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The Internet and the Public Sphere

During the past twenty years, there has been increased concern among sociologists, political scientists, and communication scholars about the health of the public sphere as a space for democratic deliberation and debate. To some extent, the present anger about the public sphere has its origin in Jürgen Habermas's 1989 book, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (originally published in German in 1962). In that work, Habermas presented a genealogy of the bourgeois public sphere in Europe, which he viewed as having its origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Using extensive citations from published documents of the time, Habermas traced the rise of the bourgeois public sphere as the result of a combination of factors, including increasing literacy, a rising commercial and trade sector, and the formation of a bourgeois class.

He noted the importance of the private sphere within its historical context, viewed as the realm of commodity exchange and social labor imbedded in the conjugal family as it related to salons, the theater, reading practices, and social gatherings of the day. The private sphere served as a resource for the public sphere, a space in which people read, discussed, and wrote about opinions, issues, and ideas in coffee houses and public meeting places. An analogous phenomenon in our current media environment might include the contents of personal blogs, social networking, and mobile communication as "private spheres," since much of this
content is not necessarily intended for public deliberation. Habermas described the characteristics of his construct of the bourgeois public sphere, which included widespread rational-critical debate, equality and association among persons of unequal status, freedom from censorship of free expression, and the opportunity to reach consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all persons.

The Public Sphere as a Contested Concept

The Habermasian public sphere has to some extent become an idealized construct against which the venues and practices for public discourse in other eras have been assessed. It had its shortcomings, some of which were described by Nancy Fraser. She noted that the bourgeois public sphere excluded many groups of people, especially the illiterate, women, and other groups in society (Fraser 58). Its exclusive emphasis on debate and rational-critical discussion also excluded other forms of communication, such as performative and aesthetic expression, which unified social groups and enabled identity formation (Warner, "Abbreviated Version").

Because of these objections, the viability of Habermas's version of the public sphere as a model of public deliberation has been widely challenged; thus the very idea of a public sphere is highly contested among scholars. Some critics of the concept, such as Fraser, have noted that the public sphere as conceived by Habermas incorporates "a historically specific and limited form of the public sphere," which Habermas called the "liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere" (Fraser 58).

In contradistinction to an idealized public sphere that would include groups from all sectors and strata of society, promote transparency, and encourage rational critical debate, the Habermasian public sphere was therefore compromised by a number of exclusions, and Fraser has maintained that "declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so." (60).

Other scholars have observed that the idea of a single, unitary public sphere is of limited value. For example, Gerard A. Hauser, in his book Vernacular Voices, invoked the idea of a "reticulate" (that is, networked) public sphere, comprised of a plurality of publics, and he described these publics as "emergent manifested through vernacular rhetoric" (14). In shifting the focus away from a unitary bourgeois public sphere and toward interactions that constitute the mundane transactions of words and gestures that mark our mundane encounters in public discourse, Hauser has opened up the possibility that we might want to consider public sphere discourse in terms of a multiplicity of spheres emanating from a variety of perspectives.

tives. He described civil society as "a web of discursive arenas in which members of society engage each other in ongoing dialogues that continually confront public problems, constitute publics, and challenge [each other] within and across domains for the formation of public opinion" (49).

Another scholar of public discourse, Michael Schudson, has also questioned the uniqueness of the bourgeois public as an ideal. He expressed reservations about its influence as an unprecedented framework for civic engagement. He dryly noted the fallaciousness of an idea expressed in current critiques of American politics and culture that emphasizes a "decline from some great and golden age" (143). The Habermasian public sphere invoked a sort of nostalgia—a belief that the virtues historically associated with deliberation and public debate have somehow been lost. In questioning this assumption, Schudson enumerated features that should characterize a healthy public sphere, such as citizen attendance at town meetings, voter participation in elections, a nonpartisan press, and inclusion of groups from various strata of society. By consulting historical records, however, Schudson found that voting percentages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fluctuated from 80% in 1844 to a very low point in the 1920s. Furthermore, literacy levels among the general populace in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were very low. Decisions reached during this period by many governing bodies at the state level were rarely made public, and then, as now, newspapers often boosted the parties they represented. After describing the potentials for bribery and intimidation at the polls during the same time period, Schudson viewed the imagined historical public sphere as a chimera, and he concluded by reminding his readers that "thinking through the conditions and possibilities for more rational and critical, fair and fair-minded, political practices in our own day will not profit from maintaining illusions about the character of the public sphere in days gone by" (161).

Public Discourse as Circulation and Response

In surveying work conceptualizing the contemporary public sphere, we should also consider the well-recognized work of Michael Warner, whose description of the formative influence of circulation in public sphere discourse is worth noting. The first principle he invoked when defining and describing a public is that it is self-organized, functioning as a space of discourse "organized by nothing other than the discourse itself." (Warner, "Abbreviated Version") (50). By "discourse," Warner is referring to a broad set of articulations, including books, Web postings, speeches, and other public statements, as well as visual and audio texts. A codicil to his conception of a public is that it "can only produce a sense of belonging and activity if it is self-organized through discourse rather than through an external framework"
(52). An “external framework” would be an entity like the state or some other en- tered institution.

A second principle of Warner’s is that a public is the social space created by reflexive circulation of discourse. Warner emphasizes that “a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not the circulating texts themselves that create publics; it is the concatenation of texts through time” (62). Warner’s view then, is that public discourse is a responding discourse, precipitated and made possible by discussions that precede it. Thus, the public sphere eventuates from the active circulation of argument about public issues and responses to them.

A third principle articulated by Warner is that “a public is constituted through more attention” (60). Warner notes that, unlike other entities, “publics lack any institutional being, commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated” (61).

**Manuel Castells’ View of the Public Sphere as a Site of Scandal Politics**

We will now discuss the aspects of roles played by public controversy and scandal politics in political campaigns and online news content. In his account of these developments, Manuel Castells emphasizes the ways in which news releases and scandal influence public perception of candidates and their policies. He also notes that these developments operate to capture public attention, an important factor in public awareness about specific social issues.

In relation to political campaigns, Castells observed that “in the United States, congressional and state elections typically attract little voter interest, and voters have scant knowledge about the names of their representatives or their challengers” (250). He was particularly concerned about the phenomenon of attack politics, or what he labeled “scandal politics.” In tracing patterns of media coverage in political campaigns, Castells noted, “A growing body of research suggests that, for these politicians, particularly during primaries, being implicated in scandal may actually be beneficial” (250–51). On the other hand, for major political candidates known to the public, scandals may often prove to be detrimental, because voters already have information about the candidate and therefore are more inclined to follow the details of the scandal itself.

This phenomenon could be seen during a major scandal that arose during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008, when videos of his pastor—Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Trinity Church where Obama was a member—were widely circulated. Wright was shown on national television in March 2008 expressing extreme views related to race in America. This exposure caused consternation among Obama’s supporters and members of the general public, therefore galvanizing attention to the scandal because candidate Obama was already well known and recognized as a promising candidate.

The outcome of these events and responses to Obama’s subsequent speech, “A More Perfect Union,” illustrate the significance of a third principle articulated by Warner—that “publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation” (“Abbreviated Version” 68). Warner notes that publics can only act within the temporality of the circulation of discourse that causes them to form. He maintains that “the more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation and...the closer it stands to politics” (68).

The distribution of controversy and conflict relevant to a scandal is therefore set within the context of its media environment and other attention-getting events, and, as Warner noted, “In modernity, politics takes much of its character from the temporality of the headline, not the archive” (68).

Observers of events prior to and after Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech concerning Reverend Wright have noted that the pre-speech controversy precipitated by the televised video clips of Wright speaking on race was made available in airings by nearly every major news outlet. Robert Terrill has noted that the clip’s circulation on the Internet dwarfed previous controversies “by several orders of magnitude” (366).

The positive impact of the speech given by Obama was so evident, however, that favorable response to it seemed to quell the controversy surrounding his relationship to Wright and his views on race. The speech was widely praised by friends and foes alike, including Hillary Clinton, John McCain, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and Newt Gingrich. A CBS news poll conducted two nights after the speech indicated that 69% of those who read or saw the speech felt that Obama “did a good job” of addressing race relations, and 70% of registered voters who responded said that recent events (i.e., the scandal) had made no difference in their voting decision (CBS News, “Poll”).

By May 30, 2008, the speech had been accessed on YouTube 4.5 million times (CBS News, “Poll”). Its widespread dissemination contributed to its impact. What we learn from these developments is that the scandal triggered by airing and widespread circulation of the Wright videos was promptly addressed via Obama’s effective and favorably reviewed speech. Its positive reception by a seemingly receptive audience appeared to redirect public attention from the scandal to other developments on the political scene. The timing of developments in this scandal and the public response to it also nicely illustrate Warner’s point that publics act within the temporality of the circulation of discourse that causes them to form. In the interim between disclosure of the Wright videos, media and public consternation about them, and Obama’s crafted and effective speech, a major disruption in the presiden-
tional campaign arose, expanded, and then receded because of the public’s favorable reaction to Obama’s speech to the nation on the topic of race.

Castells on Mass Self-Communication

The Wright incident just described is an example of what Castells has labeled “scandal politics.” In his recent book, Communication Power, Castells described specific developments in public and online communication that he viewed as relatively dysfunctional. He observed that “with the diffusion of the internet, a new form of interactive communication has emerged” (55), and he labels this phenomenon as “mass self-communication” (66). He notes that what differentiates it from prior forms of mass communication are its methods of production (it is self-generated), its view of potential receivers (which is self-directed), and its patterns of retrieval of content from the World Wide Web (which are self-selected).

The nature of this seemingly solipsistic form of communication seems to be of concern to Castells. Blogs as a form of self-expression would be one example. After noting that a Pew Internet and American Life project reported that 52% of bloggers say that they blog mostly for themselves (Lenhart and Fox), Castells observed that “a significant share of mass self-communication is closer to ‘electronic autism’ than to actual communication” (66; emphasis in original).

While in some sense Castells’ indictment of blogging is of interest, he is speaking here about personal rather than corporate or news blogs. There are many types of blogs. These include (but are not limited to) personal blogs, which resemble a personal diary or commentary; corporate and individual blogs used for business purposes; and news blogs used to provide analysis and commentary on public issues. Also, many mainstream journalists write their own blogs; some of these are highly regarded sources of information and news (Wikipedia Foundation).

It would seem that, for Castells, “actual” communication is “the sharing of meaning through exchange of information” (34), and presumably, social networking would not necessarily be included in his category of “actual” communication. He acknowledged, nonetheless, that 40% of users having a profile on a social networking site reported that they have used their site for political activity of some kind (390).

Public Inattention and the Role of Infotainment

Castells has been no sanguine about the nature of mediated politics than he has been about forms of political communication online. His initial concern is about the public’s pattern of seeming inattention to political news and issues. He notes that “political messages must overcome a major difficulty to reach the minds of cit-

izens” (205). He cites reports based on information-processing research that indicates that “average Americans pay close attention only to news about significant topics that clearly relate to their lives and experiences” (205). For example, political news that seemed to be of interest to the public at the onset of the midterm election period in 2010 was news that directly affected people’s lives and well-being. This included the expanding deficit, unemployment, health care reform, increased taxes, and other issues directly related to their well-being. Since much political news is viewed as peripheral information and is often too complex for citizens to attend to and process, it must, in Castells’ view, be presented as infotainment. Incidences of infotainment personalize the news in the form of a favorite political figure in ways to which the receiver can relate, and thus are more easily understood and remembered (205).

In addition to the prevalence of infotainment in political reporting, Castells also emphasized the role of scandal politics (such as was seen in the Wright-Obama scandal). Castells noted, “Scandal politics is inseparable from media politics” (249), partly because “the characteristics of media politics make the use of scandals the most effective tool in political contests” (249).

Castells viewed this as due to the personalization of politics. By “personalization,” he meant the tendency of media news to focus on the personality and characteristics of a particular political figure so as to relate more readily to the receiver’s emotions and interests. He characterizes the ultimate goal of scandal politics as an effort to destroy a political leader by leaking or propagating scandalous behavior that can be attributed to that person. Attack politics as was illustrated in the Reverend Wright scandal is pervasive during highly contested political campaigns. This is due to the fact, pointed out by Castells, that “negative images have a more powerful effect on voting behavior than positive images” (230).

Various strategies are used in attack politics, and these include deployment of negative stereotypes associated with the candidate, distortion of the candidate’s policy positions, and accusation of guilt by association, as was effectively illustrated in an incident during the pre-midterm election season in the state of Pennsylvania in July 2010. During that month, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce posted an attack ad directed against second-term Pennsylvania congressman Joe Sestak, who was running for a Senate seat against former Republican congressman Pat Toomey. The ad as initially posted claimed that Sestak “voted with Nancy Pelosi 100 percent of the time” (O’Toole).

Prior video statements by Sestak in the form of video clips showed him supporting government-run health care, cap and trade legislation on emissions, and the $787 billion stimulus measure. The Sestak campaign protested that the “100 percent” claim was inaccurate and asked that television stations withdraw the ad. Two Pittsburgh stations—WPCH and WPMY—pulled their ads for a day. After a
meeting with Chamber officials the next day, however, the ad was reinstated after a minor alteration in the ad content that satisfied the precise timeframe of Senzak’s voting pattern (Malloy). In the aftermath of the controversy, each campaign’s representatives made efforts to impugn the credibility of other.

Online Activism and Offline Results—Spain, 2004

Despite his skepticism about the potential effects of citizen disinterest, politicians’ opportunism, and questionable practices in campaigns and other public-sphere activities, Castells nonetheless has appreciated the Internet’s capacity to incite online mobilization toward offline actors. Citing research findings that informational media use encourages citizen communication and incites civic engagement, Castells recognizes that at times the Web provides a resource and a forum that evanesces in offline activity and mobilization.

Castells presents a salient example of this phenomenon in his book Communication Power that is related to citizen protests in Madrid and Barcelona, Spain following terrorists’ simultaneous attacks on four commuter trains in Madrid in March 2004. While José María Aznar, then the conservative leader of the country, blamed the Basque terrorist group ETA, for the bombing, there was widespread suspicion that the culprits were actually connected to Al Qaeda, whose motivation could have been in reaction to Aznar’s party’s decision to support then President Bush’s war in Iraq. Castells surmises that Aznar was motivated to deflect attention to the ETA, because, if the Basques were held responsible, support for the ruling party in the forthcoming election would be bolstered. On the other hand, if the terrorists were from Al Qaeda, its involvement would lead the public to decrease support for Aznar’s ruling party, since his party’s decisions would be viewed as having precipitated the attack.

On March 12, two days before the scheduled election, the ruling Aznar government was still withholding the information that Al Qaeda was culpable, and police findings were only beginning to reach the public. On March 13, when no political demonstrations were allowed, the government media were still not divulging the facts. Someone (a thirty-year-old educated male) sent out a 160-character SMS message calling on ten friends to gather in front of the ruling party’s headquarters at an appointed time, and also to pass on the message to ten more friends (Castells 354). According to Castells, these ten friends forwarded the message to their ten friends, who did the same. The message was also relayed by e-mail and SMS. SMS traffic increased in Spain by 30% over an average Saturday. Castells reported that by shortly after 6 p.m. on March 13, the crowd in front of the ruling party’s headquarters had grown to more than 5,000 people. They were shouting, “Before voting, we want the truth!” and “Liars! Liars! Tomorrow we’ll vote; tomorrow we’ll throw you out!” (355).

In the subsequent election on the following day, the ruling party (Aznar’s) received only 37.6% of the vote, while the Socialist Party received 42.6%. Using an analysis of a number of factors in the voting patterns, Castells concluded that the demonstration on March 13 had an effect on the election outcome, and he also concluded that “a typical instant mobilization phenomenon prompted by a massive network of SMSes” greatly increased the effect of communication through interpersonal channels” (361). This dramatic outcome illustrates the potential of Internet-based political activism to trigger offline results in high-stakes situations and presages other examples of online action that are worth consideration.

Politics Beyond the Public Sphere

Though the examples above illustrate how some Internet discourse might be understood in relationship to theories of the public sphere, not all Web-based political activity falls neatly into traditional conceptions of rational deliberation and reflexivity. Though many online groups may function as an engaged collective, not all will fit an understanding of the traditional public sphere as one that is articulated, bounded, or self-organized. A wide range of activities ranging from oppositional blogging or culture jamming to hacktivism and flash mobs all potentially function through modes of address quite distinct from those discussed thus far. To consider the significance of these kinds of actions, it is necessary to expand our understanding of the public sphere in order to better account for the full scope of online political activity.

Furthermore, it is also important to recognize those online political activities that may be the work of individuals, loosely affiliated or anonymous groups, or parties that may not traditionally be considered political at all. As the Web has grown in popularity, geography has become increasingly less relevant; distinctions between public and private have been blurred, and the norms of deliberation have had to adjust for digital contexts. Because of these and other mitigating factors, existing models of the public sphere must be reconsidered in light of both technological and cultural changes.

Counterpublics

One way of thinking about those groups whose actions might fall outside the scope of the public sphere is to consider the concept of counterpublics. If, according to a traditional Habermaskan view, an ideal public sphere is formed around principles of consensus, rationality, and equality, then a counterpublic is formed around principles
of disagreement, practicality, and division. In this way, countercultures can be understood as a coming together of those individuals, ideas, and discursive "exclusions" that cannot or do not circulate within a particular dominant public sphere.

Over the last twenty years this concept of a counterculture has been defined, redefined, and applied to a number of different contexts. Trying to trace the various uses of the term can seem daunting. As Kent Ono has suggested, "countercultural theory...may have a tendency to appear isolating, part of an internal conversation within rhetorical and argumentation studies." (64) However, by working to understand some of the theoretical distinctions that are in play when analyzing countercultures, we better understand the breadth of political activity that takes place in our culture. Toward that end, it makes sense to start with some of the same critics mentioned earlier in this chapter who pointed out limitations in a Habermasian theory of the public sphere. Many of these scholars were also some of the first to suggest that certain groups of political actors might better be defined not as belonging to a public sphere at all but rather to a counterculture.

For example, in a 1990 essay Nancy Fraser points to the early twentieth-century feminist movement as a group that functioned as a "subaltern counterculture" engaged in political activity in "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate countercourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." (67) Fraser uses the example of early feminists because at that time they were unable to participate in the mainstream, male-dominated political system that excluded them. By explaining that they operate in a parallel discursive arena, Fraser suggests that many of the same activities and processes that occur in a Habermasian public sphere also occur in a countercultural sphere. Furthermore, these countercultures offered a place for self-definition and expression against any dominant public sphere. And though there are parallels between the spheres, it is important to note the norms of deliberation and reason found in countercultures are usually not reflective of those found in what Fraser refers to as the broader "multiplicity of publics." (69)

According to Fraser, countercultures are often "formed under conditions of dominance and subordination" (70) and serve two important functions for their members who have been at least partially excluded from the dominant public sphere. First, they are "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" (68). That is, they are places where individuals whose discursive practices have been deemed aberrant might find common ground with others who have encountered similar prejudice, persecution, or alienation. In this way, countercultures provide an audience for ideas that may otherwise never be heard. Fraser considers the early feminist movement as an example par excellence of the counterculture because their beliefs about the role of women in all strata of society were not a part of the national political conversa-

tion. Their continued persistence eventually provided both political change and the creation of an identifiable "space" for feminist discourse that attracted those who shared their convictions.

Second, countercultures are "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser 68). For Fraser, countercultures can be recognized when they engage other, broader publics directly. "Activities" here is vaguely defined, and she acknowledges "that some [countercultures], alas, are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian" (67). Fraser says little about what agitational activities take place within or as a result of countercultures, but a quick study of the history of social and political movements suggests that countercultures are bases for both discursive and indecorous political action. Extrapolating, some countercultural activities are seen as appropriate within a broader political paradigm (e.g., in the United States, sit-ins, marches, and rallies are all widely accepted forms of public protest), while others could be seen as radical or illegal (e.g., property damage or theft, stunts, etc.). For Fraser, then, the term "countercultural" applies broadly to antagonistic, radical, or otherwise confrontational groups of political actors; under her criteria many groups who have either suffered persecution or engaged in radical protest could be potentially labeled a counterculture. Historical examples might include groups such as the Black Panthers, women's suffragists, abolitionists, anarchists, the Zapatistas, hippies, teansters, or LGBT groups.

A more recent example of a group the Fraser might consider to be a counterculture would be users of Wikileaks.com, a Web site founded in late 2006 to "fight in the legal and political spheres for the broader principles on which our work is based: the integrity of our common historical record and the rights of all peoples to create new history" (Wikileaks). As the name suggests, Wikileaks was created as a Web site for publishing leaked government and corporate information via an online wiki. Any person or group who has confidential information it wants to anonymously make public can submit documents, videos, or other media to the wiki for consideration by those who run the site. If the information is deemed noteworthy and credible, it will be published via methods that allow for legal, juridical, and digital protection. As the site's founder Julian Assange suggested in a podcast for BBC's The World, "We're in an arms race...as the data collection increases, we are also increasing our abilities" (PRI's The World). One reason that Fraser's assessment of countercultures applies to Wikileaks is because they produce and publicize discourses that are deviant from those that traditionally appear in any dominant public sphere. Furthermore, by using a system of open and anonymous sharing to circulate sensitive information, the group runs counter to the conventions of editorial oversight that usually precedes the release of news.

In the summer of 2010, Wikileaks caught the attention of mainstream news
outlets when it released more than 90,000 secret military documents related to U.S. actions in Afghanistan. Many of these documents had previously been available to select press outlets, but other documents—including documents detailing strategies for gaining intelligence and documents revealing informant names—contained especially sensitive materials that had been kept from public record. Whereas a more traditional model of public deliberation would suggest that sensitive information should be carefully edited and screened before public dissemination, the loose organization of journalists and programmers who operate WikiLeaks chose to publish this information in a digital space that allows for the full details of the document to be read. WikiLeaks is a useful example because it fits Fraser’s conception of a counterpublic in that the group “emerges in response to exclusions within dominant publics, [and] they help expand discursive space” (67).

In the years following Fraser’s essay, much of the scholarship on counterpublics focused on identifying particular groups that could be identified and studied as such. In 2000, Robert Ason published an essay questioning the value of this scholarship. Instead, he argued that the focus of counterpublic scholarship should shift away from identifying a multiplicity of counterpublics by their material makeup (e.g., as groups of “subalterns”) and toward identification through “participants recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres and its articulation through alternate discourse practices and norms” (Asen 427). Ason’s proposal was essentially that critics should move away from creating broad definitions of publics or counterpublics since the conditions of emergence for either sphere were always discursive and contextual. Ason’s essay represented an important shift in counterpublic sphere theory, as it allowed scholars with different observations and analyses of counterpublics to potentially reconcile their disparities by effecting binary distinctions between groups.

Michael Warner has also written extensively about the notion of counterpublics, explaining, as did Ason, that they can best be defined in and against those dominant publics that shape much of political and cultural life. Concerned with the potentially broad scope offered by Fraser’s definition, Warner specified counterpublics to be those groups that “maintain at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of [their] subordinate status... Fundamentally mediated by public forms, counterpublics incorporate the personal/imperisonal address and expersive estrangement of public speech as the condition of their own common world” (“Abbreviated Version” 86–87). Like Fraser and Ason, he acknowledged the temporal situatedness and the variant circulation of discourse in counterpublics, but he was not willing to suggest that these characteristics necessarily retain an oppositional character for the duration of a group’s political life.

Much of Warner’s writing was focused on how counterpublics could find a means of obtaining agency and voice in broader political arenas, and he studied how structuring discourses change over time to allow for this to happen. In fact, because of the close relationship with the very publics they are counter to (counterpublics are “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public”) (“Publics and Counterpublics” 423), Warner suggested that for many counterpublics the moment of political agency coincided with the moment of co-optation into a broader public. Counterpublics stop being “counter” when they are acknowledged. In fact, for a counterpublic to persist, it must “make no attempt” (423) to ever present itself as “the public.” This limits the kind of political goals and tactics available to a counterpublic; Warner further explained that “a public of subalterns is only a counterpublic when its participants are addressed in a counterpublic way” and “in some cases, such as fundamentalism...participants are not subalterns for any reason other than their participation in counterpublic discourse” (424).

The contemporary Tea Party movement is an instructive example of a briefly viable counterpublic that lost its status as such and gained agency when recognized as a legitimate part of broader national political deliberation. Though it emerged publicly in early 2009, Huffington Post reporter Alex Brant-Zawadski places the origins of the movement early in the middle of the 2008 presidential campaign, in December 2007. According to Brant-Zawadski’s timeline, the movement’s inception was based on people uniting behind a set of related ideas that emerged across select blogs, political conference speeches, viral videos on the Web, and some conservative talk-radio programs. Although this consensus certainly reflected a right-wing ideology, it was an ideology that did not fit neatly into any existing conservative political party platform. In brief, at its beginning the Tea Party movement was solely invested in cutting government spending, limiting government involvement in social programs, and holding existing members of Congress responsible for their actions. Influenced by politicians such as Ron Paul, the movement had a strong libertarian and independent streak and sought the kind of wholesale reform in government that would disrupt the existing two-party dynamic.

In other words, even if the ideas and activities of the Tea Party movement were not entirely new (and certainly not radical), they were, as Warner suggests, in a “conflictual relationship” to mainstream political discourses. Members loudly disrupted local town hall meetings concerning healthcare, held small protests in targeted voting districts, mailed tea bags to members of Congress, and engaged in other forms of unorthodox protest. For a brief period of time they maintained antagonism toward both Republicans and Democrats and during this period could be classified as a counterpublic by both Fraser and Warner’s definitions. However, a quick series of events in late 2009 and early 2010 led to the movement’s eventual co-optation and incorporation into mainstream party discourses.

First, starting with some of their earliest protests, the Tea Party began to court
sympathetic elected officials from the Republican Party. For example, at some of their mid-summer protests, Tea Partyers engaged in a call and response with members of the House in front of the capitol lawn. They later invited these Republicans to speak at Tea Party events and rallies. Continuing into 2010, the Tea Party claimed responsibility for the election of Republican Senator Scott Brown in Massachusetts and Rand Paul's victory in the Kentucky U.S. Senate Republican primary. The first Tea Party caucus, held in July, was chaired by Republican Representative Michele Bachmann (Braun-Zawadzki). Collectively, this continued courting of mainstream Republican Party officials helped to promote the Tea Party's agenda onto the Republican Party platform and into mainstream political discourse.

Concurrently, the Tea Party movement gained increased national exposure and support from Fox News and some of its popular personalities. Several Tea Party events were heavily covered and promoted on the Fox News channel in the spring and summer of 2009, and as its popularity grew, the movement gained wider cultural capital. For example, a Media Matters report indicates that the nationwide April 15, 2009, Tea Party Tax Day event was basically co-sponsored by Fox News and many of its hosts. In their special report they explain that the coverage served as a recruitment tool: "Fox News has frequently aired segments encouraging viewers to get involved with 'tea party' protests across the country, which the channel has described as primarily a response to President Obama's fiscal policies." (H., E.H.). Fox's coverage emphasized the strength of a united national movement and omitted mention of many of the localized and/or gerrilla tactics found in the earliest days of the Tea Party movement. By downplaying these more radical forms of political engagement, Fox News also played a role in repositioning the movement from one that was counter to and opposed to mainstream politics to one that could have a legitimate political voice in the public sphere.

Through these two developments, the Tea Party lost its status as a counterpublic that, according to Warner, often consists of ordinary people who "are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person that would participate in this kind of talk, or to be present in this kind of scene" ("Publics and Counterpublics" 424). Warner's emphasis on the connections between the public, counterpublics, and agency highlights the significant role that visibility plays in understanding how political discourses are legitimized. By building on the scholarship of people such as Fraser and Aizen, Warner offers one of the most nuanced understandings of counterpublics to date.

Because of this, Warner's work on counterpublics was the focus of a 2002 issue of the Quarterly Journal of Speech. In that issue, David Wittenburg critiqued Warner's conception of the counterpublic by calling into question the aforementioned theories of space and visibility utilized in Warner's work. Wittenburg noted the slippage in Warner's use of this term ("discursive space," "social space," etc.) and recognized that Warner's public "abstracts itself out of space" (428). Instead, Wittenburg invoked Kierkegaard's writing about publicity to remind us that a group's appearance in the public is a victory with consequences as there is "the danger of being removed from the public, not (necessarily) by being disappeared, but precisely by being made to appear too much" (432). Wittenburg thus pushed Warner to his teleological end: what happens to a counterpublic after it achieves agency and is submerged into the public sphere? This question of appearance is a very real one for activists grounded in the digital contexts of cyberspace where successful activism often relies on strategic presence.

Strangers and Outlaws

As we've seen, the notion of a counterpublic can be useful for defining and analyzing certain groups in and against a rational-critical Habermasian framework. However, the complexity of both public sphere and counterpublic sphere theory often makes either concept less than accessible to the study of many real-world cases. One method for circumventing the potential confusion that occurs when navigating these competing theoretical positions is to search for alternative conceptual frameworks. In other words, there are other useful techniques for critiquing how political discourses circulate, shape personal identity, and effect change beyond those provided in the public-counterpublic literature. Many of these alternatives take into consideration the debate above, using it as a jumping-off point for considering those groups and individuals whose political and personal value is difficult to ascertain through either model of the public. Since the focus of this project is on the application of rhetorical theory and criticism to Web-based politics, it is worth briefly considering some of these other critical perspectives.

One such perspective was offered in the very same issue of the Quarterly Journal of Speech that investigated Warner's counterpublics. In an article that focused on the kinds of indecorous discourses that marked Warner's counterpublics, Melissa Deen challenged some of the basic assumptions of the public-counterpublic binary. Specifically, she demonstrated how publics and counterpublics alike were able to bring strangers together through processes of socialization and suggested that the earliest discursive processes in group formation were "particularly crucial" to understanding how groups attain or lose agency (Deen 445). That is, Deen contended that it is not critical-rational discourse that structured power in Warner's counterpublics but rather indecorous acts that spread throughout the group early on that "open up the possibilities for oppositional or transformative practice" (446).

Therefore, Deen proposed that critics might turn to the analysis of those key indecorous discourses (or what she calls "minor rhetorics") present at the inception.
of a political movement. She writes:

An understanding of minor rhetorics, through the concept of discours, is central to an understanding of the logics that are mechanisms of containment and exclusion within political discourse...[and] of the ways in which minor rhetorics dislodge the discursive foundation of the political. (446)

When applying this concept to the Web, minor rhetorics might be found in those posts left on Web site message boards, blog comments sections, Facebook pages, or other Web-based forums where much of a movement's early Web activity takes place.

For example, the Web site 4chan.org has conducted a number of both Web-based and public protests over the years operating under the pseudonym of "Anonymous." Their ongoing campaign against the Church of Scientology is perhaps their most famous activity, though they have also campaigned against the Australian government, Iranian elections, and other global political causes. Despite the apparent cohesiveness found in these activities, the group itself is only loosely organized and affiliated via ongoing and anonymous activity on the 4chan message boards. On those boards, much of the activity takes the form of "minor rhetorics" in that they "use the language of the majority in such a way as to make that language stunted" (447). Deem's perspective allows us to understand the kind of discourse found on 4chan.org's forums as a site for agency; there we can see the potential for discursively grounded practices to function as a device that continuously displaces the public-counterpublic binary. In 4chan's forums, everyone and no one is "unfit for publicness" (449).

Less concerned with a movement's inception or lifecycle than Deem or Warnar, Kent Ono and John Sloop offer an approach to studying movements that focuses on issues of identity construction and on the rhetorical modes of persistence, appearance, and disappearance found in groups outside of the political or cultural mainstream. With a concentration on smaller communities and nonparticipant politics, Ono and Sloop have presented a critical approach for studying what they refer to as vernacular ("Critique of Vernacular Discourse") and outlaw discourses ("Outlaw Discourse.").

Ono and Sloop's conception of outlaw discourses is especially appealing for a study of Web community-based activism, as the strategies they focus on are typical of much of online discursive activity. They explain:

We see outlaw discourses as loosely shared logics of judgment and procedure for legitimation...Outlaw discourse communities posit their sense of justice as one that should properly be shared by the dominant community. ("Outlaw Discourse," 51)

Outlaw discourses have implications for identity in that they "concern judgments made in the practice of everyday life" (60) and are deployed by "a being or group [to] preserve its identity—either through the creation of new ways to understand experiences...or through physical force" (63).

The theory of outlaw discourses is closely tied to Ono and Sloop's earlier work, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," which places "an emphasis on continuous discursive displacement...a critique of vernacular discourse strives to understand how a community is constructed and how that constructed community functions" ("Critique" 25-26). Important to their project was a theory of conditional essentialism, which allows for groups to operate in a metonymic fashion as the situation around them dictates.

Hacktivist groups, those engaged in acts of hacking for political purposes, are an example of a group that might be productively analyzed using the perspective offered by Ono and Sloop. For one, hacktivists frequently demonstrate conditional essentialism by choosing how to invoke core hacktivist values, such as the hacker ethic, in a variety of situations. In order to justify their actions, these values are continually reframed and renegotiated for contemporary concerns. This is also true of groups such as the 9/11 "Truthers," who must always reframe their arguments about the supposed government conspiracies behind the events of September 11, 2001, in light of new evidence that calls their claims into question. Both hacktivists and Truthers are examples of groups who have learned how to effectively use rhetorical techniques of appearance, disappearance, and metonymy in digital contexts so as to persist as loosely affiliated and antagonistic communities.

For Ono and Sloop, the critic should champion marginalized culture and sub-culture, and they suggest that rhetorical critics might bring these discourses into the public imaginary, giving them attention through critique and "highlight the logics of particular outlaw judgments" ("Outlaw Discourse," 64). In fact, rhetoricians are "uniquely positioned" to do this due to their "materialist[ic] conception of judgment" (54). And though Ono and Sloop acknowledge the limiting potential in setting up this dialogic model, the critical move is itself justified as a form of strategic essentialism.9

An Overview of New Media Research

Thus far we have focused on those ongoing shifts in public deliberation and debate that we take to be of central significance in both offline and online contemporary politics. By explaining the significance of public-sphere theory, counterpublics, and other perspectives for understanding the rhetorical processes that accompany these shifts,
we have offered an overview that indicates much of our own scholarly background for studying politics online. However, critical scholarship on new media is increasingly diverse and interdisciplinary, and this book also touches on work done in media studies, critical cultural studies, English and composition, other areas of communication studies, and related disciplines. This chapter concludes with several examples of how this research connects with our own interests in studying the relationship between political transformations and new media technologies.

New Media Research in Media Studies: Mary Chayko on Mobile Technology

Some of the most interesting and innovative scholarship addressing Web-based politics is done in media studies, a field that employs a wide range of perspectives and methodologies. Inclusive of everything from ongoing longitudinal studies focusing on how people use the Web for both personal and political reasons to critical-historical scholarship that reads the Web against the cultural history of other technologies, media studies offers a wealth of material for better understanding how the Web has increasingly shaped human interaction. Like the study of rhetoric, the study of media encompasses a range of various disciplines that each offer a different component to the nuanced field. And like rhetorical criticism, media studies is well suited to tackle some of the most important questions about the growth of digital technologies.

Mary Chayko's Portable Communitics: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness (2008) is exemplary of how this mixed methodological, cross-disciplinary focus applies to the study of some of the more intriguing aspects of new media technologies. In her study of social networking, mobile device usage, and other recent ICTs, Chayko starts from the position that "as a sociologist with a background in communication and psychology, there is little [about new media communication technologies] that I do not think interesting or important" (Portable Communitics 5). Like many media studies scholars, she studies the field from a particular disciplinary perspective (sociology) and in the process both extends the scope of sociology and adds to the understanding of depth of media studies.

Chayko offers several examples and case studies that are productive for considering how new media shapes community. In her discussion of how people get involved in communities she cites MMO playing, online gambling, social networking, and other forms of online activity as activities that are "so seductive, easy, and so much fun to go online...we (and our children) may indeed become immersed, even ensnared, in behaviors" (85) that are potentially destructive to other areas of one's life. Part of this allure, she explains, is the usage of "playful talk" such as gossiping, flirting, and joking that can be found in many mobile communities and that "promote and bring about social bonding, on and offline" (77). Because of the hypertextual and connected quality of the Web, these kinds of activities, which mark much of users' online experiences in communities across the Internet, are frequently carried over to those areas of the Web where we see forms of political engagement. The ubiquity of "play" across the Web cannot be underestimated when considering any Web site, no matter how "serious" it purports to be.

Chayko also points to the voyeuristic nature of many of the online interactions that users engage in within their Web-based communities. The anonymous nature of Web usage allows for members to feel that they belong to a community without ever engaging in member-to-member interaction, to observe without being identified, and in some cases to contribute without the consequence of any kind of self-disclosure. Pointing to activities such as lurking, Chayko explains that when we peek in on what others are doing online, we gain a sense of merely who comprises our portable communities—what they are doing and what they think about and, most importantly, who they are as individuals and as a collective. We need to feel the presence of others in our networks and communities and to be present to them in return. Lurking helps us to feel another's presence. (77)

This behavior is not limited to Web surfing while sitting at a PC, and Chayko found that (especially younger) ICT users engaged in various mobile forms of both identity building and the social surveillance of others. There is every reason to believe that upcoming generations of online and mobile connectors will find much of this neither daunting or confusing" as those who grow up using these technologies have "skills in accessing information, interacting, and building social worlds online, in multitasking and moving unproblematically between social spheres, and in considering what occurs in sociomental space to be very much 'real'" (180).

Once again, these observations about online behavior and demographics are important for rhetoricians to consider when thinking about the habits of interaction and the capabilities of particular audiences to respond to a rhetoric. The field's emphasis on contextual frames of analysis means that media studies investigates many of the same questions that interest rhetoricians, and a better understanding of their methods and perspectives can enrich rhetorical criticism of new media.

New Media Research in English: Jamie Skye Bianco on the Rhetoric of Security on Facebook and Other Sites

In an article in Women's Studies Quarterly in 2009, Jamie Skye Bianco traced developments related to cloud computing and personal privacy online. She began by observing that whereas with Web 2.0 software, users were dealing with content they
The third parties, of course, would be advertisers and patrons of the site in question. Bianco expresses skepticism that users will be able to distinguish between targeted marketing efforts and the latest “share with your friends” meme circulating on the Facebook network. Furthermore, they may be unlikely to recognize that third-party applications fully access the user’s data and do not provide the same caveats and provisions as Facebook’s terms of service.

Bianco’s article was published in 2009, but consulting Facebook’s privacy policy in 2010 indicates that the situation has improved, although it still retains many of the features that she pointed out. The current terms of service as of April 22, 2010, explained to users that the site uses tracking capability to document site activity (e.g., creating a photo album, sending a gift, sharing a video), and they might also log user actions such as sharing that video. They also note that data sharing, commonly known as “conversion tracking,” helps Facebook to measure its advertising effectiveness and improve the quality of the advertisements displayed to users. In addition, the privacy policy includes other codicils that might be of concern to users if those users are aware of their implications. These appear under the “Other” header in the policy and include such aspects as the following:

- You understand that information might be shared or copied by other users.
- Certain types of communications that you send to other users cannot be removed, such as messages.
- When you post information on another user’s profile or comment on another user’s post, that information will be subject to the other user’s privacy settings (“Facebook’s Privacy Policy”).

Also, one hopes that Facebook users are aware of the implications of the “Everyone” setting on Facebook, as described in the policy:

Information sent to “everyone” is publicly available information, just like your name, profile picture, and connections. Such information may, for example, be accessed by everyone on the internet (including people not logged into Facebook), be indexed by third-party search engines, and be imported, exported, distributed, and redistributed by us and others without privacy limitations. Such information may also be associated with you, including your name and profile picture, even outside of Facebook, such as on public search engines and when you visit other sites on the internet. The default privacy setting for certain types of information you post on Facebook is set to “everyone.” You can review and change the default settings in your privacy settings (“Facebook’s Privacy Policy,” emphasis added).
One hopes that users new to Facebook know that the default privacy setting is “everyone.” While Facebook users can control their privacy settings to some extent so as to stipulate who will have access to their content, frequent necessary adjustments by users to their privacy settings may be overlooked and neglected in the course of their social networking activities.

The site statement on shared information is as follows:

Facebook is about sharing information with others—friends and people in your communities—while providing you with privacy settings that you can use to restrict other users from accessing some of your information. We share your information with third parties when we believe the sharing is permitted by you, reasonably necessary to offer our services, or when legally required to do so (“Facebook Privacy Policy,” emphasis added).

What might be the ramifications of the last statement? Facebook provides additional information in response to this question:

We may disclose information pursuant to subpoenas, court orders, or other requests (including criminal and civil matters) if we have a good faith belief that the response is required by law. This may include requesting requests from jurisdictions outside of the United States when we have a good faith belief that the response is required by law under the local laws in that jurisdiction, applicable to users from that jurisdiction, and is consistent with generally accepted international standards. (“Facebook’s Privacy Policy,” emphasis added)

How might this play out? In August 2010, a fifteen-year-old adolescent from Pittsburgh was arrested by state authorities in India and accused of killing his mother at a resort and dumping her body at the bottom of a sand dune nearby. Relatives and close friends of the accused young man maintained that he could not have committed such an act. Unfortunately for him, however, there were among the hundreds of posts on his Facebook page references to his mother as “Satar” and “bitch,” as well as a statement in 2009 that said “I am going to kill my mom,” without any further explanation (Richey). The issues with his mother in August 2010 apparently revolved around where he was to attend school when they returned from their trip and her interference in his relationship with his father.

While it is unclear how his Facebook content was accessed, it is clear that the cited contents of his Facebook pages in regard to his mother were very incriminating. This is just a very clear instance of how someone's posts on a social-networking site can become very problematic for that person later on.

Bianco concludes her article on cloud computing and the security of information with a provocative question. After noting the potential for Google Library and

Google Books projects to use this form of technology to stand alone in digitizing the world’s print archives, she wonders whether “there is a serious problem with one company, albeit one whose motto is “Don’t do evil,” digitally housing and controlling access to the majority of human knowledge production.” To place that much content in a computing context potentially subject to systems failures and ambiguous policies in regard to the content it controls could be a measure that results in dire consequences.

New Media Research in Critical Cultural Studies: Anne Kustritz on Slash Fan Fiction and Web Communities

Just as media studies scholarship frequently draws on theories originating in disciplines such as sociology, mass communication, philosophy or cultural studies, so too do we in this present study. Scholars as diverse as Stuart Hall, W. J. T. Mitchell, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Guy Debord, Walter Benjamin, James Carey, and Michel Foucault are all cited in the field’s literature because of what their theories of language, technology, and space and time offer for the critique of new media texts. With a focus on culture, subculture, race, class, gender, and sexuality, cultural studies offers an abundance of resources for understanding rhetorical processes in new media.

Especially interesting in much of cultural studies scholarship are the many ways in which key concepts and terminology get utilized, debated, and productively (mis)understood. Consider, for example, Anne Kustritz’s essay “Slashing the Romance Narrative,” which is representative of cultural studies scholarship that draws on some of the foundational figures in the field to illuminate how one particular community of Web users—slash fan fiction communities—operate. In her essay, Kustritz carefully chooses when to strategically invoke the terms “community” or “subculture” to refer to that group of Internet users who regularly write, read, or comment on slash fan fiction. She writes that “until the 1990s, slash remained tucked away, a subculture within a subculture” (372). She then suggests that, with its publication on the Internet, slash fiction was able to appeal to a broader audience. Prior to its “move” to the Web it was a “subculture,” afterwards it becomes a “community.”

In the essay, Kustritz details features of the community: demographic information (mostly college-educated and “frustrated” women), aesthetic tastes and standards (e.g., disdain for the certain character stereotypes), and even “community activities” such as creating a fan canon (or “fanon”) or issuing “list challenges” to members of particular message boards or listservs. The notion of community is especially important at the end of the essay, when she writes:
The metanarrative is about how to live as a community of women who support, critique, and love each other.... These communities are actively involved in constructing a life that is truly worth living.... Perhaps it is not the potential to change the world, but it is the potential to change women's lives, one individual, one story, and one day at a time. (Dim doll, 383)

The emphasis in the article is on the relationship between personal fulfillment through both slash fan fiction community activities and the establishment of community-developed relationships. Kustritz's focus on slash fan fiction writers as a "community" provides a basis for thinking about the significance of that term, and scholarship with this kind of focus—which is found throughout cultural studies—helps us to think through the distinctions between subcultures, communities, publics, counterpublics, and other forms of rhetorically significant collectives.

Other approaches in cultural studies for studying and naming "community" vary significantly from Kustritz's use of the term. In other words, the choice to describe the slash fan fiction "community" as such implies a self-contained discursive space in which certain forms of civic discourse (as defined by "community standards") prevail. Furthermore, it suggests that any "effects" of community discourse are then limited to members of the community. In addition, as Jodi Dean points out, "Community may well be the most powerful of the aspirations linked to the World Wide Web.... It evokes the friendliness of neighbors stopping by for advice or a cup of sugar... in a community, everyone knows your name" (4). Dean suggests that, in contrast to the popular move that Kustritz and other critics make to label certain Web collectives as "communities," critics would be wise to consider how the Web itself has been detrimental to the formation of traditional communities: "Rather than fulfilling community, the Web seems to threaten it as it enables people to play with identities, forfeit responsibilities, and indulge in potentially dangerous fantasies." (13).

Dean's emphasis, then, is on the reasons why Web communities aren't really analogous to traditional real-world communities. By implying that any scholarship equating them is flawed, she prompts a question: if these Web users are not forming "communities," then what are these collections of people with shared interests? Kahn and Kellner suggest an answer to this question with their term "post-subcultures." The term "post-subcultures" can be used to describe "the new emerging subcultures [that] are taking place in a world that is saturated with media awareness and being propelled into new global configurations by technological advances such as the Internet and multimedia" (299). Post-subcultures are new in common with the traditional notion of subculture as described by Dick Hebledge than with any bounded-rational community. They write that "however, as with previous generations of subcultures, internet subcultures are desirous of a certain immediacy of experience that seeks to circumvent dominant codes" (299). Aside from being an apt description of how slash fan fiction fans use the Web, this definition allows for slash fan fiction writers and readers to maintain their identity as members of a subculture who have moved into and utilized a new medium.

The result of this move is not the creation of a "community" from what was once a "subculture" but rather an important territorial shift in an existent and continuing subculture. Rather than sanitizing the truly political nature of the slash writers by using terminology that emphasizes only group dynamics or individual identity, the notion of "post-subculture" posts slash fan fiction writers and readers as subjects directly opposed to the mainstream ideologies, norms, and so forth. Kahn and Kellner again argue that "technoculture makes possible a reconfiguring of politics, a refocusing of politics of everyday life, and the use of tools and techniques of emergent computer and communication technologies to expand the field of politics and culture" (311). To talk about "slash fan fiction post-subcultures" as opposed to "slash fan fiction communities" is to argue that the act of slashing characters from popular science fiction and fantasy has the potential to provoke and persuade others outside of the subculture into creating their own cultural beliefs about homosexual relationships, the politics of male-oriented plots in various forms of entertainment, and so on.

It also opens up the possibility that the act of "slashing" remains a political form of writing and not simply writing for the edification of the "slash community" or the individual. In other words, a post-subculture retains a dialogic relationship with the world, giving it the potential to indeed change more than just "women's lives, one individual, one story, and one day at a time." (Kustritz 383).

This focused attention on the significance and appropriation of critical terminology has an affinity with much of the scholarship in rhetorical criticism, and the field of cultural studies offers us an avenue for considering how and why we choose to frame our own arguments and analysis about the Internet as we look at Web-based culture throughout this book.

New Media Research in Communication Studies: Clay Shirky on the Effects of Social Networking in the Public Sphere

In his well-received book, Here Comes Everybody, Clay Shirky emphasizes the role and influence of the growth of social networking on the public sphere. He also notes that when communication on the Internet became rapidly facilitated in the early 2000s, its use decreased transaction costs for businesses as everyday individuals began using the online environment to create groups, mobilize constituencies, publicize issues, and solve problems at no cost other than the use of Internet tools themselves.

Shirky maintained that "the transfer of these capabilities from professional classes to the general public is epochal, built on an architecture of participation." (17).
Shirky's book has received many favorable reviews, including one by prominent blogger Bruce Schneier who noted, "The book is filled with bits of insight and common sense, explaining why young people take better advantage of social tools, how the internet affects social change, and how most internet discourse falls somewhere between dinner party conversation and publishing" (Schneier).

Unlike corporations and businesses that operate through a management structure that requires a hierarchical configuration, coordinated and managed activity, and layers of structure and rules, the users of social networks, blogs, and other online tools can work without the managerial imperative and outside previous structures that would have limited their effectiveness. Furthermore, Shirky notes that in this new communication ecology, "the cost of all kinds of group activity—sharing, cooperation, and collective action—have fallen dramatically. Social tools provide an alternative to institutionalized action because they have the capacity to instigate action by loosely structured groups, operating without managerial direction and outside the profit motive" (47).

To illustrate his points, Shirky introduces a number of examples of the use of social networking to address crises, participate in policy formation, and bring major issues into public attention that otherwise would have gone relatively unnoticed. This is particularly vital when governments impose restrictions or institutional resistance blocks public access to signal events. Some of Shirky's examples include notifications made available by London citizens to other citizens at the time of the London transport bombings in 2005, Indiana's coverage of abuses against citizens in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and coverage of the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004. He notes that when official news media do not have access to developing crises, people with camera phones and Internet access are capable of informing the public of what is happening.

Furthermore, the resources of social networking can, at times, trump the official news media when the media fails to take due notice of a breaking story. Shirky's example here is when Trent Lott, then majority leader in the Senate, praised segregationist Strom Thurman's political stance and professional record at Thurman's birthday party on December 5, 2002. The newspapers initially did not cover this story about Lott's inappropriate remarks. Instead, it was liberal and conservative bloggers who brought the public's attention to the incident, and Lott subsequently announced his intention not to continue in his Senate post. This example illustrates the constraints under which mainstream news outlets work. To be effective, news must have a certain frame that the public can relate to, such as available photographs or video clips depicting the situation being discussed. Since these components were not available within the twenty-four-hour news cycle, the news media neglected to highlight the Lott story until bloggers brought it to the public's attention shortly after Lott's speech was made public.

The kind of media shift described by Shirky can be compared with historical media shifts in which conventional forms of expression were changed because of the advent of new technologies. For example, as Walter J. Ong noted in his book *Orality and Literacy*, the advent of literacy in ancient Greek culture had profound effects on communication practices, cultural preservation, and education during that time. It precipitated the turn to formal logic and the abstraction of knowledge that gradually supplanted the oral epic as a means of preserving culture. Likewise, the shift from hand-copied manuscripts to print books in the sixteenth century had equally profound effects on education and culture. Print enabled mass produced, standardized texts that were repeatable and identical in large quantities. It also facilitated the reproduction of charts and logic tables in educational models of the day, thereby commodifying knowledge. In addition, it introduced standardization into education so that all students were studying and learning the same thing. These were transnational phenomena. Shirky's argument for the profound changes introduced by social networking and blogging is analogous to the historical observations made by Ong.

Shirky notes that the affordances of social networking have enabled "mass amanicipation" (98) which has contributed to the loss of the "clear distinctions between communications media and broadcast media" (98). At this point, one important observation of Shirky's should be invoked:

It's when a technology becomes normal, then ubiquitous, and finally so pervasive as to be invisible, that the really profound changes happen, and for young people today, our new social tools have passed normal and are heading to ubiquitous, and invisible in coming. (101)

To establish his position, Shirky turns to the example of Wikipedia as a collaborative site of content and knowledge production. The history of the Wikipedia enterprise is quite interesting. Originally Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger founded Wikipedia in 2001 as an experimental offshoot of their original idea, a free online encyclopedia of high quality called Nupedia (109). However, their initial plan of using qualified experts to post assigned articles did not function well. The arrangements made for production of the work turned out to be ineffective and, in fact, were exacerbating slowly. Sanger speculated that a more open process for submitting content would facilitate development of the project. He suggested the Wiki tool (i.e., a user-editable Web site) for getting this done. Shirky notes that this collaborative Wiki tool creates a way for the software community to devise a means of collaboratively storing shared wisdom (111).

To illustrate the functionality of Wikipedia, let us return to the example of the London subway bombing mentioned earlier. When major sites of underground
transportation in London were destroyed by terrorist attacks in July 2005, some-one initiated a Wikipedia entry within minutes of the event, followed by additional news from other users as time passed. The postings contained helpful information such as links to traditional news sources and contact numbers for people trying to find a way to get home. Shirky describes this set of developments as an example of how Wikipedia (ostensibly an encyclopedia) has exceeded its original purpose and has become a coordinating resource through the in-time information that it can provide.

The effects of profound changes in our communication infrastructure may be best clarified by an additional example provided by Shirky. Here, he provides an account of the Catholic Church’s historical efforts to downplay or wait out scandals related to priests’ misconduct with their parishioners. When the case of Father John Geoghan, a Catholic priest in the Boston Archdiocese who, over many years, had fumigated more than a hundred boys into becoming public, the lay organization of Catholics, Voice of the Faithful, was formed. The group grew in size from thirty people in a church basement to 25,000 members both nationally and internationally during 2002. Shirky noted that, whereas earlier scandals related to priestly abuse had been tamp down and kept relatively quiet by the church in prior years, by 2002 this was no longer possible. Two major developments brought about the change. First, the Boston Globe went online at Boston.com, and its online readers could then forward stories regarding the abuse scandals to interested parties domestically and internationally very easily. And, of course, those forwarded messages could then be forwarded by their initial recipients to other parties. Shirky concludes:

In 1992 the Globe went ‘global’, and the prior abuse story stayed in Boston. In 2002, the Globe didn’t need to spread the story to the world’s Catholics; the Catholics were capable of doing that themselves. (149)

Furthermore, the redistribution of this information incited widespread controversy in the press. Each time some aspect of the controversy recurred, the church’s ability to wait out the controversy eroded a little more because the issue became more salient each time it was discussed in the news. This developing situation became and remained prominent in the public eye because it was much more difficult for the Catholic Church to take no action than it had in prior years.

Shirky concludes his analysis by noting that online social tools remove obstacles to collective action, and as the obstacles are removed, the world is becoming a different place due to the availability of easy-to-use tools like e-mail, mobile phones, and Web sites. He maintains that these changes have happened not because of the tools but because society has adopted new behaviors.

Conclusion

It is our view that the public sphere, as traditionally understood, is in a state of crisis brought on by significant changes in both institutional politics and the forms of discursive activity being taken up by the polis. Significantly, rhetorical uses of new public media technologies feature prominently in these changes. In this chapter, we have explained a wide range of recent political activity and the role of new media therein. In doing so, we have highlighted how a variety of perspectives on the public sphere, counterpublics, and other forms of political organizing and action might be understood and against these political and technological shifts. One goal of this book is to explain how rhetorical criticism can be used to analyze political activity in new media, and by starting with some familiar approaches to thinking about questions of political transformation we have laid that groundwork above.

Studying rhetoric online requires grappling with new technologies and with ongoing changes in how people communicate with one another, form collectives, participate as citizens, and use rhetorical processes to shape a worldview. As we’ve explained in this chapter, there are a variety of disciplines that offer useful ideas for understanding these processes—we view this project as one with interdisciplinary appeal. In the next chapter we’ll focus on a specific U.S. election: the 2010 midterm, to further clarify the benefits of this particular approach to studying the rhetoric of new media.

Notes

1. As noted later in this chapter, sociologist Manuel Castells has documented social networking’s lack of attention to public deliberation as revealed in the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2006. See Lembarr and Fox for documentation of this trend.
2. By “counterpublic sphere theory” one refers primarily to that scholarship in rhetorical criticism that considers the practices of groups that run counter to the Habermasian model of public deliberation addressed above. Often, those groups involved in social movements (a traditional focus of rhetorical inquiry) can be categorized in this way.
3. Fraser borrows the term “subaltern” from Gayatri Spivak. Spivak suggested in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that “subaltern” is a word that refers to “men and women among the uttermost periphery, the subha, the lowest strata of the urban subalternitate” (35) who are the “true” subaltern group, whose identity is its difference” (27). In her use of the term, Spivak refers specifically to those groups who are the subject of much postcolonial scholarship.
4. See, for example, Macrì and Muharri’s 1994 study of a community women’s center.
5. It could be argued that the Tea Party’s political stance against taxation helps bolster the bottom line of media conglomerates like Fox News Corp.
Critiquing New Media Discourse

To follow up our broad discussion of the connections between new media technology, the public sphere, and critical theory in the last chapter, we now turn to a discussion of a particular political event—the 2010 U.S. midterm elections—in order to highlight some important considerations for studying political rhetoric in new media contexts. Specifically, we begin by explaining the political climate leading up to and during the election, emphasizing the role of new media. In the second half of the chapter, we focus on how a rhetorical approach to critiquing new media allows us to better understand some specific uses of new media technology in the midterms.

Overview of Online Activity During the 2010 Midterm Election Season

Shortly before President Obama took office in 2009, outgoing President George W. Bush invited three of his predecessors—George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter—to his office for a chat. On that occasion, a photo of the presidents was taken and widely distributed to the press. One cartoon commentary on the image featured text balloons above each of the prior presidents' heads. The text in the balloon read, "I'm glad it's not me!" This was a nice commentary on the situ-