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## **Abstract**

The characteristics of online news presentation offer a unique opportunity for journalists to strengthen their ability to fulfill their Fourth Estate role. In this project, traditional theories of journalism, democracy and political communication are blended with emerging theories of online communication to create a coverage blueprint or framework for online journalism. The goal is to develop and evaluate a set of normative “best practices” that online newspapers can use to help them more effectively perform their role of connecting the governors to the governed and assisting in the formation of public opinion that has an impact on public policy. The current implementation of the practices in this framework is investigated with a case study of one site where many of the practices from the framework are in use, which demonstrates that the practices can be effectively implemented in a realistic situation to improve political communication.

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Cyber-Democratic Engagement and the Online Newspaper:  
A Case Study

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## ABSTRACT

The characteristics of online news presentation offer a unique opportunity for journalists to strengthen their ability to fulfill their Fourth Estate role. In this project, traditional theories of journalism, democracy and political communication are blended with emerging theories of online communication to create a coverage blueprint or framework for online journalism. The goal is to develop and evaluate a set of normative “best practices” that online newspapers can use to help them more effectively perform their role of connecting the governors to the governed and assisting in the formation of public opinion that has an impact on public policy. The current implementation of the practices in this framework is investigated with a case study of one site where many of the practices from the framework are in use, which demonstrates that the practices can be effectively implemented in a realistic situation to improve political communication.

## INTRODUCTION

In a poll sponsored by Cable News Network and *USA Today* in late 2003, half the respondents said the U.S. political system needed either a complete overhaul (17 percent) or major reforms (33 percent). More than half of the respondents in another survey from around the same time rated the media's overall performance as only fair (43 percent) or poor (12 percent) (all from Public Opinion Online, 2003). This evidence supports the view that the public believes traditional models of political communication and the role of the media in the process have become dysfunctional; the poll findings align with negative appraisals of the political communication system in general and media performance in particular offered by such commentators as Gans (2003) and Fallows (1996).

In order for media organizations to better fulfill their normative role of the Fourth Estate, journalists could make greater use of the capabilities provided by the online environment to alter their coverage of public affairs with a goal of facilitating greater understanding of public affairs by the public and more effective civic engagement. By itself, this would not reform the dysfunctional political system. But it is a step in the right direction. If more media organizations used the tools described in the framework presented in this project, the political communication system that underlies our self-governing society might begin to function more effectively in some small but valuable ways.

## DEMOCRACY GOES ON LINE

As the Internet began to shift from a playground for the techno-savvy to a general-purpose communications medium in the late 1990s, it was a natural development to consider how its use could affect politics and governance. Because of its decentralization and interconnectivity, cyberspace can be seen as offering the ability “to foster network organizations,

new types of community and demands for different roles for government. By changing how we work, [computers] change our attitudes and political behavior” (Nye, 2002). Ideas for these new forms of political interaction also are based in the concept that the Internet breaks down barriers of physical distance and message “reach” that limit information dissemination, retrieval and exchange. As Delli Carpini and Keeler (2003) put it: “The Internet’s most unique characteristics—the marriage of increased information, targeting by providers, filtering and active self-selection by consumers and bi-directionality of communication—seem to offer truly new prospects for civic engagement. In particular, the Internet’s ability to provide information to a citizen and permit him or her to act on that information (e.g. by communicating a reaction to friends, interest groups or public officials; giving money; signing a petition; registering and voting; joining an organization; agreeing to attend a meeting, etc.) is a radically new feature of the information environment” (p. 148).

This view that the Internet has the potential to offer a paradigm shift in political communication is embodied in two ways. One is based on a populist or direct-democracy model, in which cyberspace allows for the type of information exchange and political interaction exemplified by the Athenian agora or New England town meeting. This view starts from an assumption that values these idealized environments, but acknowledges that they faced limits imposed by physical location of meeting sites and distance separating the participants. In this electronic plebiscite model, the Internet makes such limits irrelevant, thereby altering the scope and scale over which such direct democracy can be implemented; everyone with a link can participate in the decision-making (D. Morris, 1999). “America is turning into an electronic republic, a democratic system that is vastly increasing the people’s day-to-day influence on the decisions of the state” (Grossman, 1995, p. 3). “The electronic republic cannot be as intimate or

as deliberative as the face-to-face discussions and showing of hands in the ancient Athenians' open-air assemblies. But it is likely to extend government decision making from the few in the center of power to the many on the outside who want to participate" (Grossman, 1995, pp. 48-49).

The other model is based on deliberative democracy akin to the public sphere discourse as suggested by Habermas. The "cyber-salon" provides a virtual setting to replace the physical one, with the benefit that anyone, anywhere can engage in deliberative discourse directed toward improving public life, with the process guided by clearly specified rules of engagement to produce well-reasoned outcomes. Buchstein, for instance, notes that "the positive qualities attributed to the Internet strikingly resemble the Habermasian unrestricted public sphere, notably its universality, its anti-hierarchical nature and its complex modes of interaction" (1997, p. 251). Gaynor (1996) argues that the potential "ideal speech situation" described by Habermas could exist online because issues of individual status, social rank and even race offer fewer barriers in the realm of virtual communication. Further, he says, "the openness of expression which 'the ideal speech' situation demands can be applied to the Internet, where rapid exchange of dialogue and production of information take place unchecked." This approach is shared by Dahlberg, who takes six normative conditions for public sphere discourse—including autonomy from state and economic power, ability to exchange and critique validity claims, and discursive inclusion and equality—and concludes that these can take root in cyberspace, thereby allowing online discourse to develop in ways suggested by theories of the public sphere.

But the apparent promise offered by both the electronic plebiscite and the cyber-salon is flawed by a form of technological determinism, which assumes that because the network makes certain types of communication possible and practical that it therefore makes them inevitable.

Over time, the somewhat utopian views offered by these schools of thought were leavened by practical analyses, which demonstrated that the amount and type of democratic interaction proposed by “cyber-utopians” from both persuasions was not developing as theorized. Dahlberg notes that while computer mediated communication “replicates the basic structure of rational-critical debate and in various ways approximate the requirements of the public sphere, it nevertheless falls short of truly replicating the public sphere model” (Dahlberg, 2001a).

Barber (1997) takes on the technological determinist argument at its roots, noting that technology and new communication tools cannot correct every defect in a political communication system, and in fact are contrary to some of the characteristics of effective democracy because while computers are fast and binary, democratic reasoning is slow and nuanced. Wilhelm (2000) makes a similar argument for similar reasons and further notes that technical solutions cannot solve political problems, a view that is closely aligned with Habermas’s critique of instrumental reason. Barber also says deciding what type of contribution technology should make to democracy is a crucial prerequisite for implementing it; the technology cannot be left to develop on its own, a point also made by Nye (2002) and Rheingold (1994). Delli Carpini and Keeter (2003) say that greater interactivity and decentralization offer opportunities for learning and engagement, but also lead to greater self-selection and exposure to a narrower scope of political information. In an argument that serves as an effective summary for these criticisms, Wilhelm suggests a need for “structures and policies that promote real progress in greater democratic deliberation, not platitudes about the illusion of progress because of the ‘gee whiz’ qualities of new technology” (Wilhelm, 2000, p. 9).

### The significance of structure

Barber acknowledges that “Innovations in communication and information technology do offer new opportunities for strong democrats and civic republicans to strengthen civic education and enhance direct deliberative communication among citizens,” a position that “only Luddites,” would completely deny (1997, p. 208). But he is quick to add that “there are forms of control and intervention, like editing, facilitation and education, that are necessary to democratic utilization of the Net and amount to positive or legitimate forms of gatekeeping” (1997, p. 210).

In this he introduces the other common theme among the critiques, which is the need to structure and facilitate online interaction rather than assume it will develop in any meaningful way on its own. Even as Dahlberg (2001a) postulated that something akin to Habermasian discourse could appear online, he stressed that it could happen only under the proper conditions such as management of the forum. The most likely place to find the Internet fulfilling the potential for true deliberation would be in “online cyber-democracy initiatives that actively seek to structure online deliberation in the direction of the public sphere model,” according to Dahlberg (2001a). Coleman (1999) proposes mechanisms toward the same end, including establishment of virtual public spaces under the sponsorship or auspices of neutral organizations, reliable on-line information upon which discussions could be based, educational material to help guide citizens in their deliberation, and a link between the governed and the governors.

Thus, the criticisms of cyber-democracy can be summarized by noting that although Internet-based interactions allow for online deliberation to take place, such behavior will not materialize on its own. Managed structures designed to facilitate such interaction are a necessary condition as well. “A well-trained and committed facilitator, participating in forums in which the norm of civility has been inculcated, can elicit these desirable ends and craft a salutary political

exchange in which participants come to respect each other and their differences” (Wilhelm, 2000, p. 143).

## A NEW ROLE FOR ONLINE JOURNALISTS

### Online papers as a venue for cyber-democratic engagement

But who should the facilitators be, and where are they to be found? With respect to political communication, this is where a new role and function for journalists could emerge, using the interactive power of new forms of online journalism. The traditional media are far from perfect, and certainly not the sole source of information about public life for the citizenry. But they still hold the pivotal place in the political communication system (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1977), largely because they perform what Entmann (2005) calls the “core function of news” by illuminating and scrutinizing (1) public policy issues; (2) actions of those who hold political power; (3) ideologies of the political and social system; and (4) how those in power act with regard to their own self interest. Entmann says the traditional media address these four areas of public life more “thoroughly, directly, responsibly and consistently” than any other institution:

Developing such a new role, however, requires a willingness of journalists to reformulate their approach to political journalism. Online and off, journalists already can and do fulfill important roles regarding surveillance and social cohesion/construction of common knowledge. (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992) Combining these with facilitated discourse and new interactive tools for improving public understanding drawn from the ideas of cyber-democracy can add up to a more powerful process for reconnecting the public with public life.

The involvement of the newspaper, a community institution, gives the information exchanged and expressed there a certain traffic level and institutional backing that makes the interaction more meaningful because, as Entmann describes, it is where people are accustomed

to turning for accurate, credible information and analysis about those who hold power in society. This is not meant to be disparaging of those who work outside the institutional media settings, many of whom do extensive and high quality work, as documented by Gillmor (2004). But rather, as *Christian Science Monitor* editor Regan pointed out in online journalism's formative days: "As the number of news sites on the Internet grows, people will continue to fall back on trusted sources" (Regan 1997b), including online versions of newspapers they have always relied upon for political coverage. By bringing cyber-democratic-style discourse under the tent of the newspaper's institutional authority, journalists can begin to reclaim the Fourth Estate role that has been eroded away by public cynicism about politics, "the process" and the media's place within it as either passive transmitters of political "spin" or arrogant know-it-alls.

In a piece of research done in the wake of the 2000 presidential election, Singer extensively quoted one of her survey respondents who stated the case eloquently:

"This medium is about the empowerment of our community, to facilitate interaction with interesting or meaningful people, to house 'forums' in which users can exchange ideas and information, to focus on the local angles, to give people a voice ... Newspapers have always been the bridge between newsmakers and readers. With interactive Internet applications, we have a way to enhance that role and make that bridge a two-way thoroughfare. This is good for the newspaper, good for the online service and good for the users. We're muddling through the continuing chaos of [the 2000] election in which roughly half the voting public is going to feel disenfranchised, no matter what the outcome. This is a good time to be in the 'enfranchisement' business" (Singer 2003).

But how should this “enfranchisement business” be conducted? What specific prescriptions, tools or techniques should online papers use in this endeavor?

A logical starting point is to recognize the role of the paper as an institutional actor within the political communication system. Davis describes how the Internet offers vast opportunity for citizen involvement in policy processes (the standard cyber-democratic approach). But he weighs that against the need for structure in allowing the process to operate effectively and offers the view that “structure will be provided by the very players who offer structure to news and information dissemination off line” including the media (R. Davis, 1999, p. 39). Cohen emphasizes the same institutional imperative. “The ideal deliberative procedure provides a model for institutions, a model they should mirror so far as possible ... [to] make deliberation possible” (Cohen 1997, p. 79).

Another aspect of the new role online journalists could adopt extends from the recognition that simple information provision is not enough. “If the job of the press is to inform the public, and the public has become too fragmented for information to be useful, then the role of the journalist has to be restated—not necessarily changed, mind you, but elaborated. ‘Informing the public’ is too limited, too narrow. ... Only citizens can create publics, but journalists can ask themselves the following question: How do we align our practices with the ways that citizens form publics so that there are more publics and a stronger public life?” (Mathews, 1996, p. 39) Another reform suggestion from a former public journalism editor-turned-educator calls for development of “a public knowledge model, in which citizens, experts and journalists collaboratively pool their intelligence” (Campbell, 2004). Taken together, these ideas reinforce the notion that a new role for online journalists ought to include helping citizens

interact with officials in politics and government, but also ought to provide ways for citizens to interact with each other.

A framework for online public affairs coverage

Adding the capabilities of the online environment offer previously unavailable approaches that have the potential to transform political communication (Graber, McQuail & Norris, 1998). So the blueprint ascribing new roles for online journalists should include using that capacity to provide the kind of interaction, connection and information sharing promoted by cyber-democratic theory, but within a structured and facilitated framework that helps to mitigate the weaknesses of “raw” cyber-democratic theory. These include ideas such as providing information in interactive ways (hyperstories and links to further information around the Web) and helping to shape discussion about the news and providing opportunities for greater connections among citizens and officials. To summarize, a new role for online journalists that can help reclaim the mantle of the Fourth Estate can be built around the following practices that make use of interactive devices:

1. Lending institutional authority to citizen voices;
2. Providing places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues;
3. Providing spaces for citizen interaction with officials;
4. Combining institutional and citizen voices; and
5. Using interactive devices to present public affairs information serving the surveillance function.

Such a framework incorporates parts of deliberative democracy and cyber-democracy as a theoretical basis for why these practices could be effective, while avoiding the technological determinism that plagues the latter in favor of a measured, realistic and practical approach.

## A CASE STUDY OF THE FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

The *Spokesman-Review* newspaper in Spokane, WA, has long been considered a “public journalism” paper (Charity 1996) with a history of involving the public in its news coverage (Sheppard, 1995). Given that history, it is not surprising that the *Spokesman-Review* would take an aggressive approach to incorporating interactive, public-discourse techniques into its online coverage of the 2004 election. A case study of its efforts is used here as a “best practices” model illustrating how implementation of the online public-affairs coverage framework might operate. The impact of employing these practices is demonstrated with qualitative evidence drawn from the site contents.

A case study also was selected as a means of proactively addressing the concern that the framework, while it may seem plausible *in theory*, in reality has little practical value. Such criticism is leveled even at Habermas’s conditions for effective deliberation. Case studies offer limited support for any theory they are called upon to validate because of their lack of generalizability. But one way in which case studies can be valuable is in falsifying the negative view: the argument “this theory cannot possibly be valid” is voided by the case study, which shows that the theoretical relationships *are* valid, in at least a single case. This was the approach used by Fromkin (2003) and by Dahlberg (2001b), who offer case studies in which, they maintain, Internet communication created something akin to true public sphere discourse using the Habermas model to reach policy conclusions through deliberative discussion.

In this light, Spokane can be seen as the case that exemplifies “it can happen here” with respect to journalistic promotion of civic discourse through online facilitation. The *Spokesman-Review* is a medium-sized paper (109,000 average daily weighted circulation) in a medium-sized

city (population 420,000), making it neither a large-and powerful national operation nor a tiny one in the journalistic wilderness. But despite its seeming typicality it was successful at:

1. Putting institutional authority behind citizen voices, especially through the device of the citizen blogs. Through this portion of its project, four individuals received a wide-ranging authorization to help set the paper's coverage agenda with their views and links, and about three dozen others were made a part of the coverage by contributing to the Young America, Tomorrow's America, New to America and Your America blogs.

2. Providing places for citizen interaction on public affairs issues. This is one area where Spokane was a little weak in implementing the framework. Its blogs partially fulfilled this function, but technical limitations prevented the paper from offering a talk-back or "respond to this posting" feature with them. Also, the *Spokesman-Review* did not have a public forum; the paper's site had one at one time but it was closed a few months before the election.

3. Providing spaces for citizen interaction with officials. E-mail links to campaigns, candidates, public officials and state agencies were found in various places throughout the Spokane site, but the key presentation in this area was candidate chats. Through the chats, more than 60 individuals were put into direct contact with officials running for office.

4. Combining institutional and public voices. Chats and blogs fulfilled this function, including a blog maintained by the editors where a lively discussion about the *Spokesman-Review*'s endorsements was conducted, with readers challenging the logic in the endorsements and editors using the forum to explain more about them.

5. Presenting public affairs information serving the surveillance function in ways that go beyond what is possible in print, such as layering and hyper-story formulation and interactive presentations. This was perhaps the *Spokesman-Review*'s strongest area. Dozens of

aces were presented in hyper-story format. Interactive devices allowed readers to find their local voting sites and compare their views to candidates' views. Three staff blogs offered effective portals to more than 100 links to election and governmental Web sites; candidate biographies included within the site had such links as well.

The Spokane *Spokesman-Review* online paper can be seen as successfully creating the conditions (as emphasized by Cohen) under which citizens could engage in improved political communication to help them make more effective voting decisions during the 2004 election campaign. Like Fromkin's and Dahlberg's case studies of online deliberative discourse in the Habermasian tradition, Spokane stands as evidence that helps to neutralize the complaint that the media are simply part of the problem when it comes to democratic dysfunction and could never be part of the solution.

The case study was made of pages published on the *Spokesman-Review*'s Web site during the month leading up to the 2004 election, with particular attention paid to the blogs, especially the ones written by readers, and the chats.

#### Layers of surveillance detail

Some material on the *Spokesman-Review*'s site ([www.spokesmanreview.com](http://www.spokesmanreview.com)), specifically stories re-purposed from the print edition, is available by subscription only. But when it came to the election coverage, all of it was freely accessible to the public. The first page of the Voters Guide was just one layer beyond the paper's home page and linked from a prominent place on that page. On this page, three of the entries (Candidates and Races, Primary Results [recall the data collection was in October; after Nov. 2, 2004 this was replaced with general election results], and Latest Headlines) were layered or hyper-story approaches to basic electoral information. Two entries—the Precinct Search and Candidate Quizzes—offered

interactive-storytelling approaches to help site users gather information they need to participate in the electoral process. These five features are all examples of the hyper-story/interactive surveillance information portion of the online public-affairs coverage framework. Three other entries—the staff blogs—offered a mix of news and commentary combined with extensive links to sites with general government and voting information, including candidates’ personal and campaign sites and third-party information/advocacy sites. The remaining two parts of the Voters Guide—the Candidate Chats and the Searching for Democracy blogs—offered extensive presentation of citizen voices on the site along with direct (but facilitated) discourse of citizens with candidates and each other.

Voters looking for more information about any aspect of the election could find their way to it with just two clicks of the mouse, by using links along the side of the search-results page that mirrored the divisions of the elections “home” page; in essence, no matter how far down a user “drilled” into the details of a race or other information, it was as if the main Voters Guide page was still on the screen. This is a form of hyper-story presentation at its most effective because it leaves a substantial amount of control with the user to determine which content is to be accessed and in what sequence. Another particularly effective examples of interactive presentation or “online storytelling” within the *Spokesman-Review*’s election coverage were a device for entering an address and finding out details such as where to vote and which races residents of that address would be voting in; this tool was accessed by nearly 1,700 visits in September and October 2004, according to the data provided by Spokesman-Review online publisher Ken Sands. (personal communication via e-mail, Jan. 18, 2005). And a third interactive device used for several races was a “clickable” quiz in which site users could compare their views on a subject to the candidates’ and receive a score to see which set of candidate views

most closely matched their own. As users worked through the quiz, they would use a mouse click to place a check by statements with which they agreed, and move on to the next statement. At the end, the results were reported: how many times a quiz participant agreed with each candidate, and on what issues. Overall, the candidates/races pages, quizzes and other such devices offer ample evidence that the *Spokesman-Review* was successful at implementing the fifth point of the online public-affairs coverage framework regarding using hyper-story approaches for presenting surveillance information about government and politics. The popularity of these devices, as shown by the data provided by Sands, indicates a measure of success in actually engaging several thousand members of the community, as well.

#### Staff blogs

The *Spokesman-Review* hosted three staff weblogs related to government and politics that were linked from the Voters Guide page. They were Eye on Olympia (the Washington state capital), by Richard Roesler covering state issues; Eye on Boise (Idaho's state capital), by reporter Betsy Russell covering Idaho issues; and Spin Control, a general-purpose elections blog by reporter Jim Camden. All three had extensive sets of outbound links to political information elsewhere on the Web—something Sands described as “one-stop shopping” for voter information. Spin Control, for example, had links to state and county election information pages; three different campaign-information and campaign-finance disclosure Web sites; eight links to political party Web sites, including the state and county Democrat and Republican operations, but also several minor parties; and 48 candidate Web sites from major and minor parties, ranging from president down to county commissioner. Eye on Olympia and Eye on Boise were not as election-oriented, but offered well-organized portals with links to locations providing details about governmental issues in Washington and Idaho, respectively. Roesler even offered links to

an interactive budget-balancing exercise about the state budget offered by the Associated Press and to a citizen gadfly who specializes in financial disclosure.

Citizen voices: the blogs

So far, all of the devices used by the *Spokesman-Review* that have been discussed address the same part of the online public-affairs coverage framework, namely using hyper-story and interactively oriented tools to present surveillance-type public affairs information. (The portal function of the blogs also is an implementation of point three, connecting readers to officials.) But perhaps the most interesting and most significant part of the *Spokesman-Review*'s coverage was its hosting of numerous citizen blogs and citizen-candidate chats, which are excellent ways to fulfill two other parts of the coverage framework: putting institutional authority behind citizen voices, and creating a public space for citizen interaction with officials.

Under the heading of "Searching for Democracy," the *Spokesman-Review*'s blog project was billed as "Eight columnists seek meaningful conversations about politics and government in our community." The project was further described as: "Political discourse increasingly is dominated by the extremes. Media coverage focuses too much on polling and the latest perceived scandal, and not enough on substantive issues. The voices of regular people are not often heard. This unique blogging experiment from spokesmanreview.com is an attempt to address these problems." Sands said he recruited all of the citizen bloggers, using as his sources "readers who found stories on their own by surfing the Web and complained to us about how we didn't publish those stories." He gave them instructions in advance but said he was careful not to be overly directive. "I didn't want to be too prescriptive," he said. "I wanted them to have their own voices."

Two of the blogs, *Your America* and *Young America*, were organized by *Spokesman-Review* staff writers Dan Webster and Chris Rodkey but were comprised primarily of the views of everyday people—small-business owners, college professors, a college student, retirees, doctors, and a lawyer, to name a few. Rodkey’s offering, titled “Young America,” focused specifically on 18-to-25-year-old voters. Two other blogs offered specific, narrower perspectives on the election. One was “New to America,” written by Andrew Morozov, a Russian immigrant and graduate student at Washington State University, and the other was “Tomorrow’s America,” by 16-year-old high school student Anna Zeimantz.

Webster, Rodkey, Morozov and Zeimantz contributed short, “snapshot” viewpoints of about three dozen people in all—voters, non-voters and prospective voters—ranging in age from 16 to 87, and diverse in gender, race and political orientation. But four other blogs gave four readers a platform to add their own views and news to the mix through what has become the “standard model” for blogging: short commentaries combined with links to news stories and other Web sites with information related to the author’s views. All four reader-bloggers, in their introductions and biographies, said they wanted to bring balance and different viewpoints to the political discourse. As one of them put it, “My goal is to provide links to both sides of a debate—not because I believe both are right but because I believe a valid position can withstand opposing arguments.” Among the four, both sides of the political street were covered; Sands, in fact, said he consciously tried to recruit two left-leaning individuals and two right-leaning ones.

Overall, the blogging project supplies evidence that Spokane was dedicated to and successful at implementing point one of the online public-affairs coverage framework—putting the institutional authority of the *Spokesman-Review* behind citizen voices. Anna Zeimantz is certainly not the only 16-year-old with a blog, and Andrew Morozov is not the only recent

immigrant with one. But their association with the *Spokesman-Review* and its “sponsorship” of their work set both astride the flow of tens of thousands of visits to the Voters Guide site. Sands said the eight blogs were successful in attracting readership through the election and beyond it, with 22,000 page views in September and October (E-mail Jan. 18, 2005).

#### Citizen voices: Candidate Chats

The extensive use of hyperlinked election information and the citizen blogging project show that Spokane strongly implemented the first, fourth and fifth points of the coverage framework: putting institutional authority behind citizen voices (citizen blogs); combining institutional and public voices (staff blogs, especially those by Chris Rodkey and Dan Webster); and using hyper-story formulations to present surveillance information. Points two and three—providing citizens with places to interact with each other, and with public officials, in facilitated forums—took place in the candidate chats.

The *Spokesman-Review* also hosted seven chats in which citizens could interact with candidates, including three involving candidates in a Republican congressional primary and four with candidates for two county commissioner positions in the general election. (Later readers could take advantage of these, too; chat transcripts were kept on the site through the election and beyond, and they drew approximately 6,400 views in September and October.) Sands and other *Spokesman-Review* staffers moderated the chats to screen questions. The really valuable part of the exercise, according to Sands, is that the questions “were asked with the voices of the readers. The candidates seemed REALLY [his emphasis] interested in talking directly to the readers without the filter of a reporter” (E-mail Jan. 5, 2005).

Questions in the county commissioner chats focused both on specific campaign issues surrounding county services and also what might be called character issues. Issue-oriented

questions included ones about help for minority businesses (from a participant who identified himself as an African-American), enforcement of building codes, funding for arts and entertainment programs, and protection of the aquifer from which the county's drinking water is drawn. But one candidate who was government affairs director for the Spokane Home Builders Association was asked about potential conflicts of interest with regard to county decisions on land use and development that might involve his former clients. Other candidates were asked questions such as "Why should we trust you?" and "Why should the voters of Spokane County consider voting for you (when) you show a continual lack of patience, often cannot control your anger and frustrations, and you act on your passions without consulting your intellect?"

The three congressional primary chats, held a few days apart in early September, also focused mostly on specific campaign issues, both at the federal and local levels. These included questions about what came to be known as the "moral values" issues in the post-campaign analysis, especially abortion rights and Constitutional limitation on gay marriages, as well as taxes, the federal deficit, Medicare policies and energy policy. Non-issue questions to these candidates included ones about political independence; Republican candidate Cathy McMorris, for example, was asked to list areas in which she disagreed with President Bush. Other questioners asked how the candidates would deal with being "rookie" legislators and what their level of responsiveness to their constituents would be.

Overall, the seven chats for the three different races drew approximately 60 individuals into a forum where they could ask candidates about issues directly. None of the questions dealt with topics journalists typically spend a lot of effort covering: the horse-race aspect of the campaign, and the charges and countercharges issued by candidates and their representatives. Sands' comment about the value of providing a reader's voice via the chats is particularly

relevant to the “trust” and “passion over intellect” questions posed to the one county commissioner candidate. The canons of “balanced” journalistic behavior would prevent a reporter from asking either of those questions in the blunt manner in which they were presented. But the chat forum allowed for it, since the question came not from a representative of the paper but from a member of the public, and forced the candidate to respond in a public setting.

But having the paper host the chats helped in weeding out what Sands, who moderated several of them, called “inane and insulting” questions, improving the quality of the discourse for all. The paper’s sponsorship also created a platform acceptable both to the candidates and the questioners. Spokane’s chats were a prime example of how an online paper can lend its authority to facilitate discourse, but how citizen involvement can help that discourse reach places that journalists might not find on their own.

## DISCUSSION

Media organizations that take steps as Spokane did to establish themselves as a setting or venue for improved political communication, civic discourse and engagement thus might be seen as a part of the solution, rather than a part of the problem, to the widespread distrust and disgust for the U.S. political communication system in its current state. In short, the ability of the news media to fulfill their Fourth Estate role would be stronger if the practices described in the online public-affairs coverage framework were more widely adopted.

The primary basis of this conclusion is that online technology offers unique opportunities for making this happen and that online papers have a special role to play by virtue of the traditional role of journalists in the political communication process. Together, this makes the online news sites a better venue than “freeform” online discourse and information access, as represented by bloggers and some other types of political information/political discussion sites.

Online papers are exceptionally well positioned to add the structure and facilitation that critics of cyber-democracy say are required for it to work effectively, for the reasons that follow:

Online papers are part of the institutional political communication system

Cohen (1997) says the role of institutional players in encouraging a more deliberative process (and thus one with more political legitimacy) is creating opportunities for more and better discourse. The techniques in the online public affairs coverage framework are largely related to doing that by encouraging citizen-citizen and citizen-official interaction, as well as improving access to and efficiency of sharing quality information that can form a basis for public opinion. A large part of this may be ascribed to the news media still being the leading source for accurate, verified information about politics, as discussed by Entmann (2005). Online tools, and the revised tasks for journalists in the framework, let them do this in new, more efficient ways.

But at the same time, journalistic purpose and tradition in offering general information offers an opportunity for creating shared understandings and provides some protection against the dangers of overly restrictive information selection—people seeking and finding information that only reinforces their own worldview—that is so prevalent online.

Online papers can provide neutral forums for interaction

Computer technology can improve the efficiency of political interactions, including those that traditionally have taken place between members of the public and candidates or officials. Sending an e-mail is easier (and cheaper) than writing and posting a letter; participating in a chat is far more efficient for both parties than meeting in a physical setting such as a “town hall” meeting or campaign appearance. Citizens can use modern technology to take part in such events from the comfort of their homes rather than traveling across town; officials can do it from

offices, hotels or anywhere they happen to be with proper network access. These are exactly the characteristics of networked interaction touted by proponents of cyber-democracy.

But how many candidates would, in the midst of a campaign, join an invitation to chat that came from some random citizen or group, without fear of walking into a situation in which they could end up being portrayed in a bad light? Conversely what would citizens think about the potential for bias from a chat sponsored by the candidate on his or her Web site, where nothing but “softball” questions and prepared answers are a real possibility? From these examples it is obvious that sponsorship of such interactions from an organization with an established online presence and a neutral reputation can help the process be more successful for all concerned. Online papers are ideally positioned to play such a role (as Spokane did) and a prime example of how journalists can add authority, structure and facilitation that makes cyber-democracy work the way its proponents suggest that it can.

Online papers offer an imprimatur to discussion and links

Online papers can provide a sense of authority and direction for information such as links to online sources. Louis Bloom of Camano Island, WA does the kind of work that exemplifies disintermediated, citizen-directed democratic action that proponents of cyber-democracy find so valuable. Bloom files Freedom of Information requests with the state government to get the names of state employees, the agencies they work for and their salaries, then posts the information on a World Wide Web site. He writes on the site that he does this to expose nepotism and cronyism in state government. This is cyber-democracy in action, at least in the sense of providing interesting and valuable political information for widespread use, even if it lacks a forum for discussion or action upon it.

But realistically speaking, how likely is it that Bloom's work would become widely known or accessed under most circumstances? Those most likely to locate the fruits of his labors and use them are those who are already politically savvy and knowledgeable. But reporter Rich Roesler, who covers Washington state government for the *Spokesman-Review*, has made sure that anyone who looks at his blog on the paper's Web site knows about Bloom. Roesler encourages readers to look at Bloom's site and offers a link to it near the top of the page where *Eye on Olympia* is posted. This is an example of the "sensemaking" or helping readers "find the good stuff" that Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) suggest as a role for journalists to play.

#### Citizen involvement extends journalistic capabilities

*Citizen expertise.* Citizens like Bloom have access to information and ideas that journalists do not. Reporters mostly deal in generalities; they may know a bit more about some things than the general public because they have access to and regular contact with expert sources. But it is intellectually impossible for them to be experts on everything within the public sphere. The collective knowledge and expertise of the public surpasses that of any newsroom, and the framework says papers should tap into this wide-scale, broadly based expertise.

That is what happened in the Spokane chats, for example, when candidates were asked detailed questions by well-informed questioners about local concerns such as a green-space preservation program and the state of county recreation facilities in one town. It is unlikely any one reporter (or even several) would have been as well-versed in all of the topics that were presented to candidates as the cumulative knowledge of those who participated in the chats and posed the questions. Bloom's work and the Spokane chats are examples of the "public knowledge" model as described by Cole Campbell (2004) and the value of the "citizen journalism" projects as discussed by Steve Outing (2004).

*Citizen voices.* The perspectives offered by citizen bloggers and those who participate in sponsored forums fall in this same category. The framework's attribute of connecting citizens to officials, through such devices as chats and e-mail links, establishes settings where officials are obligated to respond to citizens on the public's terms. For instance, in another example from the Spokane chats, candidates were obliged to respond to questions about conflicts of interest, trust and concerns over one candidate's alleged bad temper. If these had come from a reporter in the manner in which they were presented, the reporter and/or the paper could have been subject to accusations of bias or unfairness. But coming from citizens, they were perfectly legitimate and the candidates had to dignify them with responses.

#### Online tools surpass the capabilities of the printed page

Technology allows papers to do things that are not possible in print editions. When journalists provide links to other sources beyond their own presentations, readers can “build” a story to the level or depth that they want; this is the practical value of a shift in gatekeeping. The value-added part that journalists bring in is verification and vetting of these sources—helping people find the good stuff. But hyper-story presentations not only shift some of the gatekeeping to readers, but allow for depth and persistence of presentation that are impossible to achieve in print, such as Spokane's decision to keep the transcripts of chats held in September and early October posted through the Nov. 4 election and beyond. Similarly, the *Spokesman-Review* was able to keep biographies posted throughout the time voters might need to access them. Further, a voter who was not sure which biographies to look at could use the interactive precinct-finder tool to figure out which district he/she lived in, then follow a link from the same page to learn more about the candidates in those races. Upon reaching the biography page, the voter would even find

e-mail and Web site links for many candidates to investigate further or try to contact the individual.

Arguably, motivated and interested citizens would find these links on their own. But motivated, interested citizens can attend City Council meetings, too. Nevertheless, newspapers cover City Council because not everybody can or will attend the meetings, and the journalists see it as their job to improve the public's access to what happens there by reporting on it. The online paper provides the same sort of public service, based in technology, when it collects and presents valuable links to the public.

It is an auspicious time to make such reforms

Now is the time for media organizations to be taking action to implement the devices described in the framework, because online news presentation is beginning to take a substantial hold in American life. Research shows that while television and newspapers still surpass the Internet as news sources, Internet usage for news surveillance is growing. A quarter of those surveyed by Stempel and Hargrove (2004) turned to the Internet for news four or more days a week and another 16 percent looked there occasionally (one to three days per week). Similarly, the Pew Internet & American Life project reports that 35 million Americans turned to the Internet for news on a typical day in 2004—up from 19 million in 2000 (Rainie et al. 2005). Another Pew study noted that 62 percent of Internet news consumers say they read the Web sites of local or national newspapers (Pew Research Center, 2005). Pew also found that 24 million Americans looked for political information on the Web in 2004, nearly triple the number (9 million) who did so 2000 (Rainie et al. 2005).

## CONCLUSION

The online public affairs coverage framework suggests specific tactics for creating the conditions that can improve political communication, to which the technological determinist (or cyber-utopian) might reply: “so does the network.” The key difference is that the online public affairs coverage framework starts with the network’s capabilities but then employs human artifacts—notably rules of engagement and institutional authority and connections—to channel the power of the technology for human ends, i.e., more effective self-governance via a new set of normative practices for journalists.

Journalists, newsmakers and audiences all have a role to play in the political communication system’s effective operation, and share culpability for situations where it is not implemented or does not work as intended. But one thing is certain: the first step lies with the journalists. Implementing the online public affairs coverage framework may or may not be a sufficient condition for reforming the dysfunctional political communication system, but doing something like it certainly is a necessary one. In doing so, journalists might meet a goal expressed by political scientist and press critic James Carey (quoted in Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 18), who said: “Perhaps in the end, journalism simply means amplifying the conversations of the people themselves.”

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