WHERE THE POWER LIES:

A CASE STUDY OF ABC's "THE PATH TO 9/11" AND

THE POLITICAL BLOGOSPHERE

by

COLIN JOHN LINGLE

B.A., Yale University, 1990

M.A., University of Colorado, 2007

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written by Colin John Lingle
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________________________________
Professor Robert Trager

________________________________
Professor Michael McDevitt

________________________________
Professor Elizabeth Skewes

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Lingle, Colin John (M.A., School of Journalism and Mass Communication)
Where the Power Lies: A Case Study of ABC's "The Path to 9/11" and
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On the fifth anniversary of September 11, 2001, ABC aired "The Path to 9/11," a fictionalized account of real events leading up to the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. The production and subsequent controversy in both the mainstream media and the political blogosphere offer an opportunity to examine the dynamics of corporate and independent media systems in the current "third age" of political communication. Important questions of authority, credibility and democratic culture emerge from the contestation of cultural meanings that took place first within a global media network and then among top-tier political blogs of the right and left. Framing practices in both media set the stage for a complex discourse of terrorism, othering and political fundamentalism. The case study analyzes reactions to "The Path to 9/11" among several political blogs and considers certain implications of this discourse for democratic culture.

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# Introduction

Three broad themes can be said to anchor American history: a political revolution that still echoes two centuries later, a surging business class that helped restructure the world's economy, and a cultural influence that is projected around the globe. At the heart of each of these themes, media systems have created the channels through which American ideas flow. From the early newspapers carried by riders of the colonial postal system, to a hit television show transmitted by satellite to a handheld computer halfway around the world, American media have always represented a complex matrix of political, economic and cultural power. In the course of two centuries, democratic institutions and media institutions have served each other well. The vision of a continental republic was so powerful that it drove both the political will and the technological innovation required to make such a thing possible:

> From an early point, because of the country's rapid expansion west, Americans approached technical and organizational challenges in communications from a continental perspective—building postal, telegraph, and telephone networks on a far more extensive scale than any single nation in Europe. The sheer scale of these networks—and the enormous domestic market they helped create—then had a pervasive effect on the productivity and competitive advantage of nearly all the communications industries, particularly telecommunications, motion pictures, and broadcasting (Starr 2004, 16).

Against the background of this expansion, conflict has been essentially continuous between established interests (primarily governments and businesses) and "the public" (an often indistinct but nevertheless powerful abstraction). From the economic pressure of the stamp tax, by which English authorities sought to control

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upstart newspaper publishers at home in the colonies (Starr 2004, 38), through the 1934 Communications Act and the Telecommunications Act of 1996, American culture has always emerged from the crucible of business, politics and the people (Aufderheide 1999). In other words, it comes through the media. Transitional moments in American media may therefore be investigated as transitional moments in American history and culture. This study will examine one such moment through the case of the American Broadcasting Company's program, "The Path to 9/11," which aired during the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C.

Because of their historical connection, American media and American democracy are inextricably integrated. Public expectations of democratic culture are imprinted on the media, even as the media evolve and incorporate new technologies. But the structures by which media companies organize themselves are not inherently democratic. There are other forces, both political and economic, that significantly influence how the media function. These structures and influences become sites of considerable cultural power and must be understood as, simultaneously, arenas of democracy and arenas of meaning-making. As corporate media weave patterns of economic influence into the fabric of everyday life, the nature of democratic and cultural practices change. To begin to ask how, one can look to the evolving state of political communication. In a rapidly fragmenting media environment, political communicators are creating new kinds of tools with which to reach increasingly elusive audiences. Politics and entertainment have started to merge and the power of political framing now flows through new channels. After September 11, new social

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narratives dominate public culture and, with them, new levers of social control. A new site of public discourse, the political blogosphere, has reinvigorated debate and given the public a new way to respond to media messages. Recently, corporate media have discovered this venue and the challenges that mainstream media face are beginning to emerge, in new forms, online. The independence that early online communities enjoyed can be tapped by political communicators; the blogosphere, as with all media, is now a field of economic, political and cultural competition. This theoretical overview and case study will attempt to examine how these arenas interact, integrate and conflict. An overview of specific chapters follows.

*Chapter One Overview: Democracy and Meaning in the U.S. Media System*

The ability to freely criticize the government is an essential tenet of both American democracy and American media. But free speech is not the only measure of a democratic society. Within the framework of modern communication theory, a broader definition would incorporate not only the ability to speak, but also the ability to participate in the construction of cultural meaning. A central premise of this study will be that a democratic society is fundamentally participatory (Balkin 2004). If democratic culture is healthy, more people will have a greater chance to share in collaborative social discourse. Media institutions, despite their place in American history and their traditional function as sites of public discourse, need not be inherently democratic. The development of media corporations in the broadcast era, and especially in the recent decades of dramatic and rapid conglomeration, changes the scale and scope of these institutions. As they seek to create and dominate new

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audiences, the democratic function traditionally ascribed to the press becomes, in part, a business strategy (McChesney 2004). This dual role as a democratic institution and a commercial medium engenders a host of unintended consequences. These are made more significant by the fact that the media can suggest certain boundaries of social interaction (Hall 1977; Carey 1989). If the content of the media helps establish social definitions, and if the media are under increasing commercial pressure, then political communicators can gain access to media channels through economic influence that operates outside a participatory culture. This dynamic could put powerful tools in the hands of elites and restrict the public's ability to perceive how the political and economic interests behind the media function.

*Chapter Two Overview: Political Communication in the Third Age*

In the decades after World War II, the party system was the primary orienting institution for political culture and centralized communication techniques delivered generally cohesive and loyal voting blocs (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 211). In the 1960s, as television became the dominant form of political communication, parties diversified their strategies and conformed to the demands of a new medium (Blumler and Kavanagh, 212). These first two "ages" of political communication represent a progression toward a radically diversified, professionalized and highly strategic "third age" that began in the 1990s and continues to evolve. Though their analysis has proved to be an effective blueprint for further advances in the subsequent decade, their key characteristics of the third age should be evaluated in a contemporary light. Doing so lays out a useful framework for analyzing the forces at work in the

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production of “The Path to 9/11.” A principal mechanism to consider in this regard is “framing.” Scholarship in this area has reached contradictory conclusions over the last several decades but scholars recognize the production and reception of political frames as key functions (Scheufele 1999). A useful model for how such frames move through the media sphere is “cascading activation” (Entman 2003). This model demonstrates that influential sources (e.g., the White House or political elites) can present and drive media frames through several levels of the social structure, eventually flowing down to the level of the public. This study attempts to show that new channels for political framing are now available both to elites and to the public. The final section addresses the dominant contemporary political frames in a post-September 11 media environment. Terrorism is now the primary paradigm within which cultural and political power clash in a violent media-based language that encompasses both acts of war and their televisual representations (Lewis 2005). The discursive mode of modern political communicators, particularly the Bush administration, draws on the structures and meanings of religious fundamentalism to construct narratives (Domke 2004). This morally charged, binary framework is predicated on mythic notions of good and evil that, brought to the level of political framing, inculcates fear and othering into the national discourse and identity (Aho 1994). These themes echo throughout “The Path to 9/11,” but were challenged in the political blogosphere.

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*Chapter Three Overview: Democratic Culture and the Political Blogosphere*

Since its general popularization in the 1990s (and the advent of blogging around 2000), the Internet has emerged as a cultural phenomenon that is widely reported on and often misrepresented in mainstream media. So much so, in fact, that Carey goes so far as to call idealistic analysis in the pre-September 11 era “politically and morally irresponsible” (Carey 2005, 445). While simplistic descriptions promote false benefits and fail to capture real limitations, there are, in fact, technical dimensions of online communication that do promote principles of democratic discourse, e.g. transparency in the system architecture (making it widely accessible), a paradigm of interactivity that promotes conversation, effective tools for organizing and presenting information that serves the public, and so on (Sparks 2001, 79-80). While the typical online community likely fails to attain the high standards of discourse required in a classic Habermasian public sphere, there is evidence that the discursive, disruptive work of counter-public-spheres (a theory developed, in part, by Habermas himself) represents a genuine oppositional force to counter anti-democratic tendencies in corporate media structures (Downey and Fenton 2003, 200). Issues of form and content dominate the literature on blogs and other computer-mediated communication, including a shift toward what has been called “dialogic journalism” (Deuze 2003). Atton (2006, 574) identifies trends toward “participatory communication and radicalized professional practices of journalism,” and cites Downing’s (2001, 95) definition that “‘alternative’ is employed to denote media practices that ‘strengthen democratic culture.’” Definitions and methodologies remain subjective to a degree, but one key function of the political blogosphere that should

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be examined in the context of the foregoing discussion of cultural power is the construction of counterframes. Dahlberg (2005) argues that a pervasive corporate colonization of the Web is taking place, limiting the medium's capacity for promoting democratic culture and Atton (2006) describes important anti-democratic dimensions of hard-right online discourse. Taken together, the picture strongly suggests a medium that has the potential to fulfill a democratic impulse but that nonetheless faces crucial challenges. An examination of "The Path to 9/11" can illuminate these difficulties and certain salutary responses.

*Chapter Four Overview: Research Question and Case Study*

Each of these three arenas—corporate power, political influence and democratic culture—offers a vast field of theoretical exploration. Any one of them could productively occupy a lengthy research project. But the forces that animate these arenas are intertwined in complex, consequential relationships and they influence one another at the points of intersection. For this reason, it is worth approaching the problem from a multi-dimensional perspective. Put simply, the established literature demonstrates that media are meaning-making forces: they help citizens view themselves (and one another) as patriots, as warriors, as victims and so on. They can also be used to reconstruct events in a new, reordered reality. The cultural power of media may be shaped and guided by authentic democratic impulses embedded in American traditions. Alternatively, it may be shaped and guided by actors with anti-democratic objectives. In an open society, consumers should be able to understand why and how cultural products are made. Therefore, the research

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question driving this inquiry asks what happens to democratic discourse in a media environment heavily influenced by corporate and political interests? The case study of ABC's "The Path to 9/11" provides an effective object of analysis through which to approach the key themes identified here. In this instance, corporate and political interests aligned to promote a powerful cultural narrative in both a traditional, unidirectional medium (television) and in an innovative, discursive medium (the Web). The case study will attempt to examine how these forces came together and what that means for democratic culture in contemporary media systems.

*Case Study Overview: ABC's "The Path to 9/11" and the Political Blogosphere*

September 11, 2001, is a lens that distorts history, politics, economics, communication and other broad categories of thought. As artists and producers explore those events in media productions, the narrative history becomes subject to the perspectives of both those guiding the production and those consuming the product. "The Path to 9/11" and the controversy it engendered merit analysis as an exemplar of corporate, political and democratic forces in fierce contestation. The stakes of that contest included, first, the historical narrative and public memory of the attacks and, perhaps more importantly, the meanings arising from that narrative. The consequences associated with retaliation might well have been different if the meanings associated with the attacks had been different. Various public figures struggled to establish perspectives that were more circumspect than those espoused by the administration and its vocal proponents in the media (Entman 2003). But there was essentially no parity in the infrastructure of the corporate media for those

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alternative views to receive a hearing (Hutcheson, et al., 2004). By the anniversary of the attacks in 2006, as ABC broadcast its program and the administration again mined the political imagery and meanings it had successfully established five years earlier, the blogosphere had emerged as a new venue for political discourse. In the tug of war between the left- and right-blogosphere, a familiar struggle was taking place. As in previous decades, the discourse was often contentious, unpredictable, even disreputable, but the contenders were using technologies never imagined by the framers of the U.S. Constitution. This analysis asks how the present contestation over meanings is expressed in a media environment in which both corporate and independent voices are increasingly powerful and sophisticated. The case study itself will include five sub-sections to provide context for the cultural framework surrounding the airing of the program:

- Political Decision-Making at ABC
- Production and Promotion of "The Path to 9/11"
- Realism and Framing in "The Path to 9/11"
- Echoes of "The Path to 9/11"
- Controversy in the Political Blogosphere

The political and military consequences of the September 11 attacks suggest that the present discourse and construction of cultural meanings represent a crucial moment in American history. It is essential to examine where and how political influences are being exerted within the new "third-age" mediasphere and what that means for democratic culture.

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## Chapter One: Democracy and Meaning in the U.S. Media System

Forged in the revolutionary press and popular notions of political independence, the U.S. media system bears the imprint of democracy, including such principles as reporting the general welfare, explaining issues of the day, holding public officials accountable and so on (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947). Economic pressures on American media have existed throughout their history, but at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, with the integration of the modern corporation and broadcasting technology, a crucial transition began (McChesney, 38). Over the course of the twentieth century, media companies developed an aggressive business model exemplified by "relentlessly expanding media conglomerates eager to treat the news as a 'product' to be recast for the publicity, promotional, and marketing purposes of their integrated media holdings" (Underwood 2001, 100). Such "products" are not mere disposable items, but instead represent the cultural expressions of media producers. As such, they have a communicative life beyond the television screen or the printed page; they resonate with meaning (Carey 1989, 23). The media companies that create and broadcast such products "suffer from built-in biases that protect corporate power and consequently weaken the public's ability to understand forces that create the American scene" (Bagdikian 2004, xvii). This chapter addresses certain expectations and expressions of media as tools of democracy and culture in order to introduce problems that emerge from this dual function.

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*A. Expectations of Democracy in the Media*

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart emphasized the bond between democracy and a well-informed public in his opinion in *New York Times Co. v. United States*, also known as the Pentagon Papers case:

> In the absence of governmental checks and balances present in other areas of our national life, the only effective restraint upon executive policy and power in the areas of national defense and international affairs may lie in an enlightened citizenry—in an informed and critical public opinion which alone can here protect the values of democratic government (403 U.S. 713, 728).

In the early decades of the broadcast era, influential newspaperman and media critic Walter Lippmann repeatedly warned about the need for veracity in the journalism:

> No liberty… exists "for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies." If democracy was to work, the press owed the public, above all else, a "steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news": "There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil" (Starr 2004, 396).

Renowned legal scholar Alexander Meiklejohn considered self-governance to be a fundamental principle that demands free and accurate information in order for the public to perform its essential function:

> The voters… must be made as wise as possible. The welfare of the community requires that those who decide issues shall understand them. They must know what they are voting about…. If (wisdom) fails, then (the self-governing community) fails. That is why freedom of discussion for those minds may not be abridged (Meiklejohn 1948).

Each of these quotations situates the foundational principle of American democracy in information that can best be provided to the public by a free and

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independent press. These themes echo throughout American politics and media history, even as values systems shift and new technologies evolve. Out of the rough partisanship of the golden age of newspapers, for example, the principle of "objectivity" emerged in the twentieth century to reorganize the industry around principles of dispassionate rationalism (McChesney, 58). Similarly, the broad establishment of radio in the 1930s and television in the 1950s were framed as more than a mere technological wonder. They would "change society":

> The promise of broadcasting, even more than earlier media, was to make culture accessible to all, to enable the electorate to become better informed, to put people instantaneously in touch with the news of the world. Here was a new, buzzing and booming public sphere, an updated means of forming public opinion and public taste appropriately scaled to the age of mass democracy (Starr, 347).

The media evolve, but general notions of a well-informed public, journalistic truth and democratic discourse persist. In the long historical conversation about how these ideals are fulfilled or subverted, theoretical frames of reference may shift. This inquiry begins with a brief explanation of the definition of "democracy" that is used here. The institutions of representative government surely fall within any definition of the term, but "democracy" is more than the U.S. Congress or the White House. Scholars and critics often use the term "democratic deliberation" to refer to the processes by which the public evaluates information and makes choices. Though the term expresses certain common sense meanings, the actual theoretical requirements of "democratic deliberation" are difficult to determine and nearly impossible to achieve (Simon and Xenos 2000, 364). For example, in some definitions, true deliberation must be free from the influence of governments and institutions, it must

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lead to real changes in policy or public life, and it cannot be polemic, argumentative or one-sided (Simon and Xenos, 364). The fact that rationality is central to real democratic deliberation may explain, in part, why communities rarely meet the high standards for such discourse in "public sphere" theory (Simon and Xenos, 366, 368). Some theorists argue that broadcast media offer the public access to deliberation via "elite discourse" in which social meanings are developed and revised (Simon and Xenos, 367). But can the contemporary "top-down" political culture—exemplified in such products as elite national newspapers, news magazines and the Sunday political talk show circuit—really be said to be "democratic"? A more nuanced definition of the term would embrace not only the institutions of government, media outlets and elite opinion but, most importantly, real-world practices of the public.

In comparison with democratic *discourse*, democratic *culture* is a more expansive view of how individuals think, act and communicate collectively in the pursuit of self-governance. The principle of participation is central to all processes of democracy. As such, it offers a useful lens through which to ask whether media, institutions and practices are "democratic." A community, whatever its size, may be considered democratic not because it possesses deliberative institutions or communication networks, but if it offers its members the opportunity to participate in creating public meanings (Balkin 2004, 3-4). This broader approach encompasses both institutional and epistemological dimensions of society:

> A "democratic" culture means much more than democracy as a form of self-governance. It means democracy as a form of social life in which unjust barriers of rank and privilege are dissolved, and in which ordinary people gain a greater say over the

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> institutions and practices that shape them and their futures.
>
> What makes a culture democratic, then, is not democratic governance but democratic participation. A democratic culture includes the institutions of representative democracy, but it also exists beyond them, and indeed undergirds them. A democratic culture is the culture of a democratized society: a democratic culture is a participatory culture" (Balkin, 33).

This definition reflects certain processes by which individuals and institutions seek to create meaning, which in turn will be useful for the discussion that follows. Moreover, within the larger construct of media and democracy, this definition of democratic culture directly addresses new digital technologies that are interactive and, thus, inherently participatory. These media (e.g., email, cell phones, iPods, blogs, etc.) clearly offer more channels through which individuals can participate in cultural activities. But they also provide corporations and institutions "new opportunities for limiting and controlling those forms of cultural participation and interaction" (Balkin, 2). This dichotomy merits close analysis in an age of exponential proliferation of digital media. If democratic culture fosters greater participation in constructing meaning, corporate practices—which seek to control and constrain participation (Balkin, 46)—should be understood in terms of a capacity to limit those meanings.

Media have always been subject to economic pressures, as have virtually all social institutions, and passionate appeals to American patriotism sold many newspapers long before the colonies declared themselves independent (Starr, 16). But the evolution of contemporary media empires during the last century—effected

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through rapidly evolving technological and economic infrastructures—represents a substantively different kind of cultural influence.

*B. The Foundations of Corporate Media*

The political and social reorientation of the eighteenth century integrated the public into the national government and with this new responsibility citizens were motivated to consume greater amounts information (Starr,  64). In the first decades after the adoption of the U.S. Constitution (roughly 1790 to 1835), newspaper consumption in the former colonies increased dramatically, outstripping the European model of elite news audiences and paving the way for a distinctive American mass media system (Starr, 86). This rush on fact and opinion established a commercial press of impressive variety and a level of partisanship that might alarm modern readers; but in a complex news system where many points of view were represented, a balanced chaos by some accounts served the public well (McChesney, 58). By the start of the twentieth century, however, economic forces had started to winnow populist perspectives and to drive papers into alliances that could more effectively attract advertising (McChesney, 59). This opened the door to a new criticism (sometimes valid but other times misplaced) that advertising radically distorted media content, rendering it attractive to audiences but empty of sociological value (Nerone, ed. 1995, 110).

As the influence of the press and emerging communication technologies increased, corporate media and political interests grew more intertwined. The National Association of Broadcasters lobbied members of Congress who were laying

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the foundations of broadcast regulation, saying "the public" would be the great beneficiary of the new medium; once the Communications Act of 1934 was enacted, however, it was the broadcasters themselves who demanded First Amendment protection (McChesney, 41). Rowland (1997) explains this type of negotiation as a dynamic of mutual benefit between corporate media entities and the regulators who oversaw the rapidly developing industry. This dynamic infuses the language of the "public interest," a term that opponents have used on both sides of the public/private debate for decades. Rowland describes the origin of this system of integrated interests:

> During the century-long period before the enactment of broadcast radio law, the public interest standard came to be interpreted widely by administrative agencies and the courts as a doctrine too insure the economic well being of the regulated industries. Particularly in telecommunications it tended to support industry needs for steadily improving technological and infrastructure development and related capital interests. It was undergirded by a pragmatic policy doctrine at the heart of which lay an accommodation between public and private interests that assumed that public service benefits would most like and best derive from regulatory guarantees of advanced technological capacity and economic profitability for the private industry service providers (Rowland 1997).

Broadcasters invoked democratic ideals to foster, promote and protect new modes of communication, but it was no secret that these powerful tools were exclusively owned and managed by profit-oriented corporations. The anti-trust laws of the early twentieth century and the reservation of parts of the electromagnetic spectrum for nonprofit public channels, for example, demonstrate a longstanding, if intermittent, commitment to the public interest (McChesney, 211). But the overriding

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paradigm of broadcast media regulation is one of corporate and political cooperation in which economic interests are ensured and actual democratic policies tend to devolve into secondary importance (Arsenault and Castells 2006, 301). It would be a mischaracterization to portray this collaboration as being inherently anti-democratic. The extensive benefits that have historically accrued to media corporations—postal subsidies, intellectual property rights, favorable tax policy and so on—are congruent with political philosophies that promote capitalist advancement and, indeed, with the purposeful development of America as an economic world power (Starr, 392). It is reasonable to assume that any corporation will exert all available influence to protect and expand its ability to do business. In the context of media corporations, this influence necessarily encroaches into the political sphere (McChesney, 46). This ongoing negotiation takes place on a political battlefield where antitrust policy and legislative control are wielded in the name of the public. But the powers in apparent opposition have many common interests and, as the twentieth century progressed, media corporations won a greater role in setting the rules of engagement. One of their greatest successes was the deregulation permitted in the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which dramatically accelerated the trend toward conglomeration. In last decades of the twentieth century, what was once a moderately diverse array of interrelated media companies focused on broadcasting publishing, filmmaking and so on, had been restructured into only five massive, global media corporations (Bagdikian 2004).

The principle aim of such aggregation is to control greater amounts of audience share and to construct new markets for media products and advertising. The familiar corporate jargon is “synergy,” which today amounts to a network of

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interlocking technological, legal and corporate systems that can be controlled in such a way as to promote the production and broadcast of content literally around the world (Gamson, et al., 375). The centralization and scope of these massive networks—the same qualities that provide vast economic advantages—also give them the ability to project synchronized, "synergistic" content across multiple media platforms in private and public spaces virtually anywhere (Gamson, et al., 378). This is a well-developed strategy, refined over decades, for any corporation seeking to minimize risk and maximize profit. But in terms of democratic culture, the system is a failure by almost any measure. When corporations sell this extraordinary reach to political communicators, the fundamental principle of "democratic discourse" is superceded by a paradigm of commercial content, unidirectional flow and tight message control (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Representation, participation and transparency may be limited or non-existent. Corporate culture does not operate by the same guiding principles as democratic culture. Yet, in a number of ways, the two coexist, overlap and influence one another. For example, corporate and democratic cultures both depend on the establishment and maintenance of authority, both draw heavily on narrative forms, and, significantly, both seek to connect with their audiences in the arena of culture.

*C. Media as Systems of Meaning*

Carey (1989, 23) offers a concise definition of communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed." This reaches beyond the mere presence of a given medium, but the pervasiveness of media

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forms does suggest where and how such cultural power can be transmitted easily and widely. In a media-rich environment, cultural definitions and practices are ever present. Starr describes the context of an encroaching media sphere in the 1920s:

> The media… had fulfilled the democratic hope of universal access so well that they were developing into a nearly ubiquitous aspect of daily experience. Cultural forms that had once been hard to acquire were becoming hard to escape. The change had begun, if not with printing itself, then with the revolution of cheap print and the growth of penny newspaper, dime novels, and other throwaway reading matter available for quick scanning on the go. The printed word also became part of the built environment as signs, electric lights, and advertising billboards went up in nineteenth-century cities. A similar process then happened with the environment of sound. The phonograph, radio, and the talkies reshaped aural experience. Broadcasting invaded the routines of daily life at home, at work, in private automobiles, and in public places as a growing majority of people listened to the radio for hours everyday…. (2004, 386-7)

This envelopment by media was not limited to external environments. It also involves an internal restructuring of perceptions. Hall's (1977) work on the penetrating nature of media draws on Gramscian hegemony to explain the transparency of deep-seated cultural assumptions:

> What passes for 'common sense' in our society—the residue of absolutely basic and commonly-agreed, consensual wisdoms—helps us to classify out the world in simple but meaningful terms. Precisely, common sense does not require reasoning, argument, logic, thought: it is spontaneously available, thoroughly recognizable, widely shared. It feels indeed as if it has always been there, the sedimented bedrock wisdom of 'the race,' a form of 'natural' wisdom… (Hall, 325).

This general perspective in cultural theory extends to political contexts as well:

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> The revival in interest in political culture brought with it a richer notion of culture, one derived from developments in other disciplines—notably sociology, literature and history—in which culture was treated as a powerful active agent…. These definitions portray political culture not as a set of dispositions or pre-ordained attitudes, but rather as… something *lived*… [it] does not describe a pregiven set of psychological states, but becomes a part of the language of politics, and as such constitutes political experience (Street 1997, 128-9)(emphasis in original).

Carey's definition posits communication as a semiological endeavor, a construction of meaning through signs. As such, it reaches deeply enough to constitute reality itself:

> Reality is not given, not humanly existent, independent of language and toward which language stands as a pale refraction. Rather, reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication—by, in short, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms. Reality, while not a mere function of symbolic forms, is produced by terministic systems—or by humans who produce such systems—that focus its existence in specific terms (Carey, 25).

Symbols, then, are the means by which individuals and groups—intentionally or otherwise, consciously or otherwise—organize the world. This management of symbols takes place primarily within the media and constitutes a "selective construction of social knowledge, of social imagery" that places individuals within a social context (Hall, 340), specifically one that arranges the world into a hierarchy (Hall, 328). The codes and discourses that exist at a given moment will define the environment and, thus, the reality of that individual's social experience (Hall, 330).

This view of cultural location implies an array of available positions, perceptions and realities. In traditional Marxist theory the positions that present

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themselves most naturally will be those that constitute the ideology of the dominant class (Hall, 331). But in viewing culture through the paradigm of social practice (i.e., as a state of dominance that experiences constant change), it is possible to consider that the dominant ideology is constantly under challenge (Williams 1978, 110-11). The caretakers of the dominant ideologies must continually redefine, reinvent and reinforce them in order to maintain their "naturalness" (Hall, 331). This struggle constitutes a nuanced, integrated, even collaborative relationship between dominant and subordinate classes or worldviews:

> 'Hegemony' is in operation when the dominant class… not only possess[es] the power to coerce but actively organize so as to command and win the consent of the subordinated classes to their continuing sway.... In part, 'hegemony' is achieved by the *containment* of the subordinate classes within the 'superstructures': but crucially, these structures of 'hegemony' work by *ideology*. This means that the 'definitions of reality', favourable to the dominant class fractions, and institutionalized in the spheres of civil life and the state, come to constitute the primary 'lived reality' as such for the subordinate classes…. [The dominant class] set[s] the limits—mental and structural—within which subordinate classes 'live' and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them (Hall, 332-3)(emphasis in the original)(emphasis in original).

This negotiation of acceptable conceptual boundaries might be considered a phenomenon of cultural interaction that resonates on multiple social levels, from the broadest Gramscian field to individual cultural products. Though these struggles for hegemonic control take place on deep, even unconscious, fields of contestation, evidence of the struggle may be seen in political communication practices.

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If political communicators within dominant class structures are indeed attempting to establish and maintain status quo power structures, they may take advantage of the previously noted fact that both corporate and democratic cultures are transmitted through the same media structures and exhibit several communicative congruencies (e.g., narrative structures, deference to authority, etc.). This influence might be achieved by exercising tighter control over news content and availability (as will be discussed further in the next chapter, this is a prominent feature of contemporary political communication). Such strategies offer political communicators control over facts in the present. Another powerful mechanism of control is the ability to control facts in the past: in essence, to rewrite history. Narratives evolve as they recede in time and they are recorded not only in physical records but perhaps more significantly within the collective memory of a society (Edy 1999, 71-2). History might even be easier to control, since historical perspectives are in some sense always open to reinterpretation and revision. In an environment rich in cultural products, the primary obstacle would be access to the resources of cultural production. Media corporations that own or manage such resources would not have to relinquish control to political communicators. There are means by which a corporation might be influenced to create and distribute a cultural product that could reorient the public's perceptions of an event. The manipulation of such narratives would represent the rewriting of culture for ideological purposes. As such, it would be contradictory to the ideals of democratic culture. It would it not only circumvent the public's participation in the creation of meanings; it could essentially erase previously established meanings and substitute other meanings in their place.

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Democracy is infused with conceptions of liberty, equality, civil rights and so on. Political leaders might use democratic or hegemonic practices to establish a stable system wherein various groups are made interdependent for the greater good. Gramscian hegemony, by contrast, posits “unstable equilibrium”:

> ‘In other words, the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the state is conceived as a continuous process of formation and superceding of unstable equilibrium….’ For Gramsci, this often has a great deal to do with the manner in which, at the level of the superstructures and the state, particular interests can be represented as ‘general interests’ in which all classes have an equal stake (Hall, 334).

The construction of a sustainable system of hegemony, then, is dependent upon a symbiosis between classes, which can be most easily achieved and maintained by incremental adjustments to the political and cultural environment. This suggests a scenario in which a dominant class may construct narratives, messages, products—the components of ideologies—not to directly control, but rather to influence a subordinate class. An effective conceptual approach is the appeal to national unity or patriotism:

> [I]ndividual political legal subjects are ‘bound together’ as members of a nation, united by the ‘social contract’, and by their common and mutual ‘general interest’. … Once again, the class nature of the state is masked: classes are redistributed into individual subjects: and these individuals are united within the imaginary coherence of a state, the nation and the ‘national interest’ (Hall, 337).

There is no particular contradiction in considering the dominant/subordinate dynamics of hegemony and still concluding that the democratic system designed by the framers remains a vital and necessary social system. But it does invite analysis of

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how the language and mythologies of the American political system—the ideology of democracy—may be susceptible to manipulations in an "unstable equilibrium" model. In order to maintain the democratically desirable "well-informed public," it becomes important to discern which expressions of political power are democratically motivated and which are based on reproducing myths, messages and structures that reinforce dominant ideologies.

The American press (and other media institutions) can serve as a powerful infrastructure for democratic and humanitarian ideals. The mythologies of the "free press" are woven into the national character. They may be at once a Gramscian tool of subordination and a culturally coded reminder of the more noble values that inspired the American Revolution. Carey (1989, 18) offers his positively inflected "ritual" view of communication as one that is "directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs":

> News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world. Moreover, as readers make their way through the paper, they engage in a continual shift of roles or of dramatic focus. … The model here is not that of information acquisition, though such acquisition occurs, but of dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at play. … Newspapers do not operate as a source of effects or functions but as dramatically satisfying, which is not to say pleasing, presentation of what the world at root is. And it is in this role—that of a text—that a newspaper is seen; like a Balinese cockfight, a Dickens novel, an Elizabethan drama, a student rally, it is a presentation of reality that gives life an overall form, order, and tone (Carey, 20).

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The emphasis on cultural texts, on the living forms of language and ritual, demonstrates that the production of cultural meanings can both undermine and foster democratic culture:

> Reality must be repaired for it consistently breaks down: people get lost physically and spiritually, experiments fail, evidence counter to the representation is produced, mental derangement sets in—all threats to our models of and for reality that lead to intense repair work. Finally, we must, often with fear and regret, toss away our authoritative representations of reality and begin to build the world anew (Carey, 30).

This is hardly the impulse of a dominant-class ideologist, but is, instead, the view of a democratic egalitarian for whom the benefits of social order must be maintained in the name of a common humanity. Both of these approaches place communication in an appropriately broad scope, one in which it is possible to evaluate the dynamics of cultural practice and to look for the influences—social or psychological, political or economic, corporate or independent—that seek to control rather than inform.

The corporate foundations of American media discussed here leave society vulnerable to both well-intentioned and well-disguised manipulation. In concert with the rapid transformations in political communication that will be explored in the next chapter, media corporations may be enabling practices that contravene the tenets of democratic culture. This system of cultural meaning-making still resonates with longstanding ideals of freedom and independence. In many cases, journalists and members of the public still embrace and practice those ideals. But the competitive pressures faced by massive corporations exert significant pressure on corporate decision-making. If major media companies are selling the opportunity to influence

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their audiences, proponents of democratic values should question the intentions of those who want to purchase that influence. The next chapter discusses political and economic factors that are multiplying the channels through which that influence can flow. It then addresses "framing," a process by which political communicators create and contest meanings, and some of the dominant frames in contemporary media.

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## Chapter Two: Political Communication in the Third Age

The cultural influence exerted by corporate and political interests may be effectively viewed and understood through the theoretical frame of political communication. In 1999, Blumler and Kavanagh's description of a "third age" in political communication captured several important trends in journalism and media. Their analysis was preliminary in some senses, but the trends they described have developed rapidly and revealed their overview to be prescient. The first section of this chapter reviews their arguments and examines how third-age perspectives inform the environment in which "The Path to 9/11" was produced. Next, the transformative impetus that Blumler and Kavanagh describe—and a primary mechanism through which cultural power is exercised—is examined through the theory of "framing." Scholarship on this topic reaches back several decades and exhibits a number of incongruent and contradictory conclusions. Scheufele (1999) published a synthesis of framing theory that included a useful typology of the key studies. Within this framework, Entman's (2003) concept of "cascading activation" provides a reference point for examining how the frames embedded in "The Path to 9/11" moved through the media. Finally, three important theoretical perspectives help describe the cultural power being tapped within the larger context of September 11 and the subsequent communication policies of the Bush administration. First, Lewis (2005) locates the practice of narrative control on the scale of global culture and demonstrates how societies engage in "language wars" that draw up on the commission and, more importantly, the broadcasting of acts of violence (including both terror attacks and

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state-sponsored military attacks). Second, Domke (2004) addresses domestic communication strategies that bring together politics, communication and religious framing in a practice he calls "political fundamentalism." Finally, underlying these communication strategies, the practice of "othering" is identified as a way to create a powerful, mythological enemy, as outlined by Aho (1994). Each author advances previous theoretical perspectives by describing broad and pervasive systems in which cultural power is a clash of worldviews written in the languages of technology, psychology and war. This clash—a framing contest that encompasses enemies and acts of violence in both the physical world and the mediated world of televisual culture—takes place against a background of media fragmentation that Blumler and Kavanagh anticipated but could not yet fully describe.

*A. Third-Age Political Communication: Fragmentation and Hybridity*

According to Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), political communication experienced three major transitions, described below. The emerging third age in which contemporary political actors find themselves is a complex and still-evolving construct. To their credit, the authors' "structured reconnaissance" has proven to be a generally predictive assessment of political media in flux. Their account of emerging trends captures the most important transitions in a sophisticated, media-rich environment at the end of the twentieth century. However, many of the professional and technological developments they identified have advanced significantly even in the short time since they published their analysis. Their study is therefore somewhat limited and should be carefully applied to contemporary media conditions. A crucial

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dimension of political communication that eluded their analysis was the politicization of the Internet, which will be addressed briefly here and is the subject of the following chapter.

Blumler and Kavanagh frame their study within several key social shifts—what they call a "chain of exogenous change"—that influenced (and were, in turn, influenced by) media practices:

> • *Modernization*…fragmenting social organizations, interests, and identities.
> • *Individualization*…citizens have become more like consumers.
> • *Secularization*…evaporation of deference and increased skepticism about the credentials, claims, and credibility of authority holders.
> • *Economization*—the increasing influence of economic factors and values on the political agenda and other areas of society….
> • *Aestheticization*…a closer association of politics with popular culture.
> • *Rationalization* (of persuasion) based on the techniques, values and personnel of (a) advertising, (b) market research, and (c) public relations (Mayhew, 1997).
> • "*Mediatization*"—the media moving toward the center of the social process…elevating the communication function and the role of communication experts…(Blumler and Kavanagh, 210).

This array of social forces is subsequently expressed in specific media trends that define the third age. The characteristic "ages" that the authors describe begin in the decades following World War II, when "the political system was regarded as the prime source of initiative and debate for social reform; the party system was closely articulated to entrenched cleavages of social structure; and many voters related to politics through more or less firm and long-lasting party identifications" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 211). This period, "Age 1," was defined by well-established, centralized

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party structures that delivered "substantive" messages and loyal voting blocs (Blumler and Kavanagh, 212). "Age 2" began in the 1960s, when television first mediated political messages for a majority of voters and political parties compensated by "adopt[ing] an array of tactics to get into the news, shape the media agenda, and project a preplanned 'line'…" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 212). This inaugurated an era of tight control over content, subtext and political messaging. Political communicators would refine their practices over the next several decades until experts had carefully matched specific techniques to an expanding multiplicity of media outlets. This current state, the authors' "Age 3," or third age, is characterized by five trends: 1) professionalization of political advocacy, 2) increased competitive pressure, 3) anti-elitist popularization and populism, 4) centrifugal diversification and 5) audience reception. (Here, the final two trends will be considered together, since they are closely related.) Each is briefly considered below, with attention to how the trend has evolved since 1999 and how it pertains to the case study.

*1. Professionalization of Political Advocacy*

This first trend encompasses not only the profusion of professional specialties within the field of political communication, but the subsequent emphasis on "owning" the terms of political debate (Blumler and Kavanagh, 214). The professional perspective becomes a mercenary dedication to gaining and maintaining control over media content. One expression of this is the "permanent campaign" of modern governance where political parties incorporate media strategies into policy planning at the highest levels (Blumler and Kavanagh, 214). In such an environment, political

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operations continually develop and deploy aggressive media strategies, seek out new venues through which to communicate, and recruit non-traditional advocates and groups to promote core messages (Blumler and Kavanagh, 214). Sophisticated attack and response units cultivate a heightened fealty to approved spin, regardless of the consequences for democratic discourse (Blumler and Kavanagh, 215).

The authors suggest that these professionalized operations function under "what Gould (1998) terms a 'unitary command' system," which is probably true within the context of a specific political campaign. But a more important aspect of this trend is the increasing orientation among political actors to "seek less mediated lines of access to the electorate" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 216). In Blumler and Kavanagh's view, this included what are now perfectly ordinary communication strategies such as outdoor advertising, editorials, coordination with think tanks and "the creation of 'must-see' political spectacles and events that defy media intervention" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 216). All these were common dimensions of the 2000 and 2004 American presidential elections, where, for example, campaigns staged elaborate rallies in which candidates faced only favorable and pre-approved questions from loyal partisans (Bumiller 2004). But political operations in the "permanent campaign" have turned to more deceptive means to control media messages. A prime example is the recent "payola" scandals wherein Armstrong Williams and other journalists received undisclosed payment from government agencies to report favorably on policies (Trotter 2006). The urge to circumvent media that are perceived as hostile may drive political actors to an increasingly aggressive

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"struggle for tactical supremacy" over traditional media (Blumler and Kavanagh, 217).

It is reasonable to expect modern campaigns to pursue tactical supremacy through specialized political communication professionals. But Blumler and Kavanagh's analysis suggests that, as political voices and channels diversify and become professionalized, there may be more politically affiliated individuals in place to independently promote a particular agenda or specific parts of an agenda. In a deeply integrated political/corporate complex, this might conceivably include decision-makers at major media companies, producers and writers, advertising executives, actors or others involved at virtually any level of cultural production. Thus, while campaigns may be using "managed spectacles" to circumvent questions put to them by a media company's reporters, the company—or individuals within the company—may be using other strategies to promote the campaign's themes. This does not necessarily require direct or complete control of a media channel. It may be implemented through informal relationships between corporate media and political operations or through political organizations that can disseminate messages in accord with a larger political agenda. Only rarely can a single individual at a media corporation dictate political ideology for the entire company. But it is worth asking whether an informal group within a media company could influence the production of cultural products imprinted with a given political ideology. This notion represents an extension of Blumler and Kavanagh's reasoning and merits inquiry in the case of "The Path to 9/11."

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*2. Increased Competitive Pressure*

A range of economic arguments might be marshaled to investigate evolving corporate media practices. Blumler and Kavanagh's formulation addresses several elements that derive from the proliferation and diversification they describe earlier. In addition to a greater number of channels that are available to viewers, they cite an expanding array of specialized forms of journalism (e.g., focusing on sports, business, fashion, etc.) (Blumler and Kavanagh, 217). They note that corporate imperatives have penetrated once-sheltered newsrooms, such that news organizations are now "driven to base the news on what will hold costs down and keep advertisers sweet and what market research and focus groups, along with rule-of-thumb hunches about human interest appeals, tell them will attract bigger audiences" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 217). They also describe the tightening link between news divisions and the parent organization's political priorities (Blumler and Kavanagh, 218). Most importantly, this competitive paradigm drives the "infotainment" strategy, engenders "hybridity" (blended forms of cultural products, e.g., morning news programs, tabloid television) and, notably, the "further mixing of information with drama, excitement, color, and human interest…" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 218). Subsequently, individual programs are targeted at increasingly fragmented audiences and traditional conventions of journalistic integrity "come under great pressure, and uncertainty, differences, and controversy over them abound" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 218).

This hybridization within an economically competitive environment has continued in earnest since Blumler and Kavanagh's study, and indeed has probably accelerated. Boundaries have been further blurred with such series as Home Box

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Office's experimental "K Street," which told fictionalized political stories using a documentary format and recruited actual Washington, D.C. insiders as actors (Lee 2003). One of the most popular and influential cable programs, Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" (along with its spin-off "The Colbert Report") is a blend of entertainment, news, satire, social commentary and media criticism, thus serving multiple functions at once (Baym 2005). It is no longer unusual or unexpected to see traditionally journalistic formats being blended with other types of media products. But the freedom to cross-pollinate genres contributed to controversy in the case of "The Path to 9/11" when ABC appeared to stretch the definition of the "docudrama" format while emphasizing the factual basis of the material. Though such practice is neither new nor inherently anti-democratic, in the third age of political communication the economic imperatives of hybridity may unintentionally serve as a smokescreen for politicized "infotainment" and propagandistic techniques.

*3. Anti-Elitist Popularization and Populism*

This dimension of third-age political communication is extremely important but perhaps the least developed by the authors. Here, they note the general inversion of "top-down" political structures and the new emphasis placed on content that is based on the opinions and, significantly, the words of "ordinary members of the public" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 219). Before this period, the public's ability to respond to media messages was either limited in scope (e.g., letters to the editor) or transmitted through "surrogates, such as opinion poll results and questions put by interviewers to politicians on their behalf" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 219-20). During

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the 1990s, however, multiple forms of "populist" media gave the public a more direct means by which to engage and challenge the "paternalistic discourse" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 220). This new orientation toward a more popular idiom compelled media organizations to "adapt… to what ordinary people find interesting, engaging, relevant, and accessible" and to "seek ways of making politics more palatable and acceptable to audience members" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 220).

This emphasis on popular participation may be seen in both positive and negative lights, depending on one's theoretical, political, or economic perspective. On one hand, such forms of political communication open corporate structures to the perspectives of individuals who otherwise would be unheard. On the other hand, influential expressions of "public opinion" can be artificially created. Blumler and Kavanagh leave this area largely unexplored, but they emphasize that the value or danger of such cultural communication depends greatly on "the aims of its producers and on how it is received by audiences" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 221). In the context of "The Path to 9/11" contemporary political communication has again followed the trajectory that the authors define, but has superceded their expectations. There are two important dimensions in this case. First, for certain audiences (but not for all), the production and promotion of "The Path to 9/11" referenced implicit and explicit themes of circumvention of the supposed "liberal media," despite the fact that the film was a production of a major media company (Hewitt 2006A). This notion of getting at the "truth" of the issue, despite mainstream bias, is a resonant populist trope in contemporary political communication, particularly in the political blogosphere. Second, it is the political blogosphere that best embodies the anti-elitist/populist trend

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that Blumler and Kavanagh describe, even though they could only gesture at the intensity and importance (at least for participants) of this emerging medium. They anticipated that computer-based politics would be increasing in the third age (Blumler and Kavanagh, 222), but they could not foresee the coming intersection of these trends in a political arena that had only started to take shape.

*4. Centrifugal Diversification and Audience Reception*

These final trends may be considered together, inasmuch as they are closely linked and echo arguments that Blumler and Kavanagh made previously. But there are important distinctions to this part of their analysis. Centrifugal diversification is the authors' term for the (partial, not complete) reversal of direction in political influence, from "top down" to "bottom up." In Age 2, news was managed through a "limited set of master images" that politicians attempted to project in order to bring individuals' opinions into conformity (Blumler and Kavanagh, 221). Though this is still a fundamental goal of political communication there is, as described above, a greater diversity of channels and products available in the third age and a greater incentive to "tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions and tastes" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 221). In this diversity, there is a danger, however. The authors note that forces of populist, minority, and online media should "reduce the influence of 'the political-media complex'" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 223). But there may be a cautionary lesson in the production of "The Path to 9/11." The controversy surrounding the program suggests that the illusion of independence can make the public more susceptible to elite political influences. Here, audience

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reception is a pivotal aspect of the study. When audiences "pick and choose" political information that is blended "into a flow of diverse other materials," it is not always clear what information is accurate, what is politically expedient, what is complete, what is reliable, and so on (Blumler and Kavanagh, 223-24). These variable interpretations allow skillful political communicators to create cultural products that resonate with different audiences in different ways, perhaps using partisan themes, patriotic messages or external threats (Pan and Kosicki 2003, 40). Political information becomes severely compromised when, in the fragmented, diversified, economically reductivist third age, political messages are distorted and disengaged from reality in order to serve a partisan agenda. The case study of "The Path to 9/11" will examine the film's production (and the public claims of its producers) in the context of this paradoxical third age to ascertain whether and how corporate/political interests may have attempted to influence the public.

Blumler and Kavanagh end on a positive note, encouraging political theorists to "devise fresh models of democracy" suited to third-age political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh, 226). The next section of this chapter examines a central theoretical perspective of political communication: framing. This discussion is intended to help ground the final section of the chapter, in which contemporary framing practices that informed ABC's "The Path to 9/11" demonstrate how deeply third-age dynamics have penetrated contemporary political communication.

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*B. Framing in Political Communication*

Blumler and Kavanagh's argue that a highly professionalized media environment fosters sophisticated, multi-dimensional strategic communication practices. In addition to the professionalization and economic factors the authors describe, this includes an "aestheticization" of media, a "closer association of politics with popular culture" (Blumler and Kavanagh, 210), where the production of traditional news programming is extended to a range of "hybrid" products that incorporate dramatic narratives and sensationalist approaches. Media institutions, particularly when pursuing a political agenda, can make use of several strategies in constructing cultural messages. Those most pertinent to the present study are theorized within the scholarship of "framing," which extends over at least three decades. In a broad overview, Scheufele (1999, 105) situates contemporary framing research within the field of "social constructivism," emphasizing the power of the media to delimit and define social reality. Current research in framing is oriented around two foci: media frames (the organizing principles that orient the boundaries and substance of an issue) and individual frames (concepts perceived by both media producers and audiences) (Scheufele, 106-07). This division helps simplify a highly articulated cultural system and permits analysis of these two levels individually and in relation to one another. It resonates with Hall's (1977) theorization of cultural power as a negotiation or discourse between dominant and subordinate classes, one that inherently expresses ideological conflict. This is a valuable perspective with which to analyze new hybrids of journalism and entertainment within the political/corporate media complex. The overarching model can be thought of as an iterative process,

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wherein frames are constructed in response to previous frames, building on one another in a kind of meta-discourse (Scheufele, 115). Two key elements in this model are "frame building" and and "frame setting." Frame building is the construction or revision of frames by journalists, political actors and specific media (such as talk radio or the blogosphere). Frame setting is a more subtle process in which specific facts or perspectives are emphasized to increase their importance in comparison to competing frames (Scheufele, 115-16). It is this second strategy that seems to align with certain framing practices at work in "The Path to 9/11."

It is important to note that, in defining boundaries, framing strategies may purposefully obscure broad themes, specific details or ways of discussing an issue (Altheide 2002, 45). These discursive acts are designed as tools of strategic communication and embody a crucial mode of public deliberation (Pan and Kosicki, 39). Political elites are well equipped to engage in successful framing practices, inasmuch as they possess the means, skills and personal networks with which to do so, but grassroots or independent communicators can create opposing frames (Pan and Kosicki, 40, 44). The objectives of a framing agenda may encompass the redrawing of discursive boundaries, a definitional power over political actors and the deconstruction and reconstruction of "factuality" itself (Pan and Kosicki, 40-3). A critical component in the successful framing of an issue is the transference of the frame through different dimensions of a communication environment. This process is effectively described in Entman's (2003) model of "cascading activation," which begins by positing a hierarchy of levels within the U.S. political media system. At the top of this system, the smallest but most powerful source of frames is the

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administration, including the office of the president and high-level departments (e.g., State and Defense). Ideas originating here move down the stair-step model with relative ease, passing through other levels—media elites (e.g., political figures, experts), the media (e.g., journalists, news operations), constructed frames (e.g., specific words and images)—finally reaching the largest but least organized and thus weakest level, the public. Frames can move up through the system, as when public opinion drives journalist to confront political elites, but this requires extensive coordination and control, which is often lacking. Thus, the upper levels create and disseminate frames that are evaluated and transformed as they pass downward. The lower levels can counter or reject these frames, but it is typically the upper echelons that dictate the shape of these ideas. In light of preceding arguments concerning cultural power and social constructivism, Entman's model would seem to suggest that the administration could dictate reality to a degree. In some sense this is true; when high-ranking officials make announcements, it is common journalistic practice to focus attention on them (Bennett 1996, 376). But the contemporary media environment as it actually exists is a significantly more complicated system. For example, the fragmented audiences and hybrid cultural products of Blumler and Kavanagh's third age create a myriad of channels through which such frames might be directed. Also, the political blogosphere represents a new kind of tool with which the public can more effectively participate in framing practices. Where political blogging communities are large enough and sufficiently well organized, they may push frames into the mainstream media, either by creating "buzz" or by earning a place for key bloggers as guests on media programs. "The Path to 9/11" exemplifies

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certain key aspects of these perspectives on framing, including the construction of frames to define people (e.g., Clinton) and issues (e.g., September 11, 2001), the emphasis on specific details to establish or contest a frame, the "discourse" between (dominant) political elites and (subordinate) public communities and so on. The "cascading activation" model, if considered in a third-age level of complexity, suggests how certain frames may have moved through the media to the public and, via the political blogosphere, back into the media. (This process will be addressed more fully in the case study.) To begin an analysis of the program and the controversy surrounding it in terms of framing, the next section examines certain dominant modes of discourse in the post-September 11 political media environment.

*C. Contemporary Frames: Terrorism, Good and Evil, and Mythic Enemies*

In the period since the September 11 attacks, a pronounced shift in the cultural content of political media has occurred. Members of the administration and other officials established a discourse about U.S. national identity that influenced news coverage of government policies and smoothed the path for aggressive new legislation (e.g., the USA PATRIOT Act) and military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Hutcheson, et al. 2004). The language of fear and death bolstered the president's public stature (Landau, et al. 2004) and political discourse took on aspects of melodrama (Anker 2005). These themes appeared in virtually every level of political communication, from budget policy briefings to public protests to campaign commercials. Certain cultural ideas infuse these pervasive new narratives: violent imagery of terrorist and military attacks, stark distinctions between good and evil, and

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an updated mythic enemy—the terrorist of radical Islam—who serves as a foil to the inherent goodness of the United States (Kellner 2005, 32). These themes have been analyzed as cultural tools used to express dominance and superiority in both national and partisan identity discourses, including "The Path to 9/11." This section looks at three theoretical views of this post-September 11 cultural construct.

The contestation that Hall (1977) described is vividly exemplified in the elaborate cultural structures Lewis (2005) calls "language wars." Lewis uses the term to refer to antagonistic engagements over meaning that take place within and between communities, typically expressed through various kinds of media texts. These conflicts penetrate cultural discourse, grounding them in "reality" and establishing them a basis for action. At the extreme, they are enacted as violence: terrorism and military violence become expressions of cultural struggle, messages written in physical and psychological damage (Lewis, 2). Significantly, these messages are dependent on media systems to convey and amplify their essence (Lewis, 5). As illogical as this impulse may be—apart from the inherent destructiveness, there is no guarantee that such messages will be "read" as intended—it is nonetheless a mode of representation that is taking place in a global language of televised violence (Lewis, 6, 7).

The role of media systems is essential to this discourse, inasmuch as televisual systems have been deeply integrated into the meaning-making practices of communities around the world (Lewis, 8). Lewis cites established theory (Heidegger, McLuhan, Baudrillard) to argue that "spectacle" in contemporary culture is inseparable from the technology of media. Thus war, for example, becomes as much a

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product for visual consumption as an expression of power, a negotiation of force at the end of both gun barrel and zoom lens (Lewis, 8). A terrorist act encompasses both the event and its representation, and the media become the field of battle where "language wars" are fought (Lewis, 9, 10). In this context, the control of information becomes an act of power and institutions expend resources to capture and control meaning:

> Institutions seek over time to stabilize and fix signifiers to specific signifieds, creating the conditions for durable meaning. This attempt to stabilize meanings by fixing them to specific signs (concepts, symbols, images, discourses, texts and so on) is a political strategy as it necessarily involves the exercise of power: institutions marshal subjects and meanings in order to assert their own social, political and cultural primacy (Lewis, 10).

Terror itself becomes, in a sense, a cultural product, managed and replicated through media systems that exist in as many places as receive the signal (Lewis, 22). This interpretation complicates the notion of a democratic press in part because the mere accusation of "terrorism," for example, "becomes a tool in the management and durability of state-based hegemony" (Lewis, 23). As such, televisual products of all kinds, but particularly those of political intent and influence, should be evaluated not simply in their textual expression, but also as constructs that may embody a number of unseen agendas. Icons of democracy—reporters, officials, the president—function as symbols in an elaborately constructed (and expensively maintained) system of representation. When analyzed in concert with the Bush administration's overall communication policy, "The Path to 9/11" echoes narratives of stark good and evil and reinforces the idea of a clash between morality and degeneracy with the lives of

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innocents at stake. The source and structure of this morally charged binary language is effectively illuminated in Domke's (2004) analysis of "political fundamentalism."

On September 20, 2001, an estimated 82 million people watched as President Bush addressed the nation concerning the recent attacks (Domke 2004, 158). That speech was a first glimpse of several elements of the administration's subsequent communication strategy, both immediately following the crisis and then as further conflicts emerged (Domke, 158). The groundwork for these strategies had already been laid, but the September 11 attacks provided the necessary political and social climate in which they could be wielded as a transformational political weapon. Domke defines "political fundamentalism" as a policy wherein elements of conservative religious ideology, politics and strategic communication are combined in order to establish a position of control over the media, Congress and public opinion; as such, it can be considered a fundamentally anti-democratic mode of discourse (Domke, 5, 6). The religious language and coding of Bush's 2000 presidential campaign was more explicitly integrated into politics and policy following September 11, 2001, at which point the administration chose "language and communication approaches that were structurally grounded in a conservative religious outlook but were political in content and application" (Domke, 6). Based in the language and psychology of faith, political fundamentalism offers "familiarity, comfort, and a palatable moral vision to the U.S. public in the aftermath of September 11" (Domke, 2). This strategy derives from (and promotes) the integration of the political infrastructure of the Republican party and the social infrastructure of the Christian right, but it also reaches beyond a single political party or administration,

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encompassing a complex network of think tanks, talk radio networks, conservative publications and advocacy groups (Domke, 6-8).

The administration practices that Domke analyzes represent an expansive and resonant project of framing, primarily through the use of the September 11 attacks as an epic "crisis" at the center of a "clash of civilizations." Crisis dynamics create a permissive state where the traditional restraints on executive power are lifted (Domke, 24). The Bush administration, already thematically invested in the moral surety of evangelical Christianity, was able to translate the paradigm of good and evil into a political message where the apocalyptic consequences were on view in the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Domke, 4). Several communication strategies emerge from a crisis paradigm, each of which may be seen as a frame that can focus or deflect competing understandings. Elements of fear and paranoia would be central in the propagation of political fundamentalism, in terms of both personal and national security, as well as through an essentializing discourse of Islam-as-terrorism and the carefully cultivated fear of "the other" (Hutcheson, et al. 2004). National identity and moral authority are heightened in a crisis frame, particularly in relation to real or imagined enemies, thus making the public more receptive to other aspects of political fundamentalism (Domke, 12, 13). This complex social dynamic also shifts power from the press to the administration, both because journalists and producers are involved as citizens and because the public will economically punish a media organization for "unpatriotic" views (Domke, 20, 22). Not only are alternative views marginalized, but any disagreements become couched in frames that favor the administration's position (Domke, 162, 163). The natural

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affinity in journalism for conflict and drama is more than adequately met in the hyperbolic language of political fundamentalism (Domke, 165). This dynamic compels ostensibly “objective” journalists to report the official story, to minimize alternative viewpoints, to provide commercially viable “unity.” In the case of “The Path to 9/11,” similar impulses may have influenced the shaping of a cultural hybrid that incorporated aspects of journalistic credibility, sensationalist terror thrillers and a modern, secular passion play. The moral clarity that emerges from this paradigmatic portrayal of good and evil relies on the construction and maintenance of a powerful enemy and fundamental narratives (Altheide, 50).

The “enemy” is a deep-seated conceptualization that fulfills several multifaceted functions in society (Aho 1994). One of the key roles of the enemy is to instill and maintain fear. Unfortunately, fear has become a defining trait in American culture (Altheide, 41). Fear as entertainment has its place in films and television shows, amusement park rides, campfire stories and so on. But fear also provides the ground for a powerful psychological construct: victim identity (Altheide, 59). Righteous victimhood lowers the barrier to the condoning or commission of violence and, as such, can lower social resistance to conflict ranging from verbal abuse to war (Aho, 11). Victimhood frees individuals and communities to engage in unfettered hostility by portraying some violence as “justified” and, thus, not only permissible but mandatory or even noble (Aho, 12). This creates fertile ground for the cycle of retributive violence suggested by discursive language wars. This construction of the enemy is the culmination of the social process of “othering,” which Said (1993, 191-92) describes as a form of meaning-making that may be conducted not only as

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intergovernmental policy but within cultural forms, such as the novel or film. Moreover, to obtain the advantages of having an enemy, political communicators may write their own (Aho, 114). Significantly, according to Said, othering disguises imperialist impulses and creates a dynamic where established power structures must subjugate the other to maintain their authority. This cloaking of the objectives behind hegemonic practice is essential, because it maintains the transparency of Hall's deep "common sense," the individual's feeling that the social hierarchy is natural and benign. Aho describes the multi-stage process of social projection of evil, a highly ritualized set of cultural practices that naturalizes violence and facilitates state aggression:

> [The objectification of evil is] mediated by group processes, not simply psychological ones. Furthermore, it is said to involve not one but a series of steps… A problematic individual or group is classified as an instance of human refuse; the validity of the label is tested and confirmed in public hearings or tribunals conducted by experts certified in making defamatory pronouncements; legends are then woven by mythmakers to "explain" the necessity for the evil party being as it is; these legends are passed on by pedagogues, priests, and parent as ontological truths, and received by an audience which, not present during the initial steps, is unable to fathom the fabricated nature of the evil; finally, the truth of the myth is recognized (re-known) through its ritual dramatization in armed engagements, domestic and foreign, against the evil object (Aho, 114).

This process is part of a larger project of social control through the cultivation and management of fear (Altheide, 13). Practices of othering, like those described above identify and emphasize the enemy. This engenders fear, which in turn leads to victim identity, driving the public to leaders who promise protection. Fear can be

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managed in a population with relative ease, allowing significant influence over populations that might otherwise express their will by force of numbers: it is a profound desire to be free from fear and "directing fear in a society is tantamount to controlling (society)" (Altheide, 15, 17). Thus, in societies built around narrative modes of discourse, a "discourse of fear" is a tool of control, particularly if it resonates with universal meanings but references the present circumstances (Altheide, 47, 49). The key to such a narrative is that protection—freedom from fear—is available via the sure hand of a given political leader.

The dialectic of the hero has certain characteristics that are nearly universal (Aho, 24-5). In Western cultures, the hero lives in a world where the natural order is disrupted. He is inextricably bound in some way to the villain. The narrative typically includes three basic phases. First, an idealized society is imagined that represents a state of purity and moral perfection. Next, the real world is juxtaposed with the ideal, introducing elements of corruption or disease. This engenders compassion for the innocents trapped in a state of danger or disorder. Finally, to relieve the suffering of innocents, the hero under takes his quest, a labor or journey, in which he comes to embody the ideal of a warrior, savior or god. The defense of the community, the eradication of filth embodied by the diabolical enemy, becomes noble, even holy work (Aho, 110).

These themes are prevalent in narratives from around the world. But they are particularly pronounced in popular Christian media, which take these elements and attempt to embed them deep within a mediated identity. Eldredge (2006) cultivates

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the warrior Christ (among other roles) in his self-help guide for men seeking strong, Christian narrative icons:

> The enemy is coming, Jesus told his disciples, but "he has not hold on me" (John 14:30 NIV). I love that, I just love it. Jesus is so clean, they've got nothing on him. It tells us something vital about warfare. First, that holiness is your best weapon. Spiritual warfare will make you holy. Trust me (Eldredge, 177).

"The Path to 9/11" functions in a similar fashion, working within an overarching construct of terrorism, then developing icons from the dialectic of the hero while drawing fundamental Western narrative tropes and, very subtly, specific Christian themes. The program revisits past events and constructs a narrative infused with the positive and negative charges of Western cultural myths. This feat of retroactive prediction both heightens the salience of victim identity and lowers resistance to taking actions in the future (Edy, 79). The final stage in creating the enemy is concealing the fact that he is a construct, making the fact of his existence appear to be "common sense" (Aho, 113). To maintain the dehumanization of the enemy, it is important to limit the availability of information to the public. This can be done by framing cultural narratives to one's advantage, obscuring some facts and emphasizing others. Political actors can redefine and revise enemies as needed, bringing them forward at specific moments to focus the public's fear and introduce the hero who will oppose them.

The first chapter established a broad framework against which media corporations embody both ideals of democratic communication and also systems of cultural meaning. The chapter argued that the demands of corporate structures open these powerful cultural systems to possible manipulation, since, in corporate

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boardrooms, economic factors may well outweigh esthetic notions of self-governance. Chapter Two described the complex evolution taking place in media, demonstrating that the proliferation of fragmented audiences and "hybrid" programs may give political communicators more tools with which to construct frames and exercise cultural influence. Furthermore, the modern arena of political discourse is built from intense visual and psychological languages of terrorism, fear, faith and redemption. Considering both chapters together, it is worth questioning how broadly and deeply the power of skilled professional political communicators may now reach. On one hand, there is greater flexibility to construct messages in the media and more potent raw material with which to hold people's attention. And yet, as noted earlier, social control is never a smooth, effortless process. The ideas and assumptions of cultural dominance must be maintained and updated. The notion of independence, even revolution, is an essential part of the mythology of democracy in this country. And though corporations and professional political communicators have access to the largest, most traditionally powerful media tools, the urge to talk back to authority is irrepressible. The next chapter will discuss how these powerful framing systems are now extending their influence into what some consider the best hope of democracy, the political blogosphere.

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## Chapter Three: Democratic Culture and the Political Blogosphere

The Internet is a complex network in every sense. As a technological medium it is unprecedented, giving individuals around the world access to one another and to vast stores of information. Economically, it is the channel for a vast quantity of commercial transactions that would have been impossible only 20 years ago. Politically, it represents the possibility of a global discourse that could foster local democracies around the globe. Perhaps the only thing more varied and far-reaching than the Internet itself is the limitless field of expectation that has accompanied its development. Within this expansive framework, researchers might select and study any number of crucial issues. Most of the discourse that takes place online is dedicated to business; the political dimension constitutes a comparatively small proportion of online activity (Sparks 2001, 92) But the influence that political interests and the public can exercise on the Web has implications that reach far beyond the physical collection of servers, switches, cables and computers.

The political blogosphere may be considered a subset of political activity on the Internet, which includes (among other elements) chat rooms, user groups, government databases and Web sites for political parties, campaigns and activist organizations (Dahlgren 2001, 53). But it is an important site of struggle within each of the broader topics already addressed here: cultural production, corporate and political influence and democratic discourse. In the context of "The Path to 9/11," the political blogosphere was a key site for the exercise of political and cultural power. Though cross-platform marketing strategies have long been commonplace, ABC's

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promotion of the program may represent a new level of sophistication in using the political blogosphere as an economic and political strategy. The controversy that surrounded the production sparked debate on both left- and right-wing sites, echoed in the mainstream media and incited public complaints. In short, an online struggle over political frames became a major (if fleeting) political event that would not have developed in the same way without the political blogosphere.

To help delineate the boundaries of the political blogosphere, this chapter will address three perspectives that have dominated the debate over this new public space. The first concerns the heated language that greeted the political blogs when they first emerged as self-appointed watchdogs of the mainstream media. This section references the diversification of third-age political communication and helps demonstrate how "independent" media may interact with established institutions. The next section concerns whether the political blogosphere represents a new "public sphere" or not. The question provides important theoretical perspective on what kind of public discourse the political blogosphere may or may not be able sustain. The final section addresses the crucial issue of credibility, which played through the controversy surrounding "The Path to 9/11" both in mainstream media and in the blogosphere.

*A. Political Blogs as Journalism*

The advent of any major new medium engenders disruption, conflict and reconfiguration (Dahlgren 2004, 45). The introduction and rapid development of the Internet has been no exception. Within the larger social and economic disruption, the

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relationship between the mainstream media (including their online outlets) and the political blogs has been particularly contentious. Even as newspapers and television broadcast companies adopted a wide range of online strategies to stay competitive, some journalists and news producers publicly expressed an aggressive disdain for bloggers and independent media in general. Despite their long-established authority, large staffs and global reach—and despite their own crises of credibility—many mainstream media outlets lashed out at the self-appointed watchdogs who worked unpaid, on their own time, with only modest publishing platforms. The debate has moved beyond its initial simplifications, but a review highlights important trends that are central the third age of political communication.

The origin of "blogging" may be debated, but its popularity increased significantly when Pyra Labs introduced "Blogger," a simple Web publishing tool that significantly lowered the level technical literacy required to post online (Perlmutter and McDaniel 2005). This innovation evoked images of the pamphleteers of the American Revolution and purportedly gave "millions of people the equivalent of a printing press on their desks…." (Blood 2003). Between 2001 and 2005, awareness of blogs increased as several high-profile incidents broke into the mainstream media in both general interest news (e.g., the September 11, 2001, attacks and the December 2004 tsunami) and political news (e.g., racial comments by then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, the "netroots" presidential primary campaign of Howard Dean and CBS's use of suspect documentation concerning the president's National Guard service) (Perlmutter and McDaniel 2005). By July 2005, according to the blog-tracking site Technorati, more than 14 million blogs were generating nearly

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a million posts a day (Nieman Reports 2005). Amidst the dramatic statistics and breathless coverage, the political blogosphere also received a decidedly unwelcoming response. Some journalists and news organizations embraced this sudden introduction of public influence but the general reaction among professionals was one of disdain, suspicion and contempt (Regan 2003). The emergence of a new breed of watchdog (even one that had its share of credibility issues) provoked a passionate, sometimes virulent response among those for whom the traditional "gatekeeper" role was sacrosanct (Regan 2003). Critics rightly noted that because of bloggers' informal self-regulation, it was easy for inaccurate information to get published and then picked up by mainstream news outlets. One blog-friendly journalist noted how rumors seemed to cycle from the Internet to television back to the Internet, claiming, "Blogs and the mainstream media have brought out the worst in each other" (Young 2005). Some of the hostility toward political blogs during this nascent phase may be partly due economic pressures on mainstream media companies. In the words of one reporter, "Mainstream journalism is running scared" (Chinni 2005) and blogs were merely the latest in a series of supposedly fatal developments. Some reporters relied on generalizations and unsupported accusations to criticize those same faults among bloggers (Cohen 2005). At its most narrow and reactionary, this backlash took on an exceedingly aggressive tone, as in an article that advised targets of blogger activity to "Bash back… Attack the (Internet Service Provider)… Sue the blogger" (Lyons 2005). The environment was highly charged and arguments tended to polarize the issue.

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Other journalists, however, countered "blogger triumphalism" not with scorn but by pointing out that the mainstream media are essential both to public discourse and to blogger content: "The blogs picked up the story, but they couldn't carry it to the finish line alone. They were complemented by traditional media but never came close to supplanting it" (Wasserstein 2004). This description of an interdependent relationship more accurately reflected the dynamics of an increasingly complex media environment. Insightful journalists and bloggers noted the areas of intersection and distinction between mainstream media and the political blogosphere. Though it was not always widely accepted, certain reporters promoted this view during the blogosphere's early phase:

> Weblogs should not be considered isolation, but as part of an emerging new media ecosystem—a network of ideas. No one should expect a complete, unvarnished encapsulation of story or idea at any one Weblog. In such a community, bloggers discuss, dissect and extend the stories created by mainstream media. These communities also produce participatory journalism, grassroots reporting, annotative reporting, commentary and fact-checking, which the mainstream media feed upon, developing them as a pool of tips, sources and story ideas. The relationship is symbiotic (Lasica 2003).

This description accurately reflects the type of blogs that most closely align with normative aspects of journalism and the democratic ideals embodied in a free press. As time passed, the best-established blogs developed large audiences and became acceptable sources within mainstream media and public discourse (Cohen 2005). Participants at a January 2005 conference at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government reported, among other conclusions: "There is room for both professional news organizations and citizens' media, such as blogs.... Blogging and

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journalism are different, though sometimes they intersect…. Ethics and credibility are key, but there are no clear answers on how credibility is won, lost or retained…" (Giles 2005). These notions may have seemed self-evident to some bloggers and journalists well before 2005, but this rapidly evolving medium can still confound uncritical consumers of news and other online content. One respected analyst and author (who is also a pioneering blogger) noted the danger of blending blogs and journalism, particularly when the blogger is an "industry insider" with a vested interest in a particular public issue, concluding: "(Blogger) commentary, done with integrity, can be a great source of accurate information and nuanced, informed analysis, but it will never replace the journalists mandate to assemble a fair, accurate and complete story…" (Blood 2003). Where the best principles of blogging and journalism meet, there is significant agreement on the value of accuracy and the primacy of truth, even if the framework of "objectivity" (a compromised notion itself) is giving way to more populist expression. A former newspaper editor described such values in a context that the most credible bloggers would fully support:

> Must journalism give way to polemic? I hope not. Instead, the successor to the dying regime of mass market-driven pseudo-objectivity might lie in the tradition of principled advocacy journalism. This can be an expression of conviction and commitment, but to be journalism it must submit to the test of truthfulness. The painstaking process of gathering facts must be the beating heart of the practice. Suppressing or omitting material facts or contrary thinking must be prohibited. Whatever the journalist's preferences, she must be willing to yield to the weight of stronger evidence and modify conclusions as new facts emerge. No matter how right the cause seems, for this work to be journalism—not mere rumor, clamor or propaganda—such are the rules (Wasserman 2005).

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These values apply to the more credible blogs, just as they would to the more credible mainstream news outlets. This public and professional negotiation of credibility within the political blogosphere demonstrates that it is an environment where rules can be constructed and contested, but it is also recognized as a site of democratic culture, a new public space where some writers and readers expect certain normative values to apply. Having touched on the political blogosphere's contentious relationship with journalism, it is reasonable to say that this medium is a new (if not fully established) center of influence within the contemporary media environment. To ascertain whether that might matter in any way, it is worth surveying the academic question of whether the political blogosphere represents a public sphere. Much as the question of blogs and journalism hinges on the credibility of sources, the debate over the Internet as a public sphere (which is anything but resolved) hinges on the credibility of the medium.

*B. Political Blogs as a Public Sphere*

The concept of the public sphere is a central feature of the theoretical landscape in communication. Though scholars since Dewey have addressed the idea in various ways, it is the Habermasian public sphere that drives most theorizing and counter-theorizing in contemporary work (Dahlgren 2001, 33). The scope of the debate is extensive, but a few key notions drawn from the field can help explain the political blogosphere in terms of democratic culture. The problems arising from the assertion of an idealized public sphere are similar to problems that arise from an

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idealized political blogosphere. Thus, to understand the blogosphere, one can review basic tenets of the public sphere debate.

In his comparison of the public sphere and the Internet, Dahlgren (2001, 33) provides a useful overview of the main theory, citing Habermas's historical perspective of an emerging "institutional space" in the decades around the turn of nineteenth century—including both social spaces (e.g., salons and coffee houses) and media (e.g., books and newspapers)—wherein political will was shaped and guided through public discourse. The discourse that took place within these institutional structures was specifically an expression of various Enlightenment ideals: freedom, knowledge, rationality, argument and so on (Dahlgren, 34). Over time, Habermas's public sphere expanded, based on the growing reach of literacy and the press, then decayed as journalism grew more sensationalistic and commercial; in the twentieth century, politics became trivialized and publics evolved into "consuming collectives" (Dahlgren, 34). The forms and functions of Habermas's theory have been criticized as overly idealistic, narrow in focus or inadequately descriptive of contemporary media systems (Papacharissi 2002, 11). Schudson (1997, 307) questions the very premise of a public sphere, arguing against any inherent democratic value of discourse and noting that in some cases (e.g., religious subjects within state affairs) democracy suppresses conversation. Though some critics dismiss the notion of the public sphere as a fiction, Dahlgren (2001, 35) rightfully contends that the construct is a useful analytical tool and that, practically speaking, the normative values that "promote 'good journalism' or 'information in the public interest' are not so different from ideals about the media inspired by the framework of the public sphere." Here,

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Dahlgren generalizes the public sphere in a contemporary context, referring to "the relationships among media, communication, and democracy." In analyzing this public sphere and the Internet together, Dahlgren (2001, 35) discusses three fundamental ideas: the structural dimension of each, their spatial boundaries and the role of communicative action. These ideas apply equally well to dimensions of democratic discourse in the political blogosphere, so Dahlgren's analysis serves to frame the next chapter's case study discussion about online discourse and "The Path to 9/11."

The structural dimension refers to the issue of universality, which, however desirable it may be, remains an impossibility in both the public sphere and the Internet. In Dahlgren's words, "Seen from this angle, the vision of a public sphere raises questions about media policy and economics, ownership and control, the role of free market forces and regulation, issues of privatization of information, corporate power, and so forth" (Dahlgren, 36). This set of issues pervades the political blogosphere as well, invoking not only conflicts surrounding service and access regulation of the Internet (as in the net neutrality debate), but also overt and obscured relationships between media-owning corporations and ostensibly "independent" Web sites. In the fragmented, multi-dimensional, third-age media environment, informal arrangements between various media outlets, particularly with respect to channels of political communication, may constitute structural relationships that fall into this category.

The notion of spatial boundaries here refers to constructs within media that allow individuals to congregate in meaningful relationships outside the physical limitations of the real world (Dahlgren, 37). Once again, commercial interests drive

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the formation and regulation of the largest conceptual space, the market (Dahlgren, 37). The political blogosphere provides an effective counter-strategy to this constraint, one that generally eludes commercial Internet sites: that is, because of the nature of political blogging, traditional economic factors are minimized. Many of the most successful political bloggers do so without compensation, successfully solicit support from readers or take part in small, targeted advertising networks. However, there is a spatial liability embodied in the notion of the "radical ghetto" (Downey and Fenton 2003). Though basic forms of online communities are now well-established, such spaces are still in a dynamic and unpredictable relationship with traditional media:

> One could argue that the internet [*sic*] may foster the growth of transnational enclaves of great value (for example, the environmental movement), but their value depends ultimately on how influential these enclaves become in the context of the mass media public sphere and formation of public opinion beyond the radical ghetto (Downey and Fenton, 190).

In the case of "The Path to 9/11," the cross-platform dynamics of mainstream and "alternative" media outlets neither originated in nor were limited to the "radical ghetto." As this study suggests, the blogosphere is becoming increasingly integrated into the planning and practices of mainstream media corporations.

Finally, Dahlgren (2001, 40) cites Habermas's (1996) reconception of the public sphere's function, which "emphasizes his theory of communicative action, understood as the discursive negotiation of norms and values, based on intersubjectivity and linguistic-cultural competence." This principle centers on communication that is open, honest and committed to a collaborative objective. It is

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specifically distinct from "strategic action" (which is defined as "goal-oriented and manipulative" communication) and aligns with concepts of "deliberative democracy" (Dahlgren, 41). In terms of media and the political blogosphere, communicative action refers not only to "truth, accuracy, fairness, and other qualities having to do with the empirical validity of media portrayals," but also to ways that the media may influence audience construction and audience identities (Dahlgren, 41). As the case study will show, cultural products that target politicized audiences with messages operating outside established norms of "empirical validity" raise serious questions. This is another dimension in which practice falls short of ideals, as economic factors tend to trump imperatives of democratic culture:

> It is one of Habermas's major theses that normatively based communication between people—which is the fundamental logic of the 'life-world' of our daily reality—is increasingly being eroded by the strategic logic and instrumental rationality of the 'system,' that is, by the underlying imperatives of power and markets (Dahlgren, 41).

It is unrealistic to expect the Internet and the political blogosphere to transform democracy simply because they are innovative or interactive. Carey (2005, 444) described the eagerness of scholars and commentators to indulge in the "rhetoric of the electric sublime," an imaginative faith in the power of emerging media to resolve the problems of the day. This rosy lens distorts crucial dynamics in politics, society and the economy that may culminate, as Carey contends they did on September 11, 2001, in a shattering return to reality (Carey, 445). The consequences of this self-distraction demand a more careful analysis of the limitations and uses of new media systems. Dahlgren's description of the public sphere highlights key shortcomings in the political blogosphere. But just as new media should not be overly

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praised, neither should they be carelessly dismissed or denigrated. As with all media, activity in the political blogosphere is an expression of interests and policies that exist in the larger world. As Papacharissi (2002, 21) writes, "It is the existing structure of social relations that drives people to repurpose these technologies and create spaces for private and public expression." Technologists can create more or less sophisticated channels through which individuals might interact, but democratic culture (or lack thereof) will depend, as always, on political will (Papacharissi, 22):

> [T]he internet and related technologies have managed to create new public space for political discussion. This public space facilitates, but does not ensure, the rejuvenation of a culturally drained public sphere. Cheap, fast, and convenient access to more information does not necessarily render all citizens more informed, or more willing to participate in political discussion. Greater participation in political discussion helps, but does not ensure a healthier democracy.

Though the Internet maintains a "wild west" reputation, there are now a variety of interests staking claims to this territory (Dahlberg 2005). Questions of who participates and how should be central to any analysis of political blogs. One of the key criticisms of Habermas's formulation of the public sphere was that it focused almost exclusively on the bourgeoisie and neglected other discursive segments of culture (Fraser 1992). However, in subsequent analyses, Habermas incorporates additional social spheres and articulates an oppositional hierarchy:

> Habermas is well aware… that the bourgeois public sphere was oriented not just toward defense of civil society against the state but also toward the maintenance of a system of domination within civil society. It is also the case, however, that throughout its existence, the bourgeois public sphere was permeated by demands from below. These took the form not only of calls for broader inclusivity but also more basic challenges and the pushing of new issues forward on

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> the agenda. Moreover, important parts of the struggle to establish some of the features Habermas describes as integral to bourgeois publicity, like freedom of the press, in fact were carried out largely by activists in the so-called plebeian public sphere (Calhoun 1992, 39).

Non-elites, then, participated in essential formations and revisions of institutions and practices that fall within public sphere theory. It is therefore correct to say, with caveats noted above, that a dynamic field of contestation and counter-framing has always been a part of the public sphere. Downey and Fenton (2003, 195) describe a "cultural politics of counter-publicity" that infuses social and media environments. These "alternative public spheres" incorporate global and local dimensions of social discourse, embody an inherent instability and operate "against the constant power of cultural and economic capital and accumulation" (Downey and Fenton, 195). Habermas eventually embraced the power of a pluralistic public that could "resist mass-mediated representations of society and create its own political interventions" (Downey and Fenton, 187). Even within entrenched systems of dominant cultural production and economic power, counter-publicity can be used to disrupt the flow of ideological messages, generating "new forms of fragmentation and solidarity" which are crucial to contemporary democratic discourse (Downey and Fenton, 200).

Though the political blogosphere is sometimes viewed as an idealistic forum of independent thought, the "left-wing" and "right-wing" blogs are each distinct parts of a vigorous ideological contestation (Downey and Fenton, 198). There is, in fact, tremendous potential for a robust and salutary democratic discourse in the political blogosphere comprised of alternative views, counter-publicity, free speech and even

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radical ideology. But it is not a domain of standardized communication practices, even when structural appearances suggest similarities on the left and right (Atton 2006). Though diversity of social strata and political perspectives is desirable, there is an inherent danger that, as has happened in broadcasting, corporate interests or political communicators may seek to manufacture positions of "alternative" or "independent" credibility. The stakes are undoubtedly high:

> A central question for Habermas is whether these groups in civil society can intervene in the mass media public sphere and change the agenda through bringing about a critical process of communication. This can be exceedingly difficult to do in a market-led, mass-mediated system enveloped in its own professional ideologies about what is and is not newsworthy, about who is a credible source of opinion and information and who is not (Fenton et al., 1998). Furthermore, the ability of alternative forms of communication to encourage progressive social change must be set in the context of the global dominance of multi-media conglomerates, such as News Corp and AOL/Time Warner (Downey and Fenton 2003, 188).

Much of the crucial interplay of dominant and truly alternative public spheres online takes place "backstage," that is, outside the surface discourse recorded in blog commentary, chat rooms and so on. This struggle happens in an environment that is fundamentally institutional and almost entirely commercial (Downey and Fenton, 193). That is, the technological infrastructure on which this public sphere relies was built to transmit military and economic data and now caters primarily to business and entertainment (Sparks, 92). So individuals who enter the political blogosphere may very well be squaring off against transnational corporations, which are competing in realms they have shaped, and extremely sophisticated political communicators who may have influence with or specialized access to those corporations. This is a rapidly

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evolving, highly fragmented environment where citizens with every type of motive brawl over political facts and meanings. In this space, the quality of democratic discourse (where it can be said to exist at all) hinges on the credibility of those in the fray.

*C. Discerning Credibility in the Political Blogosphere*

The analysis in Chapter Two suggests that third-age political communication is geared toward the production and control of specific messages, across a number of platforms, in a variety of hybrid forms. The political blogosphere is not the newest or the largest sector of the media environment where political communicators can pursue such strategies. But the structure of the political blogosphere allows messages to be produced and maintained cheaply in influential networks of partisans and politicians (Atton 2004). The question of credibility helps determine whether such messages are effective and whether they can be successfully projected to larger publics. The limitations of this study preclude the kind of quantitative analysis that might reveal how viewers' attitudes changed when they watched "The Path to 9/11." But the online discourse about the controversy turned on the concept of credibility at various levels, including individual Web sites, the left- and right-wing blogosphere, the mainstream media and both the Bush and Clinton administrations. "The Path to 9/11" exemplifies the dynamics of political interests in corporate media in the third age of political communication. The heart of the issue is a struggle over who has the credibility to define the cultural meanings of September 11, 2001.

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Kiousis (2001, 381) explains that credibility has been an anchor of communication theory since the earliest days of the discipline. Bucy (2003) notes two key dimensions in a contemporary framework: "In a time of rapid technological change and format experimentation, credibility remains central to understanding public perceptions of network news as well as encouraging acceptance of the Internet as a trusted source of news and information." In a fragmented media environment, consumers can easily access news interpersonally, in print, on television, on the radio and online. Not all forms are equally credible in the eyes of all audiences, but research suggests that credibility does extend across various platforms; if a television network is considered credible, it is likely that their online news is credible as well (Kiousis, 394). Kiousis (2001) describes how scholars have delineated important distinctions in the articulation of credibility, identifying and analyzing different originating points. For example, in journalism, source credibility—encompassing such ideas as expertise and trustworthiness—is distinct from medium credibility, which has been measured both as a complex construct and in various individual variables (Kiousis, 384-85). Significant methodological challenges confront researchers in this field, not least because of the intricate, variable relationships between established and emerging sources, multiple media platforms, corporate reputations, individual journalists and so on (Kiousis, 385-86). This supports Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) vision of a highly fragmented media environment and suggests that the most skilled political communicators are those who can manage political messages across a variety of platforms. It also suggests that political

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communicators can draw on specific, established forms of media to enhance the credibility of their messages, as in the "docudrama" framing of "The Path to 9/11."

Kiousis (2001, 395) touches on an important aspect of credibility that merits further study in the field: interpersonal communication. Kiousis's research failed to find a relationship between "interpersonal discussion of news and perceptions of credibility for newspapers and online news," but scholars need to advance the study of the intricate dynamics of interpersonal communication in the political blogosphere. Deuze (2003, 209) creates a typology of four fundamental types of online journalism and places blogs in both the "index" and "comment" categories, explaining how they selectively present content and generate abundant (if restricted) commentary. This is a useful tool for categorization but as with other research conducted in the first years of new media forms, the emphasis on structure fails to capture emerging cultural dynamics. MacDougall (2005) advances the study of the political blogosphere as a site of complex social and interpersonal meaning-making. His analysis examines the powerful psychological forces that bind and shape these online political communities, which in turn points toward possible mechanisms by which ideological messages are seeded and reinforced within cultural industries. MacDougall (2005, 579) notes that online communities are typically constituted of like-minded participants and makes an important, but incomplete, point concerning political blogs. The problem here is, in part, one of definition. MacDougall (2005, 579) defines political blogs as "explicit partisan sites intended to extend the message of a candidate or interest group" and cites MoveOn.org and the Swiftboat Veterans for Truth (the latter in its 2004 campaign iteration). It is tempting but inaccurate to equate these two sites: despite

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their structural similarities as partisan campaign operations, they represent radically different approaches toward political communication, democratic culture and the urgent question of credibility in third-age political communication. MacDougall appears to draw a distinction between political blogs, narrowly defined above, and "news blogs and online news lists," in which category he includes Slate.com, BreakingNewsBlog.com and Poynter Online (MacDougall, 576). Here, he excludes all of the most prominent political blogs in the left- and right-wing blogosphere. These sites are pointedly political in nature but they also make claims to alternative and independent perspectives, which in turn helps them negotiate credibility within their communities. Despite this imprecise sampling, MacDougall makes an important point regarding the ostensibly apolitical "news blogs":

> [N]ews blogs and online news lists often claim to have no explicit agenda other than disseminating information. Because of certain structural features of blogs, however, the "open objectivity" some of these online fora purport to have may systematically degrade with time into thinly disguised partisan platforms, thereby becoming ideological nodes in a network of what on the face of it, appear to be open-sourced (i.e., polycentric) and openly accessed political news and information repositories (MacDougall, 579-80).

Though his point is not directed toward the sites that dominate what most political bloggers (and probably most mainstream political commentators) consider the "political blogosphere," the analytic instinct is correct. The problem MacDougall describes is, in essence, the problem at the heart of the political discourse around (and embedded in) "The Path to 9/11." Political blogs manage their communities in order to develop and reinforce ideological credibility, but different sites have widely divergent views on accuracy, facticity, ethics and so on. Some embrace more rigorous

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standards that generally align with principles of democratic discourse, though they may flout certain laws of journalistic objectivity (e.g., by using informal or vulgar language). Others may incorporate journalistic practices (e.g., deference to traditional channels of authority in society and government) while promoting pointedly counter-factual narratives. MacDougall's work points to the need for a more detailed and rigorous analysis of political Web sites in general and the political blogosphere specifically. The ability to share ideas in an interactive space is only the most superficial aspect of this new medium. Behind the scenes, within the infrastructure, embedded in the language and ideology of these spaces, political communicators are helping to shape reality for members of these communities and, subsequently, a larger public sphere. They may align themselves with the values of open discourse and democratic culture or they may deploy the methods of strategic communication and rely on techniques of distraction. MacDougall concludes:

> [A] Web site, an e-mail message, and a blog should all be thought of as certain kinds of tools. We need to stop thinking about communication media as neutral vehicles that we use to transfer thoughts, ideas, and messages. Especially in this age of the image and the telemediated world, we need to start thinking about communication media and the messages embodied by them as occasions for people and institutions to create selves, mold identities, and construct entire realities (MacDougall, 595).

Researchers should work to draw out the connections between ideological message formation and various dimensions of the rapidly evolving political Internet. Journalists, theorists and the public can easily misunderstand or misinterpret the kind of cultural and ideological production that sophisticated political communicators (whatever interests they may represent, political or otherwise) produce every day in

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the political blogosphere. A critical view of cultural products and the processes behind them is essential to understanding the social and political power of the media. In a third-age paradigm, this view has to include not only television, but also the political blogosphere; not only production companies, but political communicators; not only economic factors, but cultural meanings. It is a complex system, but in certain instances, all of the elements may be momentarily discernible in the same cultural product. ABC's "The Path to 9/11" is one such instance.

The following case study examines the production and promotion of "The Path to 9/11" and attempts to focus particular attention on the issues that have been addressed so far. The program offers multiple points from which to apprpoach the contemporary state of political communication, including questions of broad corporate reach, narrow political networks, powerful cultural frames and implications for democratic culture. After examining how the production resonated with existing political frames and sparked a heated controversy in mainstream media, the case study will analyze specific modes of discourse in the right and left wings of the political blogosphere. This inquiry may help shed light on whether and how democratic practices, corporate interests and political influences are evolving in this new public arena.

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## Chapter Four: A Case Study of ABC's "The Path to 9/11" and the Political Blogosphere

September 11, 2001, was an immediately mediated event, a spectacle of good and evil made real and global. As undeniably heinous as the physical dimension of the attacks was, the "synthetic experience" of the attacks could hardly have been better suited to the technical systems of mass communication (Lewis 2005). From the first minutes after the violent impacts in the primary locations, the images were compulsively reproduced by media organizations and compulsively consumed by horrified and fascinated audiences around the world (Anker 2005). In addition to this flood of imagery, September 11 also initiated a series of political and military actions by the Bush administration that were aggressively framed and promoted within a rapidly constructed narrative of the attacks (Hutcheson, et al. 2004). Some of these actions were already part of the administration's political agenda before September 11, 2001, and evidence suggests that the administration used the disruption caused by the attacks to implement policies that was technically unrelated to those specific events (CBSNews 2002):

> With the intelligence all pointing toward bin Laden, Rumsfeld ordered the military to begin working on strike plans. And at 2:40 p.m., the notes quote Rumsfeld as saying he wanted "best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit S.H." – meaning Saddam Hussein – "at same time. Not only UBL" – the initials used to identify Osama bin Laden. … "Go massive," the notes quote him as saying. "Sweep it all up. Things related and not."

In the five years after the September 11 attacks, the visual and narrative content of the attacks continued to be powerful storytelling tools for both politicians

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and media producers. Images and information emerge and remerge over time, sometimes reframed or repositioned depending on the source, the timing and the political context. Perhaps most significantly, the September 11 attacks were cited extensively by Bush administration officials in making the public case for initiating military action against Iraq. As late as September 2003, 70 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was responsible for September 11 (Milbank and Deane 2003). The cultural symbols of September 11 are a key component of an overall security frame like that proposed by Aho (1994) in which a continual threat is invoked to secure the free exercise of presidential power. Such political narratives are enhanced and maintained by ongoing terrorist activity (e.g., deadly bombings in Bali, London and elsewhere) and the intermittent but persistent appearance of terrorist figures in news reports (Lewis 2005).

In this terrorism-rich media environment, a host of cultural products further examine the multi-dimensional aspects of the attack, maintaining the salience of the threat. These include magazine articles, documentaries, plays, architectural designs (e.g., for September 11 memorials) and books of all kinds, from political analyses to graphic novels. The most high profile cultural productions thus far were probably the motion pictures “United Flight 93” and Oliver Stone’s “World Trade Center,” starring Nicholas Cage. There is, in a sense, a permeability between news and cultural production, a blending of content and technique, a political language of terror that is present across multiple media platforms (Lewis 2006). Within the mainstream development of cultural material, the political blogosphere has emerged as a site of active and innovative public discourse (Blood 2003). How does the blogosphere

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relate to traditional mainstream cultural production? Can it be said to foster or inhibit democratic culture? These questions help frame an approach to the confluence of corporate structures, political influence and cultural discourse. The debate in the political blogosphere surrounding ABC's "The Path to 9/11" is an effective lens through which to view these issues. A case study analysis of eight major political Web sites (one in each of four categories on the "left" and "right") suggests that online discourse over the meaning of September 11 does not exist in its own isolated environment. Rather, it is situated in relation to corporate media structures that can be used to advance the cultural production agendas of political communicators.

### *A. Political Decision-Making at ABC*

The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) is one of the pioneering "big three" television networks in the U.S. It is currently owned by the Disney Corporation which, in addition to media holdings that include cable channels, radio stations, publishing and Web sites, a broad level of audience access and marketing coordination throughout their global media networks. ABC, as with most media companies, is geared toward the goal of creating "synergy," the promotional collaboration that extends the network's reach across different media outlets throughout the holdings of its parent corporation (Turow 1992, 683). Neither the Disney Corporation nor ABC claims to support a specific partisan agenda because the necessities of a synergy strategy preclude the adoption of any specific political posture. But the wide variety of markets, audiences and programs that corporations wish to reach leads to a fragmentation of cultural programming (Turow, 684) and,

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subsequently, political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). This process generates an array of programs geared toward a multiplicity of cultural meanings and political attitudes (Levine 2005, 86). ABC and ABC News, along with most media corporations, have received their share of criticism from across the political spectrum. Though bias seems easy to find, research suggests that in general reporters and news organizations abide by norms of objectivity. For example, network news organizations, including ABC, exhibited notably even-handed coverage in both the 1991 Gulf War (Althaus 2003) and the 2003 Iraq War (Aday, et al. 2005). Throughout much of broadcasting history, the line separating a media company's news and entertainment divisions was clear. But this has started to change in recent decades and the demands of synergy may be exposing network decision-makers to greater and more varied pressures (Turow, 702).

Within Disney's media holdings, one of the consequences of this pressure seems to be the normalization of certain politically extreme views. A number of incidents suggest that some journalists and television hosts within ostensibly objective news operations now feel free to express a range of political opinions that might previously have been considered unprofessional, including virulently anti-Islamic and xenophobic rhetoric. In January 2007, ABC hired Glenn Beck as a regular contributor to the network's morning news show, despite his history of on-air comments equating Islam and terrorism, promoting racially charged stereotypes of illegal immigrants, mocking anti-war protest leaders and suggesting it might be necessary to "nuke the whole (Middle East)" (Media Matters 2007A). He firmly established his role as a provocateur when, in November 2006, he challenged newly

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elected U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, a Democrat from Minnesota and the first Muslim sent to Congress, to “prove to me that you are not working with our enemies" (Media Matters 2007A).

This xenophobic language may be found in other high-profile areas of the Disney media empire. ABC’s radio station KSFO in San Francisco features several hosts whose violent, anti-Islamic rhetoric was recently highlighted by a blogger-driven boycott campaign. KSFO host Brian Sussman had demanded a caller prove he (the caller) was not a Muslim, demanding, "Say ‘Allah is a whore.’ ... Say that you love eating pig” (Media Matters 2007B). Host Lee Rodgers said on another occasion, "Indonesia is really just another enemy Muslim nation. ... You keep screwing around with stuff like this, we're going to kill a bunch of you. Millions of you” (Media Matters 2007B). Though these examples are part of a larger pattern with Beck, Sussman and Rodgers, militaristic and anti-Islamic comments do not, in and of themselves, indicate or promote a specific conservative agenda. However, KSFO’s home page offers links to several Web sites addressing a range of traditionally conservative issues such as the liberal press, the global warming hoax, and “leftist agitators who aid and abet” illegal immigration (KSFO.com 2007). It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that in the San Francisco market at least, ABC Radio caters quite openly to a conservative political community. A further instance of this cultivation of conservative audiences within ABC News itself, however, does seem to flaunt traditional boundaries of journalistic objectivity and explicitly suggests a broader strategy of appealing to conservative politicians.

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Mark Halperin is the former political director of ABC News. A former Clinton-administration appointee, he had previously been on the receiving end of a right-wing political attack; in 2005 and 2006, he may have shifted the perspective of the ABC News political team—including the influential Web site "The Note" that dispenses insider perspective at ABCNews.com—significantly to the right (Boehlert 2006). During the 2006 campaign, in the midst of which Halperin was promoting his book, "The Way to Win" (which approvingly focuses on the strategic insights of Republican Party political adviser Karl Rove), Halperin appeared on Fox News's "The O'Reilly Factor" and cited the financial incentives that underlie conservative journalism: "As an economic model, if you want to thrive like Fox News Channel—[if] you want to have a future—you better make sure conservatives find your product appealing" (Boehlert 2006). Halperin was even more explicit at a media stop on his book tour:

> These ["liberal" news] organizations have been around a long time. And for 40 years, conservatives have looked with suspicion at them. *I think we've got a chance in these last two weeks to prove to conservatives that we understand their grievances.* We're going to try to do better, but these organizations still have incredible sway. And conservatives are certain that we're going to be out to get them. *We've got to fix that* (Think Progress 2006A). (emphasis added)

Thus, highly placed executives at ABC News were publicly solicitous of the attitudes and priorities of conservative audiences and political communicators at a crucial moment during the election. Halperin's suggestion to align the network's news strategy with those priorities supports the notion that the connection between political influence and corporate not only exists, but is active during election periods

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when democratic discourse is presumably most important. This leads back to the original question of how pervasive and influential such dynamics might be. What happens to democratic discourse in a media environment heavily influenced by corporate and political interests?

Corporate "synergy" offers a blueprint for collaborative promotion of other kinds of interests throughout a media network. Typically, there is an uneasy dividing line that separates synergy efforts among a corporation's news holdings from those in its entertainment holdings (McChesney 1999, 25). But ABC's Vice President of Synergy and Special Projects Judith Tukich was willing to test that boundary by promoting "The Path to 9/11" in openly conservative media venues. Tukich specializes in cross-promotional production within ABC's entertainment division and has been responsible for both secular and Christian-themed programming. According to her biography on the ABC Web site, Tukich:

> is responsible for overseeing all ABC Synergy and various special projects for ABC Entertainment. She manages all elements of ABC's synergy initiatives, which include working with all divisions in the Walt Disney Company and all synergistic tie-ins within entertainment programming.…
>
> Ms. Tukich has been responsible for overseeing the Synergy campaigns of successful ABC shows including "Lost," "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy," "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" and "Dancing with the Stars." She has also been responsible for the successful grassroots campaigns for "The Miracle Maker," "The Ten Commandments" and "The Path to 9/11" (ABCmedianet.com).

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Tukich places a strong emphasis on her Christian programming projects and has noted in Christian media outlets how mainstream media can be used to promote religious values:

> "There has been marvelous support here at ABC," said Judith Tukich, Director of Special Projects. Ms. Tukich also stated, "We've been looking for a great Easter film for several years. I believe 'The Miracle Maker' is it! It's a quality piece, a very effective and engaging film for the entire family. We've had much success running 'The Ten Commandments' at Easter time. But that's not really about Easter. 'The Miracle Maker' reveals Christ as the Son of God. It teaches children, while entertaining them. And it has just as much to offer adults. What more could you ask from a family film?" (Boatwright 2000)

Tukich's efforts are part of a larger discourse in Christian media organizations about improving the quality and quantity of explicitly Christian material offered to the public in mainstream media environments. In an undated interview in NRB, the magazine of National Religious Broadcasters, several Christian communication professionals spoke about their efforts to use mainstream media resources more effectively in disseminating Christian messaging. In the interview, Tukich specifically addressed one of the projects she promoted, "The Miracle Maker":

> Judith Tukich, a Christian who attends Jack Hayford's church (The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, CA), is director of synergy and special products for ABC, and was largely responsible for bringing The Miracle Maker to air….
>
> Tukich says there's clearly an appetite for programs with a spiritual message. "I think a lot of people underestimate the power of this," she says. "There are people out there who want to watch this. There is a need and a desire to see inspiring programming. I would never have wanted to license this if it wasn't

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> spiritually pure to the Word of God, but it is, and it's top-quality material" (Trouten).

Though Christian media constitute a multi-billion dollar industry (BusinessWeekOnline.com 2005), the impulse to better integrate a religious message into mainstream media is evident. In part, the discourse focuses on secular "Hollywood" as a source of cultural influence to be harnessed:

> "The single greatest way to evangelize the world is through the media," she insists. "We send our kids off to Borneo and New Guinea, but I reached more people that night [the program was broadcast] than probably every church on the Pacific Coast. … This is the reality of it; this is where the power lies" (Trouten).

This commitment to a Christian worldview is a widely accepted element of American society and, as with all religions, the freedom to practice and preach those values is clearly protected in the U.S. Constitution. But the modern conflation of Christian, corporate and political interests may combine to undermine other ideals enshrined in that same document. When they do—as in Tukich's recent synergistic project "The Path to 9/11"—it merits a careful analysis of how notions of truth are expressed and what that means for democratic culture. Such analysis pertains to the organization and mobilization of any interest group working within corporate media structures and the associated range of attitudes toward democracy they may hold.

*B. Production and Promotion of "The Path to 9/11"*

When the first reports of the so-called "Untitled History Project" appeared in 2005, the secrecy was tantalizing to industry reporters (Dixon 2005). The cast included well-known actors such as Harvey Keitel and Amy Madigan, and the budget

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was reportedly in the $30 to $40 million range (Adalian 2006). To enhance the credibility of the production, ABC hired the former Republican governor of New Jersey, Thomas Kean, who had co-chaired the 9/11 Commission, as a co-executive producer (Marcus 2006). Members of the production team who developed the project were established in Hollywood. Executive Producer Marc Platt had a successful production career that included such mainstream films as "Legally Blonde" and "Josie and the Pussycats" (Internet Movie Database 2007A). Platt hired Cyrus Nowrasteh as a writer and producer. Nowrasteh had directed a previous political/historical project, "The Day Reagan Was Shot," which was produced by Oliver Stone (who in 2004 was working on his own September 11 project, the feature film "World Trade Center") (Internet Movie Database 2007B). David Cunningham was hired to direct. Cunningham's resume was not particularly distinguished, but he had produced and directed more than a dozen films since the early 1990s (Internet Movie Database 2007C). Cunningham also aggressively recruited and placed young Christian media professionals in the industry through The Film Institute (TFI), which he co-founded as part of his father's right-wing evangelical organization, Youth With A Mission (YWAM). The group's mission statement explains their commitment to "a Godly transformation and revolution TO and THROUGH the Film and Television industry" (Blumenthal 2006) (emphasis in the original).

Shortly before the airing of the program, ABC announced that "The Path to 9/11" would be shown commercial free and made available via Apple, Inc.'s iTunes distribution system; 100,000 high school educators would receive a letter from 9/11 Commission Co-Chair Kean inviting them to download it and share it with their

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students (Adalian 2006). ABC also announced a partnership with educational publisher Scholastic to offer an online teaching guide to "The Path to 9/11" to 25,000 teachers (Think Progress 2006A). Though the company quietly approached some unidentified sponsors, none participated. An ABC representative said, "By giving it this platform and by dramatizing it, we'll get more people to get that information. We spent $30 million on this and we're putting it on without commercials. How important we think this is speaks for itself" (Variety 2006). Clearly, the project was a high-profile effort that had strong support within the company.

The marketing campaign for the program put a strong emphasis on the 9/11 Commission Report as the primary source for the content of the production; in fact, Fox News reported that ABC producers said the film was "based solely and completely on the 9/11 Commission Report" (Think Progress 2006A). Promotional materials billed the production as a representation of "What Really Happened" and in interviews, many of the principle producers reiterated the notions of "getting information" to the public so that "it doesn't happen again." Much of this discourse was promoted in conservative media outlets, as in Nowrasteh's interview in *Front Page Magazine*, which is part of the media network managed by right-wing activist David Horowitz. In that interview, Nowrasteh invoked issues of "real truth" and credibility that would appear as central frames in the program:

> Nowrasteh: This miniseries is not just about the tragedy and events of 9/11, it dramatizes "how we got there" going back 8 years to the first attack on the WTC and dealing with the Al Qaeda strikes against U.S. embassies and forces in the 90s, the political lead-up, the hatching of the terrorist plots, etc. We see the heroes on the ground, like FBI agent John O'Neill and others, who after the '93 attack felt sure that the terrorists

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> would strike the WTC again. It also dramatizes the frequent opportunities the Administration had in the 90s to stop Bin Laden in his tracks -- but lacked the will to do so. We also reveal the day-by-day lead-up of clues and opportunities in 2001 right up to the day of the 9/11 attacks. This is a terror thriller as well as a history lesson. I think people will be engaged and enlightened.
>
> FP: When you refer to the failed effort to stop Bin Laden in the 1990s, this was obviously the time of Bill Clinton. How much do you think his administration made us vulnerable to 9/11?
>
> Nowrasteh: The 9/11 report details the Clinton's administration's response -- or lack of response -- to Al Qaeda and how this emboldened Bin Laden to keep attacking American interests. The worst example is the response to the October, 2000 attack on the U.S.S. COLE in Yemen where 17 American sailors were killed. There simply was no response. Nothing.
>
> FP: So could 9/11 have been stopped?
>
> Nowrasteh: Difficult question. Many experts believe it could not have been stopped. Maybe if the FBI had been allowed to look into Zacarias Moussaoui's laptop when he was arrested in mid-August, 2001, or if the terrorists on the watch list living in San Diego under their real names had been picked up. No one can say for sure.
>
> In the miniseries we focus on weaknesses and mistakes so that we can learn from them. So that we can be safer, stronger, wiser. We do, though, highlight the heroes on the ground and the small victories (the break-up of the millennium plot) in the lead up to 9/11. Our harshest criticism in the show is for our enemies (Glazov 2006).

As Nowrasteh promoted the film, Judith Tukich was implementing a new synergy strategy based on the grassroots successes of her earlier projects. In the weeks leading up to the airing of “The Path to 9/11” her office sent screening copies to several hundred right-wing media outlets (some reports suggest as many as 900),

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including many of the best-known commentators in the political blogosphere. Significantly, scenes in the program suggested that the Clinton administration's concern over political appearances allowed Osama bin Laden to escape capture or assassination. Yet neither former Clinton administration officials nor comparable left-wing radio hosts and bloggers were able to obtain copies, despite repeated requests (Think Progress 2006B). Tukich's strategy was effective in two ways. First, it disseminated the film to commentators who were inclined to promote the same frames that Nowrasteh emphasized in his interview with Front Page Magazine. Second, it created a firestorm of controversy in the political blogosphere, where left- and right-wing bloggers launched accusations at one another and bolstered awareness of the project. In this, Tukich may have succeeded too well, as the controversy ensuing from her synergy strategy seemed to reveal a distinct partisan frame to "The Path to 9/11" and exposed crucial fault lines in the struggle over truth and meaning surrounding the September 11 attacks.

*Controversy in the Mainstream Media.*

As conservative media figures and bloggers began to comment on the content of "The Path to 9/11," their left-wing counterparts protested the political nature of Tukich's "grassroots" campaign, as well as the authenticity claims of the promotion and the political frames that were starting to appear in such right-wing media outlets as Horowitz's Front Page Magazine. Eventually, left-wing bloggers did obtain copies of the DVD and reported on the subtext of the controversial scenes. In these scenes, which take place during the Clinton administration, then-National Security Adviser Sandy Berger is seen panicking over the "political fallout" of taking lethal covert

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action against bin Laden, thereby allowing him to escape and thus "allowing" the September 11 attacks to take place. As the content of these scenes was publicized, first online and on political radio, several Clinton administration sources stepped forward to deny the implications of the material. Richard C. Clarke was the director of the National Security Agency under President Clinton and held related high-level positions in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and both Bushes. Clarke pointed out that, in fact, Clinton had authorized the use of lethal force against bin Laden and tried on several occasions to capture or kill the al Qaeda leader. Both Berger and Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State under Clinton, registered public complaints in the mainstream media and lawyers for Clinton and others sent letters to ABC president Robert Iger threatening legal action if the program aired with the misleading scenes in place. ABC modified its stance somewhat, claiming that scenes were "composites" and represented "compressed time," and suggesting that, even a few days before the program aired, that edits were still being made. It was reported at this time that FBI officials who had been consultants on the production had quit in protest. Two prominent conservative commentators actually pointed out that the inaccuracies crossed an important line and Harvey Keitel, the star of the program, disavowed certain claims, urging ABC to correct the misleading material (Media Matters 2006C). Under this increased scrutiny, Scholastic pulled out of the online distribution arrangement they had made.

*Airing of "The Path to 9/11"*

"The Path to 9/11" aired on ABC, commercial-free, on the evenings of September 10 and 11, 2006. The program also aired in Canada, Australia, the United

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Kingdom, India and other countries on the same or proximate evenings**.** The controversial scenes aired mostly intact; ultimately about a minute of footage was deleted, but the essential assertions remained intact. ABC included disclaimers before the start of the program that read:

> Due to subject matter, viewer discretion is advised.
>
> The following movie is a dramatization that is drawn from a variety of sources including the 9/11 Commission Report and other published materials and from personal interviews. The movie is not a documentary.
>
> For dramatic and narrative purposes, the movie contains fictionalized scenes, composite and representative characters and dialogue as well as time compression (text from video).

On the second night, September 11, 2006, the five-year anniversary of the attacks, the program was punctuated by President Bush's televised address to the nation. The address reflected several of the emotional cues that are common to the discourse of the September 11 attacks: security/threat, good/evil, innocence of victims, democracy and freedom, the "clash of civilizations," honorable sacrifice, religious (specifically Christian) unity, a plea for political unity, justification for the Iraq war and the need to exercise military strength to prevent attacks in the future. Significantly, many of these themes were also prominent in "The Path to 9/11." The following excerpts from the president's anniversary speech echo specific political frames that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter:

> Five years ago, this date—September the 11th—was seared into America's memory. Nineteen men attacked us with a barbarity unequaled in our history. They murdered people of all colors, creeds, and nationalities—and made war upon the entire free world. …

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> On 9/11, our nation saw the face of evil. Yet on that awful day, we also witnessed something distinctly American: ordinary citizens rising to the occasion, and responding with extraordinary acts of courage. …
>
> Since the horror of 9/11, we've learned a great deal about the enemy. We have learned that they are evil and kill without mercy -- but not without purpose. … The war against this enemy is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century, and the calling of our generation. …
>
> On September the 11th, we learned that America must confront threats before they reach our shores, whether those threats come from terrorist networks or terrorist states. I'm often asked why we're in Iraq when Saddam Hussein was not responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The answer is that the regime of Saddam Hussein was a clear threat. My administration, the Congress, and the United Nations saw the threat -- and after 9/11, Saddam's regime posed a risk that the world could not afford to take. …
>
> The spirit of our people is the source of America's strength. And we go forward with trust in that spirit, confidence in our purpose, and faith in a loving God who made us to be free… (Bush 2006).

Other major broadcast networks also aired programming related to the September 11 attacks on the night of the anniversary. But the congruency between "The Path to 9/11" and the president's address was particularly evident. The controversial scenes seemed clearly to shift responsibility toward the Clinton administration and to portray Bush as the reluctant hero. The dovetailing of themes, fictional and factual, overt and implied, demonstrated how the Bush administration's political agenda may be able to penetrate corporate decision-making and amplify or diminish certain issues, even without a direct line of command. But the ability to establish frames is not absolute. Certain elements of discourse in the mainstream

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media and the political blogosphere challenged this framing of the September 11 attacks. The cultural contestation over the meanings and "real truth" of the attacks quickly spilled into other arenas. The next section address how some of those frames were constructed.

*C. Realism and Framing in "The Path to 9/11"*

The discourse surrounding "The Path to 9/11" focused on a range of issues, including factual accuracy, promotional messaging, reactions from producers and Clinton administration officials and more. That discourse emerged in response to the production and promotion strategies described previously but also, just as importantly, to frames within the production itself. This section describes the most prominent frames so that they may be identified within the discourse of mainstream media and political blogosphere. To begin, it should be noted that credibility or the "real truth" about September 11 was a crucial dimension of the controversy. As noted, in Nowrasteh's words, "This is a terror thriller as well as a history lesson" (Glazov 2006). Building on the fact that the story is based on actual events and characters, the producers of "The Path to 9/11" employed a number of cinematic and narrative techniques that were likely intended to enhance the realism of the production. If successful, these techniques would have heightened the believability of the frames that the producers wove into the narrative. In her study on audience perceptions of realism, Hall (2003) notes several elements that heighten the believability of a media text. Among her sample population of 47 undergraduates, factuality was the "gold standard of realism" (A. Hall, 633). In addition, information

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drawn from multiple sources, narratives with significant affective power and stories that had internal consistency were all deemed to be more realistic (A. Hall, 634-36). All these elements were present in “The Path to 9/11,” presumably making the production more realistic, but each is actually a weak basis on which to make such a judgment. For instance, factuality can be highly subjective and facts can be distorted to suggest counter-factual conclusions. The multiple sources on which “The Path to 9/11” was based were not unassailably objective. The affective power of an event so dramatic and tragic must be significant, but it does not follow that all interpretations (even ones that seem obvious) are therefore true. Finally, a production may be internally consistent in presenting distorted information, which could easily reinforce counter-factual or politically inflected meanings. The following analysis addresses certain cinematic techniques that enhance perceptions of realism and introduces key political frames that were present in “The Path to 9/11.”

*Visual and Narrative Cues for Realism*

Several cinematic techniques helped establish a realistic tone in which the production’s specific frames were presented. One overt technique was the use of a handheld camera with artfully simulated shakiness and documentary-style in-camera pans and refocusing. In this, the program borrows the contemporary style of popular crime programs seen in such shows as NYPD Blue, Law & Order and CSI. Several television clichés from such programs appear in “The Path to 9/11,” including the sting operation set piece, the interrogation scene, and convicted prisoners being escorted through popping flashbulbs and a crush of reporters. As recurring characters are introduced, names and descriptions appear along the bottom of the screen,

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granting them a historical factuality. Extreme long shots and extreme close-ups are employed, particularly with the terrorist characters. The long shot evokes a sense of voyeurism or surveillance; the close-up echoes both "confessional" video (as in an interrogation or prison interview, or possibly the psychological study of a mass murderer) as well as horror films. Historical video is included periodically throughout the film, typically playing on monitors within a shot. This subtly blurs the distinction between fiction and reality and allows the producers to make suggestions by replaying images of Osama bin Laden or Clinton's dissembling during the Lewinsky scandal. One of the most pronounced visual cues centers on the distinction between physical environments in the Middle East and America. While the production design in this regard lends itself to a certain kind of "realism," it also becomes a conceptual device that runs through the visual and narrative content. In "The Path to 9/11," Middle Eastern countries are harsh environments, sun-baked, dusty, filthy, constructed of crazed architecture (an Escher-esque jumble of rooftops, ladders, hidden doorways and alleys) and populated by impoverished, dark-skinned mobs. By contrast, any action that takes place in Washington or New York happens in a pristine environment of cool, clean blues and grays, sleek office towers, high-tech conference rooms and polished marble hallways (occupied by, for the most part, impeccably dressed white males). The locations that appear in the program are based on real places and there are certainly differences between a Sudanese village and a Manhattan office tower. But the distinction in the production design strains to make a visual reference to heaven and hell. The effect is also an overt exercise in "othering," suggesting a profound discrepancy between worlds: one inhabited by filthy, scheming

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enemies and the other by suave, assured technocratic heroes. A few characters cross over the border, but the qualities of their environment are inherent in them: when terrorist plotters live in the West, it is invariably in filth and squalor; when a "composite" CIA agent is in the Middle East, he remains impervious to heat or dust. In this, the visual "realism" begins to build out various subtextual meanings that, combined with the overall narrative structure, develop into distinct frames. The most pronounced of these are examined below and include: othering and Islam; noble warriors; and culpability of both government in general and individuals in the Clinton administration specifically.

*Framing in "The Path to 9/11"*

A wide range of opinions and attitudes might coalesce around any program that addresses such charged content as the September 11 attacks. The emotional intensity of those events may very well heighten the subjectivity that individuals bring to the material, introducing deeply personal readings of this particular cultural text. Nonetheless, certain narrative content is so clearly emphasized, and certain storylines are so pronounced, that the primary political frames in the program are evident. Other researchers might approach these frames from different perspectives, but it is noteworthy that the core issues addressed below are not only quite obvious, but they resonated in the discourse of both the mainstream and blogosphere controversies, as well as with framing strategies of the Bush administration. As such, a reasonable observer would likely say the following frames are both present and intentional.

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*Othering and Islam*

As a historical project, "The Path to 9/11" seeks to represent terrorist networks and plotting that took place in locations around the world in the 1990s and leading up to the attacks. But these heavy-handed stereotypes are infused with misrepresentations of "radical Islam" and may well foster generalizations that negatively reflect on Muslims in general. Terrorist characters at various points throughout the story are cunning, malevolent, committed to murder and mayhem, eager to wage war and to kill for their strange god. This approach may make good television villains, but it poorly serves the nuance and complexity of real international and cross-cultural politics. Mohammed Atta was a key organizer of the attacks and one of the pilots who flew a plane into the World Trade Center in New York City. In the film, as Atta prepares for the attack on September 11, he squats naked in the bathtub splashing water and chanting an ominous invocation (which is really nothing more than a prayer in Arabic). When he looks up, his eyes are deep black and he has transformed into a kind of monster. The actual Atta and his co-conspirators have earned no claim to a solicitous portrayal in the media. But there are subtleties in the conflict between the West and radicalized Islam that are obscured by catering to xenophobic anxieties in the wake of the attacks. Nowrasteh, who is Iranian, gestures toward the fact that the terrorists' actions are a perversion of the religion they profess to serve: one character asks, "Why would any Muslim try to blow up a Mosque?" Another says, "I don't see the killing of innocent women and children as jihad." This is likely a common view among Muslims, but such sentiments are lost in the blunt good/evil binary of the overall production. One obscuring element is the repeated

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(and rather sensationalistic) invocation of innocent victims: children laughing and playing, a visibly pregnant woman, a soldier wounded in the U.S.S. Cole attack, passengers on the hijacked flights and so on. The human dimension of this tragedy is obviously horrific. But at virtually every step, the producers of "The Path to 9/11" chose the simplest caricatures of good and evil to tell what is in fact an extremely complex story. In this case, some people could reasonably be said to possess such qualities as "real evil" and "pure innocence." But the characters in the program are drawn in such broad strokes that they seem constructed merely to serve a political narrative. The "noble warrior" frame is one such example.

*Noble Warriors: O'Neill and Massoud*

John O'Neill was an FBI agent who worked diligently over a number of years to stop al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Shortly before September 11, 2001, he left the FBI to become the director of security at the World Trade Center; he died in the attack. Ahmad Shah Massoud was an Afghani soldier who led a successful resistance campaign against the Taliban forces in that country. He was assassinated on September 9, 2001, by al Qaeda operatives posing as journalists. Both men were charismatic leaders who inspired those around them and made tremendous sacrifices, ultimately including their lives. While each may be said to have exemplified true heroism, in "The Path to 9/11" they are stripped down to simplistic caricatures. As "noble warriors," they become moral exemplars within a degenerate political system. Both are written as such extraordinary men that the unfavorable comparison with other historical figures, particularly Clinton administration officials, is unambiguous. O'Neill is portrayed as being brilliant, tenacious and indefatigable as a professional;

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in his personal life he is suave, virile and witty. This seems to accord with personal accounts of O'Neill and also makes him an engaging hero for the story. Massoud is portrayed as being intelligent, charming and media savvy; this also matches his real-life profile. Throughout the production, both characters suffer the failure of Washington bureaucrats who refuse to give them the resources they need to defeat Osama bin Laden. Time and again, O'Neill and Massoud are stymied by short-sighted, simpering politicians who fear for their jobs. Always willing to break the rules and do what needs to be done, the two men are tragic heroes who will be betrayed by a hesitant and fearful government. In the film, O'Neill, eventually worn down by the bureaucracy, resigns and takes up the fight as the WTC security director, still sharp as ever, but now free to act independently. Massoud, meanwhile, tells his CIA contact, "If they defeat me, if they kill me, you will know they are coming. That will be your signal." Throughout the production, both men exhibit special prescience about what is required in the "new kind of war" in which they are engaged and each embraces the moment of his death with stoic resignation. If any figures deserve to be lionized in the story of the September 11 attacks, O'Neill and Massoud are prime candidates. But their treatment in this particular production is unfortunately distorted, as the lives of both men are used to create impossibly noble characters—men who could have prevented the attacks—apparently for the primary purpose of demonstrating the culpability of the Clinton administration.

*Culpability Frame: Bureaucracy*

Throughout the program, the blame-shifting dynamics of bureaucracy are shown to inhibit the fight against the terrorists at virtually every step. In several

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scenes, different individuals are warned that they must not break the rules, they have to follow orders and if they act on their conscience (e.g., saving a piece of evidence from a crime scene or intimidating an Arab suspect), they will bear the punishment alone. Repeatedly, investigators' hands are tied by seemingly ridiculous rules and red tape. Unnamed "superiors" are unwilling or unable to provide the resources they need. Restrictions on torture, domestic surveillance and evidence handling repeatedly derail cases. On the rare occasion where investigators (including O'Neill) are allowed to "do their job," they score successes. But these victories come despite the bureaucrats who continue to hinder the investigations, not because of a competent system of police and prosecutors. A culture of craven self-interest plagues Washington in "The Path to 9/11." The noble warriors do whatever they can, knowing ultimately (as the audience does) that it will not be enough to stop the attacks. Kirk, the composite CIA agent, expresses this attitude, saying, "War is about killing the enemy and destroying his resources, not about sitting around a conference room covering your own asses." In "The Path to 9/11," the litany of causes—cost-cutting, restrictive international law, sensitivity to racial profiling, fealty to foreign governments and so on—accords with conservative political positions. In the film, whenever bin Laden is close to being captured, a failure of planning, resources or authority permits Atta's advance toward the inevitable conclusion. The noble warrior O'Neill laments, "Political correctness rules the day," and, later, "We're not safe yet. And no one seems to care." This approach aligns with the communicative strategy of political fundamentalism, which conflates religious and political narratives and

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facilitates attacks based on both moral and social grounds. It was also expressed in the culpability frames directed at the Clinton administration officials.

*Culpability Frame: the Clinton Administration*

Bureaucracy is a root cause of the attacks in "The Path to 9/11," but sharp criticisms are targeted at certain political figures. The culpability frame directed at the Clinton administration and Clinton himself is by far the most dominant. The O'Neill character, universally loved within the narrative, has no respect for Clinton, telling Kirk, "We're all in danger. The fact is terrorism is perceived by this administration as a 'law and order' problem. Period." Later, O'Neill asks Richard Clarke, "It's okay if somebody kills bin Laden as long as he (Clinton) didn't give the order? That's pathetic." The failures of the administration drive another CIA character, Patricia, to tears when the U.S.S. Cole is bombed. Confronting nervous officials over their previous failure to kill bin Laden, she sobs, "We had him!" When CIA director George Tenet says, "We don't know for sure it's him (who bombed the Cole)," Patricia laughs in stricken disbelief. Within the narrative, the cowardice of the administration is plain, and only those who want to kill bin Laden are human enough to weep. Clinton appointees, by contrast, recite a series of excuses. After the embassy bombings in Africa, a cold and calculating Secretary of State Albright says, "Taking on the Taliban would require a major military effort; the president's not prepared to go that far based on attacks on two embassies." When portraying the missile attack that Clinton orders on an al Qaeda training camp, the subtext dismisses the effort as a distraction from the Lewinsky scandal. When a Seattle customs agent helps foil the Los Angeles millennium plot, a TV report states there was "no official direction to be

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vigilant," thereby depriving the Clinton administration of a success. Each of these incidents might be evaluated for accuracy, but the overall frame is readily apparent. The first night of the program ended with an unambiguous articulation of the culpability frame directed at the Clinton administration. A montage of scenes from the first night appears, including footage of bin Laden, Sandy Berger saying, "I don't have that authority…," and CIA agent Patricia crying out, "We're responsible for that because we didn't act!" Though the word "that" the script refers to the Cole bombing, the associated images are of the September 11 attacks. The voiceover is particularly damning: "They knew 9/11 was coming. They'd even caught some of the conspirators. But why didn't they eliminate bin Laden? And how could they fail to stop the attack?" As the word "they" is repeated, images of Clinton administration officials are shown on the screen.

The dominant frames promoted in the production, then, include: the truth frame (i.e., assertions of realism and, thus, factuality in the content of the program): the othering frame (the pure evil of terrorists and the innocence of their victims); the noble warrior (the pure good of the tragic heroes); and, most prominently, the culpability frame (both on the part of Washington bureaucracy in general and president Clinton and his administration specifically). The Clinton administration is not blameless in its failure to capture bin Laden or prevent the terrorist attacks that took place. In fact, Clinton himself has openly addressed the issue and took responsibility (Fox News 2006). The blame that must be shared extends over several administrations and multiple government agencies. But the Clinton administration is repeatedly shown as a moral failure that not only could not prevent the September 11

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attacks, but inhibited the heroes who might have stopped it. At no point in the production does the narrative directly address any of the criticisms that were later leveled at the Bush administration over the mishandling of national security. This overt frame may not entirely explain what ABC and the producers of the intended audiences to take from "The Path to 9/11." But it seems suggestive of a specific political agenda. In light of subsequent discourse that took place during the controversy over the program, it would be difficult to conclude that these frames were not intentionally promoted.

*D. Echoes of "The Path to 9/11"*

The frames that were developed and advanced through the discourse around "The Path to 9/11" echoed in mainstream media outlets, the political blogosphere, media watchdog organizations and activist groups. One high-profile example demonstrates how antagonistic political framing can sometimes be quite combative. Shortly after "The Path to 9/11" aired, President Clinton accepted an invitation to be interviewed by Fox News anchor Chris Wallace, nominally to discuss the Clinton Global Initiative, a social organization which had recently announced a major fundraising success. Wallace confronted Clinton with some of the assertions echoed in "The Path to 9/11" and stirred the ire of the former president:

> WALLACE: When we announced that you were going to be on Fox News Sunday, I got a lot of e-mail from viewers. And I've got to say, I was surprised. Most of them wanted me to ask you this question: Why didn't you do more to put bin Laden and Al Qaida out of business when you were president? …

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CLINTON: OK, let's talk about it. Now, I will answer all those things on the merits, but first I want to talk about the context in which this arises.

I'm being asked this on the Fox network. ABC just had a right-wing conservative run in their little Pathway to 9/11, falsely claiming it was based on the 9/11 Commission report, with three things asserted against me directly contradicted by the 9/11 Commission report.

And I think it's very interesting that all the conservative Republicans, who now say I didn't do enough, claimed that I was too obsessed with bin Laden. All of President Bush's neo-cons thought I was too obsessed with bin Laden. They had no meetings on bin Laden for nine months after I left office. All the right-wingers who now say I didn't do enough said I did too much — same people. …

WALLACE: Do you think you did enough, sir?

CLINTON: No, because I didn't get him.

WALLACE: Right.

CLINTON: But at least I tried. That's the difference in me and some, including all the right-wingers who are attacking me now. They ridiculed me for trying. They had eight months to try. They did not try. I tried.

So I tried and failed. When I failed, I left a comprehensive anti-terror strategy and the best guy in the country, Dick Clarke, who got demoted.

So you did Fox's bidding on this show. You did your nice little conservative hit job on me. …

WALLACE: And all I can say is, I'm asking you this in good faith because it's on people's minds, sir. And I wasn't…

CLINTON: Well, there's a reason it's on people's minds. That's the point I'm trying to make. There's a reason it's on people's minds: Because there's been a

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> serious disinformation campaign to create that impression (Fox News 2006).

Though a broad content analysis of national press coverage is beyond the scope of this study, three incidents suggest how cultural products such as "The Path to 9/11" enable iterative cycles of meaning-making among the general public and partisan audiences. In the first example, a critic for *The New York Times* reviewed the program and, based on the content, distorted conclusions that could be drawn about the comparative amounts of time the Bush and Clinton administrations had to deal with the problem of al Qaeda. In the column, the critic presents the culpability frame as an argument for objectivity:

> All mini-series Photoshop the facts. "The Path to 9/11" is not a documentary, or even a docu-drama; it is a fictionalized account of what took place. It relies on the report of the Sept. 11 commission, the King James version of all Sept. 11 accounts, as well as other material and memoirs. Some scenes come straight from the writers' imaginations. Yet any depiction of those times would have to focus on those who were in charge, and by their own accounts mistakes were made.
>
> The first bombing of the World Trade Center happened on Bill Clinton's watch. So did the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 attack on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen. The president's staff — and the civil servants who worked for them — witnessed the danger of Al Qaeda close up and personally. Some even lost their lives.
>
> In 2001 President Bush and his newly appointed aides had ample warning, including a briefing paper titled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S.," and they failed to take it seriously enough, but their missteps are not equal. It's like focusing blame for a school shooting at the beginning of the school year on the student's new home room teacher; the adults who watched the boy torment classmates and poison small animals knew better. … (Stanley 2006)

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In this case, as elsewhere, the supposedly even-handed culpability frame manages to focus on distortions of Clinton-era intelligence problems and completely elides analysis of equally serious Bush administration failures. In a second example of message repetition strategy, Fox News sustained the frame when in September 2006 it re-aired material from "The Path to 9/11" that supported the Clinton culpability frame (TPM Café 2007). Then again in January 2007, Fox host Sean Hannity once again re-aired "controversial unseen footage" and interviewed Nowrasteh (Media Matters 2007C). Nowrasteh had given several presentations to conservative-leaning organization audiences using scenes from the program. Thus, months after the original airing of the program, major networks still had access to this material and these political frames. In a third example, shortly after "The Path to 9/11," Nowrasteh was the subject of news stories as the recipient of "Freedom of Expression" award from the Liberty Film Festival, a "forum for conservative thought on film" which had recently become part of Horowitz's media network (Media Matters 2006B). That year, perhaps inevitably, the other recipient of the "Freedom of Expression Award" was ABC vice president of synergy, Judith Tukich (Media Matters 2006B).

*E. Controversy in the Political Blogosphere Over "The Path to 9/11"*

The political blogosphere is a crucial dimension of the present case in two distinct respects. First, as noted above, when Tuckich of ABC distributed several hundred preview copies of "The Path to 9/11" to conservative political bloggers she provided a catalyst for the controversy. Second, much of the resistance to the political

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frames advanced by "The Path to 9/11" was organized and documented online, where it remains a public record of the controversy. Mainstream news outlets reported on the production and the charges about its apparent biases, but the most rigorous attacks and the most voluble defenses were conducted online. As in the larger debate about journalism and blogs, the essential issue lies in the credibility of various outlets and the meanings inherent in their content. To review this aspect of the case, it may be helpful to recall the framework laid out by Dahlgren in Chapter Three, which addresses questions of universality, spatial boundaries and communicative action. As Dahlgren suggests, the question of universality touches on the fragmentation of audiences and the complexities of "economics, ownership and control… corporate power, and so forth" (Dahlgren 2001, 36). These questions may seem not to pertain to nominally independent bloggers. But it is worth examining how these questions affected partisan discourse about the production. Spatial boundaries, in Dahlgren's formulation, represent the social structures within a media sphere in which audiences cohere and construct meanings for themselves (Dahlgren, 37). The polarity of the political blogosphere suggests distinct spatial boundaries that are reinforced both internally (by communities' self-definitional practices) and externally (by the defining and labeling of others). These distinct communities will accept, process and judge forms of cultural content in different ways, presumably within their existing values systems. Dahlgren (2001) referenced two communicative modes described by Habermas's (1996): communicative action, which corresponds to certain concepts of deliberative democracy; and strategic action,which is "goal-oriented and manipulative." Both are common in the blogosphere. The use of one or the other in

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the discourse surrounding “The Path to 9/11” should shed light on how different groups of political communicators use the Web.

Two other aspects of the analysis in Chapter Three should be refreshed at this point. The first is the issue of dominance and contestation. The production and airing of “The Path to 9/11” clearly constitutes an expression of political and cultural values within the public sphere. Did the political blogosphere reinforce the frames and conclusions of the production or were “alternate public spheres” created to oppose “the constant power of cultural and economic capital…” (Downey and Fenton, 195)? Bloggers pursued both strategies of course, but which bloggers and to what end? A second issue is credibility. MacDougall cited a principle concern that:

> [Web sites may have] systematically degraded with time into thinly disguised partisan platforms, thereby becoming ideological nodes in a network of what on the face of it, appear to be open-sourced... (MacDougall, 579-80).

These issues can be illuminated by a direct comparison of partisan perspectives on “The Path to 9/11,” as expressed in well-known sites from the right and left sides of the political blogosphere.

*Comparing Discourse in the Political Blogosphere*

It would be impossible to capture the complete scope of reaction to “The Path to 9/11” that occurred within the political blogosphere. A Google search on the film’s title returns results from a broad range of media outlets. To narrow this analysis, eight of the best known political sites were selected, four from the right wing of the blogosphere and four from the left. Based on traffic, incoming links and influence, each blog would be recognized on their respective sides of the political spectrum as a

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generally reputable, high-profile political site. Four general categories were selected, with one site representing each category from the right- and left-wing blogosphere. Categories are not rigid and sites may share some aspects; nonetheless, the general delineations should allow enough distinction. The categories include: a media watchdog site; a political pundit site; a professional group site; and a public community site. In this study, the "media watchdog" category refers to an organization that tracks and criticizes political media. The "political pundit" category offers an individual blogger's perspective, but often featuring a limited slate of guest bloggers. The "professional group" aggregates recognized professional writers or commentators into a group blog where the content is produced exclusively by invited members (though comments may be allowed). The "public community" is the most open blog platform, in which members of the public, who typically must be registered users, can produce widely accessible content at any time. Though this selection clearly offers only a limited picture of the true scope of online discourse about "The Path to 9/11," it should permit a comparison of various communicative strategies and partisan distinctions. A list of the selected sites follows, with descriptions.

The most intensive period of discourse about "The Path to 9/11" occurred in the weeks leading up to the airdate. This roughly marks the period when right-wing bloggers began to describe the content of the program, based on ABC's distribution of screening DVDs. Shortly after the airdate, other political scandals overtook the popular political discourse, both in mainstream media and in the blogosphere. Thus, the period of analysis is limited to September 1 through September 15, 2006, which encompasses the most heated commentary and the airdate. Searches on each site were

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conducted using the term "ABC The Path to 9/11." In some cases, when search functions returned incomplete results, data was accessed through the site's archives or through a site-specific Google search. Because of variations in site structure, weaknesses in search function design, and the instability of online data over time, it is unlikely that every post could be collected, even from a relatively small sample such as this. Some selectivity, therefore, was applied in data collection, but the overall data set is representative of content on the various sites within the specified time frame. A total of 144 posts was collected, 33 from right-wing blogs and 111 from left-wing blogs. This represents an average of 18 posts per site, though no right-wing site had more than 18 posts (Hugh Hewitt). The greatest number of posts (36) came from the left-wing watchdog Media Matters and the least (1) from the right-wing watchdog Accuracy In Media. User comments (which in this case might number in the dozens for a given post) were excluded from analysis in this sample, but would be a worthwhile area of study in future projects.

*Right-wing Web sites*

Accuracy in Media (http://www.aim.org)

Accuracy in Media (AIM) is a well-known right-wing organization that describes itself as a "non-profit, grassroots citizens [*sic*] watchdog of the news media that critiques botched and bungled news stories and sets the record straight on important issues that have received slanted coverage." They follow and report on perceived "liberal media bias," and help frame the overall right-wing media critique. The content at AIM consists of columns, reports and press releases and, as such, does not fit the strict structural definition of blog (a site posting content chronologically in

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reverse order). However this site, and its left-wing counterpart Media Matters, function as part of the political blogosphere by providing content and context for both bloggers and general readership in the heavily interconnected online environment. As such, both AIM and Media Matters may be considered part of the political blogosphere.

Townhall.com (Hugh Hewitt) (http://www.townhall.com)

This right-wing pundit site is the online home of Hugh Hewitt, a well-known conservative political commentator and radio host. Hewitt received an advance screening copy of "The Path to 9/11" and strongly denounced left-wing bloggers and media critics who were decrying inaccuracies in the production. Hewitt's was one of the strongest voices in protesting ABC's last-minute gestures at editing controversial scenes.

The Corner at The National Review Online (http://corner.nationalreview.com)

This blog is an informal conversation between several contributors to the well-known conservative magazine, The National Review. Participants are high-profile writers and commentators working at various right-wing media outlets. Though the conversation is informal and closed to public comment, it is considered a touchstone and a reputable opinion source for the right-wing blogging community.

Red State (http://www.redstate.com)

Red State is one of several large, active, enthusiastic political blogging communities on the right. Its best-known participants are recognized in the right and left blogosphere as being opinion leaders. The site is known for being more even-

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keeled and intellectual—and somewhat less reactionary—than other right-wing blogging communities.

*Left-wing Web sites*

Media Matters (http://mediamatters.org)

Media Matters is a watchdog of right-wing and mainstream media outlets, founded by self-described "former right-wing hit man" David Brock. The site documents conservative media framing of well-known right-wing figures. Though it also provides content in continually updated sections similar to a magazine (rather than in a single content stream, as a blog typically does), it merits consideration as part of the political blogosphere since it provides content and context for both bloggers and a general readership.

Digby/Hullaballoo (http://digbysblog.blogspot.com)

The anonymous blogger Digby does not command the same kind of mainstream influence that the right's Hugh Hewitt does, but she is a principle figure in the left-wing blogosphere. She focuses primarily on current events and draws heavily (as most bloggers do) from mainstream media sources. Digby's analysis has generated an extremely robust reputation shared by only a few of the top left-wing bloggers. Digby responded directly to Hewitt's assertions about "The Path to 9/11" and framed the issue for readers in a perspective of media criticism and political communication.

Talking Points Memo (http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com)

Over several years, Josh Marshall of Talking Points Memo has been one of the most credible political bloggers. Starting out as an academic, reporter and political

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analyst, he has developed a highly successful, multi-site political news network. He is the most dispassionate and critically objective of the major left-wing bloggers, for whom he is often an opinion leader. His work still appears in well-known political journals and he is known for avoiding sensationalism. His approach to political news blogging is very different from that of the National Review Online—focusing more on journalistic analysis and political activism—but both sites are key opinion sources run by "crossover" media figures who are respected by their audiences.

Daily Kos (http://www.dailykos.com/)

Daily Kos is the largest, most active left-wing political community, receiving hundreds of thousands of visitors per day and serving as a major channel for left-wing discourse. It is a highly structured community platform with aggressive self-monitoring, but diarists and commenters have a wide latitude in which to debate.

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*"The Path to 9/11": Discourse from the Right*

This sample of right-wing blogs produced a relatively small amount of analyzable material (33 posts), compared to their counterparts on the left (111 posts). Some otherwise useful material fell outside the prescribed time frame or was undated and thus could not be included. Among the four blogs in the sample, the most prolific poster was political pundit Hugh Hewitt, who is also a well-known conservative talk radio host. A guest-poster, Dean Barnett, comments regularly at Hewitt's site and between them they account for more than half of the right-wing posts in this sample. Because the other sites posted so few comments, the tone and style of Hewitt's blog is in one sense overrepresented. However, on this topic, among these prominent right-wing blogs (and in concert with his radio show), Hewitt's framing of the debate was clearly the most visible and most enthusiastically promoted; as such, this particular approach does authentically represent the dominant right-wing frame in the sample.

Several themes present throughout Hewitt's commentary echoed in the other sites in the sample and resonated with traditional contemporary right-wing critiques of the media and political opponents. The most pronounced of these was the well-established narrative of the fecklessness and opportunism of Bill Clinton and members of his administration. In some instances, the Clinton administration was criticized with cited sources and partisan but reasonable characterizations. More often than not, however, the criticism leveled at Clinton and colleagues such as Madeleine Albright and Sandy Berger (both of whom protested misrepresentations of their actions in "composite scenes" in "The Path to 9/11") operated at a polemic level, portraying administration members and their supporters as craven, weak, self-

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obsessed and anti-democratic. In concert with this line of criticism, “The Path to 9/11” was framed as an important and “serious” work of political communication that was true at its core, even if certain facts were artistically portrayed. This permitted the further characterization of anyone protesting the production as not only anti-democratic but disastrously naïve in relation to the “new kind of war” against radical Islam in which the United States was engaged. The following post by Hewitt exemplifies several of these themes:

> Thursday, September 07, 2006
> The Clinton Censors
> Posted by Hugh Hewitt | 8:23 AM
>
> Howard Kurtz has the latest on the attempt by Clinton-era policy makers to kill ABC's "The Path to 9/11." ABC execs are under enormous pressure to bow to the airbrushers of history, but to do so will damage their brand for a decade. "The Path to 9/11" is a superb condensing of the American non-response to terrorism's growing threat beginning with the bungled surveillance of the first World Trade Center bombers right through the devastating attacks of 9/11. I spent most of yesterday's three hour program with the program's writer/producer Cyrus Nowrasteh, and no serious observer could listen to this interview and conclude that the movie is other than a deeply serious attempt to recount the events leading to the massacre of five years ago, primarily through the eyes of John O'Neill, the FBI agent who had taken over security at the World Trade Center just weeks prior to the attack and whose actions that day are believed to have saved thousans [*sic*] of lives. For the Clinton team to demand cancellation [*sic*] or edits of the movie is to once again see them elevate their own personal [*sic*] vanity above every other interest, especially over the interests of John O'Neill and th emany [*sic*] other public servants who saw the threat clearly and did their best to stop it. The objections of various Clinton-era figures --Berger rightly argues he didn't hang up a phone in one scene, for example-- are absurd complaints about the tiny details used to compress eight years and eight months

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into five hours of drama. From these complaints they have built a tissue-thin demand for an Orwellian memory-hole moment.

My Townhall.com column today, "Why Does The Left Hate "The Path to 9/11," expands on the controversy….

First, hundreds of people have screened :The Path to 9/11," [*sic*] including me and many other critics and/or hosts of large audience shows. (Complaints from tiny lefty bloggers that I received a screener and other s [*sic*] didn't ignore the fact that I requested it weeks ago and that I have an audience in the millions, not the tens.) To my knowledge not one professional critic has yet suggested the film is other than a powerful narrative of the era, especially chilling in its portrait of the enemy, or particularly damning of the Clinton-era fecklessness regading [*sic*] terror. It isn't like we don't know that Monica was a distraction and Madeleine Albright a less-than-brilliant Secretary of State (how about that late lurch towards North Korea?) John O'Neill was in fact fired; there were warnings that were ignored about the African embassy bombings, and no response followed the Cole attack and the American ambassador to Yemen was an obstruction to that investigation, Massoud was assasinated [*sic*] by al Qaeda. These are not debatable subjects. They are facts. …

Finally and most importantly, just because people complain that a film is inaccurate doesn't make it so. The Reagan pic was by CBS's own account a deeply flawed bit of anti-Reagan advocacy.

This is not the case about "The Path to 9/11," which is a powerful and hugely researched project, though it is not a documentary and does not claim to be. There is no reasonable case to be made that the film distorts history or slanders public figures in any significant way.

("The Path to 9/11" doesn't even raise the most damning charge made against Clinton --that he fumbled an Osama hand-0ff [*sic*] from Sudan.)

If ABC caves to the vanity of Bill Clinton and his band of defenders, the network can give up any claim to being other than an extension of the DNC. That it

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> would consider doing so over such a powerful film on so important a subject on such a meaningful pair of days is hard to imagine. Those who are urging the network to do so are disgracing themselves, not the picture or its makers (Hewitt 2006A).

The reference to ABC "caving" was another recurring theme throughout the right-wing discourse. The protests that emerged focused a significant amount of attention on the content and accuracy of the program, as described above. The strong and pointed interpretations by partisan factions raises the question of whether the production had a specific political agenda. For the political partisans, the substance of the production was either crucial wisdom or deadly poison. In terms of criticism from the blogosphere, this put ABC in a somewhat difficult position: if the network aired "The Path to 9/11," it would be a tool of the right-wing who besmirched a national tragedy; if it made any substantive changes based on complaints by Clinton and the left, it would be "caving." This constituted a central fault-line in the discourse and demonstrated one peril a media corporation faces in attempting to accommodate a set of fragmented audiences. At another point, Hewitt posted an email from an anonymous reader who claimed to have information about Disney's internal deliberations. The following is the complete text of the post:

> Tuesday, September 05, 2006
> Did ABC Edit "The Path to 9/11?"
> Posted by Hugh Hewitt | 6:17 PM
>
> From the e-mail box:
>
> The Disney execs met all through the weekend - unheard of in this business - debating what changes would be made and what concessions should be given. Here is what looks to be the conclusion:

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> - There will be a handful of tweaks made to a few scenes.
> - They are minor, and nuance in most cases - a line lift here, a tweak to the edit there.
> - There are 900 screeners out there. When this airs this weekend, there will be a number of people who will spend their free evenings looking for these changes and will be hard pressed to identify them. They are that minor.
> - The average viewer would not be able to tell the difference between the two versions.
> - The message of the Clinton Admin failures remains fully intact.
>
> The story here is the backlash that the Disney/ABC execs experienced was completely unexpected and is what caused them to question themselves and make these changes at all. Had this been the Bush Admin pressuring, they wouldn't have even taken the call. The execs and studio bosses are dyed in the wool liberals and huge supporters of Clinton and the Democratic Party in general. They had no idea any of this could happen. As I understand this, the lawyers and production team spent literally months corroborating every story point down to the sentence. The fact that they were the attacked and vilified by their "own team" took them completely by surprise; this is the first time they've been labeled right-wing, conservative conspiracists. [*sic*]
>
> The scramble caused by this backlash was so all consuming that the execs spent their holiday weekend behind closed door meetings and revamped their ad campaign. But at the end of their mad scramble, they found only a handful of changes they could make and still be true to the events. The changes are done only to appease the Clinton team - to be able to say they made changes. But the blame on the Clinton team is in the DNA of the project and could not be eradicated without pulling the entire show. A $40 million investment on the part of ABC is enough to stem even Bill Clinton's influence (Hewitt 2006B).

It is difficult to judge the assertions in this particular post since it is completely anonymous and neither the writer nor Hewitt offers any contextual

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credibility (e.g., confirming the writer's identity offline or even simply explaining how the writer came to this knowledge). The author might be a Disney employee or a private individual with no connection to ABC at all. The author could even be Hewitt or Tukich. This kind of anonymity is, of course, a complaint against political blogs in general. Whatever its source, this can be said about this particular email: it reinforces the frames that were prevalent in right-wing blogs concerning the "real truth" of the production, conservative attitudes about Bill Clinton and the underlying political agenda of "The Path to 9/11." As the anonymous author wrote—and as Hewitt passed on to his audience without comment—"the blame on the Clinton team is in the DNA of the project." Though much of the discourse in the political blogosphere centered on which changes might be made, what disclaimers might be added, and so on, the general consensus on the left and the right was that ultimately little was changed. In the words of a prominent poster at the National Review Online:

> Monday, September 11, 2006
>
> The Path to 9/11 [Kathryn Jean Lopez]
> I haven't seen all of it, but some 3-plus hours. I don't care what was edited out...you can't watch this and not see an indictment of the Clinton administration. Maybe ABC did some editing but they didn't cave (Lopez 2006).

Though the foregoing posts accurately portray certain kinds of support for the program, it is important to acknowledge that even the most highly politicized sites in the blogosphere may foster disagreement and criticism within the community. A limited but distinct disagreement emerged on Hewitt's blog, amidst some of the most full-throated support of "The Path to 9/11." Dean Barnett, Hewitt's regular guest-poster, criticized the accuracy of the program but did so from a right-wing

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perspective. Barnett is no apologist for Clinton or the Democrats, but he was willing to address the debate over "The Path to 9/11" and to do so in the same political channel as Hewitt. During the selected time period, Hewitt never references Barnett's comments. Indeed, there appears to be no interaction between the two of them, though Barnett acknowledges his stance in relation to the community's expectations:

> Wednesday, September 06, 2006
> My Concerns with "The Path to 9/11"
> Posted by Dean Barnett | 1:48 PM
> I know this may not be a popular sentiment around here, but I'm uncomfortable with the upcoming miniseries, "The Path to 9/11." Let me explain why… (Barnett 2006A).

In the same post, Barnett frames his critique within the larger right-wing perspective and then explains his misgivings:

> In the conservative portion of the blogosphere, the film has occasioned much joyous ballyhoo. At last, we seem to be collectively exclaiming, someone with an appropriately large soapbox is telling the true story of Bill Clinton's neglect regarding terrorism. …
>
> I'm especially uncomfortable with this controversy since it's so unnecessary. The record of the Clinton administration on terrorism is an embarrassment and a disgrace. All serious studies of the matter have reached the same conclusion. …
>
> To be fair, it's not exactly like Bush spent the 1990's being a Churchill-esque figure warning America about the gathering storm. And when he took office, his administration's attitude towards terrorism was strikingly blasé (with the noteworthy exception of Donald Rumsfeld).
>
> "The Path to 9/11" may well be a great film. It's a compelling narrative, and all preliminary indications are that it's told quite skillfully. But whether it works as a piece of art and whether it withstands scrutiny as a historical document are two entirely distinct matters.

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> And I would argue that it is far weaker for any ahistorical embellishments that the filmmakers decided to include (Barnett 2006A).

As the airdate approached, Barnett continued to examine the issue critically but from within a partisan political framework. In a post where he asks and answers his own questions, he made some concessions to Democratic critics and essentially rejected "The Path to 9/11" as an inadequate reflection of reality:

> 1) Why have the Democrats made such a fuss about this film? First, let's concede the obvious – they have a point. There are "conflations" and "dramatizations" that cast their previous administration in a negative light. If I were Sandy Berger, I wouldn't be thrilled about my depiction. Then again, if I were Sandy Berger, I'd probably keep a low profile during this entire controversy, figuring the less snooping done into my record on terrorism, the better. But conservatives should be upset about these inaccuracies, also. …
>
> 9) But aren't you curious about "The Path to 9/11"? Yeah, but on a different level than most people are. For instance, I understand that FBI agent John O'Neill (who died in the World Trade Center shortly after moving to the private sector) is the hero of the piece. But John O'Neill was dead set against assassinating bin Laden. He insisted that he was a lawman, not a killer… (Barnett 2006B).

Eventually, under pressure from readers, Barnett watched the program and offered his assessment:

> Responding to the hue [*sic*] and cry of many emails, I reluctantly watched "The Path to 9/11" last night. First the good: I thought it was quickly paced and well done. I especially enjoyed Harvey Keitel's performance. It was good to see him in a lean and feisty mode. As a work of art, I liked it.
>
> Now the bad: As a historical document, its rampant inaccuracies both bothered and distracted me. Osama

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> bin Laden did not fund Ramsi Yousef. Al Qaeda did not control the Taliban. The film's implication that the Taliban was bin Laden's puppet is absurd. Al Qaeda was not awash in riches; the organization was chronically impoverished. In other words, it really disturbed me how the film magnified and exaggerated the capabilities, reach and power of Al Qaeda.
>
> Okay, now a word on THE SCENE, the one where the Northern Alliance and a few intrepid CIA men were ready to snatch or kill bin Laden only to have gutless Washington bureaucrats thwart their efforts. Nothing like it ever happened… (Barnett 2006C).

And, in a subsequent post:

> I just finished watching part two of "The Path to 9/11." Same drill as this morning – first the good: I thought as a film it was fantastic; a truly gripping and moving drama. I'll further add that this movie will likely get all who viewed it to think about terrorism. For any work of art, such a positive impact is a remarkable accomplishment, and everyone involved in the project should feel a measure of pride. And for the readers who compelled me to watch it, I offer a hearty thank you.
>
> Part II, however, like Part I before it, was marred by historical inaccuracies. For instance, Hugh Shelton was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 9/11, not Dick Myers. I'm pretty sure Shelton was scheduled to retire (and did retire) later in the week. The filmmakers' carelessness with such points of fact is truly mystifying.
>
> I also resent the implication that the 9/11 Commission's recommendations are by definition the Rosetta Stone of terror prevention. Call me a cynic, but I don't think partisan hacks like Jamie Gorelick and Richard ben Veniste necessarily hold the exclusive claim to the ideas that will keep us safe… (Barnett 2006D).

Other conservative commentators in the mainstream media pursued a similar line of reasoning (conservative politician and critic Bill Bennett was one high-profile example), asserting that "The Path to 9/11" should have been more factual and more

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critical of the Clinton administration. Though the Bush administration received little overt praise in the right-wing political blogosphere, within the debate over "The Path to 9/11" there was a clear and one-sided culpability frame. The spirit of this framing process is captured in a reader comment that Hewitt quotes in full from another well-known right-wing blog (the following is from "Byron_the_Aussie" at FreeRepublic.com, quoted at Hewitt's blog):

> It's no wonder the Clintonistas have thrown everything at ABC/Disney, in a desperate effort to have the miniseries cancelled. Documents exactly what we've been following over the years on FR. Brave agents on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Dedicated people at Langley and the J. Edgar Hoover building, working around the clock to capture or kill Bin Laden, Ramzi Yusef et al. And all their efforts derailed by Clinton appointees like Berger and Allbright [*sic*]-selfishly putting their own careers (and covering their asses) before protecting the USA. The line of the show delivered by the actor playing Masood [*sic*], brave and charismatic leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan:
>
> ...are there any men left in Washington? Or are they all cowards?... (Hewitt 2006C).

The commenter quotes "The Path to 9/11" back to the Free Republic community and Hewitt reproduces it for his own readers. This anecdote gestures at the relatively closed nature of the discourse on the right. Within the total sample of right-wing discourse, the primary sources cited include a relatively limited list: other right-wing sources online; some bloggers' own content from other media channels (e.g., Hewitt citing his radio show in his blog column); anonymous email; and mainstream conservative commentators. The most nominally neutral source cited was probably media critic Howard Kurtz. Even in Barnett's critiques, only limited

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references to outside sources are included. Instead, bloggers cite pre-existing political and cultural mythologies, focused primarily on Bill Clinton as the embodiment of political corruption and the "leftists" who are his obedient minions. In the right-wing blogosphere, "The Path to 9/11" and the actions of ABC (both in producing the program and in the last-minute edits) are framed within Clinton's culpability for September 11 and the inherent dangers of the "new kind of war" against radical Islam. While these kinds of issues merit further attention in future research, the sample of right-wing bloggers here suggests a less than open approach to political discourse.

*"The Path to 9/11": Discourse from the Left*

Structural and strategic similarities are evident in the two poles of the political blogosphere. Participants on both sides routinely make sweeping generalizations, commit errors in fact or logic, and rely on uncritical assumptions. In many cases, polemic content is standard; for every epithet hurled from one side, there is an equal and opposite insult hurled back. However, in the sample selected for this study, there are also noticeable differences in the approach to political communication and community-building in the blogosphere. Though limited in some respects by the issues described earlier (the unequal number of posts, problems with content design and functionality, etc.), this comparison of the discourse of the right and left does suggest some important distinctions.

Among the sites in the sample, blogs on the left were more likely both to cite and to critique sources outside their immediate political community. A review of the

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content referenced by the left-wing blogs includes: counterterrorism analysts, professional databases, trade journals, mainstream news outlets, right-wing pundits, the program's producers, ABC spokespersons and, significantly, community-generated information from industry professionals, legal scholars, activists, independent researchers and other sources (citations omitted).

An example of this detailed sourcing and analysis can be found in one of the posts from Media Matters, the left-wing media watchdog:

> On September 7, during the 9 a.m., 10 a.m., 11 a.m., and 2 p.m. ET editions of MSNBC News Live, MSNBC anchors Alex Witt and Chris Jansing, as well as MSNBC chief Washington correspondent Norah O'Donnell, made a series of misleading or baseless claims while reporting on the controversy surrounding ABC's upcoming "docudrama," The Path to 9/11. During the 9 a.m. broadcast, Witt suggested that the Clinton administration failed to act on a plan to apprehend or kill Osama bin Laden; stated that the Monica Lewinsky controversy was "a distraction from bin Laden"; and quoted from an article by the conservative news outlet NewsMax.com, which claimed that former Clinton administration officials are upset about the "docudrama," not because of its reported factual inaccuracies, but because, in Witt's words, "this information was meant to be kept behind closed doors and not get out." As Media Matters for America has documented, The Path to 9/11 has been heavily criticized for its reported factual inaccuracies and inconsistencies in representing the 9-11 Commission report, as well as misrepresentations regarding the Clinton administration's counterterrorism policies… (Media Matters 2006C).

This analysis not only addresses the danger of inadvertent or deliberate misrepresentations by reporters, but also details certain practices by which right-wing news sources (in this case NewsMax.com) can establish political frames within the discourse of more mainstream media outlets. The intensively annotated post provides

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a dispassionate explanation of the particular incident, which becomes part of the public record on the Media Matters site. A post such as is this is open to public comment (free registration is required) and typically includes links to resources that readers can use to contact reporters, editors and executives. Thus, the public receives sourced information in an open system that gives them access to the producers of the original report. By many standards this would be considered a more democratic model than the single post at the right-wing Accuracy in Media, which only mentions "The Path to 9/11" obliquely within the context of a fundraiser in opposition of the Al-Jazeera network's introduction to American cable systems. (It should be noted that a limited number of other posts at AIM addressed "The Path to 9/11" more directly, but none during the September 1 to September 15 timeframe.) Using this model, Media Matters generated the greatest number of posts on the controversy surrounding "The Path to 9/11" (36), the greatest quantity of analysis (gauged informally by raw word count) and the most heavily annotated analysis of any of the blogs in this study. Though both Media Matters and AIM function less like traditional blogs in the strictest sense of the word, their content is actually closer to a blog format than other online magazines, network news sources, and so on. For the reasons mentioned earlier, these sites can be considered to be part of the political blogosphere and should be evaluated in terms of their relationship to corporate media, established political interests and democratic culture in general. In this sample, on this topic, Media Matters appears to have provided a significantly more robust and democratic content flow than AIM. Different conditions would likely generate different results, but in this case, the comparison is stark.

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The second category, the political pundit site, represents a more traditional blog format. "Digby" is the principle poster at Hullaballoo where, as in Hewitt's blog, a limited number of regular guest-posters also contribute content. Digby, like Hewitt, provides an openly partisan perspective that is not bound by journalistic politesse. Each blogger calls back to established partisan themes, particularly those that he or she has addressed in the past. But, at least in this study's sample, Digby's arguments were more likely to cite specific actions in order to build a logical case (similar to Barnett's posts), rather than relying on emotional generalities. Digby often writes in a conversational, emotionally charged tone, as many bloggers do. In this case, the tenor communicates a value judgment of "The Path to 9/11":

> …This brings up the single most damning aspect of this entire episode: the network's decision to send out advance screening copies only to conservative outlets, and providing one screening in DC featuring only the Clinton distortions while not providing DVD's of that portion so that any Democrats in the audience couldn't pass them around. Slick move.
>
> Hewitt says he's not special, but clearly he is and there is a reason they did this: someone was very conscious that this was going to get a friendly reception from Republicans and an unfriendly reception from Democrats. The marketing and publicity staff or their suncontractors, [*sic*] at least, knew exactly what they had. And knowing that, while continuing to portray this film as an "important event" based upon the 9/11 Commission Report and with no commercial interruptions is why suspicions are running so high about the filmmaker's and Disney/ABC's motivations.
>
> Indeed, the fact that Nowrasteh chose to do exclusive interviews with Hewitt and Horowitz in the midst of all this controversy says everything you need to know about his objectivity. Michael Moore never made any claim to being objective when he made "Fahrenheit 9/11" and he never said he was basing his film on an

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> official bi-partisan investigation. If you bought a ticket to F9/11 you knew exactly where Moore was coming from. Nowrasteh, on the other hand, is trying to have it both ways. He wants the conservative community's approbation and has cooperated in a marketing plan to appeal to them while at the same time claiming that he has no agenda for a television program that is being presented for free as if it's a public service (Digby 2006).

This analysis is deeper than that of a simple reactionary anti-Bush or anti-conservative blog. Though partisan discourse is inherently biased, Digby's site suggests that bloggers can aspire to partisan perspectives—and can contribute discourse with the intent to contest and transform political frames—without necessarily sacrificing accuracy or devolving into plain vituperation.

The bloggers at Talking Points Memo pursue a different balance, applying journalistic reporting practices to a critical partisan perspective and using the blog format (and the Web platform in general) to bring readers into the information-gathering process. At the counterpart site on the right, the National Review's The Corner, a cadre of well-known conservative pundits post their thoughts throughout the day, interact with one another, and offer links of interest to their readership. Occasionally, the bloggers will include emails from readers. The site does not, however, allow comments. This is not uncommon in the political blogosphere, particularly on the right, though generally comments are considered a positive aspect of the medium. In the case of "The Path to 9/11," the bloggers at The Corner took very little interest, only occasionally reiterating a point from elsewhere in the right blogosphere. By contrast, Marshall's Talking Points Memo used "The Path to 9/11" as an opportunity to educate readers.

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Talking Points Memo began a single-person blog and can currently be classified as a professional community blog, based on the definition given earlier (however, in the present study, only Marshall commented on "The Path to 9/11"). Marshall does not allow comments on the main Talking Points Memo site. However, he has launched two sister sites, TPM Café and TPMmuckraker, both of which allow for public comment on content that flows between the three sites. Marshall has earned a reputation as an effective organizer of blog communities. In the case of "The Path to 9/11," Marshall solicited input from readers and encouraged them to contact local affiliates to create a composite picture of how the controversy was playing in local markets. This kind of reporting would be difficult for most traditional reporters to manage, but because of his large virtual community, Marshall can quickly obtain a range of data and publish the findings. The following series of posts suggests how TPM solicits and reports information in an iterative fashion:

> (September 06, 2006 -- 07:55 PM EDT // link)
>
> Okay, I admit it, my curiosity got the best of me. So I decided to call a few ABC local affiliates and see what the deal is, specifically whether they were planning on airing ABC's Path to 9/11 and whether they planned on airing any rebuttal to the alleged errors contained in it.
>
> I tried to get through to someone at Boston's WHDH. But I couldn't find a number that anyone would answer. So I moved on to KABC, the LA station that I grew up watching. The woman who I spoke to informed me that, yes, they were airing it. And no there would not be any rebuttal. However, there was going to be a "disclaimer" shown "throughout" the two night presentation. I had a hard time getting down the whole text of the disclaimer she read out to me. So I asked if she could email it to me. But she said she wasn't allowed to do that.

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Anyway, after that, a few readers helpfully pointed out that the ABC stations in the biggest markets are pretty much all O&O's. That is, Disney/ABC owns the stations themselves. So they're not really affiliates and they have no independent choice whether to air the movie. Apparently, at least New York, LA, Chicago, San Francisco, Philly and Houston are all covered by Disney.

Do you live in a media market with an ABC channel that isn't directly owned by Disney? (Marshall 2006A)

—

(September 06, 2006 -- 08:27 PM EDT)

A bit more on ABC's O&Os, the local affiliates who are actually owned and operated by ABC parent company Disney. Here's the list of all of them. But the rest -- listed here -- are independently owned. They don't have to run the ABC 9/11 bamboozler if they don't want to.

Just to remind everyone, think back to the Sinclair Broadcasting imbroglio. Petitions don't mean jack. They don't care. Local affiliates, though, live and die by the revenue they get from local advertisers. It's a really big deal.

So take a look at the list of independent affiliates. And just ask them what they're going to do. No need to be rude or unpleasant. It's just a question. If you get a response, let us know and we'll share it with the rest of our readers (Marshall 2006B).

—

(September 07, 2006 -- 11:27 AM EDT)

Boston's ABC affiliate WCVB is apparently telling viewers they have no choice but to run the ABC 9/11 movie. But I'm not sure that's true since they're an independent affiliate. The station is owned by Hearst, not ABC (Marshall 2006C).

—

(September 07, 2006 -- 12:39 PM EDT // link)

The response from WCVB, the ABC Boston affiliate ...

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> > Thank you for contacting us regarding the ABC special, “The Path to 9/11.”
> >
> > This Sunday and Monday WCVB-TV Channel 5 will air ABC’s commercial-free broadcasts of “The Path to 911. On Monday, Part Two will be followed by a special edition of “Primetime Live,” an electronic town meeting.
> >
> > We will forward your concerns to the ABC Network, since they are still in the final edit of the program….
> >
> > Neil Ungerleider | Assistant News Director | WCVB | 5 TV Place Needham MA 02494
>
> Also of note, a lot of stations, like the ABC affiliate in Cleveland, seem to be fibbing to their viewers, claiming that they have no choice but to air the movie, even though that's not true, since they are independent ABC affiliates (Marshall 2006D).

With each post, Marshall added or modified information, creating a conversation between readers and the media outlets they were engaging. Marshall’s community identified and helped promote important details, such as the following review that hints at the ease with which the program might be accepted as “real,” even by professional journalists:

> (September 10, 2006 -- 04:50 PM EDT // link)
>
> Why all of ABC/Disney's bogus disclaimers don't mean jack.
>
> From the review of Path to 9/11 in the Providence Journal-Bulletin ...
>
> > The two-part, five-hour ABC special airing Sunday and Monday at 8 p.m. on Channels 5 and 6 is compelling and confounding, gripping and disturbing. And it’s all completely true. The program, which gives TV docudramas a good

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> > name, is based on the 9/11 Commission Report, which was published in 2004.
> >
> > All the details are documented. All the characters are real; so are the events, unfortunately.
>
> Speaks for itself. And the Projo isn't even a conservative paper.
>
> Special thanks to TPM Reader YP, who's keeping her eyes open (Marshall 2006E).

In this manner, Marshall's blog becomes, as others do, a forum for public discussion of critical issues. What makes TPM distinct (and successful) is the ethic of credibility that Marshall imparts to his site and demands of his guest-posters, based on his training as a journalist. Once again, this is an example of third-age political communication that can be partisan yet accurate, informal yet credible.

Finally, the Daily Kos represents the largest and most active left-wing public community site, claiming more than 100,000 registered users and 600,000 daily visits. Launched and still managed by Markos Moulitsas ("Kos"), the Daily Kos community directed a great deal of attention to "The Path to 9/11." Among several dozen posts that referenced the program, 27 were identified for this study as suitable for analysis; other search processes might return different results. Top-level posts are written by site editors and are highlighted on the front page; "diaries" can be created by any registered user. The posts analyzed in this study include primarily top-level posts and a limited number of diaries. The distinctive feature about the Daily Kos community is that the large numbers of active participants often means an extremely robust conversation is taking place. Moulitsas posted several top-level stories about the controversy as it developed and many of the posts that focused on "The Path to

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9/11" generated several hundred reader comments. As with Talking Points Memo, the community will sometimes conduct research and report findings. Often, users share particular kinds of expertise. The following is one of several examples of readers contributing professional perspectives on the ABC's decision-making processes in the production, promotion and airing of "The Path to 9/11":

> thoughts from a TV movie producer on path to 9/11
> by robert green
>
> UPDATED BELOW: I've produced or exec produced 12 TV movies this year, including Life is not a Fairytale and Firestorm. i thought, given some of the silliness i'm seeing in the diaries that it might be useful to some here to understand the process that gets such movies made.
> so, below the fold, a primer on how it works.
>
> robert green's diary :: ::
>
> there aren't very many of these made any more--the heyday of the TV movie is long since behind us. when selling to the networks only an event is going to get their interest. 9/11 was always going to be a movie on one of the networks or on cable--it was just a question of where. when cyrus was pitching the story, he had insider info as a movement conservative, so he knew how to get the line on the commission report and so on.
>
> what follows is speculation (a dramatic recreation, if you will, with some license taken, some composite character, and some fictionalizations. hell, maybe there's even some improv.)
>
> at ABC, you have various lines of defense. someone in the middle ranks (a VP or slightly higher up) gets a call from cyrus's agents saying: "we have a great take on 9/11 as a mini-series". a pitch would be set immediately, because cyrus is considered a solid writer (he in fact IS a solid writer, with some decent credits and a few good scripts behind him). And given the profile of the pitch, Steve MacPherson would be in that first meeting, most likely. I doubt VERY much that

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> Cyrus pitched a political slant--more likely he just pitched a "i know people on the inside" angle. as well, everyone wanted to tell john o'neill's story (that was oliver stone's original angle as well) and cyrus had a bunch of info from that end as well.
>
> ABC probably bought this in the room, as they say--a good writer, a great story, a true event. kind of a no-brainer. with that deal done, cyrus commenced to writing, with some input from ABC but probably very limited at that point. once he finished his draft, then the network got involved. notes are written (by both VP types and probably higher ups) and those notes are both creative and now quite possibly political in nature. the highest-ups at ABC would be well aware of this project, and were i'm sure very keen to have this movie on for the fifth anniversary, putting everyone under the gun. that this coincided with the election coming up was most likely not on people's minds-i am reconsidering my intemperate remarks on digby's blog yesterday. airdates have their own logic--this one was too obvious to need to question… (Green 2006).

This information runs counter to more reactionary discourse and raises important points that can then be further vetted in the comments sections. The particular diarist may or may not be entirely honest or reliable, but as a registered user within the community he may have established a certain level of credibility. Other readers could check his profile, see if he has posted other diaries, review his user ID number to see roughly how long he has been a member. With that information, readers can at least make a choice as to how to interpret his post. Another interesting post on this topic concerned the legal dynamics of libel. Though such commentary is only as worthwhile as it is accurate, the Kos community does self-regulate and other legal professionals would be likely to call attention to errors in the comment section. A limited selection of a much longer post is included here:

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> First, we're talking tort law here, that body of law in which plaintiffs can seek injunctions, apologies, retractions, compensatory damages and punitive damages as a result of intentional or negligent interference with their rights. This is as opposed to contract law, though at several deeper levels, there might be some contract liability somewhere in this thing.
>
> Specifically, we are addressing the tort of defamation…
>
> Meanwhile, Disney, which is shielded from direct liability for ABC's actions by virtue of stock ownership rather than direct control, might want to be checking on whether allowing, after ample warning, a Disney subsidiary to expose the corporation that has the most to lose from a tarnished image, i.e., Disney, could be grounds for a shareholder derivative suit against the board for mismanagement and a resulting loss of value to its trademarks and image, resulting in likely diminished stock value. This is why I think Disney is the Achilles heel in all this… (The Crusty Bunker 2006).

Though the caliber of the professional perspective is open to debate, the significant point is that a wide range of views are introduced into the discourse. Professional input is also augmented by independent research, providing context and participation that are rarely available in mainstream media. One poster provided background on the Christian organizations in which “The Path to 9/11” director David Cunningham got his start. Again, these are limited selections from a longer post:

> The story behind how "The Path to 9/11" (PT911) came to be made is still quite murky, so the degree of influence various individuals and entities had is very much up in the air. Nonetheless, it is certain that director David Cunningham had a lot of power--after all, directors usually do, and the producer's own statements indicate he took a rather hands-off approach.

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> So who is the director, and what are the influences on him? This is surely a complicated investigative question for anyone with so little previous public record. But we do know this much:
>
> (1) He's the son of Loren Cunningham, the founder of a very big missionary organization, Youth With A Mission (YWAM),
>
> (2) He founded an auxiliary of YWAM, The Film Institute (TFI) with the goal of producing a "Godly transformation and revolution TO and THROUGH the Film and Television industry."
>
> (3) PT911 is TFI's "first project." …
>
> Therefore, whatever other influences are involved in the production of PT911, the role of YWAM has to be considered as an important contributor. It's all too easy for those left of center to refer to the "religious right" as a sort of short-hand, but this is often politically foolish when we are dealing with specific groups or individuals whose beliefs and practices are strikingly at odds with what the majority of Christians believe--or sometimes even with what the majority of rightwing Christians believe… (Rosenberg 2006).

Again, the validity of this particular critique is open to question. But it speaks to the value of discourse and debate at the Daily Kos—and in the political blogosphere in general—that detailed analyses of relatively obscure aspects of the production of this particular program are available to anyone with access to the Web. The relative openness and vibrancy with which the Kos community addressed this particular issue suggests that the politicization of the September 11 attacks is an urgent issue among independent political communicators in the blogosphere. Considering the activity of the right- and left-wing blog sites in this study, it seems reasonable to conclude that political partisanship was a factor in determining how members of the political blogosphere responded to the controversy. The final chapter

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of this study offers some further analysis and attempts to place the controversy within the larger context of this project.

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## Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

This study attempted to examine a complex process taking place within a complex system. In doing so, it analyzed several theoretical approaches, levels of media and types of political communicators. Chapter One noted the expectations of democratic culture that are embedded in the media and suggested that economic pressures make corporations susceptible to influence by political communicators. Chapter Two examined the state of third-age political communication and some of the processes by which political frames are created. It noted that today dominant frames draw heavily on themes of terrorism, political fundamentalism and othering. Chapter Three considered the political blogosphere as a potential site of democratic culture, compared it to both journalism and public sphere theory, and suggested that credibility is an important additional measure. Against this backdrop, Chapter Four examined ABC's "The Path to 9/11" to gauge, first, how political communicators were constructing frames within and around the program and, next, how those frames were contested or advanced in the political blogosphere. All of these elements interact in a complex articulation that is essentially impossible to delimit. This study is in no way definitive of how this process works; indeed, the case is sui generis. But the larger picture is indicative of how political meanings emerge from this tangled net of business, politics, technology and emotion. The hope is that this analysis will establish a starting point for more detailed inquiries into the influences on political meaning-making, particularly that which operates outside democratic culture.

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This final chapter reviews the main points of the preceding material in a summary, then offers conclusions that seem reasonable to assert within the scope of the project. Limitations of the study included here should help direct future research and establish a basis for useful empirical investigations. The last section touches on general ideas in media policy and practices to address some of these problems.

*A. Summary*

Chapter One addressed the media as a crucial site of social intercourse. Based on the long history of the American press and its pivotal role as the voice of the public, normative ideals of a free and independent media system endure. In the eighteenth century, publishers and pamphleteers helped unite the population in revolution. In the nineteenth, the tools of communication allowed the new nation to expand across the continent and the penny press made the news a fundamental part of American culture. In the twentieth century, as newspapers and radio brought people authoritative news of world wars and the Great Depression, a new entertainment culture appeared in movie houses and on television (Starr 2004). Today, these systems have evolved into complex networks of extraordinary reach and technological sophistication. Their products are available at virtually any moment, around the globe and in the most private spaces (McChesney 2004). This penetration of the physical world extends the power of the media as a system through which individuals and society create and communicate a range of symbolic meanings (Carey 1989). Complexity arises from the fact that the same media serve as both a site of democratic tradition and a system of cultural production. In a deeply networked corporate media environment, this can subvert the democratic role of the media to

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corporations' economic needs. Though the public maintains expectations of independence and journalistic integrity, economic pressures are likely to dominate the practices of media corporations (Bagdikian 2004). These pressures may align with the principles of a democratic culture at times, but the primary goal of the corporation is to maximize profit and minimize risk. As such, these vast, multifaceted companies may be simultaneously pursuing a number of marginally coherent, even contradictory goals (Turow 1992). It may be economically advantageous to foster democratic ideals in the media, as in the professionalization of journalism through the development of principles of objectivity (Starr 2004). But forms of journalism can also be appropriated for entertainment or other purposes. Producers of tabloid journalism, for example, can mimic the forms of authority that sustain a credible news-gathering organization (Underwood 2001). This may result in a product that draws authenticity from the democratic legacy of the press, without actually adhering to democratic principles. This combination of economic pressure and deep cultural power creates a dangerous dynamic. Political communicators can gain access to these vast networks, either through traditional business exchanges (e.g., purchasing advertising) or through more indirect influences (e.g., loosening regulations on ownership). When political influence penetrates the system of cultural meaning, it circumvents democratic ideals of openness and participation (Balkin 2004). This can happen under the cover of legitimacy that media companies have developed through the careful cultivation of their credibility. The public should be wary of political communicators who appropriate this credibility to create or revise cultural meanings.

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Chapter Two offered some perspectives on approaching this problem. First, by examining Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) analysis of third-age political communication, it is possible to identify several important trends. For example, the professionalization of political communication has two primary effects. First, it separates the political communication product (e.g., events, commercials, speeches) from the democratic ethic of political discourse, resulting in tightly controlled campaigns where spin trumps public debate. Second, it introduces professionals from non-political arenas into the field of political communication. These factors lead to the proliferation of new types of media content and greater competition (both of which are general trends in broadcasting). Producers mix and match political news with a variety of entertainment formats, creating hybrid products that may conform to democratic ideals to greater or lesser degrees. In turn, the profusion of products and channels in an increasingly competitive environment leads to a fragmentation of audiences and, subsequently, a greater array of possible interpretations of political news. This greater number of readers of political news translates to a new level of subjective selectivity in politics. Political communicators can produce targeted messages for specific sub-audiences and media consumers can find versions of "truth" that align with pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. The primary way these meanings are constructed and read is through the process of political framing.

Research explains many of the complex dynamics by which political actors vie for influence by constructing and contesting frames (Scheufele 1999). The process of cascading activation describes how frames can flow with relative ease from sources of authority through various levels of the media—the administration, political

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elites, the media and so on—down to the level of the public (Entman 2003). In this model there is a limited ability for the public to introduce and push frames back "up" through the media. Now, however, in the third age of political communication, two other important levels of political framing have emerged. The first is the network of professional political communicators working both in politics and in political media. The second is the network of structured communities in the political blogosphere. Both of these networks have skills and capacities to create and promote political frames, though the means by which they do this may vary. For example, political communicators may have direct access to decision-makers within a media corporation. Bloggers, on the other hand, exert pressure through creating communities, engaging in political activism and attracting the attention of news producers. If political communicators are focused on creating political messages that can be disseminated through the mainstream media, communities in the political blogosphere are, in general, more likely to position themselves as "watchdogs." Whatever the strategy, both groups work with powerful political frames that resonate on a cultural level.

The frames that dominate contemporary political communication derive from well-established cultural themes that have been present in the West for decades or centuries (Said 1993). Such frames need to be continually reexamined and reevaluated to determine how they are being used, by whom and to what effect. The frames addressed in this study—terrorism, fundamentalism and fear of the other—are old messages that have been repackaged and expressed across new media systems. In each case, the professionalization of third-age political communication has increased

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the sophistication of these frames. Though terrorism has been a political theme throughout much of the twentieth century, Lewis (2005) convincingly suggests that political communication is now firmly entrenched in a paradigm of discursive, mediated, global violence. An international "language war" emerges in which meanings are expressed in the broadcast of fictional and actual combat, destruction and death. Another key political communication strategy draws on the linguistic and narrative forms of fundamentalist religion to advance political arguments (Domke 2004). The tendency toward a reductivist view of the world in this mode is inadequate to the complexities of real political conflict. But the simple binaries of moral surety create powerful claims to authority that evoke religious devotion and the obeisance of faith. Political communicators have also updated the age-old Western discourse of fear of the other (Said 1993). The psychology of othering and the enemy is also a powerful tool for political framing, in part because it reduces resistance to political authority and promoting a simplistic cohesive national identity (Aho 1994). "Radical Islam" is disseminated as a mythological construct, emerging in the political discourse of such media figures as CNN's Glenn Beck, radio hosts at San Francisco's KSFO and prominent political bloggers. It is in this last arena where the relatively free flow of discourse provides the best opportunity for contesting frames and achieving the ideals of democratic culture.

Television, radio and newspapers offer limited opportunities for public discourse. Readers of newspapers can send letters to the editor or complain to a reporter. Radio and television programs may invite a panel of individuals to respond to an event and audiences can sometimes participate by phone. But these forms of

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interaction greatly constrain free participation in cultural discourse. Opportunities in these media are limited in scope and intermittent in availability. The Internet offers a different structure and has its own limitations (e.g., participants must have access to the technology, online communities can control and exclude members and so on). Despite these, it also offers a fundamentally participatory mode of discourse. Readers can sample from a wide array of perspectives and, in general, can comment freely or with a simple registration process. Though this platform does support certain practices of democratic culture in these ways, the discourse that takes place there is not inherently democratic. Chapter Three compared the political blogosphere to two key arenas that are associated with a functioning democratic society. The first, journalism, is grounded in daily life, as evidenced by the modern proliferation of news sources. The second, the public sphere, is more conceptual, drawing on the idealized notions of deliberation in Habermasian theory.

The discourse in the political blogosphere varies significantly from journalism. The rules of gathering, analyzing and presenting information are flexible, the tone is often irreverent and hierarchies are much less formal. But at a certain level of analysis, blogs and journalism perform similar functions. At the most credible blogs, as at the most credible news outlets, facts are presented and evaluated, public knowledge is amplified and cultural ideas are promoted or rejected. The antipathy between bloggers and journalists in blogging's nascent phase centered on questions of credibility and each side had valid criticisms of the other. But as they both grow more tolerant and knowledgeable, the two occupations should be able to collaborate more constructively, which would better serve their shared goals. Chapter Three also

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touched on the more theoretical question of whether the political blogosphere might serve as a public sphere, a site of freer and more pure public discourse. Though a true public sphere cannot really be said to exist, the concept offers a useful measure of the political blogosphere. Consider that the tradition of public restlessness in media that animated Habermas's theory resonates with the history of political blogging. Also, certain questions are central to both, namely the structural (Who own the channels?), the spatial (Who participates in the discourse?) and the communicative (What is the purpose of the discourse?)(Dahlgren 2001). If, as Habermas suggests, the public sphere as a system of meaning is susceptible to the influence of business interests, then political bloggers should be prepared to navigate similar dangers. Truth is neither definitive nor universal, but in the political narratives that the public uses to make decisions, transparency and accuracy should be fundamental. Credibility, as a central tenet in both journalism and the public sphere, can serve as a measure for the public in evaluating the quality of democratic participation.

The concerns set forth in these three chapters cover a broad range of theoretical approaches. But each is important in this attempt to understand the construction and contestation of political frames—and, thus, the production of cultural meanings—in an extremely complex media environment. Though the theories addressed here may not naturally seem to cohere, they can all be seen working together in "The Path to 9/11."

In Chapter Four, an examination of ABC revealed a corporation, much like any other, facing a highly competitive and fragmented marketplace. The company responds as others do by pursuing a multiplicity of strategies and targeting products

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to a wide array of audiences. In 2004, when “The Path to 9/11” was likely conceived, the network would presumably have had a very easy decision in approving the project. The events of September 11 were already highly mediated and were beginning to be evaluated in a range of other media products, including major motion pictures from competitors. The five-year anniversary was imminent, a writer with an established track record was attached and a strong cast could be assembled. The material would draw on the 9/11 Commission Report and the project would include the co-chair of the Commission as a co-executive producer. It was essentially a natural event for this production to develop; the crucial issue is the intended meaning and function of the final product.

At the time the production was being developed, a number of influential individuals within ABC had an interest in promoting certain ideologies. The political director of ABC News openly solicited conservative approval for ABC in a number of interviews with right-wing media outlets (Media Matters 2006). Meanwhile, the producers of “The Path to 9/11” had hired a director and were coordinating with the network’s vice president of synergy, both of whom were active in Christian organizations dedicated to promoting Christian values through mainstream media sources. This informal affiliation of political interests within the network gave shape to the content and promotion of the program, which resonated with long-established right-wing political discourse. Within the network’s goal of appealing to a wide range of audiences, political conservatives became a primary target. This, in itself, is not anti-democratic; other parts of the Disney Corporation likely pursued other political audiences. But, in the case of the “The Path to 9/11”—perhaps the most culturally

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charged event of the preceding four decades—the network invested tens of millions of dollars and the authority of its brand name to generate an aura of credibility around a program with a distinct partisan slant. The conservative political frames embedded in the program included, most obviously, the culpability frame applied to the Clinton administration (and to President Clinton in particular who is framed as both a political and moral failure), the noble warrior frame (with a repeated allusion to the special wisdom these men possess and their ultimate sacrifices) and the dangers inherent in the strange, monstrous radical Islamicists. Whether or not it was conceived as such, it is possible to place "The Path to 9/11" within the larger discourse of global mediated violence that Lewis calls language wars. Significantly, the primary frames in the program fit tightly within Bush administration frames in support of the Iraq war. The premise of "The Path to 9/11"—that the failures of a cowardly and feckless Clinton administration led to the death of innocents on September 11—supported the textual and subtextual message of Bush's anniversary address, which occurred within the broadcast window of the program: namely that Bush, as a noble warrior, had the special knowledge needed to defend the country from terrorists and would do this through continued military action in Iraq. After emphasizing this link for many years in political discourse, this was perhaps the administration's most sophisticated conflation of September 11 and Iraq to date.

As these frames moved through the mainstream media (e.g., in news coverage of the controversy, in Clinton's interview on Fox News and so on), the political blogosphere approached them in a different way. When Tukich distributed screening DVDs only to right-wing media outlets, she ensured that the political discourse in so-

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called alternative media would be central to the promotion of the program. This effort on her part demonstrates that corporate media—and political communicators who may have influence within them—will use the political blogosphere as another venue for the promotion of products and ideologies. Though the Internet has enjoyed a reputation as a site of open, democratic discourse, it is now also a venue for corporate synergy practices. As in other media, the expression of hegemonic ideology will be essentially invisible in both structural and policy developments concerning the Internet. More immediately, political frames may have the look and feel of independent discourse, when in fact they are part of a strategic communication agenda. This might happen on either side of the political spectrum or in non-partisan policy discourses. While no form of hegemonic control is absolute or uncontested (Hall 1977), the broad scope and cultural power of institutions such as ABC suggest that skilled communicators within large corporations may be able to exert considerable influence on how the public reads and receives mediated events.

Within the political blogs examined here, there were two basic approaches to the political frames generated by the controversy around "The Path to 9/11": advancing them or contesting them. It is encouraging that both sides of the political blogosphere engaged in at least a minimal level of democratic cultural practices. Both sides engaged their audiences with issues of political and social importance and, to varying degrees, invited comment from readers. Both sides, again to varying degrees, cited outside sources and used these views to increase public knowledge. And both sides negotiated "truth" in the context of "The Path to 9/11." And yet, as might be expected, the two camps also responded in different ways. The right wing tended to

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see the program as an affirmation of political frames that existed outside the program. Credibility was negotiated not strictly on facts but on an established perception that was part of a larger political discourse, namely the Clinton culpability frame. The salient issues were not the specific points about factuality and dramatic license raised by the left, but rather, for example, whether ABC would "cave" to murky Clintonite conspirators. The left wing contested the particular frames and situated the production—specifically its questionable accuracy and its promotion of anti-Clinton frames—within a well-established left-wing argument about conservative political discourse. This difference in strategic communication approaches suggests that the two sides perceive media in different contexts. The right, in some cases within this sample, seemed to use the political blogosphere as an extension of a political framing system. The left follows similar strategies, but its discourse is couched in a broader, more inclusive debate about democratic discourse and political communication. In the sample selected for this study, debate on the left was noticeably open, well sourced and grounded in an ethic of credibility.

This more open discourse on the left suggests that, within this study, the left exhibited much better communicative practice from the standpoint of fostering democratic culture. Other studies might come to different conclusions. The overall analysis raises a particular concern, however, an observation that challenges the notion of the blogosphere as a democratic space in general. Both sides in this controversy responded by constructing arguments within larger discourses. And both appropriated the cultural product and analyzed it with more partisan rigor than the mainstream media would be able to do. But these messages are deeply embedded in

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their respective communities and very little sincere communication moves from one side of the political spectrum to the other. Both arenas are highly keyed to the agendas or the readers and they seek to influence the public discourse by aggregating and focusing public opinion. Rarely do bloggers on opposite sides of the political spectrum recognize or analyze one another's critiques. Even when the political blogosphere is at its best, it remains a highly partisan environment and thus excludes certain kinds of discourse that could help foster democratic culture.

*B. Conclusions*

Because of the nature of this study, it is not possible to measure direct effects of "The Path to 9/11" on audiences or to say definitively what may have motivated certain political communicators. But based on the theoretical background and what transpired in this case, the evidence permits some basic conclusions.

*Professionalization, Fragmentation and Hybridity*

Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) described a communication environment wherein the production of political content is increasingly professionalized. Campaigns evolved from a democratic contest over electoral representation toward the construction and maintenance of tightly controlled messages. Economic issues compelled news operations to be more profitable and drove the creation of news and entertainment hybrids. Executives and producers targeted fragmented audiences that were increasingly difficult to attract and maintain. An independent attitude toward traditional top-down authority emerged at the same time that a more audience-oriented idiom took hold. To make politics more "palatable and acceptable," media

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producers reframed "truth" as something audiences could know for themselves. These pressures, in combination, helped create the modern environment where consumers can pick and choose from an array of political products, based on their preferences. Several of these trends were at work in "The Path to 9/11."

Although it may be read as part of a larger framing project for the administration's commitment to the Iraq War, "The Path to 9/11" was not campaign communication. It did, however, exhibit certain elements of the professionalization that Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) described. Their study focused on media practices that incorporated media professionals into political communication networks. As with other trends they noted, contemporary business practices have already overtaken their observations. In this case, professionalization animates Christian media organizations such as director Cunningham's The Film Institute, which establishes a network of media professionals that may be accessed when individuals within a corporation wish to produce programs with certain religious or political themes. Such political groups may be able to influence executives and producers to subtly align their work with some aspect of a dominant political ideology. Whereas Blumler and Kavanagh noted that professionalization separated political communication from the tenets of democratic discourse, the current study suggests that political communicators can now tap existing networks of politicized cultural producers. It is important to note that this kind of influence could occur on either side of the political spectrum. An inexact example from the political left might be political documentary companies such as director Robert Greenwald's Brave New Films, which produced "Outfoxed," a critique of Fox News, and other political films (BraveNewFilms.org 2007).

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Competition in this arena, as Blumler and Kavanagh noted, is likely to drive further fragmentation and further innovation in creating marketable "hybrid" products. ABC's "The Path to 9/11" was a hybrid: a "docudrama" that was based on real events but fictional, or as Nowrasteh said "a terror thriller as well as a history lesson." It was also a project of both entertainment and political framing, targeted simultaneously to a mainstream audience that understood the events to be "real" and a conservative sub-audience that would recognize specific frames as "truth." In this particular case, the discourse that emerged centered on the issue of credibility, with sub-audiences on the left and on the right taking action in support of or against the political frames of the program, choosing, in essence, which meaning of "The Path to 9/11" they would fight for. It seems reasonable to conclude that, in the contemporary political environment, this sort of contest will occur again.

*Fear, Fundamentalism and Language Wars*

Domke (2004) describes political fundamentalism as an exercise of political framing within the language and linguistic mode of religion. Though the content of "The Path to 9/11" included few overt Christian references, the noble warrior frame and the implied moral failings of the Clinton administration both express comparative themes that are present in the Bush administration's discourse of political fundamentalism. References to the Lewinsky scandal are only part of the morality frame. The failures of the government during the Clinton administration become a moral failure in allowing the victims of September 11 and other terror attacks to die. Though not expressed in specifically religious terms, scenes such as the fictitous CIA agent's tearful rebuke invoke a moral chastisement. The moral and political contexts

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blend together into a critique that is congruent with messaging from the Bush administration. Domke's study is extremely useful for analyzing political language (e.g., in speeches, campaigns and so on) particularly in the context of journalism. This case study of "The Path to 9/11" suggests that such strategies may also be imported—once again through third-age hybridity—into other kinds of cultural products as well. To better understand the dynamics of terror framing in political communication, this study also drew upon Lewis's (2005) notion of language wars, which asserts that contemporary political culture is infused with the language of terrorism. Lewis argues that terrorism is not merely (or even mostly) about the violent act, but, more importantly, the subsequent media representation of the act. In a global media era, the world itself becomes a battlefield of meaning through violence. Lewis naturally ties this expressive function of violence to the asymmetrical warfare of al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. But he extends the analysis to demonstrate how institutions (e.g., states and nations), in seeking to create and stabilize meanings to perpetuate themselves, also must engage in language wars. Thus, "shock and awe," "mission accomplished," and the Iraq "surge" become weapons of hegemony. In president Bush's speech of September 11, 2006, he directly linked the meaning of the attacks five years earlier to the Iraq war:

> I'm often asked why we're in Iraq when Saddam Hussein was not responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The answer is that the regime of Saddam Hussein was a clear threat. My administration, the Congress, and the United Nations saw the threat—and after 9/11, Saddam's regime posed a risk that the world could not afford to take (Bush 2006).

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This is the contemporary argument that is implied throughout “The Path to 9/11.” In the promotional clip at the end of the first night’s program, the voiceover asks, “They knew 9/11 was coming. They’d even caught some of the conspirators. But why didn’t they eliminate bin Laden? And how could they fail to stop the attack?” The construct of Clinton/September 11/failure is juxtaposed with the construct of Bush/Iraq/success. The implication asserts that Bush is preventing the harm Clinton permitted in the past. This entire formula is supported by the deeply entrenched vocabulary of terror, violence and war that is dominant in political discourse at the moment. As this vocabulary migrates between news, politics and entertainment, democratic culture—which can be more easily subverted or circumvented in times of crisis (Hutcheson et al. 2004)—is put under increasing pressure. The language of terror as a political tool should be considered anti-democratic if it encompasses misinformation, othering, simplistic or deceptive framing practices and so on. In focusing his study, Lewis asks whether propagandists can exert influence on the polis by manipulating the language of political violence and terrorism. The limitations of this study preclude a definitive answer to that question. However, it seems clear that “The Path to 9/11” was, at least in part, an attempt to exert such influence.

*Political Communicators Within a Corporate System*

It is probably impossible to know what factors ABC’s management considered in giving the network’s imprimatur to “The Path to 9/11.” The producers of the program, however, had clearer ideas of the political frames they wished to advance. The core of the project was a relatively small group, most notably executive

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producer Platt, writer/producer Nowrasteh and director Cunningham. Two of these people, Nowrasteh and Cunningham, have connections to right-wing or Christian media networks. A third, vice president of synergy and special projects Tukich, had a established reputation for infusing Christian values in mainstream media. Other decision-makers at ABC may or may not have had similar interests; regardless, the political agenda expressed in the framing of film appears to have been the work of a small group. Though Nowrasteh insists he was simply telling the "truth" of the September 11 attacks, the close alignment between the political frames in the program and right-wing critiques of the Clinton administration strongly suggests a political agenda. This encapsulates the danger of a corporate media structure that can be manipulated by a handful of individuals. If the content threatens the ability of Americans (and others) to clearly and accurately understand a crucial historical event, this should be considered detrimental to democratic culture.

*Advancing and Contesting Frames in the Political Blogosphere*

The promotion of specific frames from "The Path to 9/11" in right-wing blogs—originating in but not limited to Tukich's distribution of DVDs only to right-wing media outlets—indicates corporate media are already "colonizing" the blogosphere. The Internet's reputation for independence and free expression is based in real practices, but as the medium matures, questions of authenticity, authority and credibility become increasingly important. As with other media, it is essential to understand how various interests are using the medium and to know how to identify those interests. Transparency is a virtue on the Internet, just as it is in other media. In

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the case of “The Path to 9/11,” the political blogosphere became the site of two distinct kinds of discourse, both the advancing and the contestation of political frames. Bloggers on both sides of the political spectrum used modes of open and closed discourse, but the central issue was one of credibility: right-wing bloggers asserted an essential truth behind the program while left-wing bloggers asserted an essential truth about right-wing political communicators. Both sides situated their arguments within a frame of “truth” and both sides likely believed that the objectives and agendas they were pursuing were grounded in “reality.” This suggests that, within an already fragmented media environment, cultural products are further scattered and dissected among sub-audiences, creating a massive field of contestation in the political blogosphere. This allows the public, media corporations and political communicators to meet in the arena and test their skills in advancing their own political frames. Though the field may be somewhat more level than in other media, the public needs to be aware messages and meanings that seem like common sense may be serving powerful interests. It is crucial to note here that while this study found a certain partisan orientation in the material and the discourse responding to it, any political community or political communicators may use anti-democratic tactics at any time. However individuals gather the information they use in a democratic culture—whether through the press, the airwaves or the blogs—vigilance is still the price of liberty.

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*C. Limitations of the Study*

The primary limitations to this study concern the inability to know how the frames in the program were constructed by producers and interpreted by audiences. Though viewership was in the millions, audience effects would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to measure in retrospect. Some of this data might be available if audience panels were conducted in local markets around the country. It might be possible to conduct experiments using the program in the future, though it would be impossible to capture its impact within a larger cultural context of revisiting the attacks for the five-year anniversary. In terms of audience effects, one lesson to take from "The Path to 9/11" might be to develop rapid-response measurement processes that could be rolled out when important but unexpected events develop. The inability to assess the intentions of the producers and ABC executives also limits the interpretive power of the study. The data here is restricted to news reports and blog content, neither of which can be considered complete or entirely accurate. This limits the reliability of certain conclusions. Directors and producers exert a great amount of control over creative products and the political frames in "The Path to 9/11" are certainly intentional. But even with direct access to producers and ABC executives during production it would difficult to know all the influences that informed the program. It might be possible to conduct post hoc interviews that would shed light on the production process. It would be more productive, however, to use this study as a starting point to design data collection processes for future research on similarly complex projects.

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Furthermore, even in the areas where data was available to be collected, limitations on research capacity constrained the sample size. Though it would be impossible to generate a complete picture of the online discourse surrounding "The Path to 9/11," the blog posts in the sample were drawn from a slender range of the political blogosphere. Though these choices were reasonable compromises, the study necessarily excludes a wide field of discourse. Within this specific selection of blogs, it was unfortunately impossible to analyze user commentary from blog communities. The similarities and differences between the primary bloggers and their communities would be a microcosm of the issues of framing and authority discussed here. With more research resources, it would be possible to track more blogs in greater depth and potentially identify sub-frames that would illuminate subtleties of contestation below the current level of analysis.

As with many case studies, the question of generalizability is a major limitation. Though "The Path to 9/11" will never command the same attention that it did in those weeks, similar scenarios are likely to emerge. It is difficult to predict the combination of events that might lead to the kind of political framing processes seen in this case. It might be possible to analyze a number of other cases in concert with "The Path to 9/11" to draw more concrete conclusions. As above, researchers might benefit who have an analytical system in place that can be quickly activated and tailored to rapidly developing media events. The institutions, personal networks and political agendas that drove "The Path to 9/11" are all well established. Further study of this phenomenon will permit more detailed analysis in future cases.

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Finally, the cultural perspectives of any scholar are necessarily informed by a host of subjective experiences. In the case of a researcher working within a highly familiar media environment, assumptions may narrow the scope of inquiry. Though the blogs in this study were chosen based on sound criteria, other valuable perspectives would have emerged from other methods of sample selection, such as randomization. It would be useful to follow processes specifically tailored to new media whereby researchers can ensure that they are capturing a reliable picture of a complex set of interactions. Subjective attitudes can be difficult to perceive (and more difficult to suppress), particularly in a political framing contest centered on emotionally charged material. In such cases, it would be beneficial to incorporate researcher triangulation or peer reviews to generate more broad-based results.

*D. Policies and Practices*

The primary objective of this study has been to understand these framing contests as being subversive of democratic culture. Scholars have for many years devoted themselves to examining and defending freedom of expression. The contemporary media environment and this third age of political communication will require such scholars to be as nimble and innovative as media producers. With a deluge of new kinds of communication, it is both increasingly difficult and increasingly important that scholars and activists promote and maintain central ideals of democratic culture. It is likewise important that they continually evaluate and update what those central ideals are. As new forms of media emerge, which they will surely do, core values of democratic culture should be adapted to this process of

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innovation rather than to each new medium. This may require a level of theoretical and technological expertise that does not yet exist, but careful and persistent progress can achieve that goal.

The dangers associated with media conglomeration are well known and have been analyzed in depth elsewhere. As such, it is not necessary to restate the prescriptive strategies from that field. But it would be useful to consider certain issues addressed in this study in light of the powerful systems of meaning that these media conglomerates represent. Credibility is a dimension of political communication that might be elevated to a more prominent place in media, public discourse and popular culture. As new media and the proliferation of third-age media products make it easier to construct "authoritative" sources, certain principles bound up in the notion of credibility (e.g., transparency, accuracy, accountability and so on) should be defined, discussed and incorporated into public discourse (Entman and Bennett 2001). Particularly where political and emotional content are heightened, the sources, intentions and meanings of cultural products should be open to analysis as much as possible. Domke (2004, 182) notes that "fear, more so than any other human emotion, is the enemy of democracy." Though dramatic narratives and terrifying headlines can benefit a media company's bottom line, professional practices should minimize sensationalism and tabloid journalism. This, too, is a well-established topic in media scholarship, but it still seems that new forms of rational discourse are too rare. Researchers should continue to attack the question of terror frames and othering in political communication and should bring their conclusions to the public debate. When and if mainstream media outlets resist this discourse, scholars should simply

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turn to new media alternatives and engage the public directly, as other democratically inclined citizens do. Inasmuch as mythic villains are constructed in the media, they can also be deconstructed (Aho 1994). Scholars and activists should continue to discuss and defuse the psychology of the enemy and, where possible, make this a part of political discourse. In the present climate, the media should pay specific attention to the cultural practices and meanings of Islam, the political conflicts behind international terrorism and the costs (economic, political and social) of protracted military engagement. If media producers adopted a more rigorous ethic of inclusiveness in public discourse, drawing on a wider range of sources, perspectives and ideas, they would better serve democratic participation and society in general. A well-informed public is more likely to conduct constructive debate and make wise decisions.

New forms of media will continue to emerge and, with them, new forms of public discourse will be possible. To achieve greater democratic inclusion, policy-makers should foster new kinds of media (and media reforms) that encourage participation in public discourse and restrict those practices that narrow the field of meaning-making. Complex issues such as "net neutrality" and digital free speech are already present in public discourse, but more citizens should be drawn into the debate. When possible, there should be more venues for public discourse and less restriction on expression. However, when a lack of regulations results in the narrowing of discourse and the anti-democratic production of cultural meanings, reformers and activists should argue for rules that favor more transparency and greater participation. Media reform is an area where organized public discourse is

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likely to benefit all sectors of the public, including political parties, corporations and citizens of all stripes. Of course, more voices mean more perspectives, more "truths" and more contestation. If the public can identify and reject anti-democratic framing, wherever it comes from, society is likely to benefit.

The narrative mode is fundamental to human communication. The dense media sphere that envelops people in the West (and much of the rest of the world) offers a constant stream of narratives, all inflected with meanings. From these, individuals construct their realities and negotiate their lives. The perils of social control that may be inherent in a global system of meaning are countered (though not negated) by an emerging culture of independence within the media. For the vast majority of human history, the ability to construct reality resided with authorities who controlled communication. In a million microcosmic events taking place today, that master narrative may be changing. In this plot twist, the public is turning back toward the storytellers, ready to take responsibility for how its stories are told and what those stories mean.

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