Chapter 1
Blogs as a Source of Democratic Deliberation

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the deliberative potential of blogs and blog users. It investigates whether heavy reliance on blogs promotes positive characteristics—political efficacy, political interest, and political involvement—needed to foster democratic deliberation, or whether it leads to negative attributes—low trust, selective exposure, and political partisanship—that hinder democratic deliberation. Results show that unlike those who rarely rely on blogs, heavily dependent individuals are more involved in current events and are more trusting of the government, but they are also more likely to practice selective exposure by reading ideologically consistent blogs. Further, heavy reliance predicts involvement and selective exposure. The deliberative potential of blogs is boosted by users’ involvement in political issues but impeded by their propensity to seek out blogs that contain agreeable information. Instead of evolving into a public sphere, blogs may be becoming issue-oriented zones in which deliberation is limited to an ideological perspective.

INTRODUCTION
The emergence of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s resurrected hopes of reinvigorating democracy by creating a space where democratic deliberation—a process in which citizens voluntarily participate in discussions about public issues—could take place and the voice of the people could be elevated above the din of special interests and have a greater influence on public opinion (e.g., Jones, 1995; Rheingold, 1993).

Some envisioned the Internet as a deliberative democratic forum where citizens engage in rational debate over common problems leading to
more informed public opinion that can help guide decision-making by public officials (Dahlberg, 2007; Habermas, 1989). However, more recent research has raised doubt about the Internet’s ability to stimulate democratic deliberation. Rather than bringing people together to engage in rational debate, the Internet may be creating communication outposts where likeminded people gather to reinforce their preexisting opinions and attack those who hold opposing ones, leading to increased polarization of political views (Galston, 2003; Sunstein, 2001). Blogs that typically post highly partisan content abet polarization by attracting users who seek out opinions that support their point of view and avoid those that challenge them (Johnson, Bichard, & Zhang, 2009). Thus, political discussion on blogs may represent the antithesis of democratic deliberation ideals.

While several studies have examined whether the nature of blog discussion constitutes democratic deliberation (Koop & Jansen, 2009; Xenos, 2008), what has not been as extensively researched is whether reliance on blogs leads to positive political attributes (such as increased self-efficacy, political interest, and involvement) as well as negative effects (such as low trust, selective exposure, and political partisanship). This study then examines whether reliance on blogs influences political attributes that foster or hinder democratic deliberation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratic Deliberation

Interest in democratic deliberation first began to flourish during the 1970s in response to people becoming less trustful, less interested and less engaged in the political process (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Putnam, 2000). Democratic theorists argue that political conversation really is the soul of democracy and that for democracy to thrive it must have an engaged and informed citizenry (Fishkin, 1991; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999). Also, decisions derived from democratic deliberation are believed to benefit democratic governance more than simple majority rule or decisions made only by elites (Kim, 2006; Strandberg, 2008).

While theorists have devoted considerable attention to discussing the importance of “democratic deliberation” to the political process, it is not always clear what is meant by the term (Bohman, 1996; Hardy, Scheufele & Wang, 2005). Several studies have used the terms “democratic deliberation” and “public sphere” interchangeably (e.g., Dahlberg, 2007; Vergeer & Hermans, 2008), though the public sphere as envisioned by Habermas (1989) is technically the space in which the activity of democratic deliberation occurs.

Democratic deliberation has been defined as “discussion that involves judicious argument, critical listening and earnest decision making. Full deliberation includes a careful examination of a problem or an issue, the identification of possible solutions, and the use of these criteria in identifying an optimal solution” (Gastil, 2000, p. 22). Therefore, deliberative democracy is a process where citizens voluntarily participate in discussions about public issues (Kim, et al., 1999). During deliberative discussion, participants carefully examine a problem or issue, identify possible solutions, establish or reaffirm evaluation criteria, and use these criteria to identify the optimum solution to the problem (Dahlberg, 2001, 2007; Gastil, 2000; Sunstein, 2001). The quality of public deliberation depends on informed participants offering diverse opinions.

Democratic deliberation is typified by several important characteristics including: (1) a diversity of points of view in which people are given equal opportunity to express themselves; (2) a rational and critical debate focusing on an issue or a set of issues; (3) a discussion of issues of social importance; and (4) an arena to develop solutions to problems: