

Beyond Citizen Journalism: Weigelgate, JournoList, and the Shifting Media Ecology of America

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"This is not just sour grapes about the sudden rise of these untrained kids, though I have to think that some people in the building resent them for bypassing the usual way people rise here. This is really about the serial stupidity of allowing these bloggers to trade on the name of the Washington Post." –anonymous Post staffer speaking to Jeffrey Goldberg, June 25th, 2010

The incorporation of blogging tools into elite media institutions has created a series of frictions between networks of journalists who came of age in the broadcast news era and networks of journalists whose careers have featured new media tools. We can no longer speak of bloggers as “citizen journalists,” competing with or seeking to replace elite media institutions. Rather, blogging software has undergone several modifications, precipitating in changes to the media ecology of the United States. Under the heightened circumstances of the newspaper crisis, in which questions of “the future of journalism” attract major public attention, these frictions have produced public standoffs; moments in time that serve to define how media institutions will be structured in the future. Such standoffs provide a lens through which we can evaluate the roles of reporters, editors, bloggers, and other media professionals in a rapidly changing communications environment.

This paper will examine one such event: blogger/reporter David Weigel’s resignation from the *Washington Post* following public revelation of several emails he had posted to the “Journolist” backchannel listserv. It uses this case to illuminate three major trends under way in the emerging media environment. First, the “Weigelgate” episode emphasizes that the term “blogger” has ceased to have any single overarching referent. As the simple piece of software architecture has diffused through the population, it has undergone mutations, modifications, and recombinations. Blogs are now used by divergent communities to serve a host of different purposes. We cannot

continue to treat all bloggers as members of a single population of counter-institutional “citizen journalists” given the prominence of community blogs, institutional blogs, and other institution-augmenting blog architectures (Karpf 2008b). Second, the public revelation of JournoList messages, and subsequent shuttering of JournoList’s doors, affords a rare opportunity to examine the role that such hidden lists play in the new information environment of the networked public sphere. Semi-formal Google-Groups like JournoList are widely used, but their internal rules make them nearly immune to academic inquiry. As a result, the common use of backchannel lists for discussion, information-sharing, debate, and coordination has been virtually absent from public understanding of the changing media environment. This absence itself helped create the Weigelgate situation, making it far easier for critics to demonize the listserv as a “secret cabal” of sorts. Third and finally, the scandal highlights the problematically fluid nature of privacy norms in the online landscape. When is email a private activity, versus a public activity? In what space should a reporter be allowed to voice his or her own thoughts, blow off steam, or joke with friends?

The paper proceeds in four sections. It begins with a discussion of the basic facts of the “Weigelgate” incident, drawing from the abundant media analysis that occurred in its wake. Here I draw solely from institutional blogs (Karpf 2008b), limiting the sources to the elite journalistl-bloggers and conservative media critics who populate such high-traffic sites. It also includes twitter posts with the hashtags #teamweigel and #weigelgate, around which competing sets of elites deployed their shared media frames. I then turn attention to each of the substantive trends – blogger/journalists, backchannel infrastructure, and privacy norms – touching upon an array of disparate literatures in the

process. The first of these sections utilizes data from a public dataset, the Blogosphere Authority Index (Karpf 2008a) to examine the degree to which blogging has intermingled with journalistic practices in recent years. The second section investigates the technological affordances of backchannel listservs through a step-by-step examination of the Google-Group architecture and through analysis of publicly-revealed details of JournoList and Townhouse. The third section uses that same elite discourse to examine changing privacy norms, particularly in quasi-institutional settings like backchannel lists. The final two sections also rely on background knowledge obtained through ethnographic participant-observation with the progressive netroots at events like the Netroots Nation convention¹. The conclusion places the “Weigelgate” incident in the larger contemporary discussion about the changing role of media institutions in political discourse.

“Weigelgate”

“This would be a vastly better world to live in if Matt Drudge decided to handle his emotional problems more responsibly, and set himself on fire.” – David Weigel, venting frustration in an e-mail to JournoList.

In late June 2010, journalist/blogger David Weigel had a string of really bad days. Weigel had been employed for three months by the *Washington Post*, where he was charged with covering the conservative “tea party” movement on a blog titled “Right Now: Inside the Conservative Movement and the Republican Party with David Weigel.” A vocal and at-times-brash libertarian, Weigel was nonetheless well respected by a

¹ Full disclosure: I have presented research on the netroots at Netroots Nation 2009 and 2010. Though I was not a member of either of the backchannel lists discussed in this paper (JournoList and Townhouse), I am a member of a handful of similar netroots lists, both in my role as an interested researcher and in my former leadership role in a national environmental organization.

network of mostly left-leaning peers who, like him, came of age as journalists in the internet-enabled environment. Between these friendships, his sometimes-sarcastic twitter posts (Harper 2010), and his frequent guest spot on the liberal news program *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, Weigel had attracted the ire of some conservatives who felt it was improper for him to cover a social movement of which he himself was not a member. He nonetheless had developed solid contacts within the tea party movement and was responsible for breaking news stories (Sanchez and Weigel, 2008) and generally credited for providing some of the better reporting on the topic. His longtime friendship with liberal journalist/blogger Ezra Klein (who likewise holds a prominent position at the *Post*) had gotten him invited onto the backchannel “JournoList” listserv, and likely had played a role in his March 2010 hiring by that organization.

The bad news started on June 24th, when the DC gossip blog Fishbowl DC posted excerpts from four emails that Weigel had sent to the formally off-the-record JournoList. The text of that post is block-quoted below:

“...Seems Weigel doesn't like (and that would be putting it mildly) at least some of the conservatives he covers. Poor Drudge - Weigel wants him to light himself on fire.

Weigel's Words:

- ‘This would be a vastly better world to live in if Matt Drudge decided to handle his emotional problems more responsibly, and set himself on fire.’
- ‘Follow-up to one hell of a day: Apparently, the Washington Examiner thought it would be fun to write up an item about my dancing at the wedding of Megan McArdle and Peter Suderman. Said item included the name and job of my girlfriend, who was not even there -- nor in DC at all.’
- ‘I'd politely encourage everyone to think twice about rewarding the Examiner with any traffic or links for a while. I know the temptation is high to follow up hot hot Byron York scoops, but please resist it.’

•'It's all very amusing to me. Two hundred screaming Ron Paul fanatics couldn't get their man into the Fox News New Hampshire GOP debate, but Fox News is pumping around the clock to get Paultard Tea Party people on TV.'

Weigel says he 'happy to comment' to FishbowlDC but it seems he's tied up on the phone. Will bring you his remarks as soon as he provides them." (Rothstein 2010)

Weigel responded soon after on his *Washington Post* blog, apologizing and explaining the first comment while defending-and-explaining the other three (Weigel 2010). Matt Drudge (of the Drudge Report) had linked to Weigel earlier in the day, leading to the cascade of conservative hate-mail that many journalists on JournoList had become accustomed to. The message was sent in sarcastic frustration. Weigel apologized, noting "I was tired, angry, and hyperbolic, and I'm sorry." The other comments, including the use of "Paultard" – an insult applied to Ron Paul supporters by the left and the right – Weigel felt were fair, though he sarcastically apologized for the Byron York quip. He also offered his resignation to the *Post* editorial staff at that point, though they declined to accept it.

The following day, even more of Weigel's leaked JournoList emails were reported by conservative news blog The Daily Caller, which is run by well-known conservative media personality Tucker Carlson. (Strong, 2010) Carlson had reportedly asked Ezra Klein a few weeks earlier if he could join the list, but had been rebuffed (Klein 2010a). These emails included snarky insults at Rush Limbaugh and conservative activist Betsy McCaughey, among others. As Jonathan Strong of the Daily Caller put it, "Weigel was hired this spring by the [Washington] Post to cover the conservative movement. Almost from the beginning there have been complaints that his coverage betrays a personal animus toward conservatives. E-mails obtained by the Daily Caller

suggests those complaints have merit.” In the wake of increased conservative complaints regarding Weigel’s objectivity, Weigel again offered his resignation and *Post* staff accepted it.

There were three central reactions to the *Post* letting Weigel go. To the network of young journalist/bloggers who populated JournoList, this amounted to an unjust firing of their friend and colleague. The *Post* had plenty of options, including leaving him on that same beat or moving him to a different beat. The decision to drop the blogger/reporter due to the airing of his private emails seemed unduly harsh, either a knee-jerk reaction to conservative criticism or a propensity to treat the “new media people” as disposable. Outraged, they posted condemnations of the *Post*’s decision on blogs, linked together through Twitter posts with the hashtag #teamweigel.² To conservative media observers, the episode fed into a long-running narrative about JournoList as a semi-secret cabal of leftwing journalists exercising unfair power over the dominant media narrative. They likewise flocked around the incident, connecting via the twitter hashtag #weigelgate. Though several conservative journalist/bloggers rose to Weigel’s defense, including Liz Mair (Mair 2010) Ross Douthat (Douthat 2010), Ed Morrissey (Morrissey 2010) and John Miller (Miller 2010), the overall trend was to use the leaking of JournoList emails to further a conversation about liberal media domination. To old-line journalists like Jeffrey Goldberg, the episode provided a cautionary tale about the lowering of professional standards that led the *Post* to hire a “blogger” in the first place. His blog postings at *The Atlantic* on the topic led to a furor of angry replies from

² Twitter.com is a microblogging service that allows registered users to post 140-character messages (“tweets”) to a list of “followers.” It is frequently used to embed hyperlinks to longer blog pieces. Hashtags like #teamweigel and #weigelgate serve as an annotation of sorts, allowing users to search for all tweets on a given topic.

#teamWeigel supporters, some of whom were themselves housed at *The Atlantic* (Coates 2010). Goldberg initially provided the primary mouthpiece for old-line journalists, granting them anonymity to badmouth their former colleague. Later, these journalists turned to the broader phenomenon of JournoList, noting their distaste for the existence of such a closed, private list. (Simon 2010) Over approximately the following week, these three narrative threads kept Weigel in the relative spotlight, as representatives from each of these networked communities traded hyperlinked barbs back and forth and sought to use the incident to further ongoing arguments about what’s going wrong with journalism today³.

It bears noting that, when the smoke had cleared, little had substantively changed in the journalistic profession. Ezra Klein shuttered the virtual doors of JournoList, but another backchannel listserv was launched by Jon Cohn, Michelle Goldberg, and Steven Teles immediately (Goldberg 2010e). Andrew Breitbart, proprietor of the conservative sites BigGovernment.com and BigJournalism.com offered a \$100,000 reward to anyone who would send him the JournoList archive, an offer which appears to have been accepted. Jonathan Strong of the Daily Caller continued to publish excerpts from JournoList, but few other professional casualties have been claimed. Weigel himself took a position as an MSNBC contributor for one month before joining *Slate* magazine as a regular contributor on the conservative beat. In his own post-mortem, Weigel reflected that the incident “was [due to] the hubris of someone who rose – objectively speaking – a bit too fast, and someone who misunderstood a few things about his trade. ... No serious

³ Interestingly, Goldberg later softened his stance on Weigel after listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates, Mark Ambinder, and Ross Douthat on the subject, he wrote that “Weigel is a good reporter who did something boneheaded.” (Goldberg 2010c) Apparently

journalist has defended the leak of my private e-mails; no one who works in politics or journalism would accept a situation where the things they said off the record could immediately become public. But no serious journalist – as I want to be, as I am – should be so rude about the people he covers.” (Weigel 2010b)

In that light, David Weigel’s very bad week hardly deserves the “-Gate” suffix. But the particulars of this case highlight three important changing trends in the evolving media ecology of US political journalism. First is the changing role of blogging, particularly with regard to investigative journalistic practices. Weigel self-identifies as a journalist, and has a resume that follows suit. Yet he also takes advantage of the new media environment, inviting scorn and distrust from legacy media specialists. His experience tells us much about how newsrooms are changing and established roles for journalists are being challenged and redefined. Second is the role of lists like JournoList itself. JournoList provides a semi-formal instantiation of a longstanding informal network. Was Weigel wrong to post intemperate opinions to a backchannel list such as this, treating it as he would a conversation with colleagues over beers? There are hundreds of lists like this supporting the work of networked individuals and organizations on the left and the right. Such lists are nearly immune to scholarly analysis, given that they are formed on the basis of joint privacy. (Making them immune to any analyst who requires IRB authorization) The public discussion of JournoList’s demise provides us with a rare lens into these semi-formal institutions that are a crucial hidden component of the networked architecture of online journalism and political engagement alike. Third is the changing nature of privacy. “WeigelGate” is not even the most memorable case example from the summer of 2010 on this topic. Both the Shirley Sherrod firing from

USDA and the Wikileaks release of 92,000 secret government documents regarding the Afghanistan war indicate that the new media environment is one in which data is abundant, context is easily lost, and the proper role of the fourth estate is a work-in-progress. In the presence of the World Wide Web, whose information abundance leads to “The End of Forgetting” in the words of Journalism Professor Jay Rosen, how are we to treat spaces like this? If the list had been an internal *Washington Post* listserv, would it have been more or less acceptable, more or less private?. The following three sections consider each of the changing trends in turn.

Beyond Citizen Journalism: The Changing Role of the Blogger in US Media Ecology

“In the first (and still best) ‘Austin Powers’ film, a United Nations representative calls the film’s villain ‘Mr. Evil.’

‘It’s Dr. Evil,’ he huffs. ‘I didn’t spend six years in Evil Medical School to be called ‘mister,’ thank you very much.’

This is how I feel when I’m referred to as a ‘blogger,’ sometimes with political qualifiers like ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative attached. I’m a reporter. I’ve been a reporter since high school. Like a lot of other people, I lucked into some reporting jobs that took advantage of the speed of the web – thus, I blogged. And I left the *Washington Post* because I was intoxicated by this medium by and the privileges of reporting. *The leak of my private e-mails wouldn’t have been possible 10 years ago; but then, neither would have my career been possible.*” – David Weigel, “Hubris and Humility” post-mortem post, July 28th, 2010 (italics added).

Weigel’s own commentary above reveals a central dynamic of the Weigelgate episode. Many of the journalist/bloggers who rallied around the #teamWeigel banner focused their ire at Jeffrey Goldberg, who stepped in as the mouthpiece for an older generation of journalists through several posts on his blog at *The Atlantic*. In his initial post on the topic, Goldberg wrote, “The sad truth is that the Washington Post, in its

general desperation for page views, now hires people who came up in journalism without much adult supervision, and without the proper amount of toilet-training.” (Goldberg 2010a) Soon after, Goldberg added a follow-up post with anonymous quotes from “superannuated reporters,” including the comment, "It makes me crazy when I see these guys referred to as reporters. They're anything but. And they hurt the newspaper when they claim to be reporters." (Goldberg 2010b) Let's set aside for a moment the irony of this attack-on-bloggers occurring through Goldberg's blog. Likewise, ignore the sloppy journalistic practice of granting his friends anonymity for the sole purpose of sniping at a colleague (both of these points were made frequently in blog posts and tweets by Goldberg's critics). Is Weigel a blogger, a journalist, or both?

From his resume alone, Weigel's journalistic credentials are clear. Weigel's career began like many other journalists, serving as editor of a campus paper in college. After graduation, he took a position as an Editorial Assistant at USA Today and was a freelance writer for *The American Spectator* and *Reason* magazine. He then worked fulltime with a byline at *Reason* and *The Washington Independent* before being hired by the *Washington Post*. (Weigel 2010b) That may be a quicker career trajectory than in previous decades, but it otherwise is indistinguishable from the type of resume one would expect from a member of his profession. Weigel is referred to as a blogger because one of his duties at *Reason* was to feed a blog. Graduating college in 2004, Weigel entered a professional landscape in which online publication was frequently used alongside print publication by media outlets. Ta-Nehisi Coates, senior editor for *The Atlantic*, holds Weigel's journalistic skills in high regards, “No blogger better, and more routinely, defied the stereotype of simply opining. Dave traveled. Dave worked the phones. And

Dave wrote stories.” (Coates, 2010) Andrew Sullivan, also of *The Atlantic*, summarized Weigel’s work as “brilliant, obsessive, accurate, and first-hand reporting – yes, old-fashioned, grass-roots *reporting*.” (Sullivan 2010a) This was a common refrain among #teamWeigel – that David Weigel’s reporting skills were first-rate, but that he was thrown to the wolves due to his status as a “new media guy.” Weigel engaged in acts of journalism, often while employed by traditional journalistic outfits – newspapers and magazines. Goldberg’s characterization of him as a non-reporter who lacked “toilet-training” speaks to a growing tension between the new generation of reporters and those who “cut their teeth” in a print-only environment⁴.

One interesting wrinkle in Weigel’s self-commentary is the assertion that “The leak of my private e-mails wouldn’t have been possible 10 years ago; but then, neither would have my career been possible.” In point of fact, listservs and emails were already in wide usage by the year 2000. The leak of his private e-mails would have been very much a possibility, although the list he would have been posting to would likely have been a Yahoo-Group or institutionally-sponsored listserv rather than a Google-Group. And indeed, by 2000 several legacy media organizations had started to experiment with new media platforms. Pablo Boczkowski’s 2004 book, *Digitizing the News* details several early efforts in this vein, including the *Times Online* project by the *New York Times* and the Community Connection initiative of New Jersey online, which sought to

⁴ It bears noting that Goldberg retreated from this hostile stance after hearing from his colleagues Ta-Nehisi Coates, Marc Ambinder, and Ross Douthat. After these journalists had vouched for Weigel, he spoke with Weigel on the phone and concluded that “Weigel is a good reporter who did something boneheaded.” (Goldberg 2010e) Goldberg’s second-thoughts are arguably a testament to the importance of informal networks in determining “reporter” status.

empower citizens as journalists. (Boczkowski 2004) Both email leaks and online journalistic opportunities certainly *did* exist 10 years ago.

The new media architecture that was lacking 10 years ago was the blogosphere, not email lists. Blogging as an easy-to-use platform for self-publication was first introduced by Pyra Labs in 1999 and was still in the lead-adopter phase of diffusion during the first few years of the 21st century⁵. Political blogs gained broader readership during the leadup to the Iraq war in 2002 and 2003 (Moulitsas 2008, Bennett 2007, Perlmutter 2008), and as such the early community of political bloggers were frequently termed “citizen journalists” and treated as a counter-institutional force in competition with the mainstream media. This view of blogs was captured in the mass-market books of the day, as blog authors like Hugh Hewitt (2005) and Glenn Reynolds (2007) suggested that the rise of blogging would provide an “Army of Davids” to compete with mainstream media Goliaths.

As blog readership increased, two important changes occurred which complicated these predictions. First was the uptake of blog platforms into legacy media institutions themselves. Top bloggers from the political left and right were hired to bring their opinions and audiences to *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Slate.com* (owned by *The Washington Post*), *Time Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and others. Bloggers began appearing on *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and *Fox News Channel* as paid on-air contributors. Matthew Hindman argues that elite bloggers are akin to Op-Ed columnists, both in terms of their demographic characteristics and in their type of contribution (Hindman 2008). All of this created a tension between the received culture of blogging (opinion-first) and

⁵ for a discussion of lead adoption, see Von Hippel 2005.

the received culture of journalism (just-the-facts,-ma'am) that we can see playing out in Goldberg's commentary and anonymous quotations.

A second change has often escaped notice from both journalistic professionals and academic observers: blogging as a platform has undergone substantial changes. The software code underlying the first generation of blogs supported a system of single-author websites, usually including reverse-chronological posts, a space for reader comments, archives of past blog entries, and a "blogroll" sidebar for listing recommended peer authors. These technological affordances have been treated as essentially static, even as the underlying software code has undergone dramatic shifts. Many of the top political blogs today offer a community architecture that allow users to register and post their own content as "diaries" on the site. This allows sites like DailyKos.com, the largest political blog on the left, to function as a gathering space for a community-of-interest. In practice, community blogs have less in common with first-generation blogging than they do with political advocacy groups. DailyKos has a small staff, and an active participatory membership base of self-identifying "Kossacks." DailyKos endorses and fundraises for political candidates, selects issue campaign priorities, and attempts to mobilize political power to affect decision-makers (Karpf 2008b, Karpf 2010).

Alternate software architectures within the broad class of blog platforms have been used to create media sites such as the Huffington Post and Talking Points Memo. Each of these can be credibly treated as media properties, relying on the affordances of internet communication to experiment with new business models for journalism, rather than engaging in Op-Ed style opinion-writing. Both Huffington Post and Talking Points Memo have journalists on staff, hired away from legacy media organizations such as *The*

Washington Post and *The New York Times*. Both sites have broken major news stories, with Talking Points Memo receiving the Polk Award for Journalistic Excellence (Cohen 2008).

Blogging, in short, has changed. *Some* blogging consists of citizen journalism. But some blogging is intended as political activism, and some blogging is real, professional journalism, hosted either by an established media property or an upstart media competitor. The image of bloggers as pajama-clad loners, typing away from their parents' basement is dramatically out-of-step with how the software platform has mutated and recombined in recent years. Technology changes, and is changed by, the existing media environment. There is no longer a single, identifiable population of "bloggers" to study or characterize. Blogging is simply the practice of writing things and posting them online. The differences between first-generation blog platforms and a site like Huffington Post are far greater than their similarities.

At stake here as well is the unfolding crisis of how American society is going to pay for good journalism. Since the *Rocky Mountain News* shuttered its doors in March 2009, the journalistic profession has been undergoing a period of intense introspection. Readership rates have declined for decades, but what is different now is that, while internet-based readership is on the rise, revenue streams are collapsing. Figure 1 provides a comparison of unique visitors per day to CNN.com, NYTimes.com, HuffingtonPost.com, and WashingtonPost.com based on the Alexa.com traffic rankings. The Huffington Post is by far the most widely-read news blog in America. The Huffington Post ranks third among the four, with substantially more readership than the *Washington Post*, but millions fewer visitors per day than NYTimes.com or CNN.com.

The newspaper crisis is not rooted in individual readers abandoning traditional news sites for opinionated blogs. It is based in the collapse of classified ad revenue (Jones 2009) and a recent history of leveraged media consolidation (Diddlebock 2009). Nonetheless, in the heightened tension of a changing media system, younger journalists like Weigel face increased pressure from longtime professionals who are displeased with changes to the profession, skeptical of new media platforms, and rarely aware of the speedy evolution of blogging as a platform for amateur and professional publication.

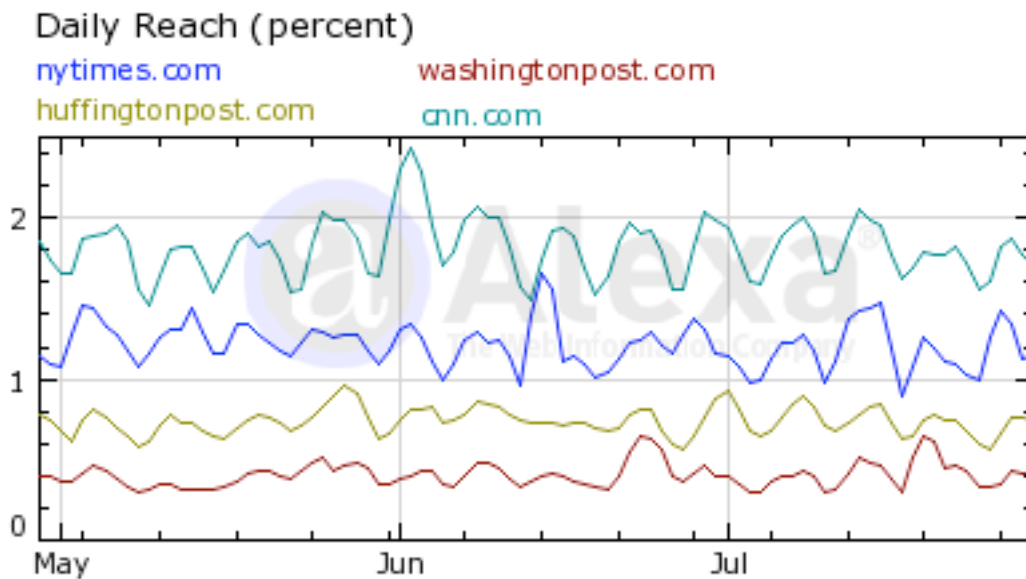


Figure 1: Comparative Traffic Rankings based on Alexa.com

Since August 2008, I have maintained the Blogosphere Authority Index (BAI), a ranked tracking system for analysis of the elite political blogosphere. The BAI gathers four types of data – blogroll mentions, hyperlinks, site traffic, and comments-per-week – to produce aggregate rankings of the left-wing and right-wing clusters of political blogs (Karpf 2008a, also see www.blogosphereauthorityindex.com). These rankings illustrate

the wide array of platforms classified as “blogs.” The top 25 list for the progressive cluster demonstrates a high level of stability (Karpf 2009), with only 31 sites appearing on it in 2009 and 2010. Figure 2 provides a summary of the sites appearing in the BAI, following the coding protocol laid out in “Understanding Blogspace.” Only 14 of the 31 sites could be classified as minor variations on the traditional blog platform. Four these (Atrios, FiveThirtyEight, America Blog, and Atrios) are by authors who have themselves either written a full-length book about politics or have been hired by a major media institution (Duncan “Atrios” Black is a senior fellow at Media Matters, Nate Silver of FiveThirtyEight has been hired by *The New York Times*). Another four (Lawyers, Guns, and Money, Sadly No!, Balloon Juice and Jesus’s General) are primarily comedy blogs, and two others (Juan Cole and Crooked Timber) are academic blogs. Of the 17 other sites in the BAI, 6 are community blogs that function as quasi-advocacy groups (DailyKos, Feministing, Talk Left, OpenLeft, MyDD, and FireDogLake), 2 are blogging platforms on major institutional sites (Think Progress is the blogging arm of the thinktank Center for American Progress and the *Washington Monthly* is a magazine), 4 are bloggers employed by mainstream media institutions (Ezra Klein, Matthew Yglesias, Glenn Greenwald, and Taylor Marsh), and 3 are competing media institutions in their own right (Huffington Post, Talking Points Memo, and The Moderate Voice).

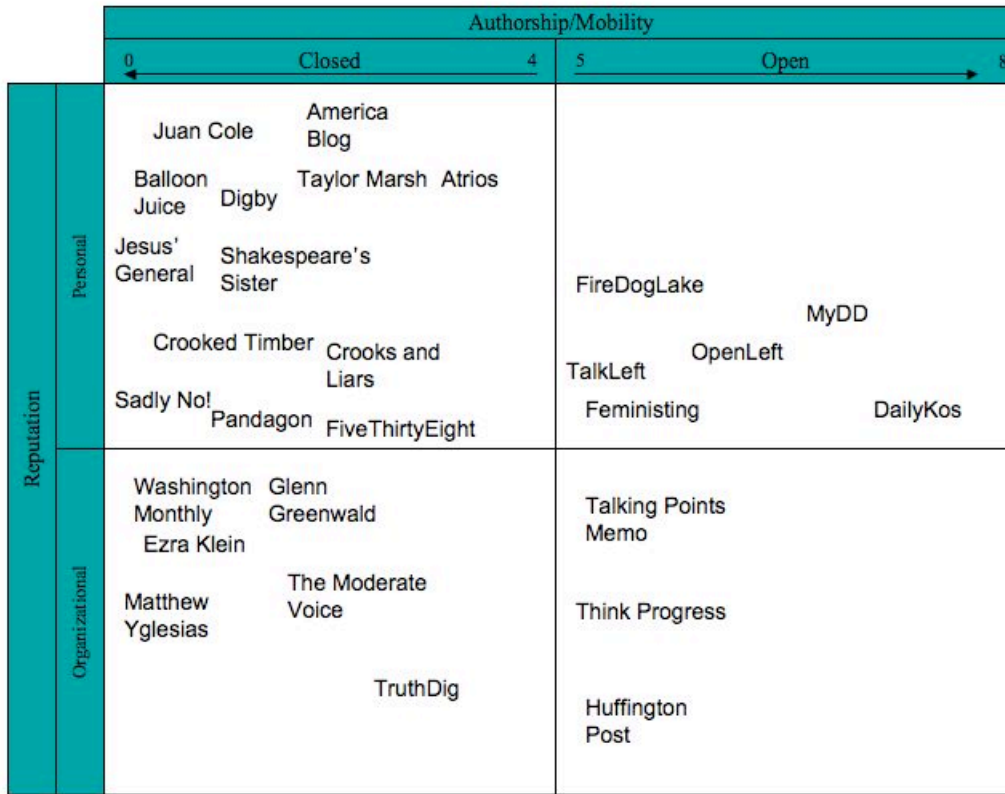


Figure 2: Map of progressive blogs appearing in BAI

Writing (on a blog) for *The New York Times*, journalist David Carr offers a useful insight into the blogger-journalist divisions in the Weigelgate case. “Mr. Weigel was the victim of a ‘not invented here’ reflex that many legacy media companies still possess. He was not, as they say, ‘one of us,’ but one of ‘them,’ brought in to sprinkle new-media pixie dust on a mainstream media newspaper that was hemmed in by political and journalistic convention.” (Carr 2010) Carr goes on to point out that, one year earlier, *Washington Post* reporter Dana Milbank had posted a “wildly inappropriate video suggesting that the secretary of state, who happens to be a woman, should drink Mad Bitch beer.” In the uproar that followed Milbank’s “Mouthpiece Theater” video segment,

the paper decided to cancel the segment but leave the reporter's status with the paper unchanged. This "one of us/one of them" framework is valuable when considering the larger role of JournoList in the emerging media ecology. Both Milbank and Weigel are members of the journalistic profession. Milbank is part of a long-tenured core of "paper guys" at legacy media institutions, and his membership in this informal network can shield him from the repercussions of new media screw-ups. Weigel is part of a new generation of journalists coming of age in the new media environment. Also a journalist, his professional peer connections are formed with a set of journalist/bloggers who likewise have moved between online and print publications over time. JournoList exists to provide a venue for Weigel's peer network to mimic the more-formal communication channels available to "the print guys."

Theorizing JournoList: E-mail Lists as Quasi-Institutional Networked Communication Tools

"I was on all sorts of e-mail lists, but none that quite got at the daily work of my job: Following policy and political trends in both the expert community and the media. But I always knew how much I was missing. There were only so many phone calls I could make in a day. There were only so many times when I knew the right question to ask. By not thinking of the right person to interview, or not asking the right question when I got them on the phone, or not intuiting that an economist would have a terrific take on the election, I was leaving insights on the table.

That was the theory behind Journalist: An insulated space where the lure of a smart, ongoing conversation would encourage journalists, policy experts and assorted other observers to share their insights with one another. The eventual irony of the list was that it came to be viewed as a secretive conspiracy, when in fact it was always a fractious and freewheeling conversation meant to open the closed relationship between a reporter and his source to a wider audience."

—Ezra Klein, "On Journalist, and Dave Weigel." June 25, 2010

If Weigelgate subsided with relatively little damage, it was arguably the first shot in an ongoing controversy over the JournoList Google-Group from which his messages

were leaked. Conservative media mogul Andrew Breitbart wrote a blog post 4 days after Weigel resigned, stating “I’ve had \$100,000 burning in my pocket for the last three months and I’d really like to spend it on a worthy cause. So how about this: in the interests of journalistic transparency, and to offer the American public a unique insight into the working of the Democrat-Media Complex, I’m offering \$100,00 for the full “JournoList” archive, source fully protected. Now there’s an offer somebody can’t refuse.” (Breitbart 2010) Tucker Carlson’s institutional blog, *The Daily Caller*, apparently obtained most (if not all) of the archives for a lesser price, and began a running expose on the supposed liberal media conspiracy contained within. Though no other reporters have lost their jobs as a result of these leaked emails, JournoList has become a rallying point of sorts, fueling long-simmering conservative claims of liberal media bias with the specter of an organized, semi-secret cabal of journalists, academics, and liberal policy wonks.

Ezra Klein (the creator and moderator of JournoList) and other prominent JournoList members have offered clear rebuttals to the *Daily Caller* series, primarily noting that the site is digging through tens of thousands email messages, communicated in the unguarded voices of individuals speaking privately among friends, and picking a few choice phrases to “fit a narrative.” (Klein 2010) Rather than dive into a detailed accounting of each leaked JournoList email, I would invite the curious reader to peruse the hyperlinked back-and-forth that has occurred between Carlson and Klein on the digital pages of the *Daily Caller* and the *Washington Post*. For the purposes of this article, I will focus not on the supposed conspiracy, but rather on JournoList as a suddenly well-publicized example of a common but rarely-viewed piece of digital

infrastructure. JournoList is (was), first and foremost, a Google-Group. The architectural framework provided by Google helps explain many of the foreboding traits of the list, particularly its semi-secret nature.

The Infrastructure Provided by Google-Groups

Setting up a Google-Group is a simple process. Google-Groups are one of the many functionalities offered by the World Wide Web's most-trafficked company⁶. From the Google homepage, one can select Google-Maps, Google-Images, Google-News, Google-Calendar, Google-Docs, Google-Groups, and several other options. Clicking on the "Groups" option takes a registered user to his or her list of existing group memberships (see figure 3). In the upper-right screen quadrant, users are invited to "Create a group..." This button leads to a single-screen setup page (see figure 4) inviting the creator to choose a name and group email address, enter a group description, and choose an access level from among three options. The access-level decision is particularly instructive in understanding the JournoList controversy. The three options include (1) public, (2) announcement-only, and (3) restricted. Restricted lists like JournoList are not publicly searchable and are invite-only in nature. Public lists show up in Google-Group search results and have searchable archives. Announcement-only lists only allow moderators to post messages, inhibiting conversation.

⁶ As of August 2010, Google.com was the #1 site on Alexa.com's global traffic rankings. YouTube.com, a Google property, is #3.



Figure 3: Google-Groups homepage

1 Set up group 2 Add members

Name your group
Journoliszt

Create a group email address
journoliszt @googlegroups.com

Group web address: <http://groups.google.com/group/journoliszt>

Write a group description
This is a completely fake group designed for pedagogical purposes

Letters remaining: 235

This group may contain adult content, nudity, or sexually explicit material. Before entering this group you will need to verify that you're 18 years of age or over.

Choose an Access level

- Public - Anyone can read the archives. Anyone can join, but only members can post messages and view the members list. Only managers can create pages and upload files.
- Announcement-only - Anyone can read the archives. Anyone can join, but only managers can post messages, view the members list, create pages and upload files.
- Restricted - People must be invited to join the group. Only members can post messages, read the archives, view the members list, create pages and upload files. Your group and its archives do not appear in public Google search results or the directory.

Create my group

Figure 4: GoogleGroup Setup Page

For the purposes of this exercise, let's accept Ezra Klein's explanation as an honest accounting. Klein was "on all sorts of e-mail lists." None of them brought together the network of associations that he most wanted to engage with – center-to-left

journalists, policy experts, and assorted other observers. Faced with these three options, choosing a restricted list is the reasonable choice. Announcement-only would not allow for conversation. A public list would lead to guardedness in information-sharing and no shared sense of who was on the list and who could access the conversation. What's more, faced with these three choices, most of the lists that Klein and his community participated on would likely also choose the restricted option. Simply following standard practice within the "netroots" community would give Klein a reason to select this option – otherwise, he would have to convince potential participants why this should be less-private than the other lists they participate on.

I created a mock group for this exercise, titled "JournoSiszt." What separates JournoSiszt from JournoSist is revealed in the final step of the group setup process, as depicted in Figure 5. The initial members of JournoSist received invitations from Ezra Klein, who knew them personally from ongoing working relationships. Assuming Klein has a GMail account with Google, their addresses were automatically suggested as he typed their names into the invite box, and he was then able to write individual-specific messages explaining what he was doing and why he'd like them to join. Though the technological architecture of Klein's list is identical to my own, I would have to search the web for top left-to-center journalists and policy experts, and those individuals would be unlikely to accept a random google-group invitation from a total stranger. What separates JournoSist from JournoSiszt, in other words, is the network position of the moderator. Ezra Klein's JournoSist would be a different entity without Ezra Klein facilitating matters. And Ezra Klein holds a unique position indeed.

1 Set up group **2** Add members

Invite members by email | [Add members directly](#)

Enter email addresses of people to invite

Each person will receive an invitation to your group and must accept before they can receive messages.

Write an invitation message

Google Groups will automatically include the group's name, description, and address in the email.

Invite members

Skip this step

Figure 5: Invite Page

Who is Ezra Klein?

Ezra Klein is a blogging wunderkind, plain and simple. He was one of the early, prolific bloggers, beginning in 2003 as a 19-year-old UCLA student and Howard Dean supporter. Offering smart, liberal commentary on a range of issues, his blogging helped earn him a writing fellowship in September 2005 with *The American Prospect*, where he quickly rose through the ranks from staff writer up to associate editor. His blog entries at “Tapped,” the *American Prospect*’s blog, were detailed, thoughtful, occasionally acerbic, and above all else frequent. During a four-year stint with the magazine, he wrote dozens of features stories, hundreds of columns, and thousands of blog entries for the magazine’s print and online offerings. This built him a devoted following among blog readers and a

growing reputation in Washington policy circles. In mid-May 2009, the 25-year-old Klein was hired by *The Washington Post*, a move which he described as “hav[ing] the same great Ezra taste, but with more resources around to make my charts look pretty.” (Klein 2009) He has also converted that reputation for cogent analysis into frequent guest spots on left-wing MSNBC news programs such as *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* and *The Rachel Maddow Show*.

Klein started JournoList in 2007, midway into his tenure at *The American Prospect*, still at the age of 22. He describes it as beginning with a web-based criticism of veteran political reporter Joe Klein (author of *Primary Colors*, no relation) over the Iraq War. From there the two had a thoughtful email exchange, which was much more measured in tone. “Taking the conversation out of the public eye made us less defensive, less interested in scoring points.” (Klein 2010a) Joe Klein corroborates the story in a blog post at *Time Magazine*’s “Swampland” blog, comparing the online discussion fostered on JournoList to the New Paradigm Society, “a bipartisan group of centrist (journalists) who met regularly for dinner in Washington at the turn of the 90s.” (J. Klein 2010) This point bears emphasis – journalists have *always* debated politics and policy with one another, sharpening their craft and building camaraderie with one another. Professional journalists are, in other words, a *network*. The difference between Klein’s JournoList and my (fake) JournoLizst lies in our relative roles inside and outside of that network. The moderator of these lists act as a “networked gatekeeper” of sorts (Barzilail-Nehon 2008), and the technology-sans-network-position proves essentially useless.

Uncovering JournoList

Despite the restricted setting, Klein's private, off-the-record list did not stay secret for very long, with *Slate.com* blogger Mickey Kaus posting an entry on July 27, 2007 to complain that he hadn't been invited to join (Kaus 2007). The list received further exposure in a 2009 *Politico* article, "JournoList: Inside the Echo Chamber," by Michael Calderone. Therein he noted that the approximately 400 "working journalists, policy wonks, and academics" on the list viewed it more as a "virtual watercooler conversation" than any sort of liberal media conspiracy. Calderone also mentioned that list members obeyed a "Fight Club-style code of silence when it comes to discussing it for publication." (Calderone 2009) This refers to a list rule that goes beyond the Google-Groups restricted software architecture, and thus deserves closer examination. Figure 6 provides the list of e-mail delivery settings available to list managers. Backchannel lists like JournoList provide a set of list rules in a message footer that is appended to any message sent out to the group. The language of a typical "Fight Club rule" is generally phrased as something like "do not mention the name or existence of the list in public or to the press."⁷

⁷ As I was never a member of JournoList, I cannot say whether this was the exact phrasing used on the list. It is a commonly used rule appearing on other backchannel lists, however.

Group settings [Management tasks >](#)

[General](#) [Access](#) [Appearance](#) [Navigation](#) **Email delivery** [Categories](#) [Advanced](#)

[Spam controls](#)

Subject prefix This text will be added to the subject lines of all messages posted to the group. We recommend surrounding the prefix with [], or {}. Add '%d' to include the message number in the subject. Leave this field blank to have no subject prefix.
 Prefix:
 Examples: [journoliszt], {JournoLiszt}, [journoliszt:%d]

Message footer This text will be appended to the end of all messages posted to the group.

Do not use a footer
 Use the default footer (shown below)
 Make a custom footer:

Replies to messages Replies are sent to the whole group.
 Replies are sent to the author of the message.
 Replies are sent to the owners of the group.
 Users decide where their replies are sent.

Figure 6: Email Delivery Settings

The “Fight Club rule” certainly *sounds* conspiratorial. In practice, it is primarily used to support two goals. The first is to allow backchannel conversations to remain in the background. Offline gatherings like Joe Klein’s New Paradigm Society or less-formal bonds forged in press rooms and press buses allow for the closing of group membership based on physical co-presence. The in-group is delineated by physically being there. Given that anyone *could* join an open JournoList, and anyone hearing of its existence could ask Ezra Klein to add them (and potentially be offended if turned down, i.e. Tucker Carlson of the Daily Caller), limiting public knowledge of a backchannel allows it to perform a similar function as a weekly dinner engagement among a

community of professionals. Jonathan Chait of *The New Republic* offers this explanation of the closed rules of JournoList: "...Conversations consisted of requests for references -- does anybody know an expert in such and such -- instantaneous reactions to events, joshing around, conversations about sports, and the like. Why did this have to be private? Because when you're a professional writer, even in the age of Twitter, you try to maintain some basic standard in your published work. I don't subject my readers to my thoughts on the Super Bowl as of halftime, or even (usually) the meaning of the Pennsylvania special election two minutes after polls close. You want the ability to share your thoughts with a group to which you may not have physical proximity." (Chait 2010)

The second function is to keep such lists from becoming the source of rampant conspiratorial speculation. Here the fate of JournoList serves as a cautionary tale of sorts. Its existence, once reported by Kaus and Calderone, became the source of intense speculation. Would a closed-membership, closed-archive list that was mentioned in the public and press more often have attracted *less* suspicion of liberal conspiracy? This seems unlikely. The "Fight Club rule," though ominous-sounding, is designed for practical purposes.

It also bears noting that the informal nature of these lists makes them a terrible forum for actual conspiracies. The only sanctions available against rule-breakers are public shaming by the moderator via the list itself, and removal from the list. Assuming that conspiracies require some degree of enforcement and coordination, these are not particularly effective tools. Klein himself, in asking the list whether they'd agree to modify membership rules to allow conservatives like Tucker Carlson to join, noted this disciplinary problem, plainly stating, "Journalist now leaks like a sieve." (Klein 2010c)

Compared to Grover Norquist's famed in-person weekly message coordination meetings for conservative elites, a backchannel Google-Group simply does not provide the tools for effective conspiracy.

Along with the "Fight Club rule," there is an epiphenomenal "Russian nesting doll" effect that tends to occur on backchannel Google-Groups. Ruled by informality, lists like JournoList are akin to a hip new restaurant that everyone enjoys but hopes will remain a secret. Over time, this information spreads through the network and the crowd grows in size (Barabasi 2003). JournoList itself started in 2007 with approximately 30 journalists, bloggers, policy experts and academics. By 2010, it had grown to 400. If it hadn't been shut down, there is little doubt that membership would have continued to expand inexorably outward. This leads to two types of crowding threshold. First, more people can mean more messages, on wide-ranging topics irrelevant to any one individual reader. At some scale, the email becomes too much, leading a reader to either drop off the list or start their own Google-Group, inviting the subset of members that *they* wish to associate with. Greg Sargent, who writes "The Plum Line" blog for the *Washington Post*, notes that he was once a member of JournoList, but dropped out, "mainly because I was sick of being overwhelmed by emails." (Sargent 2010) Second, more people necessarily provide more conflicting interests. For a journalist-focused listserv that forbade actual coordination, this just adds to the conversation. But for the hundreds of similar backchannels that support progressive and conservative issue communities alike, sub-lists are bound to form so that individual components of the community can coordinate internal arguments before they are made to the broader community as a whole.

Evidence of the “Russian nesting doll” effect is, by rule, impossible to provide without violating the “Fight Club rule.” It bears noting however that both Kaus and Calderone draw upon an even larger Google-Group called “Townhouse” as a benchmark for understanding JournoList. Townhouse may in fact be the original backchannel Google-Group, and is certainly the most-reported one on the left. The name itself is indicative of the space that these lists are meant to represent: “Townhouse” is a Washington, D.C. bar frequented by progressive bloggers living in the area. Blogger Matt Stoller created the Townhouse backchannel in order to provide an online extension to the watering-hole-conversations of the blogger community that frequented the bar. Townhouse eventually grew to over 1,000 members, leading many bloggers to treat dismiss it in conversation with the Yogi Berra aphorism “nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded.” Writing in April 2007, Matthew Yglesias described it as “hardly an institution – it is, simply put, an e-mail list with many, many, many members and a tediously heavy volume of traffic.” (Yglesias 2007)

The combination of Fight Club rules and the Russian nesting doll effect leads to a nearly unsolvable problem for the research community. Anyone can create a Google-Group, and copying standard list rules and moderation policies into the email footer can be accomplished with a few points and a clicks. As such, *the total population of backchannel lists is an unknowable quantity*. There are lists within lists, all protected by Fight Club rules making their existence unknowable. The 2,000-person annual blogger convention, Netroots Nation, features dozens of informal gatherings for such listmembers, organized through the lists beforehand, where online watering-hole-conversation can be transferred back offline. These lists allow networked communities-

of-interest to engage in a type of backstage discourse often unrecognized by new media theorists. List participation is limited to a privileged in-group, belying the “information wants to be free” ethos promoted by early internet optimists (Barlow 1996). Yet in-group status is dramatically easier to obtain than in previous communications regimes. An invitation to Townhouse or similar lists will be extended to anyone who writes smart things, meets or is recommended to a list moderator, and isn’t a jerk⁸. Compared to an invitation to join the internal discussion of elite media and political institutions, this is a *more* open system, even if it is still far from the ideal presented by techno-optimist observers.

(Over)Reacting to JournoList

Reactions to Weigelgate and the continually leaking of JournoList archives have varied predictably by network position. The reaction by former JournoList members has varied between amusement and annoyance. Even Tucker Carlson, in defending the Daily Caller’s ongoing expose, admitted that “a lot of the material on Journalist is actually pretty banal.” (Carlson 2010) Nate Silver of fivethirtyeight.com, who recently was hired by the *New York Times*, provided a detailed accounting of his own participation on the list – about 150 posts, in order to inoculate himself against future hit pieces. “I made on the order of 150 posts to Journalist ... Most of the posts were banal. They might involve things like: asking for advice on book-writing, seeing if anyone had contact information for a person I was trying to reach for a story, or clarifying a point of Senate procedure.

⁸ Many bloggers would argue that “not a jerk” is not a necessary condition for group membership.

Other posts involved ‘off-topic’ threads on subjects like food or sports.” (Silver 2010) Listmember Chris Hayes, the Washington Editor of *The Nation* magazine and occasional guest host of *The Rachel Maddow Show*, took to joking with Ezra Klein on-air about him being the coordinator of the “liberal media conspiracy.”⁹

Seasoned veteran journalists who had never been invited to join the list were far more negative about the episode. Chuck Todd of NBC News revealed to *Politico.com* that JournoList had “kept him up at night.” “I am sure Ezra had good intentions when he created it, but I am offended the right is using this as a sledgehammer against those of us who don’t practice activist journalism.” Roger Simon, chief political columnist at *Politico*, likewise felt that the listserv cheapened his profession, writing a lengthy column extolling the virtues of journalism as “almost a holy calling” that had been muddied by Klein et al, treating journalism as “a toy, an electronic plaything.” (Simon 2010) Their distaste mirrors that of Jeffrey Goldberg and his anonymous “paper guys” in their immediate reaction to Weigel’s resignation. Journalism is in a period of disruption, and the extended controversy over the JournoList backchannel provides fuel for their concerns about how the profession is changing.

Right-wing media critics have of course seized on the “semi-secret list” as proof of the liberal media conspiracy. They do this partially to forward a longstanding argument (Jamieson and Capella, 2008), and partially because it is a good business model. Klein points out that the slow-moving expose on The Daily Caller quadrupled the site’s readership, with approximately 200,000 pageviews per day as opposed to approximately 50,000 per day prior to the release of Weigel’s emails. (Klein 2010b) And

⁹ *The Rachel Maddow Show*, July 26, 2010.

though the same restricted list access rules mean we cannot know for sure if similar lists exist among the political right, the easy availability and sheer ubiquity of Google-Groups make it highly likely that *some* set of equivalent listservs exists among conservative political actors. JournoList is, at base, an off-the-record discussion listserv, a new media instantiation of traditional intra-network communications. This raises the third question to be examined in this article: is there any such thing as “off-the-record” anymore?

Privacy in the Digital Age

“...*no journalistic standard was violated* by firing off intemperate e-mails to what’s supposed to be a private e-mail list. Maybe Weigel should have known better... But if hitting ‘send’ on pungent e-mails that you assume will be kept private is a breach of journalistic ethics, then there isn’t an ethical journalist in the English-speaking world.” – Ross Douthat, “The Shame of JournoList.” (emphasis in original)

Google-Groups like JournoList allow informal networks to develop communication structures that mimic those possessed by formal institutions. One of the conceptual challenges presented by the Weigelgate episode, and ongoing JournoList archival leaking, is where such communications fall on the public/private spectrum. Consider the following: *The Washington Post* Editorial Board doubtless has a listserv. So does the *Washington Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and every other newspaper. On it, members of the Editorial Board are doubtless free to speak privately about issues in the news, vent frustrations, and deliberate with one another. Such activity is an element of the Editorial-writing process. Though the text of these institutional listservs likely does not dip into the vulgarity and cattiness of backchannel lists that are designed to replicate informal, watering-hole conversations, they nonetheless would offer intemperate snap reactions and at least a few poorly-worded statements.

If the archives of one of these institutional listservs were leaked to a website such as Fishbowl DC or The Daily Caller, with the most impolitic phrases presented as evidence of liberal (or conservative) media bias, how would the story have evolved differently?

The most certain result would involve litigation. Large institutions like the *Post* and the *Journal* have substantial legal staffs. The Daily Caller likely would not run such a story out of fear of the massive lawsuit that would doubtless follow. It is also quite possible that the broader media narrative would have focused on the act of leaking, rather than the text provided in the leak (unless something blatantly conspiratorial was revealed). Journalists and their editors know how to think about protected communications on an organizational listserv. Semi-formal Google-Groups with restricted settings and “Fight Club style” rules, on the other hand, are a different matter.

Among the initial reactions to the Weigelgate episode, this question of privacy was the focus of only a minority, mostly concentrated among #teamWeigel supporters. The block quote headlining this section is noteworthy because it comes from Ross Douthat, a prominent conservative author, rather than a member of the JournoList community. Similar commentary came from Kathleen Parker, Andrew Klein, and Andrew Sullivan. (Parker 2010, Goldberg 2010c, Sullivan 2010b) Sullivan reacted by suggesting that “When Andrew Breitbart offers \$100,000 for a private email list-serv archive, essentially all bets are off. Every blogger or writer who has ever offered an opinion is now on warning: your opponents will not just argue against you, they will do all they can to ransack your private life, cull your email in-tray, and use whatever material they have...” (Sullivan 2010a) Interestingly, Sullivan’s outrage at the invasion

of privacy didn't last long. Responding to the Daily Caller's selective exposition of JournoList messages, he quickly turned his criticism toward the "socialized groupthink" exemplified by the listserv. (Sullivan 2010b) Apparently outrage at invasions of privacy has a shorter half-life than curiosity about leaked private conversation.

There appears to be a quiet consensus forming around the notion that there is no such thing as off-the-record anymore. Jeffrey Goldberg makes this claim explicitly. Andrew Klein wrote to him about the Weigelgate issue, "...Not much is sacred anymore, but can we at least say that publishing off the record remarks, no matter how silly or ill advised, is the first issue, not the second?" In response, Goldberg suggests, "The answer is simple and unfortunate: Nothing is really off-the-record. No conversation between more than two people is ever really off-the-record, and no e-mail is ever, ever off-the-record. It's just the way it is..." (Goldberg, 2010c) From a career-preservation standpoint, Goldberg makes a strong point, and Weigel himself referred to his JournoList emails as "cocky," concluding that "...no serious journalist – as I want to be, as I am – should be so rude about the people he covers." (Weigel 2010b)

Yet there remain some protected spaces, be they protected through social convention or the threat of lawsuit. The broader controversy over JournoList relates to what *type* of space we consider such backchannel listservs to most resemble. For his part, Ezra Klein waxes philosophical on the leaking of JournoList emails:

"There's a lot of faux-intimacy on the Web. Readers like that intimacy, or at least some of them do. But it's dangerous. A newspaper column is public, and writers treat it as such. So too is a blog. But Twitter? It's public, but it feels, somehow, looser, safer. Facebook is less public than Twitter, and feels even more intimate. A private e-mail list is not public, but it is electronically archived text, and it is protected only by a password field and the good will of the members. It's easy to talk as if it's private without considering the possibility, unlikely as it is, that it

will one day become public, and that some ambitious gossip reporters will dig through it for an exposure story. And because that possibility doesn't feel fully real, people still talk like it's private and then get burned if it goes public.

Broadly speaking, neither journalism nor the public has quite decided on how to handle this explosion of information about people we're interested in. A newspaper reporter opposing the Afghanistan war in a news story is doing something improper. A newspaper reporter telling his wife he opposes the war is being perfectly proper. If someone had been surreptitiously taping that reporter's conversations with his wife, there'd be no doubt that was a violation of privacy, and the gathered remarks and observations were illegitimate. If a batch of that reporter's e-mails were obtained and forwarded along? People are less sure what to do about it. So, for now, they use it. Facebook pictures get used too, though there's a bit of shame in it. If the trend continues as it is, people will become much more careful in those forums. For now, we're in an awful transition, where we haven't quite adjusted for the public sphere's ability to appropriate the freshly-enlarged private sphere.” (Klein 2010a)

The Weigelgate episode stands out as a “teachable moment” for students of the continued blurring lines between public and private. Daniel Solove focuses on several such moments in his book, *The Future of Reputation*. “Information that was once scattered, forgettable, and localized is becoming permanent and searchable. (pg 4)” Jonathan Zittrain (2008) discusses the danger as “Privacy 2.0.” “While privacy issues associated with government and corporate databases remain important, they are increasingly dwarfed by threats to privacy that do not fit the standard template for addressing privacy threats. (pg 205)” Whereas privacy law and privacy norms have generally been concerned with the acts of government or large corporations – the only organizations large enough to intrusively gather data – the “era of cheap sensors” (as Zittrain puts it) empowers individuals like Carlson or Breitbart to exploit the unclear privacy landscape.

The lesson here may be that off-the-record *does* still exist, but only in established institutional environments that can offer a credible threat of litigation and in the most

clearly private personal settings. The Daily Caller has experienced a surge in traffic as a result of its JournoList expose. Digging into borderline cases along the public/private divide proves to be a good business model, even if it offers the slipperiest of slopes for journalistic practice. Conor Freidersdorf of *The Atlantic* noted this ugly aspect of the case: “Firing Dave Weigel incentivizes more digging into the personal opinions of journalists, and validates the idea that they should be judged on the basis of those opinions, rather than the content of their work. What’s next? E-mails sent to a few people and leaked? Opinions offered at a bar over beers and surreptitiously recorded?” (Freidersdorf 2010)

In the meantime, we can add another item to Klein’s list of institutions whose place on the public/private spectrum needs to be rethought. Informal conversations among professional communities have always occurred. Formal discussion within institutions continues to hold a privileged position. Semi-formal, backchannel listservs like JournoList are something in between, enhancing the former while structurally identical to much of the latter. Veteran reporter James Fallows offered the following summary of the broader JournoList controversy: “I have one question for people who are upset about an email list involving 400+ mainly-liberal journalists and academics: *Have you ever been on a listserv?* If you have, everything about the dreaded Journalist would be familiar to you. It had all of the virtues, and many of the faults, of the standard internet email list.” (Fallows 2010) Social norms about online privacy are in a period of flux. The decisions of powerful actors will shape not only how people behave online, but what type of society we live in more generally. Perhaps more than anything else, the

Weigelgate episode will be memorable as yet another event in the ongoing decline of the private sphere.

Conclusion

Considered independently, “Weigelgate” itself was a relatively small matter. Intemperate private emails were leaked, a talented reporter lost his job, and he was subsequently hired by a different media organization. These things happen all the time. The sheer volume of journalistic coverage devoted to Weigelgate and subsequent JournoList topics is indicative of broader changes in a field that is stumbling blindly forward into the new media environment. In his 2004 book, *Digitizing the News*, Pablo Boczkowski argues that “new media emerge by merging existing social and material infrastructures with novel technical capabilities, a process that also unfolds in relation to broader contextual trends. (pg 4)” His study focuses on the early adoption of new media tools in the newsrooms of several daily papers in the late 1990s. The Weigelgate episode suggests an addendum of sorts: as existing infrastructures are merged with novel technical capabilities, old networks of influentials are challenged by new networks seeking to drive that change. This sets the stage for disruptive changes within the industry. Whereas Boczkowski’s study looks at the first halting steps of an industry into an emerging media environment, Weigelgate indicates the later period of conflict between the “print people” and the new generation of internet-mediated journalists.

As blogs have segued into their role of “yesterday’s hot new technology,” the Weigelgate case also illustrates how the blogosphere itself has changed. No longer a population that can be uniformly described as “citizen journalists” (or by any other moniker, for that matter), today we are better off considering blogs to be a *medium*,

whereas journalism is a profession or a skill set. All of the bloggers quoted in this article work at major media institutions. Nearly all of them write articles for the ink-and-pulp products of those institutions. All of them have opinions, and all have had successful enough careers as reporters to earn a coveted job with a legacy media organization. The snap reactions from Jeffrey Goldberg and his anonymous sources at the *Washington Post* are indicative of how the change of media offerings has created tensions between old-boy-networks of longstanding reporters and the new generation of writers entering the newsroom today. This was not a case of bloggers-versus-journalists, but rather of two competing professional networks in a volatile professional environment.

The social benefit offered by Weigelgate and the JournoList archive leaks lies in illuminating a whole class of communications channels that has as-yet been overlooked. Discussion boards and listservs are “mundane mobilization tools,” to borrow a phrase from Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2010). They have been around for enough years that they have faded into the background. Yet in so doing we have failed to account for the important role that they play in facilitating activity among communities-of-interest. Not all blog communication happens out in the open. “Information,” it turns out, does not always “want to be free.” Discussion, deliberation, half-baked ideas, and social coordination all occur on backchannel listservs. “Fight Club rules,” restricted-access architecture, and an epiphenomenal “Russian Nesting Doll” structure make them seem more menacing when they are revealed, but only because we frequently pretend as though they do not exist. Such backchannels increase the power of informal networks of authority, but also make those networks more porous and accessible – while the *Washington Post* Editorial Board listserv is publicly known and protected, few of us have

any hope of joining it; lists like JournoList can be accessed simply by impressing Ezra Klein or one of his associates. Particularly in a world where the private sphere is diminishing in size, understanding the power derived from those informal networks becomes an increasingly important endeavor.

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