something that may not end well."\(^{26}\)

Lippard identified one of the major difficulties Anonymous faced in coordinating its protest: the balancing act between the “pranking” tactics and the quite serious motivations behind them. Lippard warned that if Anonymous’ “prank” was taken seriously, it could have repercussions for the movement and its members—especially given the Church of Scientology’s history of threatening people and organizations it has deemed enemies. Perhaps this is why the most well-known anti-Scientology site, Operation Clambake, also initially disapproved of Anonymous’ tactics. Later, however, Operation Clambake hosted a gallery of photos from the protests and proclaimed, “Extraordinarily well done, Anonymous! :).”\(^{27}\)

*Meme Versus Meme*

Disapproval notwithstanding, the February 10 protests (and several later ones) were successful in terms of participation, although somewhat less so in terms of attracting positive coverage in the mainstream media. The participants, at any rate, seemed to have fun. Several bloggers noted the almost surreal quality of the protests, as if they were something from a science fiction or cyberpunk novel come to life. Tomas Martin wrote, “It’s very reminiscent of the blending between virtuality and reality seen in Charles Stross’ *Halting State*. . . . Whoever is doing it and for what reason, it’s a fascinating example of just how different our world(s) are now compared to even a few years ago.”\(^{28}\)

Blogger “DeathBoy” described the London protests as successful, remarking:
I can't remember the source, but there's some sci-fi story I've read where the conclusion reads along the lines of “They could withstand the fiercest of our weapons, they could defeat us intellectually, but in the end, I think they died of sheer culture shock” - the looks on the faces of the scientologists when faced with a crowd in which a lone voice shouts: “I HEAR TOM CRUISE HATES MUDKIPS!”

(all) “NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

... how do you fight that?

How do you, ideologically speaking, defeat a crowd that is enthusiastically demanding that you “DO A BARREL ROLL!" DO A BARREL ROLL!"

How, indeed? As this blogger pointed out, there was more to this particular cyber-protest than the viral nature of the original protest. It also seemed to encourage a certain blurring between seriousness and levity, to change the attitude toward protest as well as the content and the tactics of the dissent. HuffingtonPost blogger Chez Pazienza wrote, “It's kind of satisfying to watch someone turn the tables on Scientology, using the same brand of furtive cloak-and-dagger absurdity to publicly shame an adversary that the church has used for decades.” This turning-of-the-tables is an example of what Christine Harold and others call “culture jamming.” Through “artful proliferation of messages,” culture jamming employs “a rhetorical process of intervention and invention” that challenges the ability of the targeted group “to make meaning in predictable ways.” Anonymous layered Internet memes such as “DO A BARREL ROLL,” pop culture references such as Guy Fawkes masks, “hacktivism,” and traditional social movement tactics into an
assemblage which the Church of Scientology found difficult to counter. Harold argues that a wider participation in the culture jamming process can lead to innovation in rhetorical techniques. In this case, the assemblage Anonymous created, though bewildering, was certainly innovative as a protest tactic; since there was no way to predict Anonymous’ next move, the Church of Scientology could not form a counteroffensive.

The multifaceted nature of Anonymous’ protests appealed to many bloggers. Science fiction author and blogger Elizabeth Bear notes that Anonymous was “basically fighting meme with meme” and that she “can’t wait to see if it works”:

What strikes me about this is that it's an absolutely brilliant use of the internet, and the sort of thing that SF and comic book writers have been talking about for decades. . . . It consists of a lot of the same techniques that revolutionary organizations have been using for years to affect social change, but tailor-made to the internet. Because the internet loves cool. . . . We are Anonymous. We are legion. Expect us. Yeah, you can dance to that. . . . even if it is just one guy in a basement, as the meme spreads and replicates, the fact that maybe it's a guy in a basement means absolutely nothing. Because it's not a guy in a basement anymore. It's a million guys in a million basements. . . . And a meme ain't nothing but a narrative. And a religion is a kind of meme.

Here, Bear identified several factors critical to understanding the nature of viral movements. First, as she pointed out, many of the tactics Anonymous used were adaptations of traditional social movement tactics, including face-to-face protest. Yet the
sensibility behind these tactics has changed with the Internet. As Bear notes, “cool” was part of the picture, and the assemblage of a variety of cultural texts was expected from an organization as steeped in Internet memes as Anonymous. Second, the ubiquity of the Internet and the networked nature of the blogosphere meant that large groups of people could be mobilized with little notice. Finally, Bear’s comments about “narrative” were especially telling in the context of the blogosphere, where bloggers literally write the story of their movements. Torvill Elvira Mortensen has noted that part of the nature of weblogs is “an understanding of connectedness. To post online is to declare that you are part of something larger . . . To study weblogs should not just be a study of form and technicalities, but of interconnectedness.” That interconnectedness, exemplified by the thousands of Anonymous protesters and the bloggers who joined in virtually, speaks to the potential of the Internet for social change.

**Anonymous as Viral Movement**

At first glance, “potential” is all that Anonymous’ protests demonstrated; their efforts were in vain, at least materially speaking. Although the Church was literally “expelled from the Internet” for a few days, their Web sites were restored shortly thereafter—and continue to be available. The thousands of protesters who demonstrated at Scientology centers seem to have faded back into cyberspace, though occasional small-scale protests against Scientology still occasionally occurred months later. For a time, Anonymous successfully engaged in culture jamming—using both Internet memes and the Church’s own tactics against them. However, as Vince Carducci writes, to be “truly effective as a cultural, media, and social practice,” culture jamming “must be tied to a larger purpose and not be taken as an end in itself.” In this case, Anonymous’ “larger
“purpose” seems to have faded from view. The “anonymous” nature of the group meant a lack of accountability, which protected participants from retaliation by the Church. But it also meant there was no leadership and no organized group of activists to carry the movement forward.

Still, locating the movement in its meaning, rather than in its results, helps us understand the power of viral movements in the moment. Though Anonymous seems to have had little long-term effect, their sudden and concentrated attack on the Church of Scientology disconcerted the Church (who sent members to videotape the protests in hopes of gathering evidence against protesters) and provided a communal identity with which participants could identify—even though that identity was “anonymous.” As Hyung-jin Woo, Yeora Kim, and Joseph Dominick have argued, hackers generally do not fit the media stereotype of isolated individuals bent on destruction and vandalism, but are “members of an extensive social network” whose identities are constructed through the quality of their pranks and the effects of those pranks.\(^{39}\) In their study of hacking, Woo, Kim, and Dominick found that hacks performed just “for fun” were generally less aggressive in tone and methods than those which had a political motivation. However, no matter the motivation, hackers were “proud of their work” and “almost always wanted others who accessed the site to know who controlled, owned, and conquered it. . . . Hacking is not an anonymous activity.”\(^{40}\) As I discussed in the previous chapter, online activism creates and makes use of personal connections to advance movement activities, and this protest was no different. By joining with Anonymous, participants could take the aspects of Internet life they found appealing—anonymity, community, and even silliness—and put them to use for what they saw as positive social change.
RaceFail ‘09

RaceFail ‘09, also sometimes referred to by its participants as “The Great Cultural Appropriation Debate of Doom,” was a relatively brief but heated discussion in the blogosphere about race, writing, and representing the Other. Involving professional authors (mostly in the science fiction and fantasy genres), editors, amateur writers, and many readers, RaceFail spanned several months of weblog posts and comments before virtually disappearing from the Web. The first entries appeared in early January of 2009, and while that initial burst of activity died down by late March, a second round of posts erupted in May with the publication of a fantasy book viewed by many as offensive to Native Americans. In this analysis, I deal primarily with the first “wave” of the movement (January-March 2009), although it is worth mentioning that occasional weblog posts referencing the subject appeared as late as November 2009.

The Beginnings of RaceFail

The conversation about race in fiction began in a weblog entry by Jay Lake, a science fiction author and blogger. On January 8, 2009, he wrote a weblog entry titled “Another shot about thinking about the Other,” in which he mused about the difficulties writers sometimes have writing about cultures and races not their own. He concluded the entry by asking, “Whose voice counts? Why or why not? I find these questions distressing and uneasy, which means they’re important questions. The churn they raise drives the boundaries of good fiction, good thought and good citizenship.” Lake’s post sparked a heated discussion about white privilege and racism in the comments. Commenter “karjack,” unknowingly foreshadowing much of the discussion to come in
the blogosphere, wrote, “You're damned if you do, damned if you don't. Write outside your cultural experience and you get told you have no right. Stick to your cultural experience and you get people saying, ‘Why are all your characters white? Are you some kind of racist?’”

If that had been the end of it, little would distinguish this weblog discussion from any other, and certainly nothing would qualify it as a viral movement. However, four days later, fellow author Elizabeth Bear took up the question in her weblog in an entry titled “whatever you're doing, you're probably wrong.” In it, she offered her thoughts on the “ongoing problem in all writing (and most art), which is, of course, Writing The Other without being a dick.” Arguing that “it's actually pretty simple,” Bear wrote that, “in the long run, we are all people,” and that “the basic similarities in the Venn diagram are more prevalent than the differences.” She wrote that the first step was to “stop thinking about those people as The Other. Because they're not. I mean, okay, they may not be a lot like you? But they're also people, and if you can question your own cultural assumptions about what people ought to be like, and also the stereotypes you've probably assimilated without knowing it, you can hopefully write people who are not just like you.” Bear also advised writers to do their research: “Find some people whose lives were informed by similar experiences and talk to them. Read primary sources.” Finally, she concluded: “Accept that no matter what you're doing, some people are going to think you're getting it wrong.” As Bear frequently blogged about her writing, there was little reason at that point to expect that this post would spur more than the usual discussion in comments, despite the potentially controversial topic.

Bear’s post initially was met with positive comments from her readers, many of
whom thanked her for taking on the topic and stated that they were linking to the post in their own weblogs. On the second page of comments, however, readers began to take issue with certain portions of Bear’s entry. For example, N.K. Jemison, an African-American science fiction and fantasy writer, reacted negatively to Bear’s advice to consult people as primary sources, writing: “As someone who's had to endure uncomfortable conversations with well-meaning strangers who want me to describe The Black Experience (tm) to them... Please don't do this. Even if they're your friends, rather than strangers? Please don't do this. A writer should be able to glean enough information from secondary sources, and extrapolate from observation, to cadge together a reasonable facsimile of someone from a different background. There's no need to objectify any single human being as the Voice Of Her People (tm).” Commenter “fire_fly” also critiqued Bear’s advice, arguing that treating “otherness” as a technical writing problem elided the materialist inequities with which non-whites must contend in their everyday lives. She wrote: “I think you're being overly, and insensitively relativistic when comparing oppressions. . . . While ‘otherness’ might be a technical problem for writers, it's also a manifestly social problem for people who are othered. And you treating it as a technical problem has tended to be relativistic when it comes to the real, material inequalities that people experience, which leads to the cultural marginalisation that causes othering.” These comments hinted at the debate to come in the blogosphere, both in terms of content (concern over the material repercussions of treating race lightly) and tone (the commentators were offended, but apparently desired to explain why they were offended rather than resort to the traditional Internet practice of “flaming,” or responding with angry personal attacks).
Although the critical discussion continued in several threads, most of the top-level comments on Bear’s own site were positive, thanking her for her thoughtful consideration of the matter. However, other bloggers were beginning to respond to Bear’s entry in their own weblog spaces. First among them was “DeepaD,” who identified herself as an Indian (South Asian) woman who “sporadically” wrote about issues of identity and social justice. Her response to Bear’s post discussed the systemic inequities that made it impossible for her to take Bear’s advice; for example, she noted, although she grew up speaking Marathi and Hindi, the only children’s books available to her were in English—a fact which, she argued, hampered her and her schoolmates’ ability to write creatively. Like Jemison and fire_fly, DeepaD drew attention to the materiality of race and culture, stating, “Asking an author to write the Other with respect and assuming it to be sufficient, is like telling a person that being polite to everyone is sufficient in their goal of being an anti-racist ally. This is crap. Your definition of individuality, just like your definition of politeness is culture-specific.” DeepaD concluded by stating that she distrusted “universalising statements proclaiming our inherent mutual humanity because they are uni-directional—they do not make everyone more like me, they make everyone more like you. And I do not want that.”

DeepaD’s response was the first posted outside Bear’s or Lake’s comments section, but it was an entry by a blogger called “Avalon’s Willow” (who writes a webcomic called Seeking Avalon), which really got RaceFail going. Avalon’s Willow self-identified as a Person of Color, or PoC. Her response was written directly to Bear (indeed, it was titled “Open Letter: To Elizabeth Bear”) and took aim at what she saw as unspoken assumptions based in white privilege. She began by expressing “personal
confusion” that a highly respected writer would cater to racist stereotypes by writing in her novel *Blood and Iron* about “a magical negro who gets bridled by a white woman after trying to kill or eat another white woman and, to my horror, becoming some sort of beast of burden/big buck protector.”\textsuperscript{48} Worse, Avalon’s Willow argued, Bear and other white writers “*don’t have to think about this stuff,*” as they had the “ready made excuse that it all *serves the story*’ and that said character was written intelligently and as a well rounded individual with wants and needs of his own; with plots even.” Recalling that she “threw [Bear’s] book across the room in disgust,” she nevertheless insisted that she was not calling Bear a “monster” or a “racist.” Instead, she called Bear “clueless and ill worded and more than a touch thoughtless,” contending that Bear’s “ability to think about things, *sometimes*” was not enough to earn her respect. Finally, Avalon’s Willow attacked what she saw as Bear’s white privilege and heteronormative attitude, concluding:

> I despise the phrase *happens to have*. Do you *happen* to be white? Do people *happen* to be straight? No. You hear ‘*He or she happens to be Chinese/Indian/Gay/An Immigrant/Etc...’* And you, Elizabeth Bear in particular have written that someone just ‘*happens to have that cultural background*’. . . . I do not *happen* to be black or gay or have a Caribbean culture background. I’m not a straight white woman who just *happens to have on* these ‘accessories’. Who I am, the facets that make up *me* cannot be picked up somewhere for $3.95, no matter how well you think you shop in exotic locations for true bits of said exotic culture. (emphasis original)

Avalon’s Willow drew both from her own personal experience to illustrate her point and conducted a bit of rhetorical criticism, critiquing Bear’s language choices. Both were
rhetorical moves which recurred many times throughout the discussion, as participants took issue with each others’ rhetoric and used autobiographical evidence to bolster some points and to refute others.

Bear responded to Avalon’s Willow’s open letter with a post to her own weblog saying, “You’re right. You’re pretty much right categorically and without exception, and I’m sorry to have misled you for a moment into believing I think anything different. I will say that the book of mine you threw across the room is, in part, actually intended to address the point you make about it, but I obviously failed for you as a reader in doing so, and I’m sorry.” She went on to respond to a couple of specific criticisms leveled by Avalon’s Willow, while admonishing her own readers to be polite in their responses. Nevertheless, the very first comment to Avalon’s Willow called her post an “overreaction,” declaring: “Over sensitivity to perceived racism tends to result in the nitpicking of words and sentence structure.” As one can imagine, this led to another long thread of argument among commenters, some of whom took “cdguyhall” (the original commenter) to task, while others agreed with his sentiment and posted their own critiques of Avalon’s Willow’s letter.

Again, things might have stopped there—a disagreement among a few bloggers, with their commenters brought into the fray. Yet, instead, these exchanges led to hundreds of posts and thousands of comments, establishing a large network of posts and links that make up the RaceFail “movement.” Although Lake’s entry was posted first and Bear’s appears to have been a response to the questions he posed, she did not name nor link to him, so it is impossible to ascertain whether she was responding directly to him (though the timing and subject suggest a connection). In any case, it was Bear’s original
post and Avalon’s Willow’s response that served as the catalyst for the ensuing five-hundred-plus entries in the blogosphere at large. In these posts and their attendant comments, bloggers and commenters discussed, argued, fought, apologized, and called each other names. They also ruminated, thought “out loud” and otherwise debated and deliberated about the problem of racism, both in fiction and in society.

**Memetic Themes**

RaceFail participants sometimes found themselves on opposite sides of a particular discussion point, such as the best way for a White writer to approach writing about a character of color, but they nonetheless constituted a single movement out of their shared desire to call attention to lingering problems of racism. The “establishment” in this case was not any one privileged race, but racism itself. RaceFail participants may have disagreed as to the best way to combat racism and privilege in fiction and in society, but they all agreed that the issue was real and that it was important. The discussions were wide-ranging, but several common themes emerged. These themes included self-reflection, a concern over what writers are and aren’t “allowed” to write, white privilege, and “derailing,” or redirecting arguments via ad hominem attacks or red herrings. Each theme was interpreted, reinterpreted, and debated by different bloggers with different perspectives, spreading memetically in entries and comments across hundreds of blogs.

Although some bloggers attacked either Bear or Avalon’s Willow for their views, many simply presented their own thoughts on the subject, using the opportunity to publicly examine (or at least appear to examine) their own unquestioned prejudices and practices. For example, blogger and webcomic writer “Janer” wrote that the ongoing discussion “has really deeply hit home, showing me the real depths of my ignorance and
lack of understanding, and how much further I really have to go.”

Others also discussed how the movement has affected their own views. In her LiveJournal weblog, “emily_shore” recalled a previous incident when she allowed comments to her weblog which some saw as anti-Semitic. Recalling the fallout, she wrote: “If there's a lesson here, it's not about How Well I Did or about How To Become An Enlightened Ally In One Easy Step. Even at the end, I was still doing worse than I should have been doing at the beginning. Furthermore, it wasn't an easy step and it was only one step in a lifelong journey. Still, it's an incident that I reflect upon as I try to do better work.” The theme of self-improvement was common: for many, the meaning of the movement was found in the questions it raised about race in everyday life. For example, “icecreamempress” wrote: “The tough part for me was realizing that not actively discriminating isn't enough. It's easy to pat yourself on the back for not burning crosses, but as Chris Rock might say, 'What do you want, a cookie? You're not supposed to burn crosses, you low-expectation-having white person.'”

As we saw earlier in the discussion of DeepaD’s and Avalon’s Willow’s entries, the autobiographical nature of individual weblogs lends itself to public self-reflection. As bloggers like Janer, emily_shore, and icecreamempress wrote the movement into being through their weblog posts, they also rewrote themselves as more enlightened people publicly accepting their own faults.

Another theme evident in weblog posts and comments, especially early in the movement, was an apparent fear of being accused of racism—either for creating flawed characters of color in their writing, or for not including any characters of color at all. For example, in a comment to Bear’s second entry, “metafrantic” wrote: “I'm a white male, and this suggests that I'm not allowed to write anything but white males. No matter what I
do, no matter how hard I try, if I write a non-white character someone will think I'm being racist - that I'm feeding the culture of racism. . . . There is nothing I can do to prevent people from perceiving racism if they want to - short of never writing a non-white character, which I'm not willing to do.” Reactions to this comment were mixed, with some commenters agreeing that metafrantics’s fears were justified, while others countered that fear of negative feedback should not prevent writers from tackling difficult topics. Hearkening back to karjack’s comment on Lake’s original post about writing the Other, commenters here deliberated about the difficulties of addressing race from a position of privilege.

White privilege was discussed widely in the movement. In a weblog post targeting specific arguments arising out of the general discussion, blogger “shewhohashope” wrote: “You’re damned if you [do], and damned if you don’t (as a white writer).” She continued: “It's not about you. And this kind of response will get you nothing but disdain from the people whose criticism you're responding to. . . . Yes, being white disadvantages you in discussions of racism. Complaining about it when people are discussing how their ethnic background affects them getting jobs, or being arrested does not make you look good.” Commenter “ciderpress” responded to shewhohashope’s statement by writing, “I see those words repeated so many times, in so many different journals. . . . One day, we will not need to have discussions that argue and justify and explain why we need to have these conversations before we can actually have a discussion about racism and white privilege in culture or society or corporate hiring practices etc. I can only live in hope.” These bloggers’ explorations of whiteness and white privilege echoed scholarly discussions in critical race theory, noting especially that
the systemic inequities underlying white privilege remain—and that many whites seem unaware of them. Present in many of the discussions of white privilege was a sense of frustration that some bloggers seemed to stop at merely recognizing their own privilege, rather than working to eliminate it. Blogger “cryptoxin” complained in his weblog that some people acted as if “the most important thing at stake in the conversation is white people's ability to feel good about themselves and get the proper respect and validation for their self-regard.” According to cryptoxin, “the implied burden for this outcome” fell on “people of color, whether through silence, approbation, commiseration, advice, permission, patience, or erasure.” This “validation,” cryptoxin concluded, shifted the focus of discussion away from the material outcomes of structural racism onto the very members of society who benefit from it.

“Derailing,” which in this context refers to deflecting discussions of racism by focusing on red herrings such as “tone” and “reverse racism,” was another recurring theme in the RaceFail movement. As ciderpress wrote, much of the conversations came to be about “accusations of reverse-racism, racism against white people!, classism, anti-intellectualism, jealousy and grandstanding etc,” and that resulted in persons of color having to “defend themselves, their integrity and their character for having a non-dominant-white-mainstream opinion and for expressing it.” According to ciderpress, that meant that “our concerns are very much silenced and lost in the furore [sic].” Like the deflection cryptoxin highlighted, these tactics distracted from what ciderpress saw as the central issue of the discussion and put the people who were raising that issue on the defensive. Similarly, “bossymarmalade” wrote of her/his frustration over what she or he saw as silencing of “the PoC who have objected to being reduced to ‘write everybody as
though they were white on the inside!’, who have objected to dismissal as being ‘unable to critically analyze literature in the proper university-trained manner,’ who have objected to the old, tired trope of ‘if you don't like how white people write you, why don't you just write yourselves?’ Writing that she or he was sick of being criticized as “too emotional, too loud, too angry, too uneducated, TOO FUCKING COLOURED,” bossymarmalade turned the “tone” argument on its head, exhibiting increased agitation over the course of the post and thereby challenging the very paradigm she or he was describing.

For RaceFail participants, derailing was a hot-button issue that illustrates again one of the quirks of viral movements—a bit of levity amidst the seriousness. As an attempt to inject some humor and ridicule into the discussion, blogger “dysprositos” created a RaceFail bingo card, which participants could use to check off various derailing arguments. With categories such as “I’m Not Racist” and “O is for Other,” the card included quite a few of the themes discussed above, like “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” and “I don’t see race.” Like Anonymous’ cultural assemblages, the bingo card can be seen as a bit of “cool” injected into the movement, with participants playing a “game” to identify the most egregious examples of derailing.
Figure 4.4. “Racefail Bingo Card” by dysprositos

With the bingo card, dysprositos created an intertextual assemblage which represented the whole movement visually.\(^57\) Participants were either “in” on the joke or not—and if not, the bingo card served not just as a game, but as an educational tool identifying certain argumentative tactics as unacceptable within the larger community.

In the final analysis, identity became the key theme in the RaceFail movement.

As we have seen, racial identity was the central theme from the start, as participants identified as PoC or white in order to ground their observations and arguments in personal experience. Later in the discussion, personal identity again became a factor, as two bloggers, Will Shetterly and Kathryn Cramer, responded to criticisms by a blogger called “coffeeandink” by discovering and posting her real name on their weblogs.\(^58\)

Though Shetterly subsequently removed coffeeandink’s last name from his weblog and
Cramer eventually removed the entries from her weblog altogether, the incident prompted a huge spike in posts, shown in Figure 4-5, by bloggers who had already participated in RaceFail and by many more who joined in the discussion just at that point. Many bloggers were outraged at this violation of coffeeandink’s pseudonymity, while others defended it, arguing that one should be prepared to stand by one’s posts with their “true” identity. For her part, coffeeandink noted that she had been “hesitant” to post about being “outed” because she viewed it as “an outrageous derailment of the original conversation” and preferred to “re-focus attention back on the real issues.” Here the “derailing” theme played into the identity issue: coffeeandink did not wish to be seen as drawing attention away from the central issue of the movement.

![RaceFail 09 Posts by Date (January-March)](image)

Figure 4-5. Graph showing number of posts related to or addressing RaceFail between January 8, 2009 and March 31, 2009
Finally, group identity played a role in the ongoing discussion, although it was constantly being redefined and renegotiated. One place to look for group identity on a weblog is in the “tags” that many bloggers assign to their weblog entries. Tags function like keywords, allowing readers to view all of a blogger’s entries regarding a particular subject. As the RaceFail movement progressed, more and more bloggers began to use “RaceFail” or “RaceFail 09” to tag their entries, thereby binding the bloggers in Race Fail together. Even if they disagreed about certain issues, their tagging of entries (and their linking to each others’ entries) announced their participation in the movement.

*RaceFail As Viral Movement*

RaceFail’s propagation was helped along dramatically by the technological structures underpinning it. Most of the weblogs involved were hosted on LiveJournal, a blogging service which allows users to add each other as “friends” and be automatically subscribed to each others’ posts. Thus, when a participant joined the movement by posting an entry, everyone in their friends’ network was notified of the new post. And when some of those bloggers added their own entries, their friends were notified—and so on and so forth, through the whole interconnected network. This pre-existing network of interlinked participants allowed—and perhaps encouraged—the movement to spread virally.

As Figure 4-5 shows, RaceFail’s first wave had two peaks: roughly a month of daily posts at the beginning, then three weeks of occasional posts, followed by a spike at the beginning of March, which then tapered off by the end of that month. Bear’s post appeared on January 12, 2009. Over the next three weeks, participants posted an average of eight posts per day. Posting activity then died back to one or two posts every few
days. The second spike on the chart follows the “outing” I describe in the previous section and the overall fallout from that entry. The growth in the total number of posts overall can be seen in Figure 4-6.

![Growth of RaceFail movement](chart.png)

**Figure 4-6.** Total number of posts in RaceFail movement by date

Unlike Anonymous’ attack on Scientology, we can determine exactly who was involved in RaceFail and what their contributions were—though, of course, in many cases we only know their online pseudonym. Many of the participants in RaceFail were repeat posters: of the 532 entries in the RaceFail movement from its inception to March 31, 2009, two thirds (355) were made by people who posted more than one entry (Table 4-1). The five most active bloggers contributed more than fifteen percent of the posts to the discussion (Table 4-2).
Table 4-1. Participants in the RaceFail movement by number of entries posted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of posts</th>
<th>Percentage of total posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posts by bloggers with 2 or more posts</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts by bloggers with 5 or more posts</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts by bloggers with 9 or more posts</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts by the five most active bloggers</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-2. Percentages of overall posts made by bloggers who posted multiple entries.

Although many of the most prolific bloggers actively contributed to the discussion at various times, there was also an interesting phenomenon at work: several bloggers seem to have appointed themselves the archivists of the movement. They periodically posted entries which were composed entirely or primarily of links to other bloggers’ entries, sometimes with “RaceFail 101” commentary explaining the situation to newcomers. Therefore, some of the “top bloggers” of the movement, rather than (or in addition to) contributing original content to the discussion, instead created assemblages which served as loci for the ongoing conversation. This allowed bloggers who may not have been involved in the movement from its beginning to easily catch up so that they could also contribute, in addition to providing a semi-permanent archive of the movement’s development (which this critic found especially helpful). Two bloggers in
particular, “rydra_wong” and “tablesaw,” attempted to provide context for the overall discussion in the form of annotated lists of links to RaceFail entries on others’ weblogs. In rydra_wong’s link aggregation, the entries began almost with the movement itself; by March, the list had become so lengthy that it overflowed the technical limitations of a LiveJournal post and had to be split across multiple entries. In response to queries by others regarding this glut of information, tablesaw posted an entry describing the history and major arguments of RaceFail, noting the difficulty in keeping up with the viral nature of the movement:

I've been following RaceFail for a while now, and I'm just now coming to grips with the fact that my personal concept of it has collapsed. RaceFail is a decentralized internet conflict, and thinking about it in terms of sides, timelines, or threads are all (sometimes necessary) simplifications. What it is is a hypertext, wherein everything refers to something or multiple things, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. I've been maintaining that web rather well until last week, when the influx of posts caused my mental matrix to collapse. The sad result is that I'm having a harder time remembering who said what where, which can be critical when participating. . . . In many ways, the limitations placed on face-to-face communication, such as time, work toward any discussion maintaining the status quo, and a decentralized discussion like this one is better at presenting reasons for change without becoming quickly marginalized. . . . Still, if you're not used to reading something as interconnected as RaceFail, it's easy to get lost.60
This entry demonstrates how aware RaceFail bloggers were, not just of the complexities of the subject matter under discussion, but of the intricacy of the means through which it was propagated—and the layers of obfuscation those means could add to the message. Further, the work of these movement archivists shows how keen RaceFail participants were to write the record of their own movement.

Each of the bloggers involved in RaceFail could have chosen not to participate (and indeed, we have no way of knowing how many people did just that). But each of them chose the opposite: whether their impetus came from anger, confusion, well-meaning concern, pride, or any other emotion or combination of emotions, each of the participants in RaceFail joined the conversation. The sheer number of entries and comments, especially ones which began with a variant of “I wasn’t going to say anything about RaceFail, but . . . ,” suggests a clear and pressing personal exigence for these bloggers to speak out—and then speak again and again in subsequent entries and comments to ensure that their words were understood. RaceFail was thus a movement not for civil rights nor for recognition of certain grievances, but for understanding and identity. The meme which spread virally through this corner of the blogosphere was not the actual content of the posts, but the struggle they represented: a group of people trying very hard to make themselves and their beliefs about racism understood. There were no specific goals, no end results which would satisfy every participant (at one point some participants suggested a boycott of certain authors, but it was immediately rejected by other participants as a “witchhunt”). There was only talk—although in this case, talk was the movement’s action and goal and strategy all at once. The common enemy wasn’t the establishment nor a corporate entity nor a government, but misunderstanding: a condition
the participants addressed vigorously with a form of discourse that, even though it was conducted in public, was intensely personal.

**Conclusion**

What makes a movement? As I discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, movements can be historical or social phenomena with established leadership, goals, and strategies. By those criteria, neither of the viral movements I analyzed in this chapter fully qualifies as a “movement.” Anonymous had a goal and strategies, but no centralized leadership to see it through. RaceFail had opinion leaders, but no specific end result in mind. However, movements can also consist of shared meanings, and those meanings can be located in their rhetoric, or in the way their members (and outsiders) work discursively to create shared understandings and shared identities. It is this sense of social movements which helps explain the nature and significance of viral movements: the movement is the meaning, dispersed memetically across networks and written by its participants.

The movements I discuss in this chapter each reflect a certain reality and a certain understanding of the nature of social protest. Indeed, each replicates aspects of more traditional movements while subverting others. In the first example, Anonymous is not content to confine its anti-Scientology movement to online protests, preferring instead to adopt some standard movement tactics like physical demonstrations. Yet as I have shown, even these tactics have a mimetic quality to them. In the second example, participants find themselves rehashing arguments from the civil rights movement and
rewriting them for a digital age—raising questions about identity, white privilege, and personal expression in the blogosphere. In both cases, the story of the movement is written by its members through weblog posts, comments, and interlinking. The barrier to entry for these movements is low: if one can type, one can become a movement participant.

Viral weblog movements certainly are capable of generating a high amount of discussion on a topic. Indeed, weblogs can encourage debate by their very structure, as we see in the RaceFail movement, where the interlinking of “friends” networks and the hierarchical comments on LiveJournal frame a discursive space which promotes back-and-forth discussion. This can be a problem for movement members who might find it difficult to keep up with the ongoing discussion, although in the case of RaceFail the volume of posts prompted several participants to act as recorders or historians for the movement. Perhaps, then, the solution to the cacophony of voices is simply to let the movement develop its own unique response; indeed, in the case of Anonymous, the clamorous nature of the movement’s rhetoric was one of its key features, as it presented the image of a chaotic force taking on the Church of Scientology. As I have argued, viral movements write themselves memetically, and it simply is impossible to contain their spread.

Are viral movements, then, simply so much static? Or, as Lake argued in his initial weblog entry in RaceFail, does the “churn” these discussions raise “drive the boundaries of good fiction, good thought and good citizenship?” For the answer, we should perhaps look to the movements’ participants—the seven thousand mask-wearing protesters who gave up their Saturdays to picket an organization they saw as harmful, or
the bloggers who called attention to the white privilege still being written into books, weblogs, and everyday life. As RaceFail blogger “synecdochic” wrote, “This is not petty infighting. This is not trivial. This is important as fucking hell.” The very fact that these bloggers cared enough about their world to stand up to a massive organization or to try to educate their fellow bloggers about racism and white privilege is encouraging, especially given fears that the Internet might work to isolate us from one another. Viral movements might not seem as “real” or as effectual as other forms of political participation, but in the information society they function rhetorically to provide participants yet another way to be citizens.
Notes


3 Rayport, “The Virus of Marketing.”


6 Although *mimesis* can be (and has been) translated several ways, Dawkins draws on *mimesis* as imitation. In Plato’s conception of *mimesis*, imitation results in dilution of the ‘true’ or ideal thing (a painter paints a picture of a bed, which is an imitation of a bed built by a carpenter, which is an imitation of the true idea of a bed; thus the art is at least two steps removed from the ‘truth’). In viral movements, we see both this phenomenon and its opposite: although propagation of the movement across a network can lead to dilution or even distortion of the originating rhetoric, it can also increase exposure to the movement, which could make it stronger.


9 Graham Lampa, “Imagining the Blogosphere: An Introduction to the Imagined Community of Instant Publishing,” in *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*.

10 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 67.

11 See Burke, “Terministic Screens,” 49-51 for a discussion of continuity and discontinuity.


19 Most denial-of-service attacks use “botnets,” networks of thousands of personal computers infected with viruses which allow the hacker to use them to flood servers with traffic; this doubles the illegality of the operation, as it involves illegally taking control of another’s computer to commit a criminal act.

20 The date was chosen at least in part to commemorate the birthday of Lisa McPherson, who died from a pulmonary embolism while under the Church of Scientology’s care. The Church was indicted on two felony counts, but charges were later dismissed.


This seems to be an in-joke among members of 4chan.org; Mudkips is the name of a character from the children’s cartoon and game Pokemon, but it’s unclear how the meme began.

This is a reference to a line from the Nintendo game Star Fox 64.


Pazienza, “Be Wary.”


Christine Harold, OurSpace: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).


See Howard Rheingold’s study of “smart mobs” for an example of how communication technologies can assemble and motivate large groups of people with very short notice. Howard Rheingold, Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution (New York: Basic Books, 2002).


40 Woo, Kim, and Dominick, “Hackers: Militants or Merry Pranksters:” 72.

41 The term “RaceFail” first appeared as a tag on Avalon’s Willow’s January 13 weblog entry, though it is likely that the tag was added later after the name had caught on. The name appears to have been suggested in a discussion on coffeeandink’s LiveJournal weblog in an untitled January 22, 2009 entry: http://coffeeandink.livejournal.com/883626.html (accessed July 25, 2010).

42 A note on method: I am indebted to the Fandom History Wiki for their detailed pages on this movement; in particular, the timeline of posts at http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Race_Fail_2009 and the list of participants at http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Race_Fail_2009_by_author were invaluable. The tables and charts in this chapter are based on data drawn from the date range January 8-March 31, 2009, which represents the first “wave” of RaceFail. My count of the number of entries involved differs slightly from Fandom History’s due to their inclusion of some Twitter posts and some entries which I determined to be irrelevant to the RaceFail discussion. I also came across some entries that were not linked from Fandom History, though I subsequently added them to the wiki.


44 Elizabeth Bear, “Whatever You’re Doing, You’re Probably Wrong,” Matociquala LiveJournal, January 12, 2009, http://matociquala.livejournal.com/1544111.html (accessed July 25, 2010). I was aware when I began this analysis that Bear was a key figure in the RaceFail movement, but I was surprised to find her also involved with Anonymous—everything really is connected in the blogosphere, it seems.

45 LiveJournal, unlike many other blogging services which simply present comments in chronological order, “threads” comments so that readers can reply specifically to other readers,
rather than simply adding their comments to a list. These replies are visible to all readers, though, so although the interface allows for individual conversations within a larger discussion, those conversations are not private.


59 Again, my count of the overall number of posts may be slightly different than others’.


61 Lake, “Another Shot at Thinking About the Other.”

CHAPTER FIVE: Blogging, Democracy, and the Future of Online Activism

The story of the blogosphere is one of connection. It is the story of hundreds of bloggers writing eloquently and passionately about the pervasiveness of racism. It is the story of readers from around the world following one woman’s quest to live without plastic. It is the story of millions of individuals taking part in collective action every day, from simple comments affirming someone else’s political view to more complicated actions like turning off one’s electricity and blogging by solar power. It is the story of established movement organizations looking to connect to a new generation of activists through new technologies, and of protesters who hide behind anonymity yet act in concert to oppose a powerful establishment. It is a story told in the blogrolls, trackbacks, reciprocal links, and “friend” functions of weblog software, and in the social and rhetorical transactions made both through and apart from those structural affordances. If there is a unique feature of the blogosphere, it is that it makes visible much of the interconnectedness of social life—for good and for ill.

The preceding three chapters of this dissertation might suggest that weblogs are easily classifiable: they are tools of existing social movement organizations, journals kept by individual activists, or sites giving rise to viral movements. The reality is often much more jumbled. SMO weblogs can be sites for viral memes; individual weblogs may begin as simple journals but evolve into activist portals; viral movements may inspire individuals to begin their own activist weblogs. Additionally, movements may span more than one type of weblog; this is certainly the case with the environmental movement, as
shown in chapters two and three of this study, as well as with many health-related movements, such as the breast cancer awareness movement. These movements all combine the organizational, individual, and viral characteristics discussed in this study. Thus, weblog movements defy easy categorization, requiring multiple perspectives in order to be fully understood. Therefore, in the first section of this chapter, I provide an example of how all three of the perspectives outlined in this study can combine to help illuminate a single movement: the ongoing “Tea Party” movement in the United States. Throughout my analysis, I also consider the potential of weblog movements to be co-opted by corporate and institutional forces which may not share the grass-roots participants’ goals or political ideals.

As more and more discourse moves online, we must consider how technologies such as weblogs are impacting the character of public discussion. Are weblogs emerging as a credible alternative to the mainstream media, or are they simply feeding into the established media cycle? Is the blogosphere a vibrant marketplace of ideas and discussion, or has it become an echo chamber that reinforces existing views and contributes to political polarization? Does blogging really work to include more voices in democratic deliberation, or is there a “digital divide” that actually excludes many voices from the blogosphere? Is productive discussion being drowned in a sea of static, or do can important, socially constructive messages rise above the noise of the blogosphere? And does the decentralized nature of weblog discourse lead to a free exchange of ideas, or does it simply produce more chaos and disorganization? In the last section of this chapter, I return to these issues and to the basic question I posed at the
outset of this study: “Is blogging good or bad for democracy?” At this point, as I will suggest, the evidence remains mixed and it is difficult to offer definitive answers to that and many other questions about blogging’s implications for democratic deliberation. Nevertheless, there is cause for optimism about blogging’s potential to be a powerful tool of democratic empowerment. Despite concerns that the blogosphere might lead to political solipsism, bloggers are still making connections to each other, constituting collective action through their individual understandings of social and political issues.

**Countermovement, Co-optation, and Critique: The Tea Party Movement**

The beginnings of the so-called Tea Party movement in the U.S. can be traced to several sources. Although the catalyst for the movement, as I will discuss below, was a specific incident, momentum had been slowly building since the 2008 presidential campaign and the election of Barack Obama as the nation’s first African American president. Conservatives expressed concern over Obama’s message of change and the Democratic Party’s proposals for addressing the economic crisis. Indeed, before the movement came to be known as the Tea Party, several more spontaneous rallies had taken place around the country protesting the administration’s economic stimulus plan. The stage was thus set for a protest movement organized online. Just as the Obama campaign had skillfully used new technologies to recruit and organize its supporters, the Tea Party used the Internet to organize opposition to his administration.

*The Tea Party as a Viral Movement*

The Tea Party movement found its name and purpose in an on-air anti-
government tirade by Rick Santelli, a business commentator for the cable network CNBC. Speaking live from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange on February 19, 2009, Santelli “blew a gasket on the air over a plan by the Obama Administration to tackle the foreclosure crisis,” wrote David von Drehle of *Time* magazine. More specifically, Santelli took aim at the Obama administration’s proposed “Homeowners Affordability and Stability Plan,” which proposed to help homeowners avoid foreclosure on their mortgages by regulating the amount they would be required to pay and providing some financial help from the government. Santelli argued that the plan promoted “bad behavior,” then declared: “We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I’m going to start organizing.”

The rant quickly became the most-viewed video on CNBC.com. Copies uploaded to YouTube began making the rounds of conservative weblogs, which celebrated Santelli’s passion and responded to his call for a “Tea Party.” One blogger, whose weblog *A Red Voice in a Blue State* purports to “post the facts that the mainstream media leaves out,” wrote, “Rick Santelli of CNBC tells it like it is, speaking up . . . about the wasteful, regulatory nature of the stimulus bill. He asks – Do YOU want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage?! His appearance is a virtual call to action! You MUST WATCH THIS VIDEO above.” “A red voice” went on to encourage readers to sign a petition supporting a “Tea Party” protest in Chicago’s Grant Park, writing, “If we have enough folks say ‘YES!’ then we just might start a major movement with this event. But it has to begin at the grassroots. Will you be in Chicago to make a statement? Will you forward this to your friends and let them know about the NEW Boston Tea Party – held in July in
Chicago? Will you post this on your blog, web site, Twitter and Facebook? Sign our petition today!” Other bloggers also took up the call, posting links to the video and pledging to host Tea Party protests in their own hometowns, including Los Angeles, Tempe, Nashville, St. Louis, and Seattle.

Although his rant was deliberately provocative, Santelli actually seemed surprised by the response. In a statement on CNBC.com, he wrote that he had “NO affiliation or association with any of the Web sites or related tea party movements that have popped up” as a result of his comments, contending that in his “thousands of appearances on CNBC” he had often employed a similarly “aggressive and impassioned style.” This particular rant, Santelli reasoned, was “unique” in that it “obviously struck a chord with the public,” thus “inciting what can only be described as a groundswell of feedback from the public, the White House, the Internet, and the media at large.” According to Santelli, “many millions” of Americans apparently agreed with his position; otherwise, “why would this ‘rant’ be so much different than many of my impassioned comments of the past. Why would the Internet light up the way it did if people did not feel so strongly.” The answer, according to Santelli, seemed “pretty obvious; the nerve I struck resonated across the country.” Rather than take credit (or responsibility) for the movement, Santelli thus diverted attention away from his specific remarks and onto the “groundswell” of supportive opinion beginning to replicate throughout the blogosphere.

Yet what really set this rant apart from Santelli’s other tirades was not the sentiment per se but the “tea party” metaphor, which provided the budding movement with a specific meme, a rallying cry more easily embraced than vague calls for opposition
to Obama’s policies. As George Bernard Shaw once said, “A good cry is half the battle,” and Santelli’s “tea party” metaphor provided a rallying cry for previously diffuse and disorganized opposition to Obama. The “groundswell” Santelli described was also encouraged by established conservative bloggers like Michelle Malkin, who wrote, “Don’t wait for someone else to do it. Don’t make excuses. Don’t think you can pull [a Tea Party rally] off because you’ve never done it before? Look at mom-bloggers Liberty Belle and HuskerGirl. *Yes, you can!*” Here, Malkin not only ran with the “tea party” meme but also co-opted Obama’s own “Yes We Can” slogan, ironically turning that slogan against Obama’s policy agenda. Malkin was not the only blogger to co-opt liberal ideals and liberal rhetoric. A blogger calling herself “The Lonely Conservative” also turned Obama’s own rhetoric against him, disputing his claim to speak for “the people” and insisting that the Tea Party represented the “real” grassroots:

Liberals are jealous of the Tea Party movement. They’re playing off the Obama “unity” campaign slogan to try to re-create their own leftist version. . . . Too bad it’s not going to work. The Tea Party movement wasn’t the brainchild of some right wing operatives. It was an organic reaction to government gone amok. That’s why it’s still around, no matter how fractious it may be. It’s made up of average citizens who are genuinely concerned about the future of this republic. . . . Every left wing “movement” has been nothing more than a well funded enterprise made to look like it’s grass roots. Now we know what a real grass roots movement looks like, and it’s not “One Nation.”
No doubt many conservative bloggers responded spontaneously and sincerely to the Tea Party’s memetic replication. Yet the “Lonely Conservative’s” faith in the “grass-roots” authenticity of the Tea Party movement may have been somewhat misplaced, as the movement was also cultivated and nurtured by “professional” political groups on the right. The Tea Party meme spread virally and rapidly through the conservative blogosphere, inspiring many bloggers to join in by invoking historical memories of the Boston Tea Party. Given that the original Tea Party protested against “taxation without representation”—and given the fact that Obama was duly elected President of the United States—bloggers even wisely transformed the acronym TEA into a more appropriate economic complaint, “Taxed Enough Already.” Yet while individual bloggers clearly had much to do with the spread and popularity of the meme, the Tea Party movement was far from a genuine “grass-roots” movement. That would become obvious later, as the role of political professionals in promoting the “movement” was exposed.

*Tea Partiers: Individual Activists*

Many bloggers, mostly ones who already had been blogging about conservative ideals and issues, took up the Tea Party banner on their weblogs. One such blogger was Keli Carender, who went by the alias “Liberty Belle” in her weblog, *Redistributing Knowledge*. Carender had already organized one “anti-pork” rally in Seattle, Washington, in opposition to the administration’s stimulus package. When Santelli’s rant hit the air, however, she found new inspiration, screaming “Yes! Yes! Yes! You tell ’em Rick!!!!!” She immediately set about organizing a Tea Party rally for the following weekend, while still cultivating the *ethos* of an ordinary citizen *compelled* to take action.9
Describing herself as “a girl who loves to read; loves politics; loves her country; fiercely supports the men and women in the armed forces; [and] loves her family,” Carender insisted that she had finally “come to realize that the people of the USA are in dire need of a basic Economics lesson as well as a review on individual rights and freedom.” She concluded on a passionate note, pledging to fight back and invoking a series of labels frequently used to discredit Obama and his supporters as somehow un-American: “I will not sit idly by and watch as social democrats, socialists, or communists attempt to dominate this country. I am ready to do my part and fight for liberty. Join me?”

Like EnviroWoman, Carender created an alternate identity as she launched a crusade to “fight” for what she believes in. In fact, the image Carender chose to represent herself on *Redistributing Knowledge* was another superhero, a DC Comics character named “Liberty Belle,” who used her special powers to fight the Axis powers in World War II. By building her blogging identity around a patriotic superhero, Carender portrayed herself as both an ordinary American and a superhumanly dedicated patriot fighting for “true” American ideals. Although she still wrote in the first person, Carender created an online persona that transcended her “ordinary” identity as an average citizen and reconstituted her identity as part of a great crusade larger than herself.
Another blogger who “joined” the Tea Party movement online was Fred Witzell, also known as “Texas Fred.” Fred described himself as a self-proclaimed “Conservative, and a highly opinionated blogger,” and cultivated the persona of a straightforward, honest person who “tells it like it is.” If you “ask for my opinion,” Fred promised, “I'll let you know exactly what's on my mind. I don’t play the PC [politically correct] game, so, be very careful what you ask for.”

Witzell cultivated this brash, in-your-face persona in many of his weblog posts, writing, for example, “I am NOT a politically correct blogger. I am not kind to those that I feel are trying their level best to destroy this nation.”

Claiming to have organized a Tea Party chapter in his hometown of Rowlett, Texas, Witzell explained that he was part of “a group of individuals united by our shared core values. We recognize the strength of grassroots organizing powered by activism and civic responsibility at a local level.”

Witzell described the group’s core values as “Uphold the U.S. Constitution, Limited Government, Fiscal Responsibility, and Free Markets,” echoing both conservative and libertarian themes.
Both Carender and Witzell responded passionately to the viral movement’s meme. Interestingly, though, they both did so in politically traditional ways: forming local citizens’ action groups and staging protest rallies. In this case, it seems that blogging alone was not enough to fulfill these and other bloggers’ desire to enact change. Alan Scott and John Street argue that although political discourse often draws heavily upon popular culture and new media, the problems of—and methods for—communicating dissent and enacting social social change remain largely the same. Indeed, as Scott and Street contend, many political actors have simply “exploited the opportunities offered by particular technologies and modes of communication” to perform traditional movement functions, such as recruitment, fundraising, and mobilization. As Brett Lunceford argues, “when virtual protests work in tandem with physical protest, the physical aspects will likely overshadow the virtual ones.” Still, for bloggers like Carender and Witzell, the comments and entries in their weblogs announced the existence of a new movement build around the Tea Party meme and served to publicize traditional movement activities in their home towns of Seattle and Rowlett. The Tea Party thus existed on two levels: in the network of online activities that spread the meme and the movement’s ideals through discussion and crosslinking, and in the physical protests that attracted still more supporters and garnered media attention.

**Tea Party Organizations**

Though much of the organization of the Tea Party protest happened at the local level, several national organizations also picked up the Tea Party meme—though, perhaps, not the grassroots ideals behind it. One, the Tea Party Patriots, was founded by
FreedomWorks, an established conservative advocacy group and political action committee. Although FreedomWorks is listed merely as a “partner” on the Tea Party Patriots Web site, Tim Dickinson of *Rolling Stone* has reported that FreedomWorks organized the Tax Day Tea Party rallies and continues to direct the activities of the Tea Party Patriots. The Tea Party Patriots used their Web site to provide “logistical, educational, networking and other types of support to over 1000 community based tea party groups around the country.” The Web site served as a portal for Tea Party activists, providing an extensive list of all its local chapters on the front page and working to “recognize and support the strength of grassroots organization powered by activism and civic responsibility at a local level.” Local coordinators could use the Web site to sign up new members, plan events, and communicate with movement participants. FreedomWorks, of course, benefited from the arrangement by gaining contact information for thousands of Tea Party activists to use in their own fundraising and mobilization efforts.

Another organization that sprang up in response to the Tea Party movement was the Tea Party Express, a nationwide bus tour that shuttled local and national conservative figures between local rallies and urged its followers to “just vote them out!” Tea Partiers could follow the tour’s progress on the group’s Web site, sign up for local rallies, and view post-rally reports on its weblog. Similar in style to the weblogs of the 2004 Howard Dean and the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaigns, the Tea Party Express weblog featured calls to action, numerous photos and videos of rallies, and personal accounts by tour organizers and volunteers. Although the tone of the weblog was vernacular, the tour,
Web site, and weblog were organized and run by a conservative political consulting firm, Russo, Marsh, and Associates, under the banner of a political action committee called “Our Country Deserves Better.” According to the Talking Points Memo weblog, almost two-thirds of the money raised during the Tea Party Express tour went to this consulting firm.  

The third major organization associated with the Tea Party movement was Tea Party Nation, which claimed on its Web site to be “a user-driven group of like-minded people who desire our God given Individual Freedoms which were written out by the Founding Fathers.” These “freedoms,” according to Tea Party Nation’s Web site, include “Limited Government, Free Speech, the 2nd Amendment, our Military, Secure Borders and our Country!” The Tea Party Nation was founded by Judson Phillips, a Republican lawyer from Tennessee who, according to some sources, hoped to “make a fortune” off the Tea Party movement. Phillips’ organization set up the first Tea Party Convention, headlined by former Alaska governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, in February 2010. Tickets to the convention cost $549 per person, and Palin’s speaking fee was reportedly more than $100,000. The for-profit nature of the convention caused some dissent in the Tea Party movement ranks; for example, the Tea Party Patriots actually encouraged its members not to attend the convention because of the high costs. Conservative blogger Dr. Melissa Clouthier wrote, “Disillusioned Tea Party volunteers are angry at Phillips for turning the grass-roots group into a for-profit venture without their consent and for charging more than $500 per person to an event that many worked for but can’t afford. . . . all money made by the sold-out event will go straight to Tea
Party Nation, Inc. while grassroots activists have donated their time to make the event happen.” The controversy caused some speakers and sponsors to pull out of the convention, though Palin still delivered the keynote address.

Although they claimed to be working on behalf of a nonpartisan and nonprofit grassroots movement, all three of the major organizations involved with the Tea Party movement were organized and funded by established conservative interests. As I discussed in chapter two of this study, social movement organizations can perform extremely valuable functions—and certainly, these three organizations provided useful guidance and organizational structure to the emerging Tea Party movement. However, in representing themselves as genuine grassroots entities, the Tea Party Patriots, Tea Party Express, and Tea Party Nation not only misled the public but may have done their own movement a disservice, promoting their own growth and profits rather than the cause itself. Like the “wise use” arm of the environmental movement (which was, in fact, a corporate campaign to oppose environmental policies that hurt business interests), these corporate-backed organizations claimed to speak for a grassroots movement but were, in fact, professional or “Astroturf” movement organizations. Additionally, the jostling among the organizations for influence and money led to public disputes within the Tea Party ranks that only served to weaken the image of the Tea Partiers as a unified “grassroots” movement.

I have not yet mentioned the contributions of a fourth established and corporate entity to the Tea Party movement: Fox News, which gave extensive coverage to Tea Party rallies, the Tax Day protest, and the “9/12 Taxpayer March on Washington” on September
12, 2009. In particular, Fox commentator Glenn Beck not only “covered” the events but was a key player in organizing and promoting them on his hour-long show. His “912 Project” was actually a formal co-sponsor of the September 12 demonstration. Fox News’ involvement in the Tea Party movement raises yet another concern for the study of movements: when a major mainstream news organization is deeply involved with organizing and promoting a “movement,” can it really be called a “grassroots” movement? In addition, of course, Fox News’ role in helping to stage the events it then covered as “news” raises new and troubling questions about journalistic ethics. Interestingly, weblogs actually provided something of a “check” on this kind of behavior, as it was a weblog that first broke the story about a Fox News producer caught on tape riling up a crowd at the 9/12 rally for an on-air segment.26

**The Rhetoric of an Online Counter-Movement: The Coffee Party Protests**

The Tea Party’s strident anti-government rhetoric did not, of course, resonate with everyone. In fact, yet another online movement arose to counter what they saw as the Tea Party’s deceptive and divisive rhetorical style. The “Coffee Party,” as they called themselves, claimed to speak on behalf of those who support “cooperation in government” rather than partisanship and name-calling. Rather than seeking to reduce or eliminate the role of government in people’s lives, the Coffee Party professed to “recognize that the federal government is not the enemy of the people, but the expression of our collective will,” and called upon its supporters to “participate in the democratic process in order to address the challenges that we face as Americans.” As “voters and grassroots volunteers,” the group pledged to “support leaders who work toward positive
solutions, and hold accountable those who obstruct them.”

Like the Tea Party, the Coffee Party used Web technologies to organize a series of local meetings, although to date the movement has attracted little attention from the mainstream media and has had comparatively little impact on the national political scene.

The irony, of course, is that the Tea Party, which arose out of conservative ideals, has imitated the strategies and tactics of the New Left, employing raucous demonstrations and hyperbolic rhetoric to attract media attention. Meanwhile, the Coffee Party, composed of more progressive or left-leaning activists, has countered with calls for “civil” discussion and respectful debate—communicative behaviors that one might call “conservative.” Certainly, the Tea Party has succeeded in attracting more attention and has had more of an effect on the nation’s political discourse. Tea Party-backed candidates have even won primary elections in several states and will appear on a number of state and local ballots in the November general elections.

Yet it remains to be seen whether the Tea Party, with its decentralized leadership, will have any lasting impact on American electoral politics. As *Time* magazine writer David von Drehle has argued, the Tea Party in some ways resembles Ross Perot’s Reform Party, which emerged as an alternative to the Democratic and Republican parties but quickly lost its influence after the 1992 election. As von Drehle writes, “Grass-roots uprisings come and go, and protest candidates rise and fall. In the flush of righteous battle, people focus on the beliefs they share and tolerate points of difference. Eventually, though, the battle ends, the smoke clears, and even when the movement has some success, its troops tend to go their separate ways.” Lasting political influence, von
Drehle continues, requires “an enduring party that is able to outlast leaders, heal divisions, withstand opportunists and adjust to changing times.” Time will tell whether the Tea Party will be able to sustain its organizational momentum, but there is little doubt that the issues it raised will continue to circulate and recirculate in the political world of the blogosphere.

**Weblogs and Democratic Deliberation Revisited**

The example of the Tea Party might lead one to conclude that democratic deliberation is alive and well in the blogosphere—that citizens, acting of their own volition, are taking to the virtual (and physical) streets in vocal defense of their values and their vision of what democracy should look like. Weblogs, in this view, are a vital new part of the democratic process, giving voice to minority views and providing a platform for the oppressed to air their grievances. In their own minds, at least, the Tea Partiers are part of what Nancy Fraser describes as a counter-public sphere, where members of a subordinated social group “invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.”

Yet one could also draw the opposite lesson from this example: blogging may have encouraged people who are not, in fact, disenfranchised to band together against a legitimately elected government, drawing strength from each other’s words and falling into a feedback loop of anti-establishment fervor. Cass Sunstein warns of this danger, arguing that people’s increasingly personalized information habits, in allowing them to
select only the arguments with which they agree, diminishes democratic deliberation and contributes to political polarization. From different perspectives, both views may be equally true. In the introduction to this study, I discussed five pairs of opposing viewpoints on blogging’s contributions to democratic deliberation. I now revisit those oppositional pairs, considering the contributions of blogging to democratic deliberation in light of the cases discussed here and in the previous three chapters.

**Weblogs and the Media**

The relationship between weblogs and the mainstream media clearly is changing. News media outlets increasingly view weblogs as manifestations of public opinion. As I discussed in chapter one, the interdependent relationship between weblogs and the mainstream media can lead to a cycle in which discussion in the blogosphere is represented by the news media as an expression of public opinion, the weblogs then invoke the media coverage to establish their own legitimacy, and the media then takes the weblog even more seriously—and so on and so on, in an ever-expanding cycle of fabricated “news.” In fact, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between “news” and weblog chatter, as I am often reminded when I ask my students where they get their “news.” Often they are unaware that a site they obtained information from was, in fact a weblog, or that they even read any weblogs at all. This confusion is compounded by the fact that many mainstream media Web sites now look like weblogs. As one example, *Newsweek* magazine redesigned its online site in June of 2010 specifically to evoke the look-and-feel of a weblog. Rather than dividing the front page of the Web site into sections, following the structure of the print magazine, all new stories on *Newsweek* now
appear in reverse chronological order, with the name of the “section” appearing off to the side as a category label. Content from Newsweek’s weblogs is now displayed in exactly the same way as the investigative “news” pieces which also appear in their print version. The distinction between the discourse of personal weblogs and professional journalism is rapidly breaking down.

The lines between blogging and news are further blurred by the efforts of bloggers to exploit other media. For example, Colin Beavan drew attention to his No Impact Man project through radio interviews, a book deal, and coverage from other weblogs and traditional news organizations. The social movement organizations I discussed in chapter two also still cultivate mainstream media; in fact, as I argued in that chapter, their weblogs often function to channel information to media outlets, whether that information is press releases, reports of offline activism, or endorsement announcements. Although blogging is converging with many other media activities, it is still not a substitute for mainstream news coverage for most movement actors. However, the interdependence of the mainstream media with weblogs may mean that bloggers increasingly can exercise influence over the way issues are presented.

*Echoes in the Agora*

Social movement scholars such as Herbert W. Simons and Richard B. Gregg have argued that one of the audiences for social movement rhetoric is the movement’s own participants. Movement leaders must craft rhetorical messages which will keep members happy and involved; members create and respond to rhetoric which satisfies their own needs. For example, when the Tea Party was accused by the National
Association for the Advancement of Colored People of harboring racist elements among its ranks, Ellis Cose wrote for Newsweek magazine, “Tea Party leaders do, indeed, seem much more interested in attacking perceived enemies on the left than in taking on bigoted fringe groups aligned with them—not because Tea Partiers are racist, but because they are not particularly inclined to alienate allies.” This desire to placate movement members is evident not only in the messages that are created, but in those which are most widely circulated. In the blogosphere, as Davi Johnson argues, rhetoric is selected for its ability to “survive”—that is, the portions of messages which appeal to (or enrage) bloggers most will be replicated across networks. Thus, the blogosphere might actually encourage messages that merely reinforce or provoke those already in agreement with the source, creating a feedback circuit of mutually reinforcing messages that amplify the division and polarization of society.

This issue is compounded by the fact that pre-existing social networks such as blogrolls or LiveJournal’s “friend” function are powerful vectors for movement rhetoric. Sidney Tarrow describes these as “movement networks,” which he defines as centers of collective action based in social groups. For example, at the end of chapter three I described the blogger who was led to EnviroWoman’s weblog via No Impact Man and was subsequently inspired to start her own activist weblog. The high density of movement networks could also could contribute to a lack of critical reflection on the part of movement participants (if all of their friends are talking about something, it must be important). The process that replicates movements virally does not necessarily confine them to specific social networks, but the existence of those networks means the
movement may spread more rapidly through them. Although commentary and critique are rhetorical features of weblog discourse—for example, we saw in RaceFail that participants often critiqued each others’ posts in detail—it seems that the most politically provocative and controversial messages often escape close scrutiny and debate. Weblogs have the potential to encourage unreflective, uncritical replication of the “party line.” Thus, the technological and rhetorical structures which encourage rapid memetic replication of movement messages may contribute to the “echo chamber” effect—cause for concern if questioning and debate are not valued in a particular movement.

_Diversity in the Digital Divide_

Recent statistics suggest that the racial gap in Internet users has been closing and the gender gap already has closed. However, these statistics only take into account the user base of a particular technology rather than technological structures which may encourage or discourage certain forms of speech. Blogging, rooted as it is in narrative and self-expressive forms of speech, _might_ be seen as a more feminine, more inclusive form of communication. Weblogs, especially those run by individuals, seem to be perfect examples of what Kathleen Hall Jamieson names “individualized personal speech,” or speech that projects “a sense of private self” and “unconsciously” self-discloses—rhetorical strategies that Jamieson sensed on television but that appear on weblogs as well.

As Jamieson notes, this sort of speech historically has been identified with women, as women “developed facility in such private forms of communication as conversation and storytelling” in response to being denied access to the public sphere.
Nowadays, these “private” and “effeminate” forms of communication are more pervasive in public media than are argumentative or “masculine” styles. Jamieson points to Ronald Reagan as a master of the “effeminate” style, but we can also look to weblogs for innumerable examples of bloggers using narrative, conversational, and self-disclosive speech to make a political point. I believe these signs are encouraging, as people—and particularly women—who may not feel comfortable in traditionally confrontational or combative political debates discussions may find in weblogs a space where less antagonistic discourse is valued.

The issue of a racial divide in the blogosphere is more problematic. As we saw in the RaceFail movement, weblogs can provide excellent sites for illumination and discussion of issues related to racial diversity, but silencing, sidetracking, and ad hominem attacks are still common. For example, when bloggers in RaceFail self-identified as people of color to speak authoritatively on issues which affected their lives, they were often accused of speaking out of turn or using the wrong “tone.” Although the blogosphere would seem to be a space in which everyone can be equal, bloggers are still people who carry all the baggage of modern society, including racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry. Jorge Reina Schement argues that closing the digital divide may well “breathe life into the economic, political, and social life of a democratic society that embraces all,” but society itself must change before the egalitarian promise of the Internet can be fully realized.39 Blogging, though, may contribute positively to this societal change by providing a venue for the examination of these issues.
In the early, heady days of the Internet, it was easy to believe that democratic deliberation would be enhanced by the digital agora of bulletin boards, Usenet, chatrooms, mailing lists, and other collaborative and cooperative discursive spaces online. Perhaps it was. Certainly there has been more discussion—or at least more publicly visible, archivable discussion—of political and social issues since the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Yet as David Shenk and others have warned, more is not necessarily better—especially when it comes to discourse in an environment that often rewards speed over substance and reaction over genuine deliberation.40 As the signal-to-noise ratio deteriorates, they argue, we must search for new ways to boost the signal—that is, to encourage more fruitful, productive deliberations amidst all the chatter. In the case of weblog movements, I believe that the concerns over “too much information” are misplaced. Additional voices may make deliberations more cacophonous, but they also make them more vibrant and more democratic. In any case, successful movements seem to find ways to bring order to the chaos. In the case of RaceFail, for example, several “archivists” stepped in to organize and thematize the discussion. Tea Party activists turned over most bureaucratic duties to organizations and individual leaders, freeing up weblog spaces for replication and discussion of movement ideals. (In the case of Anonymous, chaos was a desired feature of the movement, so it comes as no surprise that no effort was made to bring order to the confusion.) Manuel Castells writes, “The Internet is a particularly malleable technology, susceptible to being deeply modified by its social practice, and leading to a whole range of potential social
outcomes.” The concern over “data smog” in weblog movements may be premature: the “social practices” of successful weblog movements, such as archiving and repetition of key themes, help to boost the signal through the noise.

This is not to say that there is no room for improvement; much more could be done to enhance the contributions of weblog discourse to important public discussions. Rather than try to reduce the amount of discourse online, we need to find ways to better educate netizens to make informed decisions about the content of that discourse. Alejandro Molina contends that the true digital divide lies in “the ability to construct knowledge” rather than any lack of physical access to computing technology. Similarly, Stuart Selber argues for fostering “multiliteracies”—functional, critical, and rhetorical skills for evaluating and contributing to discourse online. By providing discursively rich spaces for political and social involvement, weblog movements have the potential to enhance democratic deliberation. But if that potential is to be realized, we must foster the multiliteracies necessary to participate effectively in these new deliberative forums.

Decentralization and Diffusion

As we have seen in chapters three and four of this dissertation, the decentralization of online movements provides multiple avenues for participants to join and shape movement rhetoric. Individual activists such as No Impact Man and EnviroWoman can write themselves into a movement in ways that are meaningful to them, without having to subscribe to a particular organization’s mission. Bloggers can also join movements without having to set up specific spaces for activism—in the case of RaceFail, for example, bloggers brought the movement into their already-existing
weblogs by linking to others’ entries and posting their own thoughts on racism and privilege. The lack of gatekeepers meant that individual activists could define the movement on their own terms and help to constitute it through their discourse.

Additionally, decentralization decreases the likelihood that movements will be censored or shut down. Nicholas Negroponte writes that the Internet provides “a worldwide channel of communication that flies in the face of any censorship.” This can be a great asset for social movements such as Anonymous, who took full advantage of the protection afforded by anonymity and decentralization to target the Church of Scientology from multiple angles. Even if the Church had been able to discover the identity of one Anonymous activist, others could have continued the movement.

However, the downside of decentralization is that movements lack the ability to regulate individuals and groups who have personal agendas or who otherwise undermine the movement’s message. As Tea Party activist Deneen Borelli noted, the Tea Party was too diffuse for it to disavow those people or organizations which gave it a bad name: “There is no one single group that speaks for the entire Tea Party movement. It’s a grassroots effort ... So you’re not going to get one press release from one certain group that’s going to say x,y,z.” Recognizing this problem, several Tea Party groups and organizations joined together to form the National Tea Party Federation, hoping to create a unified message and media response and “act as a clearinghouse and to promote the Tea Party movement's objectives.” The group wrote that it was “committed to changing the dynamics of communicating clearly to its membership,” an approach that they hoped would allow for more “clarity of message [and] rapid response to media misinformation.
while continuing to build the brand equity of the Tea Party movement.” The NTPF thus aspired to “act in unison without a central leadership or overhead yet collaborate through a common set of principles.” In this instance, decentralization was seen as a threat to the coherence of the movement’s message, and so the Tea Party movement formed an umbrella organization in an effort to better control the message. As the movement strove for legitimacy, it became less of an expression of vernacular discourse and more of an institutionalized movement.

Because of their decentralized nature, weblog movements may also be particularly susceptible to being co-opted by special interests who may not share the core values of movement participants. These “astroturf” movements may be less easy to identify because of the democratizing nature of weblog technology: because anyone can start a weblog and most weblogs share common characteristics, there is little to differentiate genuine “grassroots” activists from those who may be hijacking the movement for their own purposes. As I have argued, this is a particular concern with movements which spread virally, as the rapid replication and dissemination of movement rhetoric may mean that movement leaders have less control over the messages being presented and movement participants less time to reflect fully and critically over the messages presented in their name.

**Conclusion**

For better or worse, new media technologies have changed the way we deliberate over important social and political issues. The Internet, of course, is only the latest in a
long line of technologies that changed public discourse, beginning with the written word itself. Walter J. Ong contends that the shift from oral to written communication marked a cultural shift as well as a technological one, changing the way humanity saw and interacted with the world.\textsuperscript{47} Similarly, the advent of electronic mass media in the twentieth century radically changed the form and content of democratic deliberations and brought about dramatic cultural transformations.\textsuperscript{48} The advent of the Internet is having equally profound impacts on the way people communicate with each other and the way we construct our social and political world. Tarrow argues that the popular press of the late eighteenth century “did not so much make rebellion heroic as make it ordinary.” Much the same might be said about weblogs: they may not be changing the goals or nature of political and social activism so much as they are making such activism more of an everyday occurrence.\textsuperscript{49}

The Information Age already appears to be transforming the way individuals relate to social movements. Steve Jones argues that the Internet allows us to not only join communities of interest, but to “reshape ourselves [and] adopt different personae for different communities and environments.”\textsuperscript{50} Identity—both individual and communal—is of supreme importance in modern activism. Indeed, just as Manuel Castells has argued that identities are decentered in a network society—a process which results in empowerment for the people behind those identities, as they are no longer constrained by traditional political structures—movements which are decentered may be able to break out of traditional activist models to enact new methods of protest.\textsuperscript{51} Alan Scott argues that this is already happening and identifies three characteristics that define new social
movements (NSMs): they are “primarily social or cultural in nature and only secondarily, if at all, political”; they are located within the civil sphere; and they “attempt to bring about change through changing values and developing alternate lifestyles.” While Nelson Pichardo may be right that there is nothing “new” about “how issues of identity and personal behavior are bound up in social movements,” the rich online personae of activists such as Colin Beavan, EnviroWoman, Keli Carender, and Fred Witzell point to new models of political and social activism in the Digital Age. As Julie Kalil Schutten writes, understanding how alternative identities and movements are being incorporated and represented within popular culture online is “increasingly important as individuals continue to participate in social movements and alternative identities via mediated avenues.” The activists examined in this study force us to reconsider traditional understandings of what it means to “belong” to a movement.

We can only guess about the future impact of evolving digital technologies on social movements and democratic deliberation. Nicholas Negroponte notes that “each generation will become more digital than the preceding one,” and netizens will continue to find novel ways to express their political views online. As early as 1995, Sherry Turkle wrote that habitual Internet users saw little qualitative difference between online and offline activism, although they clearly assume different forms. With Internet access becoming virtually ubiquitous, it is likely that the political and social activism of the future will increasingly be mediated by new media technologies, whether on computer screens, mobile phones, or devices not yet invented. Maria Bakardjieva argues that “citizens seem to want their voices heard and taken into account now through the new
functionalities of the Internet.” This suggests that there is indeed great democratic potential in the Internet, and specifically in its capacity to galvanize public responses and conduct them back to “previously one-way transmitters of powerful discourse.”\(^{57}\) Thus, I concur with Gilbert Rodman, who argues that we need to be able to “see the Net in all its complexity and to wrestle with the question(s) of its impact in correspondingly complicated ways.”\(^{58}\) Perhaps there is only one thing that, at this point, we can say for sure: the Internet will continue to shape public discourse in ways yet unanticipated.

Rhetoric, culture, and technology are intersecting in powerful new ways in the blogosphere, opening up new channels for discussion and new methods for activism. This dissertation has been an attempt to study one technological and rhetorical form to discover how it is changing the ways we interact with each other and the world—and the differences it is making in the character and quality of public discourse. As Brett Lunceford argues, “common citizens” have begun to “adapt technology to political ends in new and inventive ways that the technologists had not anticipated.”\(^{59}\) Although the road is sometimes bumpy, I am encouraged by the potential for weblogs to promote productive activism and bring about positive social change, particularly as “ordinary citizens” find new and creative ways to use weblogs to advocate for social change.
Notes


15 Scott and Street, “From Media Politics to E-protest,” 234.


(accessed July 26, 2010).


37 Jamieson, Eloquence, 81.

38 Jamieson, Eloquence, 82.


40 David Shenk, Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut (New York: HarperOne,


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- B.A. - The University of Alabama in Huntsville (Communication Arts), 2007.

Selected Awards and Recognition
- Dissertation Fellowship, Center for Democratic Deliberation, Spring 2009
- Graduate Research Fellowship, Research and Graduate Studies Office, The Pennsylvania State University, 2004-2007
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Publications

Selected Professional and Community Service
- Communication Arts and Sciences Graduate Forum: Professional Development Chair, 2008-2009; Intellectual Concerns Chair, 2007-2008; Technology Representative, 2004-2006
- NCA Conference Reviewer: Association for the Rhetoric of Science and Technology, 2009; Political Communication Division, 2007, 2009; Public Address Division, 2006; Student Section, 2005