



# A very popular blog: The internet and the possibilities of publicity

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## Abstract

This article outlines two modes of publicity, a publicity of promotion and a publicity of openness, and then considers their implications for traditional broadcast versus online communications. Although the structure of the internet makes it particularly good at developing a publicity of openness, the economics, regulatory structure and technology of the traditional broadcast media make them far better at developing promotional publicity. I trace a series of examples that demonstrate this inequality and discuss the implications of this disparity for the economics of attention. Ultimately, I argue, discussions of the democratic possibilities of the internet must take account of the relative lack of promotional publicity online.

## Keywords

attention, broadcasting, internet, publicity, public sphere

In April 2009, google.com had more than 139.5 million unique visitors.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Nielsen estimated that 23.3 million viewers watched a final round of Fox's top-rated *American Idol* on 28 April 2009 (Berman, 2009a). The millions who navigated to google.com reportedly visited 2.3 billion times. Eight April shows broadcast twice weekly for *American Idol* with an average rating of 13.65 should have equaled 180 million views for the month (many of whom were likely repeat viewers). On the surface, these numbers might confirm what some critics have suggested, that the internet has chipped away at the market share of the major networks and led to an environment in which broadcasters no longer hold the same power. Considering that in the 1980s, top-rated programs such as *The Cosby Show* could average ratings of 30 and higher, the relatively low numbers of *American Idol*, particularly as compared to new players such as Google, seem the latest

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drop in the ongoing decline of 'blockbuster television' (Staiger, 2000) as audiences find other ways to spend their media time.

Before declaiming the replacement of the network era with a post-network era of more open access, however, it is important to recognize the advantages that the established networks still maintain. Although only 22.5 million people tuned in to *American Idol*, those viewers all watched a single program. While the millions who visited Google started on the same page, their searches would have taken them to a variety of sites and spread their attention in vastly different directions. Suggesting the relative attention commanded by *American Idol*, three of the top five Google searches for 28 April 2009 were 'Adam Lambert Feeling Good' (one of the show's contestants and the song he sang), 'Someone to Watch over Me' and 'My Funny Valentine' (two other songs from the program). Of course, the majority of websites fair far worse than Google. During the week of 27 April 2009, Nielsen numbers indicate that 4.1 million people watched the syndicated program *Dr Phil* while only 2.8 million visited both [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) and Barack Obama's personal website for the entire month, and, with its 3.2 rating, *Dr Phil* was hardly one of the most successful programs of the week (Berman, 2009b).

Exploring the relative success of websites and television programs points towards the layers of complexity that surround these different sources. Media theorists continue to be optimistic about how 'the Internet disrupts the basic assumptions of the older positions' about US politics (Poster, 2001: 99), and such scholars as Henry Jenkins (2006) have stressed the democratic potential of blogging and other practices opened up by the digital age. Jenkins (2006) argues that online fan communities for programs such as *Survivor* can develop a 'collective intelligence' that challenges the hegemonic power of the television networks. Showing a similar optimism about the internet, the 2009 economic bailout plan proposed by the Obama administration included money for rural broadband access in the hope that bringing high-speed access to rural areas would help to equalize the information playing field and, thus, right some piece of the economic problems on 'Main Street'.

The promises of digital democracy remain alluring for scholars and politicians alike. In an era when someone can record and mix a CD on their laptop or write an online 'news story' and distribute it through sites such as Facebook, it does seem that amateur musicians and journalists can have an impact not possible during periods dominated by corporate technology. However, in addition to thinking about production, distribution and exhibition, the assumed channels of media integration and power going back at least as far as the *Paramount Decision* of 1948, this article argues that discussions of the democratic potential of the internet also need to take seriously the question of *publicity*. Because of their technological and economic structures, traditional broadcasting and the internet have different publicity possibilities. These differences ultimately give traditional media a series of advantages in terms of attracting and maintaining audience attention and create tensions within and between so-called old and new media with important implications for democratic communication.

## A tale of two publicities

Richard Lanham (2006) argues that human attention has become an especially important commodity in the information age. Today, Lanham holds, 'there is too much information

around to make sense of it all' (2006: 6). In addressing this digital-age information overload, Lanham expresses a concern that also arose around earlier communications technologies. Faced with the burgeoning radio industry, Walter Lippmann wrote that, 'the private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to stay awake' (1925: 3). The famous debate between Lippmann and fellow critic John Dewey on the question of the public was fundamentally about the status of attention in a new media age. Lippmann believed that the path through the morass of information available to the average citizen was through the work of experts who would sift out less important data and help to focus attention on particularly significant issues. Dewey, on the other hand, wanted as much information available to citizens as possible, believing this knowledge fundamental to their ability to participate in public dialog and deliberation.

These two understandings of the public reflect two different conceptions of publicity and its links to communication. According to Dewey (1927: 167), 'there can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it'. This reflects an older, Enlightenment understanding of publicity. As John Peters (1995: 10) explains, 'though we are accustomed to contrast public and private, prior to the 18th century the chief contrast was public and secret. "Publicity" was a battle cry against the Absolutist state.' Jürgen Habermas (1989) identifies this concept of publicity with the free exchange that he believes characterized the public sphere of the 18th century. Despite criticisms of Habermas's bourgeois focus (see Calhoun, 1992; Negt and Kluge, 1993; Warner, 2002), the conception of publicity as open communication has retained an important place in discussions of the public sphere made possible through the internet. Stressing the openness of online communication, Owens and Palmer (2003: 339) argue that, 'web-based mass alternative media offer increased range, immediacy, and ease over traditional alternatives'. Likewise, in their discussion of alternative online communities, Downey and Fenton assert that, 'the mass-media public sphere will become more open to radical opinion as a result of the coincidence of societal crises and the growth of virtual counter-public spheres' (2003: 199). The openness of the internet seems to have created a range of democratic and even radical possibilities.

The alternative understanding of publicity implied in Lippmann's conception of the public parallels developments during the time in which he was writing. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the earliest use of the term 'publicity' to the 17th century, when it meant 'the quality of being public; the condition or fact of being open to public observation or knowledge'. By the 19th century, a second definition had emerged that included 'the publicizing or promotion of a product, person, concept, etc.; the giving out of information for advertising or promotional purposes'. By 1925, writers had explicitly recognized that 'any publicity is good publicity' and that there was 'no such thing as bad publicity' (Simpson et al., 1989), embracing a definition more in line with the colloquial use of the term today. In 1935, public relations pioneer Edward Bernays would celebrate this new publicity, arguing that the 'organization of communication in the United States enables practically any person or any group or any movement to be brought almost immediately into the closest juxtaposition with people almost anywhere' (1935: 85).

Lippmann's call for experts to digest information for the public makes sense in the context of these changing notions of publicity, regardless of whether or not one shares his

vision of an army of social scientists guiding the disenchanted citizenry. As film, recording and radio allowed messages to be broadcast in less time over greater distances, the new publicity of promotion found a still larger audience, even as access to the channels of communication seemed to narrow. 'Many of the direct channels of news have been closed and the information for the public is first filtered through publicity agents', Lippmann (1922: 217) wrote in *Public Opinion*. He added that:

the picture which the publicity man makes for the reporter is the one he wishes the public to see. He is censor and propagandist, responsible only to his employers, and to the whole truth responsible only as it accords with the employers' conception of his own interests. (1922: 218)

Lippmann's experts were to use the pulpit of publicity for more disinterested means and thus to focus public attention on more important issues.

These two understandings of publicity, as openness and as promotion, capture two problems of democratic communication. The more open a channel of communication, the more diverse opinions it can include, but the less clearly it can focus attention on any particular topic. At its best, extreme publicity of the open sort promises a range of options for information and culture; at its worst, it threatens the disenchantment and information fatigue that Lippmann feared. On the other hand, the more a channel focuses on some defined set of voices, the more it promotes the community of attention necessary for shared deliberation and debate. However, such focussed communication risks flattening discussion into a homogenized message that excludes alternative points of view. In the US, broadcast television has historically prioritized promotion over openness. By aiming programming towards a kind of middle-American perspective, the television networks have sought to maximize their audience by offering a narrow range of programs believed to be most palatable for the largest number of viewers and most profitable for advertisers – a strategy that has remained even as the contemporary industry has embraced a niche marketing approach (Malin, 2010).

The decentralized nature of the internet has offered a welcome alternative for many media critics, in that it seems to have renewed the possibility of a publicity of openness. It is significantly easier to launch a website than a television network, making the internet seem a perfect venue for Enlightenment publicity. However, if we lose sight of the second mode of publicity, we risk overestimating the potential impact of these open networks of digital democracy, especially as the mainstream media continue and even expand their promotion. In allowing users to be both producers and consumers of information, the internet offers a series of publicity problems with powerful implications for democratic communication.

## Push and pull publicity

The economic and technological structures of the mainstream US media have made them especially well suited to promoting attention to particular topics. Since the early days of broadcast television, interference issues meant that viewers in most areas could receive no more than five broadcast channels and a great number would receive no more than three. Owing to the network-affiliate relations that developed out of radio, NBC, CBS

and ABC would come to dominate the television airwaves. Because there was little space for alternative networks, such as struggling would-be fourth network DuMont (Weinstein, 2004), these three networks would win a promotional coup as they shared an oligopoly of the country's largest new communication chain. Although cable networks are not licensed in the same way as television broadcasters, their relationships with cable companies give them a similarly direct line of promotion into people's homes. CNN's ratings jump during moments of national crisis (Malin, 2003), not simply because it is known for its news coverage, but because the network is readily available to most homes with cable. Television networks are guaranteed a base level of promotion because of their access to the commercially and governmentally restricted resources of the television viewer.

The US government has long recognized the importance of broadcasters' access to the scarce resource of the electromagnetic spectrum required to carry their signals. In *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. Inc. v. Federal Communications Commission* (1969: 400), which upheld the constitutionality of the fairness doctrine, the US Supreme Court found that 'long experience in broadcasting, confirmed habits of listeners and viewers, network affiliation, and other advantages in program procurement give existing broadcasters a substantial advantage over new entrants, even where new entry is technologically possible'. Similarly, in *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation* (1978: 727), the court argued that since broadcasting extends into 'the privacy of the home', it had a 'uniquely pervasive presence' that warranted it being treated differently than other communications media, including placing stronger restrictions on broadcasters' freedom of speech. Media scholars have likewise noted the power of broadcasting's pervasive stream of content into the home. Robert K. Merton et al.'s classic study of a 1943 war bond drive, featuring singer Kate Smith, explored how the marathon structure of the radio broadcast worked 'to focus the attention of the audience' (1946: 24) by drawing listeners throughout CBS's entire day of programming. Other researchers have stressed the unique ability of broadcasting to establish both feelings of interpersonal intimacy (Horton and Wohl, 1956) and ritualized ceremony (Dayan and Katz, 1992), due to the way in which it both pervades the schedule of everyday life and marks off the day into a sequence of discreet events.

The mainstream networks' dwindling market share notwithstanding, scholars continue to find evidence of the persuasive and ritual powers of television. A study of the 2000 US presidential election by Weaver and Drew (2001) found that television exposure was a better predictor of voter knowledge than exposure to news on the internet, and Kaid and Postelnicu (2005) found that television remained a dominant communication medium in the 2004 election, despite increases in internet usage. Likewise, research by Sweetser et al. (2008: 212) on the 2004 election 'supported the idea that television networks set the agenda for campaign communication'. Even Barack Obama seemed to recognize the unique powers of television. Despite their celebrated use of online and digital media, his campaigners decided to purchase a 30-minute prime-time television special in October 2008 amidst some of the most heated campaigning of the 2008 election.

Similarly, a number of studies have shown how regular viewing of late night programs such as *The Daily Show* can impact viewer knowledge and opinions (Feldman and Young, 2008; Hoffman and Thomson, 2009; Holbert et al., 2007). Taking advantage of their position in the broadcast or cable television lineup, these programs gain persuasive power from their ability to focus attention on a common set of topics at highly regimented

time periods, not unlike the talk radio programs that have become a ritual aspect of many audience members' radio listening (Barker and Lawrence, 2006; Bennett, 2002; Hall and Cappella, 2002; Holbert, 2004; Yanovitzky and Cappella, 2001). *The Daily Show*, like the news and political talk it satirizes, creates a ritual spectatorship around current events. Because they are held in common for a number of audience members on a regular and consistent basis, these programs have a unique ability to focus attention on specific topics and thus to give salience to particular stories or ideas.

On the internet, the fact that viewers must choose to 'visit' the websites that hold the content they wish to see, rather than having a particular channel streamed into their home or car, creates a much wider spectrum of choices for the digital citizen and a much harder task for the web publicist. Laptop journalists will find few barriers to publishing a story provided that they have access to a blog or other online site. Actually getting people to see the story, however, poses a much bigger challenge. Unlike the traditional media, the decentralized medium of the internet tends to disperse rather than focus attention, particularly in terms of less popular sites. In April 2009, when *American Idol* and Google dominated their respective mediums, the top 10 websites, as determined by TNS Media, were: Google, Yahoo (130 million unique visitors), Facebook (104 million), Live (99.5 million), MSN (89 million), YouTube (77.8 million), eBay (71.8 million), Wikipedia (65 million), Amazon (64 million) and MySpace (55.6 million). These 10 most visited websites rely heavily on content produced by other sources: news feeds, user-created pages or products, wiki entries or the whole range of sites available to a search engine. This means that unlike the more traditional medium of broadcast television, which focusses user attention on a common program or advertisement, these top sites offer users an experience unique to their search terms and browsing patterns. Not every Facebook user will, or even can, see the same things when they visit the site. Of course, users may view common news feeds or advertisements on these sites, but these tend to be taken from or paid for by more mainstream media sources, strengthening the attention-getting power of the more traditional media owners.

This dilemma of dispersion can be demonstrated by looking at a site with a relatively high number of visitors such as wordpress.com. This site serves as a publishing platform for a host of blog pages, allowing access to a range of content uncommon in most mainstream media sources. Visitors to the site may have arrived by using the URL for some specific blog or by entering the site's main address before moving on to any number of blogs accessible via it. If they use WordPress as their publishing platform, they may also have visited to update their own blog postings. In April 2009, WordPress had 25.1 million unique visitors and 59.5 million visits, placing it at a TNS ranking of 35. In contrast, during the same period of time, nytimes.com had 15.6 million visitors who made 58.3 million visits for a TNS ranking of 62. Unlike nytimes.com, however, which offers access to the relatively focussed content of the *New York Times*, WordPress visitors have a whole menu of unconnected options from which to choose. In April 2009, the most highly visited blog on WordPress, icanhascheezburger.com (a 'Lolcat' site featuring cat photos with wittily composed captions), had a mere 303,365 visitors. While WordPress had enough overall blog pages to rank fairly highly, no individual blog had drawn a significant number of those visitors. Sites such as WordPress might themselves take advantage of 'the long tail' (Anderson, 2006) that comes from accumulating an aggregate of



smaller numbers of visits, but the majority of the individual sites seem to get lost in the larger mix of that aggregation. The publicity of WordPress does not necessarily translate into publicity for the pages it makes available.

The ways in which search engines such as Google disperse users across a range of sources introduce another promotional problem for less popular websites: the 'rich get richer' bias demonstrated by a number of studies (Cho and Roy, 2004; Cho et al., 2005; Diaz, 2008; Frieze et al., 2006; Pandey et al., 2005). The ranking algorithms for most search engines, which determine where sites will appear in the order of final search results, calculate popularity in part based on the number of links pointing to a particular site. The more links a site has, the more popular it is assumed to be (with added points for links from sites that themselves score highly for popularity) and the higher it appears in the search results. Cho and Roy (2004) analyzed the evolution of site popularity by calculating the change in the number of page links in a sample of sites at two different points in time. From the first to the second sample, those sites in the top 20 percent for popularity in the initial sample (those that were linked to most frequently in that sample of web pages) had gained an additional 8 million links, while the bottom 60 percent of the linked sites had gained virtually no new links, illustrating how already popular sites can experience growth exponentially above less popular ones. Pan et al. (2007) supported concerns about search engine bias by looking at the practices of actual web users. When the participants in their study explored sites through Google, their choice of links to follow was heavily biased towards those ranked most highly in their results, illustrating a high degree of trust in Google's ranking system and a tendency to visit those sites that had already achieved popularity.

Certain sites also benefit from synergies with more traditional media that allow them still stronger promotional possibilities. Three of the top 10 sites from April 2009 are the properties of mainstream media conglomerates: Live is a Microsoft product, MSN is a property of NBC Universal, and MySpace is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. These sites gain publicity from references on their sister television networks and because they become repositories for videos and other products that have run on the traditional outlets they support. Searching for any number of Fox programs will lead to MySpace's collection of videos, allowing the traditional broadcast channel to move viewers on to the newer digital one. Similarly, CNN can use its cable news channel to call attention to stories on its website. Here, CNN uses the promotional publicity of its cable franchise to direct traffic through the more populated spaces of the internet, all of which is reinforced by the network's longstanding reputation as a cable news source. In April 2009, *cnn.com* had more than 29.5 million unique visitors, placing it 24th in the TNS rankings. During the same period, 10.3 million people would visit the Fox News companion website *foxnews.com*, ranking it at 96th, while 6.9 million people would visit *huffingtonpost.com*, the alternative news blog of political celebrity Arianna Huffington, whose many appearances in the mainstream media garner a certain amount of publicity. In contrast, the news portal *drudgereport.com* had 2.7 million visitors, while the websites for the more niche-targeted political magazines the *National Review* and the *Nation* had 550,092 and 332,118 visitors, respectively. The contrast between the number of visits to *thenation.com* and *cnn.com* makes sense given the relative popularity of each of the traditional outlets they support. It also suggests that despite making sites equally accessible

to users, the internet does not so much eradicate differences of popularity as it remediates them into a new digital form (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), such that a less read or viewed news source becomes a less visited website.

The example of hulu.com further demonstrates the power of synergies between traditional and digital media. A video site sponsored jointly by Fox and NBC, hulu.com was launched in March 2008. Taking advantage of the synergistic possibilities of its two parent networks, hulu.com had over 1 million visitors in its first month of service and averaged a 17 percent increase in visits from April 2008 to January 2009. These numbers had their biggest increase, however, in February 2009 after an aggressive advertising campaign that included an ad during Super Bowl XLIII on 1 February. While the site had 4.1 million visitors in January, in February, following the Super Bowl, that number jumped to more than 7.4 million. Although this number dropped slightly in March and April, the site still maintained an average of nearly 7 million visitors and the site ranked 107th in TNS's rankings for April 2009.<sup>2</sup> With an ongoing advertising campaign that includes such television personalities as Alec Baldwin, Seth McFarlane and Eliza Dusku, Hulu has taken advantage of promotional possibilities that are out of reach for the majority of websites and internet users. In fact, in 2004, CBS refused to include an advertisement by moveon.org criticizing George W. Bush in its Super Bowl broadcast, even though Moveon had raised the money to pay for the spot. In contrast to hulu.com, the independent video site fora.tv, which launched in 2005 with backing from William Randolph Hearst III and which makes videos of lectures and readings from across the country available to its users, had 110,515 visitors in April 2009 (ranking it at 18,707th on the TNS chart) and 489,913 total visitors for January–April 2009, 7.4 million less than hulu.com for February 2009 alone.

In addition to the more explicit synergies enjoyed by hulu.com, the traditional media also set the agenda for online sites in other ways. As Chris Paterson has demonstrated, online news tends to take its lead from more traditional news sources. As he explains, 'popular Internet news sites typically become immensely more so when a single news event is receiving saturation coverage from all media' (2005: 148). Supporting this relationship between mainstream and internet news stories, Paterson illustrates how many online sites tend to reproduce the stories being told in traditional sources. In a study of online news portals Yahoo, Lycos, Excite and AOL, Paterson found that an average of 85 percent of the content provided by these services was copied nearly verbatim from traditional news sources AP and Reuters. 'Dependency on news agency content is not always the result of a desire for perceived high content quality at little cost, but is also a function of brand association,' Paterson argues. 'Web sites seek to draw users through association with well-known brands, especially those with strong positive associations for the user' (2005: 151–2). In the process, this burnishes the traditional brand with which the website hopes to associate itself, further adding to its promotional publicity.

A look at the most viewed videos on YouTube offers a further perspective on these inequalities of publicity. Of the 100 most-viewed YouTube videos of all time up to April 2009 (as reported on its own website), 77 were previously made for the mainstream media or otherwise replayed mainstream content, the largest number of which included music videos for recording artists such as Avril Lavigne, Miley Cyrus, Alicia Keyes and



Jonas Brothers. Also included among these was a clip from the 2007 *Miss Teen USA Pageant* (originally broadcast on NBC) of Miss South Carolina's botched interview response about 'US Americans', which gained viral infamy shortly after the original broadcast. Even some of the remaining 23 videos that were not created by or for the mainstream media have fairly mainstream focusses. One of these most-viewed videos was a 'mash up' entitled 'Crank Dat Soulja Boy Spongebob' that used footage from *Spongebob Squarepants* as an animated 'music video' for the Grammy-nominated 'Crank Dat' by rapper Soulja Boy. This top-100 list suggests that YouTube users might tend to search for the things they know best – those videos that are already getting time in the mainstream media or that reference well-known media products. As is the case with the search engines explored above, popularity on YouTube may beget more of the same. Frequently viewed videos get a more prominent place in search results, not to mention being listed in YouTube's 'most viewed' category, and may subsequently, therefore, be viewed more often. Thus, YouTube may provide evidence of the enhanced promotional publicity of the mainstream media, which continue to take up a dominant position in YouTube's viewing, as well as provide a vehicle for helping to enhance mainstream promotion still further.

Social networking sites such as Facebook offer their own unique negotiations of these publicity problems. In offering an accessible forum through which users can simultaneously be producers and consumers of information, these sites deliver on many of the promises of digital democracy. These sites give users both a voice and an audience, but create a range of tensions in the process. The larger my group of Facebook friends becomes, the wider the reach of each of my immediate postings and the larger my promotional possibilities. However, because each new audience member is themselves a potential producer, the more friends I accumulate, the more incoming messages I will have to manage as well. In short, the more I am able to disperse my own messages, the more potential strain I put on my own, and others', attention. As social network analysts have demonstrated, 'there is evidence both for cognitive and time constraints on network size'. The larger one's social network becomes, the weaker one's tie with each individual network member (Roberts et al., 2009: 139).<sup>3</sup>

Owing to these issues of network size, users who acquire the biggest audiences and who care the least about interacting with them individually (in short, those users who can treat Facebook as a broadcasting medium) will have an advantage in terms of promotional publicity. Facebook has provided strong publicity for such celebrities as Barack Obama and actor Ashton Kutcher. Because of their presence in the mainstream media, both Kutcher and Obama acquired a large number of followers in a relatively short period of time. Likewise, their promotional aims – letting people know about an upcoming film or getting people to vote – required relatively little interaction. Neither needed to interact in substantial ways with the 'friends' to whom they sent their various messages. In contrast, in a study of social networks among early college students, Lu et al. (2009) found that their subjects used these personal networks in ways that optimized local gossip and interaction among a smaller group of friends. As a platform, Facebook has the means of getting a message out to vast audiences. However, not all users are equally equipped or motivated to make use of this, giving an advantage to those with an already established publicity presence.

## Public and research implications

As these examples demonstrate, broadcast and cable television command a high level of promotional publicity in comparison with their internet counterparts. As dedicated, exclusive channels into people's homes, these traditional networks have a technological advantage in terms of commanding attention. Of course, a lack of attention has certain benefits as well. The internet makes possible a mediated underground unavailable on US broadcast or cable networks; the government licensing system and the expense of operating on these exclusive channels have encouraged mainstream media producers to aim for the middle-American audience generally viewed as the target of broadcasting proper. There are no radical television networks in the USA, but neither is there an online equivalent to NBC, ABC, CBS or Fox, with their ability to focus mass attention on a specific message for a specified period of time.

Broadcast and cable producers seem to fret little over their lack of publicity of the open variety. Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, mainstream media companies pushed for a concentration of ownership that further limited access to traditional media channels. By 2002, NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox owned a stake in over 70 percent of the pilots produced for prime time (Bielby and Bielby, 2003: 587), a dramatic increase from the 1980s and early 1990s. Those people concerned with the democratic possibilities of internet communication cannot afford to be so blithe about promotional publicity. As the above examples indicate, the mainstream media continue to exercise an agenda-setting function over a number of online sources, and a still larger number of websites are simply unknown to most users. Likewise, the 'rich get richer bias' of search engines may help the most popular websites continue their dominance over less popular ones, even as websites that build synergies with the mainstream media have a still stronger advantage.

Walter Lippmann and John Dewey were prescient commentators on the place of publicity in a mediated world and their ideas offer some hints as to how we might understand and counteract contemporary imbalances of attention. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann proposed establishing 'an independent expert organization' (1922: 19) that would locate and make sense of the available facts for the larger public. In these regards, Lippmann would likely look favorably on a website such as factcheck.org, which is sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Calling the site a "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics', the site's organizers evaluate claims made by American politicians and then post these assessments online. Factcheck.org has played an important role in the past few national elections, with the candidates themselves often using the site's information to refute their opponent's claims. However, the site suffers from a relative lack of publicity during non-election periods. While factcheck.org had more than 1.5 million unique visitors in the October prior to the 2008 election, that number dropped to just over 500,000 immediately after the election. As of April 2009, the site would draw just 200,000 visits.<sup>4</sup> Like many of the websites mentioned above, factcheck.org draws its largest number of visitors when it is most frequently mentioned in the mainstream media. These issues of publicity mitigate the site's potential impact, regardless of the ongoing service it performs. Scholars interested in digital democracy should continue to explore the reach and impact of such sites in order to analyze the contexts in which they best

maintain attention. How and when do such sites become prominent and what does their relative popularity tell us about online publicity more generally?

Although Dewey shared some of Lippmann's concern regarding information overload, he could likely find more to celebrate in this age of digital interactivity because of his emphasis on a publicity of openness. Whereas Lippmann recommended that experts guide us through the morass of the information age, Dewey urged the public to cultivate 'the flow of social intelligence', which, he argued, 'circulates by word of mouth from one another in the communications of the local community' (1927: 219). To the extent that the continuous postings and updates of Facebook, Twitter and similar sites provide a space where distant users can interact with each other in direct ways not possible through the traditional media, they may indeed subvert some of mainstream media sources' promotional power. If Facebook creates tightly bound communities, even if much smaller than mainstream media audiences, then what those communities communicate about should have a powerful purchase on the group's attention. Future scholarship should analyze how these new digital water coolers operate in the broader flow of information. To what extent are postings on Facebook influenced by mainstream media sources? How does the information provided by these postings register with users and what role does it have in their opinion formation? Finally, how do both 'expert websites', such as factcheck.org, and the more grassroots communications of social networking sites function in contexts outside the US and what do such comparisons tell us about publicity in different technological, cultural and economic situations? These are just a few of the potential research questions suggested by the incongruence of publicity in the US.

## Conclusion

Exploring publicity thus raises important questions about digital democracy. Taking these issues seriously highlights both the relevance and insufficiency of arguments about 'the digital divide' and 'net neutrality', both of which place a priority on equitable access to online communication technologies and channels. If there is a substantial divide between those with and without internet access, then the problem of online publicity is all the more pronounced. The public called into existence by a website will necessarily be smaller than that addressed by a national network available to everyone with a television set, and certain groups will be systematically excluded from both accessing and producing web pages. Similarly, if those companies with the largest economic means are allowed to operate on a faster or otherwise enhanced version of the internet, an option currently precluded by net neutrality regulations (Keeping the Internet Neutral?, 2007; Newman, 2008), they will likely import the traditional media structure online, enhancing their already powerful promotional control. However, the examples above illustrate that even in its current form, the internet is not simply neutral. It exists in an economic, legal and cultural context that includes the mainstream media, and online communication is not immune to the powerful influences of these well-established sources. Neither guaranteeing a level technological playing field, nor expanding people's access to online media will solve these problems of publicity.

The imbalances of promotional publicity discussed above suggest that those concerned with democratic communication online should, in fact, be attentive to democratic

communication offline as well. Broadcasters have recognized that there is a value in the niche marketing, interactive possibilities of online communication, but they have not given up their more dedicated channels of attention in the process. *American Idol* still commands more revenue for Fox than MySpace. Ignoring mainstream broadcasting and cable in the hope of finding a democratic utopia in cyberspace risks ceding promotional publicity to those who need it least. Instead, champions of cyber-democracy should also find ways to open up and democratize mainstream media spaces so that these focussed channels of publicity are not merely avenues for corporations to promote themselves. This means fighting the deregulation of television and radio holdings with the same vehemence that has been brought to net neutrality discussions and pushing for more powerful and expansive public broadcasters who can open the airwaves to a larger community (McChesney, 1993, 1999, 2004). Only by allowing both a publicity of attention and a publicity of openness in the mainstream media can we hope that both can also flourish online.

These questions of publicity bear upon ongoing celebrations of the revolutionary possibilities of the digital age. These celebrations make sense because the internet seems to expand the reach of everyday citizens by allowing them to share messages with distant others in a way previously only available to the elite owners of exclusive media channels. It is this ability to interact at a distance that centers claims about the revolutionary aspects of the internet; otherwise, it would be no more revolutionary than simple interpersonal communication. Questions about attention are essential to the democratic potential of online communication, in that the extent to which users can actually locate each other's messages in the larger economy of information is fundamental to a democratic interactivity. Discussions of the democratic possibilities of the internet need to explore the ability of particular sites to build publicities of both openness and promotion and to analyze these within the context of the wider media environment.

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### Notes

- 1 The figures on website visits here and throughout are drawn from TNS Media's 'compete' rating system (available via [www.compete.com](http://www.compete.com)). Much like the Nielsen television ratings, TNS takes a sample of web surfers, places a tracking mechanism on their computer and then uses this to calculate the number and frequency of website visits. As with the Nielsen ratings, there are good reasons to be cautious about aspects of the TNS system, especially the representativeness of the sample of users. Still, a number of studies have used TNS data to make claims about internet and other media usage and have demonstrated the viability of these measurements relative to the more established Nielsen numbers (Donohue et al., 2007; Krugman et al., 2005; Macleod, 2006; Nail, 2007; Snyder et al., 2006).
- 2 As reported by TNS, [hulu.com](http://hulu.com) had the following unique visitors from March 2008 to April 2009:

March 2008:	1,033,369
April 2008:	896,057
May 2008:	1,148,833
June 2008:	1,255,858
July 2008:	1,389,918
August 2008:	1,519,067
September 2008:	2,312,518
October 2008:	3,750,479
November 2008:	3,389,588
December 2008:	3,667,722
January 2009:	4,146,113
February 2009:	7,352,849
March 2009:	6,660,809
April 2009:	6,958,398

- 3 Dunbar (2007) has suggested that the maximum number of network connections any one person can maintain is 150. In line with this, Facebook reports that its users have an average of 130 friends. On the issue of maintaining these networks of relationships, see boyd (2008), Lewis et al. (2008) and Lewis and West (2009).
- 4 As reported by TNS, factcheck.org had the following unique visitors per month from October 2008 (the month prior to the 2008 election) to April 2009:

October 2008:	1,566,617
November 2008:	550,079
December 2008:	221,506
January 2009:	164,170
February 2009:	218,776
March 2009:	202,373
April 2009:	214,123

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