

**Networked Public Talk:
Attention, Difference, and Imagination in Online Urban Forums**

by

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Dedication

To Dr. Lory T. Walker (1921-2010)

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ABSTRACT

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Urban residents have been using internet technologies for civic and political discussion since the earliest days of Usenet. A large part of this online talk is distinguished by its informality and spontaneity. This dissertation analyzes informal discussion as actually practiced in everyday, computer-mediated settings. The project considers the ways in which online discourse operates at a moment in political life in which day-to-day issues of urban living are articulated, contested, and brought into focus as public concerns. Using data collected from a 1.5 year online ethnography based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the dissertation characterizes this informal, publicly-oriented discussion as *networked public talk*. Networked public talk has four principal characteristics: (1) the primary activity is sustained discussion among citizens; (2) it is talk characterized by informality, not governed by procedural rules or a pre-existing agenda; (3) it is mediated through networked technologies and comprised of publicly-viewable discussions; and (4) it involves issues of collective concerns, rather than purely

personal issues. What constitutes these public matters is not pre-determined nor are the issues predefined—they emerge and take shape through public talk. The concept of networked public talk foregrounds the relationship between informal political discussion and a specific moment in public life in which participants are sifting through, articulating, and bringing into focus what are their collective concerns. In this sense, networked public talk is conceived as political because it is through talk that citizens demonstrate that an issue should be a matter of common concern. The dissertation proposes that informal talk online be understood as a process of making sense of public issues. It looks at three components of that process in online urban forums: the ways in which public issues are brought to attention, articulated, and sustained as focal points of conversation through the use of internet technologies as discussion mediums; how an information architecture and established participant norms both support and constrain a sometimes serendipitous encounter with a multiplicity of perspectives; and how the networked discussion and recognition of public issues is mediated through and helps to construct lived material places.

CHAPTER 1: Networked Public Talk

You sign up. Write threads. Reply to posts. Try to act like a human being. I like this humble little board where you can write about the city and the world and sometimes someone actually listens.

-Phillyblog poster, 2008

In late 2002, four Philadelphians started a discussion forum called Phillyblog.com. Their stated motivation was to provide a location where residents could have a “constructive, positive, productive dialogue about the city,” and to “market” the city by promoting Philadelphia to residents and visitors, but with “honest discussion.” After seeing 50 years of continuous population decline, in the early 2000s, there were multiple calls for Philadelphians to have constructive, productive, but positive dialogues about their city. Between its population height in 1950 to the 2000 census, Philadelphia lost more than a quarter of its population—about half a million people or enough to fill the entire city of Portland. In 2002, a local columnist and self-titled “Urban Warrior” Carla Anderson, urged Philadelphians to “sell” the city, writing: “Whole generations have grown up believing that true success means leaving the city. For these young people, moving out is no longer just a matter of fleeing the taxes, the trash and the schools. After years of watching friends and family leave, they now see a single-family house in the suburbs as the ultimate symbol of their success” (2002). According to

Anderson, it was time to move beyond defeatist attitudes, embrace the “renaissance” in (re)developing Philadelphia neighborhoods, and stop selling the city short.

Indeed, Philadelphia has some real assets. Situated directly between Washington, DC and New York, Philadelphia is a relatively affordable city with a historical identity of strong, distinguishable neighborhoods and significant cultural and educational resources. Still, Philadelphians aren’t historically known for being particularly optimistic about their city. In the 1970s, the city actually adopted an advertising campaign with the slogan “Philadelphia isn’t as bad as Philadelphians say it is” (Stevick, 1996). Philadelphia residents then and now are living in a city that has to grapple with significant problems: vacant and crumbling properties; lasting poverty; failing public schools; dirt, graffiti, and abandoned cars; high crime rates; and a legacy of political corruption. And there have been tensions in those so-called “renaissance” neighborhoods regarding redevelopment, displacement, and gentrification.

Throughout the last decade, however, Philadelphia has had modest increases in population even while some of its post-manufacturing peers such as Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Chicago lost residents. By the 2010 census, Philadelphia had re-assumed its spot as the fifth largest city in the country, taking back its Top 5 ranking from Phoenix. Alongside these migration trends, multiple neighborhoods have gone through significant redevelopment, more people started moving into the city’s center, homicide rates stabilized, and some Philadelphians saw a more optimistic future for the city.

It is within this context that Phillyblog and its participants’ discourse operated. Phillyblog was a highly-trafficked, multi-topic internet forum focused on discussing day-to-day living in Philadelphia. From its early years to its death in 2009, Phillyblog

participants talked about all aspects of urban life: its resources and its problems. The complex, conflicting, and diverse issues that exist in Philadelphia—growth and decay; prosperity and poverty; stimulation and fear—were also the kinds of public concerns that were expressed and debated online. There was venting about noisy neighbors. There was sharing information about local resources. And there were attempts to rally residents to make some kind of change in their neighborhood or in the city. Phillyblog was no tourist site or perfect technological enterprise. It was, according to its own users, “troubled and wordy.” But in so being, it was a telling, frank representation of the city. At its best, Phillyblog laid bare how and what Philadelphians were concerned about; motivated action; and kept people informed. At its worst, Phillyblog was “argumentative, often unpleasant, obsessed with dog poop and crime, and several of its denizens seem to be certifiably insane” (Phillyblog user, 2008).

From the standpoint of theories of political discussion, civic engagement, the public sphere, or democratic deliberation, Phillyblog is not an easy object to sort out. The discussions on the site did not always look like what active and engaged citizens might need to do in order to perform their civic duties. Much of the content was a prosaic mix of gossip, opinions and mundane information on city life—restaurant openings, parking problems, and litter—topics largely excluded from theoretical discussions of how online forums have affected American politics. Even posts that focused on more traditionally political topics, such as homeless policies or national presidential campaigns, tended to meander or end without closure, consensus or action. The tone varied from serious concerns to flippant remarks to invective and name calling. Technically, Phillyblog wasn’t exactly in the vanguard either. Described as a “decidedly Web 1.0 online forum

model” (Wink, 2009), Phillyblog, despite the name, was not a blog but an older internet message board platform. The technological structure was problematic. There were stretches of time when the site was inoperable, and it eventually went totally black in the summer of 2009—enveloped in controversies about owner lawsuits, apathy, spam attacks, technical breakdowns, and incompetency.

At the height of operation from 2006 to 2008, Phillyblog was, however, a phenomenon. The site was attracting approximately 2,000 new user registration requests and about 18,000 posts per month. There were political candidates, elected officials, neighborhood organizers, police officers, and journalists who participated in the site. And Phillyblog discussions were cited in the local news media, including the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and its online component *philly.com*, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, *City Paper* and *Philadelphia Weekly*. Phillyblog owners reported that then Pennsylvania Governor Rendell had agreed to become the site’s “honorary chairperson.” As early as 2006, one of Phillyblog’s better known posters, State Representative Mark Cohen, suggested that Phillyblog should have its own state-recognized “Phillyblog Day,” posting:

What phillyblog stands for is real people writing about things of importance to themselves and others. They write without pay, and they are a major news source that professional journalists ignore at their peril. Ridicule phillyblog all you want. It is one of the most important media in Philadelphia today. It values people. It values ALL people. Anyone can write for it. Thousands of people do write for it. More people write for it than write for all other Philadelphia-oriented blogs COMBINED. In the years of its existence, more people have written for it in all likelihood than for all Southeastern Pennsylvania weekly and daily newspapers COMBINED.¹

There was scattered support for Representative Cohen’s idea within the Phillyblog forum. In some quarters, however, Cohen’s excitement was met with ridicule.

¹ Phillyblog thread 23442 and *Philadelphia Weekly*’s Philadelphia Will Do blog post, #1 (“Worst. Idea. Ever,” 2006).

Designating Phillyblog Day the “worst idea ever” (“Worst. Idea. Ever,” 2006) one of the city’s free weeklies, *Philadelphia Weekly*, launched its own blog column entitled “I Read Phillyblog So You Don’t Have To” (IRPSYDHT), with its main writer facetiously vowing to address Cohen’s concerns: “If there’s one thing I absolutely do not want, it is to be put in a perilous situation simply by ignoring an Internet messageboard” (“I Read Phillyblog So You Don’t Have To,” 2006). The IRPSYDHT was a short-lived, tongue-in-cheek weekly selection of the most “excellent Phillyblog threads.” To prove its point, the “excellent” posts highlighted by the newspaper ranged from the conspiratorial to the inane. After the city enacted a smoking ban, one Phillyblogger proposed an alternative, petitioning to “ban fat and ugly people from bars and restaurants.” The IRPSYDHT picked it up quickly, providing an excerpt from the original post: “Ugly people ruin Philadelphia’s bars and restaurants keeping us from being a world class city. We should follow Paris, London, and California by making it socially unacceptable to be ugly.” The *Philadelphia Weekly* blog commented simply, “I’ll pause here so you can hold your sides from all the hilarity contained within that post” (“IRPSYDHT: Smoking Ban,” 2006). The IRPSYDHT writers had a point. Facetious or not, it is hard to see how such an exchange was something that “professional journalists ignore at their peril.”

Representative Cohen’s excitement and *Philadelphia Weekly*’s derision capture only two poles on a multi-faceted spectrum. Phillyblog discussions were meandering, fractious, and occasionally incomprehensible. And yet, by its own users’ characterizations, Phillyblog captured the messy essence of discourse in the city in which it operated. It was discursively interactive, informative, stimulating, connective, expressive, entertaining and diverse. Phillyblog gathered together a disparate set of city

residents who shared what was important to them personally and civically. The problems of urban life were articulated, aggregated, and archived. Hyperlocal neighborhood news, stories and commentary were shared. New pathways to the city were opened. People were mobilized to respond to neighborhood concerns. And some Phillybloggers genuinely debated the history and future of the city, revealing deep-seated disagreements about what was at stake and how they might be implicated.

1. Networked Public Talk

Michael Ignatieff (1984) writes, “Our political images of civic belonging remain haunted by the classical polis, by Athens, Rome and Florence. Is there a language of belonging adequate to Los Angeles?” Prevailing visions of good democracy and healthy public life are dominated by pictures of discursively active, information rich, and enthusiastically participating citizens. From the public sphere to New England town hall meetings, the vision of lively political participation has been fundamental to our ideals of democratic life. Democracy is “strong,” “deepened” or “deliberative” when citizens discuss, listen, and collectively decide; and it is “thin,” “diminished,” or otherwise anemic when citizens passively watch, don’t talk, or fail to inform themselves about political life. The story doesn’t change much online. Despite modifiers denoting the “newness” of internet-based political practices, we continue to be haunted by what Ignatieff calls our “political images of civic belonging”: online public spheres or electronic town meetings.

This dissertation argues that these images are inadequate for understanding the range of political talk occurring online. Urban residents have been using internet technologies for civic discussion since the earliest days of Usenet, employing the internet

for a variety of everyday civic practices: sharing information, comparing experiences, mobilizing resources, gossiping. A large part of this online talk is distinguished by its informality and spontaneity. It is not structured or organized primarily for the sake of collective decision-making, political organizing, or other traditional forms of engagement. And yet, it is participatory, sustained, and interactive. It is often focused on the ordinary problems of everyday living—detritus, graffiti, nuisance, rebuilding—that rarely appear in the institutional media, in national debates, or local deliberative forums unless they intersect with larger issues of city government, economics, or environmental impact. This informal, everyday talk falls short of the hopes of deliberative theorists and their normative visions of universal, rational, purposeful and vetted public discussion. Nor can it be easily considered a form of political activism or mobilizing because it often lacks a direct link to institutionalized forms of politics.

My focus in this project is on discussion as actually practiced in everyday, computer-mediated settings, rather than public talk organized around deliberation, mobilization, or education. I am particularly interested in those moments in political life when everyday urban issues are articulated, contested, or brought into view as public concerns. I call this networked public talk, a form of political interaction and discourse that has four principal characteristics.

First, the primary activity I am concerned with is voluntary discussion among citizens. Networked public talk is characterized by sustained, interactive, many-to-many discussion. This distinguishes it from other types of public exchange that do not include interaction by citizens themselves, such as elite-to-elite discourse (e.g. congressional hearings). It is also distinguished from broadcast communication, like elite-to-citizen

discussion in which there is primarily a one-time or one-way relay of information (e.g. press conferences or many public meetings). In this definition of networked public talk, I am indebted to Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini's (2009) definition of "discursive participation." The authors distinguish discursive participation from forms of discussion that are primarily elite-to-elite, elite-to-citizen, or citizen-to-elite dialogue. Their focus is on citizens in sustained discussion with other citizens.

Second, networked public talk is characterized by informality and spontaneity. Involving exchanges not specifically organized for the discussion of particular topics or issues, it does not follow particular procedural rules or have a pre-existing agenda (see Kim & Kim, 2008). As such, it is less structured or rule-governed than forms of political dialogue focused on purposeful discussion or decision-making. This should not suggest, however, that networked public talk is wholly unstructured. Like any form of public activity, it requires an infrastructure of discussion and a motivated community of participants.

Third, networked public talk is mediated through distributed and networked technologies with discussions that are primarily, though not exclusively, text-based. It is made up of communication that is asynchronous, aggregated over time, searchable, and semi-persistent. Moreover, it is comprised of publicly viewable exchanges, rather than private or otherwise restricted discussions such as those occurring in semi- or wholly-private spaces like personal Facebook pages or private email exchange.

Fourth, networked public talk involves issues of collective concern, rather than purely personal issues (see Jacobs, et al., 2009). These collective public matters are, at least in principle, issues that citizens need to discuss and address if we are to live together

in an environment of shared, but limited, resources (Couldry et al., 2007). What constitutes these public matters is not pre-determined nor are the issues predefined. Issues of public concern emerge and take shape through public talk, and in turn sustain it.

I want to emphasize this final point about “public” since the term plays a key role in the dissertation and is explored in depth in this chapter. My argument is the public/private distinction is meaningful in spite of legitimate disagreements over the definition and content of politics (Barry & Kimbell, 2005; Couldry, et al., 2007). As I conceive of it in this project, the boundary between public and private is not prescriptive. In fact it is ambiguous. This is particularly true in networked discussion settings where individual contributions, which are sometimes personal and sometimes political, are made to quasi-private but also quasi-public forums (Livingstone, 2005). Part of what makes networked public talk political is that through talk people demonstrate that an issue that is not receiving enough awareness or concern, is believed to be a purely personal or private matter, is an existing issue that is under- or mis-addressed, or is a problem without any agreed upon solution or definition, should be a matter of broader collective concern. Part of the work of networked public talk is to articulate, attempt to bring into focus, and also form a sense of shared public concerns.

My understanding of public talk is somewhat different from Benjamin Barber who defines public talk as that “talk in common among a community of citizens about common issues” (1989). For Barber, public talk has a civic or public orientation in that it is focused on those things which will benefit the community. Consequently, he argues when we use the language of “I want,” we are not using the language of citizenship. Public talk entails listening and talking, has an affective as well as cognitive component,

is conducted in public and dependent upon communities of engaged citizens, and is intentional, drawing talk out of the world of “pure reflection” into the world of “participation and action.”

I agree with Barber’s larger argument, in particular his appeal to community as a way to oppose a notion of politics oriented only towards satisfying private desires (Young, 1990). And with Barber, I see public talk as interactive (listening and talking), affective, and dependent upon people who are mutually committed to engage in the talk. However, in taking as his starting point “talk in common” or our common issues, Barber misses an important site of our public talk. In so doing, the wrangling over what should or should not be something that we hold in common—our common issues—is either taken for granted or has already been determined prior to that part of the public’s discussion. Publicly-oriented talking constructs matters of common concern. There is a contestory function to public talk (Fraser, 1992). Indeed, if we understand public talk as only that about the common good then we fail to see the work of such talk in sifting through, making claims to, and making sense of public concerns. From this perspective, the language of ‘I want,’ needn’t be opposed to a language of citizenship. Rather, the language of “I want/I think/I urge all of you” can be the language of public life.

Networked public talk is also distinguished from Varnelis, et al.’s (2008) “networked publics” defined as “a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (2008, p. 2). The authors are careful to note that networked publics are not simply publics that are networked together via technology. They are publics *transformed* by networked media. Such transformation is grounded in specific attributes of digital

technologies and technologically mediated practices.² I agree with this position.

However, once again, what Varnelis's networked publics notion misses is the emergent and political act of forming a public and public issues (networked or not). The nature of networked technologies is not simply transforming publics, it is changing the ways in which publics and public talk is supported and constrained, and therefore the ways in which public concerns are brought to attention, recognized and addressed.³ This point is further developed in this chapter in the discussion of John Dewey.

1.1 The project

Before moving to the theoretical framework set forth in the dissertation, it may be helpful to contextualize the work methodologically. The focus of this project was to study public talk within a context in which collective concerns are grounded in the discussion of day-to-day living. To this end, I conducted an 18-month ethnographic study of online discussion forums in the city of Philadelphia, focusing primarily on what was one of Philadelphia's most active city-focused forums, Phillyblog.com, and its successor site PhiladelphiaSpeaks.com. I employed a mixture of qualitative internet methods, including

² The authors enumerate the following affordances of digital technologies: (1) the accessibility to digital production and networking tools means larger numbers of people have available to them the means of information and cultural production and distribution; (2) networked technologies facilitate large-scale, peer-to-peer and many-to-many forms of communication that tend to be more viral "word-of-mouth" than top-down dissemination; (3) networked technologies and cultural practices have found fertile ground at the edges of social, cultural, and political realms, as evidenced by the growing influence of blogs; (4) internet technologies have enabled the digital aggregation of information that has been made findable through various search mechanisms.

³ In her work on the identity construction of teenagers through the use of social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, boyd (2008) further refines the concept of networked publics by theorizing such publics as both the space constructed through networked technologies as well as the "imagined community" which emerges through interaction among people, technology and cultural practices. She writes, "Social network sites like MySpace and Facebook are networked publics, just like parks and other outdoor spaces can be understood as publics" (2008, p. 15). boyd too takes for granted the constructive and contested nature of public-making by equating social media sites to a public(s). In so doing, she renders the dynamic and provisional process of public emergence static, taking it as a given rather than a fragile achievement.

ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews. I read through thousands of threads on the sites and conducted in-depth analysis of hundreds. I combined on and offline observation, attending civic meetings and events, and conducted in-depth interviews. I detail the methods employed in the next chapter.

Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks were important sites of study because of my interest in looking for locations of talk which supported sustained and interactive discussion among citizens rather than one-way broadcasting or elite-to-citizen discourse. Both forums employed a threaded conversational structure composed of threads and replies to those threads. On Phillyblog there was a high flow of messages; in 2009, nearly 1,300 new threads and 18,000 posted replies appeared on the site each month. Discussion threads could be initiated by any registered user and there were low barriers to enter and exit the discussion space with registration requiring the provision of an email address and username. The moderation style was widely considered “hands off,” focused mainly on policing personal attacks and spam rather than keeping discussions on topic. The content of the site was publicly viewable (e.g. did not require registration to view).

Architecturally, the site was divided into broadly-defined discussion boards that covered the city’s geographic neighborhoods as well as topical areas (e.g. politics, spirituality). One of the critical aspects of Phillyblog’s technical architecture, and a feature I take up in more detail later in the dissertation, was that it consolidated the city’s geographic neighborhoods along with topical areas into one single online space. The geographic focus of the forum was one of its distinguishing characteristics—participants deliberately and regularly invested attention in their specific neighborhoods, the city as a whole, and the region. This feature is of particular salience as it points to the role that

networked public talk has in the construction of place and the grounding of public issues. Through a process of public definition and redefinition, shared but limited urban spaces take on layers of meaning. This geographical focus is a topic I return to in Chapter 3 where I develop the category of online urban forum and in Chapter 6 where I discuss the role networked public in constructing and imagining place.

2. Political Talk at a Different Moment in Public Life

I take as a starting point that talking in public with other citizens provides opportunities for people to develop and express their views, identify shared concerns, negotiate differences, and air disagreements (see Delli Carpini et al., 2004). As such, I consider networked public talk a form of political and civic participation. It is comprised of micro actions which have a publicly-oriented frame of reference but are difficult to measure using traditional metrics of political or civic engagement. Networked public talk is fundamentally active, focused on forming a sense of what is at issue, what makes it an issue, and who is implicated in the issue. This definition distinguishes networked public talk from other forms of civic and political engagement such as voting, protesting, or volunteering in civic organization—although networked public talk may be a precursor to or an appeal for involvement in such activities.

Discourse as a central component of political life has a long legacy in critical theory, with many theorists arguing for the role of citizen conversation in cultivating democracy. In contemporary political theory, these notions have found some of their fullest expression in work collectively defined as deliberative democratic theory. Offering an alternative to traditional views of democracy that see the nature of politics as a process of will-formation determined by competition among autonomous individuals,

deliberative theorists argue politics is better conceived as a process of reasoned, norm-driven discussion to produce fair and legitimate outcomes.

The attractiveness of the theory lies in its positioning as an alternative to liberal or aggregative democracy, contending democracy cannot be reduced merely to mechanistic procedures of voting (Chambers, 2003; Young, 1996). A whole subfield of political communication has emerged (see reviews in Chambers, 2003; Delli Carpini, et al., 2004) with scholarship that is both theoretical and empirical, ranging from historical studies of actually existing public spheres (see, for example Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1989), case studies of group deliberations (Gamson, 1992; Gastil, 2000; Mansbridge, 1983), “deliberative polls” (Fishkin, 1995), to a range of empirical studies on the effects of deliberation (see review in Ryfe, 2005). Concurrently, the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have increasingly organized and supported various practical efforts in deliberation and democratic governance (Leighninger, 2009). Support for the practice of deliberation has come from the Kettering Foundation, the Harwood Institute, and Everyday Democracy. This nonprofit support has resulted in the organization of thousands of local and national deliberative forums (Delli Carpini, et al., 2004), the training of hundreds of forum moderators, and the staging of televised deliberative events such as PBS’s deliberation days (using Fishkin’s deliberative polling). Within existing governmental frameworks, policymakers and public administrators have reported on their own cases of deliberation in administrative decision-making, urban planning, city budgeting, and economic development (Fung & Wright, 2001; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Innes & Booher, 2004).

Due to the promise of legitimate, democratic solutions to political problems, deliberative discourse has developed heavy normative requirements. One of the most celebrated and influential theoretical forays connecting norm-driven discourse to a legitimate public sphere comes from Habermas (1989). From his historical analysis, he extracts the characteristics of the public sphere, or those requirements which can make democracy work as it should. Habermas conceived the public sphere as a political space between the market and the state that could only emerge through an “ideal speech situation.” First, discussion was to be open and accessible to everyone regardless of status. Second, participants were to enter into discussion voluntarily, on equal footing, and with an open mind as to the possible outcome of the deliberation. (While Habermas recognized that status inequalities existed, he argued that those inequalities were to be bracketed off with participants deliberating *as if* they were equals.) Third, arguments based solely on private gain were inadmissible. Interlocutors had to enter into discussion asserting claims that were backed by reasoned, publicly understandable arguments. Ideally, people’s initial perspectives and opinions would be transformed through discourse, and the best-reasoned arguments would win out. Fourth, rules or norms of discourse applied, such as civility, mutual respect, argumentation, and turn taking (Ferree et al., 2002). Finally, though perfect consensus was not a necessary ending point of deliberation, a unity of opinion was desirable.

Such requirements are unlikely to be met in everyday contexts or non-institutionalized settings. And as the concept of deliberation moves from theory to actual practice, empirical researchers and practitioners have had to expand their definitions. Nevertheless, scholars have still taken pains to make the distinction between talk and

what they consider to be deliberative and democratically productive dialogue. Stromer-Galley, for example, argues deliberation is different from dialogue whose goal is to achieve “mutual understanding” and from “casual political conversation” because deliberation is a process by which people “engage in reasoned opinion expression on a social or political issue in an attempt to identify solutions to a common problem and to evaluate those solutions” (2007, p. 3). Similarly, Noveck (2004) has called deliberation a “special form of speech” that is more than “just talk” because it involves purposeful weighing of options and problem solving.

Other scholars have taken issue with these strict definitions and expand deliberation still further to include a variety of conversational modes, thus opening up a space of inquiry for informal, everyday discussion. Iris Marion Young (1996), for example, challenges the valorization of argumentation as the *only* mode of democratic discourse, criticizing the Habermasian model for carrying implicit cultural assumptions, such as an emphasis on formal, general and dispassionate discourse norms. She advocates instead a more inclusive ideal of “communicative democracy” that incorporates a wider range of norms and styles of speech and promotes additional modes of interaction including “greeting,” “rhetoric,” and “storytelling.”⁴

Cook, Delli Carpini and Jacobs (Cook et al., 2007; Delli Carpini, et al., 2004; Jacobs, et al., 2009) focus less on styles of speech and broaden the concept of political discourse by expanding the times of, locations for, and participants in political discussion. Their broadened concept, what they call “discursive participation,” has five

⁴ Greeting refers to a mode of interaction where participants acknowledge the points of views of others; rhetoric includes the more affective norms of discourse and persuasion; and storytelling is a way to convey the situated or context-based knowledge of the various participants through a position of personal storytelling.

characteristics: (1) it is focused primarily on discourse with other citizens; (2) it is a form of political participation (most empirical work on participation has ignored political talk and instead focused on voting, lobbying, protesting, or volunteering); (3) it can include formal institutions of political life but is not limited to those institutions; (4) it can occur through a variety of mediums, including face-to-face conversations, email exchanges, or internet forums; and (5) it is focused on local, national or international issues of public concern. The authors distinguish discursive participation from communication between elites (e.g. campaign debates or pundit talk shows); citizen-to-elite discussions, such as school board meetings or letters to the editor; elite-to-citizen communication (e.g. press conferences); “self-deliberation” where people internally justify or challenge their political viewpoints; or discussions that are focused on personal issues not directly related to broader public issues (Delli Carpini, et al., 2004).

In a similar vein to the idea of discursive participation, Jane Mansbridge (1999) extends the definition of deliberation beyond the formalized settings of judicial or legislative bodies. She is the most explicit in theorizing *everyday* political talk. Mansbridge sees everyday talk operating in a larger, interacting political ecosystem, which she labels the “full deliberative system.” This full deliberative system operates on multiple, interconnected planes, made up of various moments in and types of political communication: structured deliberations within designated public forums, talk between constituents and elected officials, talk among political activists, as well as everyday talk among ordinary citizens about the things “the public ought to discuss.” While recognizing that this everyday talk may not always be “self-conscious, reflective, or

considered,” she argues it is critical to the full deliberative system and thus should receive as much theoretical attention as formal deliberation.

Mansbridge notes that she is not employing the term “system” in its colloquial sense to signal a mechanistic or perfectly predictable operation. Rather, she uses the term to indicate multiple interconnected parts of a whole. In later work, she refers to a deliberative ecology, yet the central notion of a political life made up of inter-influencing parts remains the same (Mansbridge & Flaster, 2007). For example, Mansbridge contends social movements are comprised of organized activists as well as “nonactivists” or “everyday activists” who may have never taken a public stand supporting the movement but who select concepts and take micro-actions via everyday talk as a way to address injustices organized activist movements have made salient (Mansbridge, 1999; Mansbridge & Flaster, 2007). In this sense, what happens in one realm of political life (the actions of activists) is effected by and affects other realms in politics (the actions and talk of nonactivists). Mansbridge writes: “The intentionally political talk of political activists both influences and is influenced by the everyday talk of nonactivists” (1999, p. 211). In other words, political life can be conceived as inter-influencing locations of political talk.

Developing the notion of a deliberative system allows Mansbridge to reclaim the importance of and provide theoretical focus on everyday political talk. Rather than seeing such talk as “pre-political” or some other antecedent to the real action of politics, Mansbridge places citizens’ everyday talk at the center of deliberation and, consequently, of political life. In other words, everyday talk is not “just talk” even if it does not look like deliberation; what happens in everyday talk is critical to the entire political ecology.

Mansbridge redirects focus away from binding decision-making and organized action as the only, or at least primary, critical outcomes of political discourse. In the full political ecosystem, people come to better understand what they want, as they:

. . . test new and old ideas against their daily realities, make small moves—micronegotiations—that try to put some version of an idea into effect, and talk the ideas over with friends, sifting the usable from the unusable, what appears sensible from what appears crazy, what seems just from what seems tendentious (1999, p. 214).

In other words, everyday political talk can help to articulate, put forward, and make sense of public issues: defining, filtering, challenging, discarding, applying and constructing political ideas.

Mansbridge proposes that what is defined as political is “that which the public ought to discuss, when that discussion forms part of some, perhaps highly informal, version of a collective decision” (1999, pp. 214-215). The term “decision” is used broadly to signal the range of choices we make as a collective each day—many, if not most, of which are “decided” outside of formal political apparatuses. These are not necessarily choices made in concert; they are made at different moments and across different levels of the political system. Importantly, Mansbridge continues to tie the political, the deliberative system, and therefore everyday talk to decision-making and action, even if decision and action are defined expansively. In addition to politics as a process of making sense of issues, she argues that such a process, “almost inevitably has decisional implications for action” (1999, p. 216).

This concentration on decision and action keeps Mansbridge squarely within deliberative theory. And she theorizes the ways in which deliberative standards of discussion (e.g. reciprocity, publicity, and accountability) are criteria that can be equally

applied, at least in a modified manner, to everyday talk. Using the normative criteria of deliberation, then, Mansbridge can distinguish “good” everyday talk, thereby placing citizen’s informal discussion directly within the purview of political theorists.

Mansbridge is central to this project because she opens up the possibility for political life, and correspondingly public talk, to operate at multiple moments. Her theorizing allows for the consideration of a larger and interacting discursive political system that includes talk in daily, non-institutional settings. Democratic life is partly enacted through everyday practice via discussion focused on making sense of, rather than making binding decisions about, public concerns. Understanding political interaction, then, also requires an analysis of the seemingly mundane discussions of everyday life. Such analysis makes it possible to see how citizens who stand outside political institutions discuss, frame, and form sense of issues (Conover & Searing, 2005; Walsh, 2004). Though it is an important building block in my argument, Mansbridge’s account of everyday talk does not quite get at the emergent and definitional moments in political life I want to identify.

Networked public talk is political because it is through talk that citizens demonstrate that an issue *should* be a matter of common concern. In other words, there is an emergent, contestatory, and definitional function to publicly-oriented talking. I propose that informal public talk online be understood as a process of making sense of public issues. In the dissertation I look at three components of that process in an online setting: the ways in which public issues are brought to attention, articulated, and sustained as focal points of conversation through the use of internet technologies as discussion mediums; how the information architecture and established participant norms

within online urban forums both support and constrain a sometimes serendipitous encounter with a multiplicity of perspectives; and how the networked discussion and recognition of public issues is mediated through and helps to construct lived material places.

3. Publics, Public Emergence, and Public Problems

In the remainder of the chapter I explore the emergent and definitional moments in political life in which public problems are articulated and turn primarily to the work of John Dewey. In 1927, Dewey provided his most comprehensive discussion of public emergence in *The Public and Its Problems*. The book was the culmination of a series of lectures in which Dewey attempted to respond to a challenge by “democratic realists”—in particular Walter Lippmann.⁵ Dewey’s interchange with Lippmann was driven by the publication of two books by Lippmann: *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925).⁶ The central problem of participatory democracy, according to Lippmann, was what he saw as mistaken assumptions about the public, including: that every citizen is regarded as omniscient and thus capable of making any public decision; that the

⁵ Michael Schudson (1978) points out that even at the height of 1920s prosperity, there was “deep pessimism about political democracy” among intellectuals. Increasingly, a group of critics, referred to as “democratic realists,” questioned the very feasibility of democracy (Westbrook, 1991). Their critique of participatory democracy focused on two of its tenets: the capacity of all people for rational political decision-making and the practicality and even desirability of public participation in policy-making. Basing their critique, in part, on a series of empirical voting studies as well as experience with an increasing use of war and industry propaganda during the twenties, the democratic realists concluded that participation, and specifically voting, was “indiscriminate and unintelligent” (Carroll Woody as quoted in Westbrook, 1991, p. 284)

⁶ It has become almost canonical to call the interchange between Dewey and Lippmann (though more Dewey in response to Lippmann) a “debate,” with Lippmann portrayed as an anti-democratic and Dewey as the participatory democratic (Schudson, 2008). However, such a representation both sells short Lippmann’s contributions to democratic theory and implies there was significant disagreement between the two. Jansen (2009) argues Dewey and Lippmann did not represent different schools of thought, rather their “phantom conflict” was reframed as such in the early 1980s.

public directs the course of events; and that the public is the executive of all things with one will and organic unity (1925).

Lippmann argued it was impossible to directly experience or understand everything that affects us, and with the introduction of more complex technologies, it has become even more unlikely. As a way to make sense of our highly-complex environments, we construct a “pseudo-environment” or medium of “fictions,” based on a picture in our head about what the world looked like. And it is on the basis of this fictitious world that we make decisions and cause action to take place in the “real” world. Lippmann was careful to point out that this fictitious world was not a lie. It is a subjective representation whose creation is an inevitability. Lippmann wrote the political world that citizens are expected to engage in is always “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined” (1922, p. 18).

This out-of-reach, imagined environment causes a problem for traditional conceptions of participatory democracy. In a complex political environment, citizens necessarily have to make public decisions about things in which they have no direct experience and with a reliance on mediated information. According to Lippmann, these decisions often are based on distorted images of the world outside. Moreover, it isn't only that people do not have direct experience of the substance of public debates; it is possible that people do not even know there is a debate, or what the debate is about (Marres, 2005).

Lippmann argued a single public could not form that had an opinion on every public question. His solution to the problem of publics was not the complete abandonment of democracy, but a notion of democracy he viewed as more realistic.

Lippmann tried to create some middle-ground between “a democratic fantasy and a democratic despair” (Schudson, 1978). In place of a public that makes decisions, we should look to science and expertise to define and explain popular will. This could be accomplished through the introduction of “some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he is entangled” (1922, p. 238). This mediating layer between the public, which Lippmann termed “outsiders,” and the governing elite was to be composed of a group of “insiders.” Lippmann envisioned these insiders as being disinterested experts and bureaucrats who had access to accurate information, the ability to separate themselves from stereotypes, and distill and analyze complex social problems. While Lippmann’s solution relies on an over-reliance and romanticizing of expertise,⁷ he nevertheless identifies an essential aspect of democratic life. Instead of a fixed public composed of citizens who would have informed opinions on all public concerns, private citizens would be involved in the issues in which they had an interest. As such, Lippmann envisions a public which is not fixed in its membership. Rather, the public “changes with the issue: the actors in one affair are the spectators of another” (1925, p. 110).

The idea that publics (rather than The Public) emerge through the recognition of public issues is, in particular, where Dewey makes a critical contribution. While agreeing with Lippmann’s diagnosis, most of Dewey’s work in the 1920s was an attempt to deal with the challenge brought from democratic realists like Lippmann, culminating in Dewey’s publication of *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). As formal political theory,

⁷ On this point it is important to remember Lippmann published *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* in the early twenties and was among many who had a strong belief in the power of science, expertise, and first-hand knowledge of the problem of political propaganda in public opinion manipulation (Schudson, 1978; Westbrook, 1991).

the essay explored the emergence and functions of the state, the public and government. Dewey defined the public and the state in quite specific ways. Contending humans existed in association and interaction; human action inevitably had consequences on others. Dewey divides these consequences into two categories: consequences which affect the individuals directly engaged in the interaction, and consequences which indirectly affect individuals not immediately engaged in the interaction. This was the essential, and only, distinction between private and public.

Dewey conceptualized multiple publics, emerging each time the indirect consequences of interactions were recognized and required management. He explained: “Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling those consequences” (1927, p. 126). In order to handle the effects of indirect association—mitigating the negative consequences and promoting the positive ones—publics would organize to form a “state” and establish officials to serve their interests.

There are several points in Dewey’s notion of the public that are worth emphasizing for the project set forth here. First, instead of defining democratic politics as based in a pre-existing or unified mass, Dewey conceptualizes publics as *emergent* social formations that are continuously developing, overlapping and disbanding. Publics change and are dependent on their historical circumstances. Dewey writes, “In no two ages or places is there the same public” (1927, p. 33). Second, what triggers publics to emerge is the recognition of their shared problems, and the recognition that others are implicated in those problems. When Dewey writes about the public and its problems, he is making two related points. He agrees with Lippmann that the democratic public is problematic

because it is currently inchoate (“in eclipse”). More fundamentally, he argues that publics emerge when issues appear that affect people collectively; as such, publics cannot be separated from their problems. Following from that, Dewey sees problems, issues, or interests as the very “participatory impulse” that cause democratic publics to emerge.

Moreover, in his description of publics, Dewey re-conceptualizes the issue of complexity that Lippmann diagnosed. Dewey agrees with Lippmann that the public’s ability to perceive and trace the effects of indirect associations has been further complicated with new technologies. At the same time, he notes how these complexities have ushered in a volume, intensity and diversity of problems that make it even more imperative (and possible) for publics to emerge. In essence, Dewey argues that complex issues “actually enable public involvement in politics” (Marres, 2005, p. 209, see also Antonio & Kellner, 1992).

For Dewey, democratic publics emerge and organize when no other institution exists to address their problems. A public had to recognize its shared problems, and because no one else was addressing those problems, the public had to organize into a “state,” designate representatives, and identify an addressee that could take care of those problems. While recognizing that this level of issue-definition and organization are not easy tasks, Dewey contends that states must always be “rediscovered” through a process of experimentation. He notes the state could be rediscovered either through “degrees of blindness and accident” or “intelligently, guided by knowledge of the conditions which must be fulfilled” (1927, p. 33). Dewey favored the latter, which requires members of the public to be able to perceive the consequences of others’ associations, trace those consequences to their source, and acquire the resources to organize in response. Finally, it

requires the selection and establishment of representatives of the public's interests, which often entailed opposing already existing and entrenched state powers.

Dewey conceptualizes publics as entities oriented to consensual action, emerging from joint action on common problems (Friedland et al., 2007). As such, the fundamental political problem for Dewey is to find the means for a "scattered, mobile and manifold public" to self-identify. He sees the answer in social inquiry (via science), full publicity, and communication—requiring both an improvement in the "conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion" as well as "freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and dissemination of their conclusions" (1927, p. 165-168). For a public to recognize and define its interests, it would have to rely on effective and organized social inquiry. And it would have to communicate and disseminate what came out of its discussions and inquiry as a way to organize action.

Dewey's framework for understanding public emergence as a process of issue emergence, identification, and definition is useful for a contemporary understanding of the kind of internet-enabled political practice that is the focus of my analysis. He emphasizes that publics and public issues are co-constituting. Publics emerge when issues are articulated and when people recognize that others are also jointly implicated in those problems. Dewey's notion of publics as emergent social forms triggered by and mediated through complex issues and among dispersed people is a particularly useful description and one I believe fits well with technologically-mediated discussion forums in which strangers communicate about issues of concern. Finally, Dewey's assertion that members of the public are fundamentally interested in their problems is also instructive, since it allows us to acknowledge that politics occurs when people talk about, collectively define,

identify others implicated, or act upon a range of problems of importance to local actors. The advantage of this conceptualization is that politics is viewed as not only a discussion of elections or ballot proposals. Publics can emerge in response to more mundane interests and issues.

4. Public but not “The Public”

Dewey provides a valuable theoretical space for exploring publics, public emergence, and public problems. Like Dewey, I connect publics and public issues. And through a process of communication that includes (though is not limited to) discourse, people may define their collective concerns, identify others who are also concerned, and articulate in what ways they are concerned. These publics can be short-lived or long-lasting; they can be successful at organizing and confronting existing political institutions, or they can fail at doing so.

It would be a stretch, however, to assume that participants in the forums I study are necessarily cognizant of themselves as a fully self-identified, conscious or acting public. They generally are *not* participating for the sole purpose of doing “public work.” Nor do their often inchoate actions meet high standards for civic engagement. While agreed-upon action may emerge, its limits are likely to be reached very quickly and go no further than a shared decision to take part in the public discussion of an issue within a space collectively maintained for that purpose. But the talk of participants in these forums can motivate, orient, and explore the kinds of actions that are expected for public participation in other venues. In other words, in online urban forums people can participate publicly by articulating, defining, discarding, forming sense of, and

recognizing others involved in public concerns without ever achieving the status of “the public” or the state that Dewey points us towards.

My notion of networked public talk, then, exists in an ambiguous space. This is not a wholly satisfying answer, and certainly not an encompassing theory, to the question of what role internet-mediated public talk plays in democratic life and civic engagement. But I believe it is closer to the messiness of real talk online. “The public” in networked public talk is not a single acting or self-aware entity. It does not, therefore, have the status or power of The Public. It may align closer to Sonia Livingstone’s suggestion that we consider the term public as an adjective rather than a noun, “doing or saying things publicly, making things public, conducting relations in public” because, perhaps, the most interesting forms of social activity are precisely those which are “ ‘public’ but not yet ‘the public’ ” (2005, pp. 25-26). As Livingstone is careful to note, however, the adjectival use of the term only postpones the question of when these public actions, practices, and talk merit the seriousness we have accorded to actions of The Public. I am sensitive to the critique that a focus on the “everyday” and the “informal,” has sometimes overreached, bringing us to the conclusion that everything we do in our day-to-day routines is political. At the same time, however, a too restrictive definition of “the political” or “the public” excludes much of what we actually do and leads, inevitably, to the conclusion that the one thing we no longer do is politics.

This dissertation advances the claim that there are important ways in which informal public discourse online merits serious attention. Perhaps it is easier to understand the political consequences of the public’s organized deliberation, particularly when (or if) it is linked to the institutions of politics. In the end, however, most of us

simply do not deliberate in formal settings; rather, our political discussions are relatively unstructured and often based in the experiences of our daily lives. My attempt to negotiate between the extremes of “everything is political” and “we are no longer political” is to put forward a term that exists in an in-between space; the kind of public talk I am analyzing is not solely deliberative discourse, nor is it only idle chat. It can be both and neither. The introduction of the term networked public talk allows me to avoid stretching, perhaps to the breaking point, the framework for deliberative democracy. At the same time, it allows me to take seriously the kinds of public talk that actually does occur in online settings.

Phillyblog (and other online spaces like it) underscores where the terms of analysis applied to deliberation may require modification, if not outright redefinition, for discourse on the internet. Networked public talk is an exploration into those moments and locations when “early expressions of interests, exploration of experience, tentative trying out of viewpoints” are expressed (Livingstone, 2005). This kind of talk, using Mansbridge, is part of a larger political ecosystem even if it may never achieve the status afforded to The Public. This kind of public talking may not look like what happens in formalized public deliberation, but public life needs it to happen.

5. Dissertation Organization

In the remainder of this dissertation I will explore these claims working from the primary case of Phillyblog. The problematic methodological distinction between online and offline is discussed in Chapter 2 on methods. Here I describe the mixture of internet qualitative methods used in the study, including ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and where appropriate primary and secondary statistical data. In

the chapter, I consider the problems researchers have faced in constructing field sites in online environments and look specifically at notions of mobile or multi-sited ethnography. I describe my own field site as a way to explore and ground the challenges of conducting digital ethnographies and account for the methodological choices made throughout the course of study. I also detail the different approaches I took to collecting data, how I chose to manage volume, and how I am presenting data I encountered in different locations (e.g. interviews and online thread data). Finally, I address other complications of collecting online data, in particular the process I undertook to ensure the confidentiality of research participants.

In Chapter 3, I think more deeply about the relationship between online discussion and larger trends in the city. I carve out a space for Phillyblog in the genre of social media and develop a category: online urban forums. The urban, place-focused component of online forums is a critical aspect of what makes these technologies a distinctive type. These forums support public talk that is directly linked to lived spaces and provided in a manner that is geographically referenced. In the case of Phillyblog, while participants talked about a nearly endless array of subjects, there were certain concerns that occupied a significant amount of space: neighborhood and population change; city politics and services; and crime, safety and quality of life. Each was an online reflection of the trends and issues happening more generally in the city. The chapter then turns to a fuller description of Phillyblog: its evolution from an aggregator of individual blogs to one of the largest multi-participant forums in Philadelphia. The structural attributes of the site—the information design, user categories, and

conversational architecture—are also detailed. The ways in which participants used the site, specifically practices of reading, writing, and maintaining are described.

In Chapter 4, I investigate some of the ways public issues are brought to attention and sustained in focus through the use of internet technologies as discussion mediums. In the chapter, I analyze specific information practices deployed by Phillyblog participants such as reporting first-hand observations, linking to outside news, and demonstrating a commitment to interactivity and play. At the center of analysis in the chapter lies attention, but I focus on a wider notion of attention and use the verb form, “to attend,” which implies a sustained commitment, presence in, and disposition to support or put effort into nurturing. The chapter describes two aspects of attending within Phillyblog: (1) calling attention to something of possible public concern by recording first-hand, personal experiences or by posting and annotating news coverage or information published in other venues; and (2) sustaining attention, giving further articulation to issues and creating a public through the engagement in the back and forth of ongoing talk. These two activities correspond to two critical aspects of public construction: the emergence and possible recognition of public issues and, therefore, an awareness that others are jointly implicated in those issues; and the means through which discussion of public issues can be developed and enlarged.

In Chapter 5, I explore encountering as an aspect of networked public talk. My focus is on the ways that an information architecture, user practices, and established participant norms within online urban forums both support and constrain an often serendipitous encounter with a varied sets of interests, perspectives, and ideologies. I build upon Iris Marion Young’s idea of city life as normative ideal in which she

envisions a form of public life defined as the encounter with and being together of strangers. Extending Young's notion to a digital environment, I translate her normative vision of city life to the concrete characteristics of Phillyblog, focusing on three primary features: malleability, multiuse, and publicity. In the case of my fieldwork, the information architecture, established norms, and user practices contributed to serendipity, heterogeneity, and variety. And yet, there were challenges and tensions posed from those same characteristics. I describe how encountering was regulated or "tamed" through the differentiation or zoning of the online space, techniques to delete or filter content, user banning, and participant practices of rebuking and calling foul.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I direct attention outward from the site itself and towards the city, thinking about the ways in which public talk in online urban forums can locate and make visible publics and public issues in concrete spatial terms and re-imagine places as locations for civic connection. I frame the discussion by looking to scholarship which insists that rather than being settled or internally coherent, places (like publics and public issues) are comprised of multiple and often conflicting understandings and representations. In the chapter, I describe two aspects of the relationship among place, publics, and internet discussion. First, I think about the ways in which public talk helps to construct and publicize places by characterizing them as one thing and not the other, and through that process, makes visible political tensions at work within the city. Second, I think about the ways in which places and the networked discussion of places help to construct publics by locating issues, and by imagining locations that invite public involvement. My point is not to suggest that these two aspects are somehow totally

separable. Rather, my argument is that online talk, place, and publics are interrelated and exist in a reciprocal relationship.

In the concluding chapter, I bring together the analysis in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 and consider the larger implications of networked public talk. I reflect on what this work means for broader theoretical conversations, and I also offer my views on how the work has pragmatic implications.

CHAPTER 2: Methods and Methodology

You know a lot people say, 'oh, it's just online stuff.' But these are real people and they are taking their time to write things and to put themselves out there. I think that people who just dismiss Phillyblog or any internet site by saying, 'oh you know its just anonymous people on the other side of the screen.' Well, it's not. They are real people. And it is real conversations that you are having.

– Elizabeth, interview

This chapter describes the research practices, choices, challenges and tradeoffs that motivated and framed the dissertation and, consequently, support and constrain its arguments. I approached the project as a qualitative internet study and designed a multi-sited ethnography focused on city-specific online discussion forums in one geographic location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I employed a mixture of ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews, and where appropriate I included secondary statistical sources so as to contextualize the online talk I was analyzing within larger trends and demographic shifts in the city of Philadelphia.

At the outset of the project, I was interested in examining online public discussion in its own terms, focusing on the ways in which the internet was being leveraged for a variety of everyday community practices: sharing information about city services; mobilizing resources to solve neighborhood problems; comparing experiences of the city and neighborhood; putting forward ideas about the causes of or solutions for neighborhood issues; and pointing others to what might be worth notice. I had previously

studied online political discussion through an analysis of online talk in national political blogs (Walker, 2006) and regional newspapers' online reader comment sections (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). My own and other research suggested that political work occurs within such talk-centric contexts (e.g. Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Ferguson & Howell, 2004; Kline et al., 2005; Lim & Kann, 2008). However, in the end, I found the sites and the commentary housed within focused on political punditry. Moreover, these sites tended to limit my analysis, tying it to pre-existing and formal definitions of politics and political exchange, effectively precluding the possibility of more everyday kinds of political and civic activity.

Instead of studying public talk that was organized to specifically discuss political topics, I wanted to study public talk within a context in which collective concerns are grounded in the discussion of day-to-day living. My focus, then, is an analysis of discussion as actually practiced in everyday, but computer-mediated settings. When constructing a field site, as described in greater detail in the next section, I was looking for sites of talk which supported sustained and interactive discussion among citizens rather than one-way broadcasting or elite-to-citizen discourse. Furthermore, I see public talking as partly an emergent practice. I was more interested in looking at sites which support the discussion of a range of issues with varying viewpoints rather than studying single issue or single ideology forums (e.g. anti-Casino development, green initiatives, progressive democrats, etc.).

During my 18 months of fieldwork, I observed numerous online Philadelphia-focused websites, blogs, listservs, Facebook groups, and discussion forums. In addition, I attended civic meetings and events, and interviewed community organizers, journalists,

and academics. In the course of research, one primary site, Phillyblog.com, and one secondary site, Phillyblog successor PhiladelphiaSpeaks.com, became hubs of the inquiry. Phillyblog was a location where a range of neighborhood groups, citizens, and journalists looked for community information—as such I saw it as an “intercept point” or one intersecting space through which different lines of public life flowed. There was a high flow of discussion threads on Phillyblog. I archived all available threads (52,000) as of May 2008. Using a stratified sampling strategy, I read through a sample of 4,000 of those threads. I then conducted in-depth analysis of several hundred. In addition, I reviewed threads on Philadelphia Speaks, followed the hyperlinks in those threads to other online city sites, and attended offline activities such as participant happy hours. In the end, I conducted 50 in-depth interviews with 41 individuals, following up with a dozen of them two or more times. I describe my thread sampling rationale and interview selection process in detail in the “Data” section of this chapter.

The rationale for using qualitative methods for data collection and analysis was based in the larger questions motivating the study: how and in what manner do city residents use online forums to articulate matters of public concern within the context of their everyday lives. In particular, what meanings and interpretations do participants in these geographically-focused discussion forums construct for themselves on public concerns. This focus on the meaning-making work that accompanies the use of information and communication technologies places my project within a grouping of internet studies that focus on technologically-mediated practices from the standpoint of the users of the technology. These “bottom-up” or user-centered studies necessarily require a focus on the practitioners of the phenomena under study and a common feature

has been to use participant observation and interviewing. Because it is a project aimed at providing an in-depth analysis of public talk as actually practiced in one online context, the dissertation provides a description of informal talk that is less exclusionary of people's actual activities. Beyond any possible theoretical contributions, this work has pragmatic consequences, potentially informing the design of future public online spaces, either those emergent or consciously engineered.

I chose ethnography because I see it as a research method that allows close examination, thick description and theory development of sociotechnical practices within everyday contexts. Ethnography is “predicated upon attention to the everyday,” (Marcus, 1995, p. 99) and local specificity is privileged. That said, ethnographic research can inform and offer valuable insights outside the specific context studied (Markham & Baym, 2009). In the case of this project, my goal has been to develop theory instead of test it. That is not to say I entered the field without existing theoretical frameworks or a set of interests that forced inclusion and exclusion of data and research avenues. Rather, I started the project with what Malinowski (1932) referred to as “foreshadowed problems.” Foreshadowed problems are “first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies” and the more problems a researcher brings with her into the field the more she is “in the habit of moulding his theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory” (1932, p. 9). Malinowski contrasts foreshadowed problems with “preconceived ideas,” notions that remain unchanged regardless of the data found in the field. In their explication of ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) use Malinowski's foreshadowed problems as a means to illustrate how most ethnographic research is focused on developing theory rather than testing existing hypotheses. Part of Hammersley

and Atkinson's interest is to underscore the ways in which ethnographic research is similar to other social scientific research in that the research begins with some problem, set of issues, or research questions and directions (e.g. foreshadowed problems). However, ethnographic research commonly diverges from hypothesis-testing in that it employs relatively open-ended approaches to research design, focusing on iterative designs. Hammersley and Atkinson write: "It is expected that the initial interests and questions that motivated the research will be refined, and perhaps even transformed, over the course of the research" (2007, p. 3).

My research design, as is typical of other ethnographic projects, was iterative and adapted as my fieldwork progressed. The critical decision points in data collection, analysis, and presentation centered around three main methodological challenges that exist in any qualitative study but are uniquely complicated when doing research in internet-based contexts and concern the following problems and choices:

- 1.) **Constructing Field Sites:** How to construct the boundaries of a project when the sites, technologically-mediated practices, and people we study exist and flow through a wider information ecology that is neither fixed nor can be located or neatly classified as "online" or "offline;"
- 2.) **Data Collection, Analysis and Presentation:** How to manage data collection that is suitable for an in-depth (the hallmark of qualitative research) study of sociotechnical practices when you are presented with an almost never-ending and interconnected volume of data and how to treat data that has been collected from multiple sources including "online" and "offline;"
- 3.) **Additional Complexities of Online Data:** How to ensure the ethical treatment of research participants when you work in online environments where there is a shifting and less than clear nature of what is private and public, the sometimes ephemeral and other times durable and traceable nature of internet discussion, and where there is a relative ease of observing internet practices without the researcher ever being "seen."

The remaining parts of the chapter cover these three challenges. First, I consider the problems researchers have faced in constructing field sites in online environments and look specifically at notions of mobile or multi-sited ethnography. I describe my own field site as a way to explore and ground the challenges of conducting digital ethnographies and account for the methodological choices made throughout the course of study. Second, I detail the different approaches I took to collecting data, how I chose to manage volume, and how I am choosing to present data I encountered in different locations (e.g. interviews and online thread data). Third, I address other complications of collecting online data, in particular the process I undertook to ensure the confidentiality of research participants.

1. Constructing the Field Site: Multi-sited ethnography

A set of fieldwork boundaries is the outcome of a project, rather than its precursor. The decision about when to start and stop, and where to go in between, is for ethnographers not made independently of the field, but is an intrinsic part of the relationship to it (Hine, 2009, p. 18).

One of the primary and ongoing challenges facing internet-based ethnographic research is the question of how to construct the boundaries of a project when the sites, technologically-mediated practices, and people we study exist and flow through a wider information ecology that is neither fixed nor can easily be located as “online” or “offline.”⁸ The internet, in particular, makes a neat distinction between online and offline exceptionally complicated because it is the very place where the “online and offline

⁸ I use the term “online” to describe internet-mediated practices and settings and “offline” to indicate practices and settings that are not directly mediated by internet technologies. I understand this terminology is problematic in that it sets up a false dichotomy that I work to alleviate in my research design, analysis, and theory-building. While I, like most researchers of digitally-enabled practices, am limited by terminology, I offer analysis of some of the ways online and offline practices are co-constituted.

meet” (Bakardjieva, 2009). Put simply, the social phenomena we study—the identity construction of teenagers (boyd, 2008); how cancer patients cope with their disease (Orgad, 2005); or even how sociability is constructed in text-based environments (Rutter & Smith, 2005)—do not live exclusively in one particular realm but instead exist, become entwined, and disentangle in a continuous flow through any number of mediated environments. Even making the claim that one studies “The Internet” as if it were a unified or static phenomenon is problematic (Slater, 2002) since, in reality, “the” internet is a mix of software; hardware; already-built infrastructures; as well as social, cultural, political and legal practices which combine, become stabilized, and are articulated in different places and under different contexts.⁹

This is as much a methodological challenge as a theoretical one. If one accepts that a rigid distinction between online and offline makes little theoretical sense, then drawing a methodological line between online and offline only reifies such a dualism. For the purposes of ethnographic research, the challenge has been to configure a field site that can take into account interconnected and overlapping mediated contexts but in a way as to make the project coherent, manageable and defensible. The field site is not something that is decided upon once and for all at the start of a project, but instead decisions about inclusion and exclusion are made continuously throughout study (Burrell, 2009). Amit describes the problem as an issue of not “discovering” but rather “constructing” the field site, arguing: “the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be

⁹ I opt for spelling “internet” with a lower case “i” and also use terms such as internet-enabled technologies or internet-based contexts. In part, this is in keeping with current trends in internet scholarship (see for example, Markham & Baym, 2009). More fundamentally, however, the lower case “i” indicates that “internet” is not a single proper place or technology that can be described as a unified whole.

laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred” (2000, p. 6).

This methodological challenge has been approached variously in internet studies and is tied to theoretical developments in the field. Reviewing the scholarship, Christine Hine (2000) distinguishes two distinct understandings of the internet. In the first, the internet is a place in and of itself, containing within it a set of norms and practices to be studied (or at least that *could* be studied) without reference to people’s offline lives. This conceptualization is one of the earlier theoretical constructions in which the internet is described as a distinct place with a specific cultural dynamic that one goes *to*. For example, early in the development of the internet as a mass communication medium, Rheingold (1993) in his writing about his experiences with the WELL (Whole Earth Lectronic Link) asserted that internet-based communication could provide richer forms of interaction and provide spaces for deep and meaningful “virtual community” formation. A common early methodological approach, then, was to define the field site as a distinct internet-based technology—a newsgroup, multi-player online gaming site, or social networking software application—and to study that site as a more or less self-contained phenomena.

The second of Hine’s categories is the internet-as-cultural-artifact perspective, which she develops within a framework of the sociology of science and technology. This perspective involves seeing the internet as the product of culture, co-configured by objects and social contexts and shaped by the ways in which it is used, marketed and taught, thus having multiple identities and interpretations (2000). Under this conceptualization, the internet exists within a broader cultural, social, political and legal

context. It is not a separate system of existence, but instead has inflected everyday life in important ways. In their notable analysis of the embeddedness of the internet in daily life, for example, Haythornthwaite and Wellman argue that one of the great “sins” of early internet research was to think of it as a “lived experience distinct from the rest of life” (2002, pp. 5-7). Similarly, Miller and Slater in their ethnographic study of the internet in Trinidad, critiqued analyses that focused on virtuality and separateness as the defining feature of the internet, claiming instead that the extent to which people treat internet relations as unconnected from their everyday lives is something that required explanation, as “a practical accomplishment rather than the assumed point of departure for investigation” (2000, pp. 5-6).

As such, a collection of influential critiques have challenged what was once an assumed division between online and offline (e.g. Carter, 2005; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002; Leander & McKim, 2003; Miller & Slater, 2000), establishing instead a view of internet-enabled practices as being embedded in everyday life. With this grounding, internet ethnographies have adopted different strategies and notions of what constitutes an appropriate field site. Hampton and Wellman (2003), for example, conducted an offline ethnography of a Toronto suburb in order to understand how internet connectivity enhanced a sense of neighborhood by facilitating contact between residents who were loosely connected. Also focusing primarily on an offline environment, Bakardjieva (2005) studied the integration of the internet into the everyday lives of users by focusing on ethnographic interviews and observation in domestic settings. Others have started in the online realm, focusing all or most of their attention there. Boellstorff (2008) constrained his fieldwork completely within the virtual world

Second Life in order to understand forms of social action and meaning-making that take place within it; while TL Taylor (2006) followed the same trajectory as her research subjects, participating first in online gaming and then joining players to observe them during their in-person meet-ups.

I subscribe to the idea that the internet is embedded in everyday life and try to account methodologically for the blurred relationship between online and offline using multi-sited ethnographic methods as a way to construct the field site. As described by Leander & McKim, multi-sited ethnography advocates for the analyst to follow the movement or trace the flow of “objects, texts, and bodies” as they move between mediated and unmediated environments (2003). First conceptualized in cultural anthropology, multi-sited ethnography is a response to several decades of methodological reflection by ethnographers who questioned the notion that a field site was a pre-defined, bounded geographic space that contained whole, intact, and knowable cultures (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992 as cited in Burrell, 2009). Marcus (1995), among others, argued that culture was not necessarily spatially fixed but was constituted by global flows made up “in/of the world system.” Ethnographic methods must account for those flows, writing that this mode of ethnographic research:

. . . moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space. This mode defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation (1995, p. 96).

Marcus forwards various “tracking strategies” in order to provide a coherent research project, including: “follow the people;” “follow the thing” (material object); “follow the metaphor;” “follow the plot;” “follow the biography;” and “follow the conflict.” The

argument for such a mobile approach highlights the centrality of movement and connectedness in social practice. It foregrounds the notion that social processes take place across distance—connecting any range of distinct entities (Burrell, 2009).

In terms of internet research, multi-sited ethnography—in particular Marcus’s tracking strategy of “following the thing,” can provide a methodological approach that accounts for the role of material objects (technologies, artifacts, media) in describing social processes that are constituted in and articulated through sociotechnical practices. Conventionally, ethnographic research has concentrated primarily on the role of human actors in meaning-making processes. Documents and artifacts have certainly been part of ethnographic projects; those objects, however, have often been examined as the product, and not a co-producer of, culture. The result is that technology often plays a limited role in understanding social practices, a point Bruno Latour makes arguing that technical objects are the “missing masses” in social science (1992).

Latour and colleagues develop the idea of the centrality of objects as a component of the social in ethnographic work emerging from science and technology studies. Marcus himself contends that the emergence of multi-sited ethnography is located, in part, in interdisciplinary scholarship such as media studies and science and technology studies and cites Latour’s ethnographic work as case in point of “following the thing.” One of the critical assertions of Latour is that we think of society and technology as one heterogeneous collective, composed of people together with technology, machines, and things. It is the interaction among these heterogeneous objects which constitute society and these interrelationships are conceived as networks of human and non-human actors, each of which is itself a network of heterogeneous things (Doolin & Lowe, 2002).The

key methodological contribution of such a construct is the notion that actors are constantly moving, interacting, changing, and in flow and the job of the researcher is to “trace” those objects as they circulate in the network.

1.1 Locating the field in a place

In terms of internet research, multi-sited ethnography provides a methodological approach that can account for the theoretical understanding that social practices do not conform to the boundaries of online or offline. Where this is most applicable to studies of online public talk is in the very idea that such discourse does not exist irrespective of public discussion or social activity more broadly.

Researchers have made various attempts to configure field sites so as to account for movement and connectedness. Using online traces, researchers have followed links within a field site. Beaulieu (2005), for example, used hyperlinks within a large database (the functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Data Center) as an ethnographic object—constituting the field site by following hyperlink traces and also reflecting on how those links were both functionally created and symbolically understood. In her study of the scientific discipline of biological systematics, Hine (2007) employed what she calls a “connective ethnography,” and explored the connections between different activities including group message exchange, institutional observation, interviews, and hyperlink paths. For Hine, a key starting point was a mailing list which she used as a source of data and complement to interviews. In her study of teens’ use of social networking sites for identity creation and management, boyd (2008) used a form of networked ethnography in which she analyzed the MySpace profiles of teens throughout the United States and interviewed teens as to their mediated practices. In each of these approaches, connection

and movement were critical methodological concerns of the project with the boundaries of the field site being constructed by an infrastructure of knowledge production (e.g. functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Data Center), discipline (e.g. biological systematics), or social media application (e.g. Facebook and MySpace).

My focus is the ways in which informal, online discourse operates at a moment in political life in which everyday issues of urban living are articulated, contested, or brought into focus as public concerns. I have been interested in how internet technologies are integrated into our descriptions, definitions, contestations, and understandings of public issues within a community context. In a very particular sense, I wanted to explore how technologically-enabled practices are articulated in local, city and neighborhood specific activity.

The first way I addressed this interest was to locate my field site in a specific place: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On the one hand this decision may seem to contradict the primary criticisms by cultural anthropologists who argue that the field is not coterminous with the researcher or by some predefined geographical boundaries. The criticism is valid, but as I understand it, their argument is not with the geographic conception of place, *per se*, but with the assumption that those places exist as neatly bounded fields. This is precisely why multi-sited ethnography is appealing for internet ethnographers: it blurs the boundary of online and offline.

If one examines the theoretical work that has emerged from the field of human geography, it is clear that those working specifically on issues of place and space no longer regard them as so easily separable from the other networks, particularly the information and communication networks, that operate within or through them. For

example, Doreen Massey writes, “the particularity of any place is...constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other that lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through its specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that ‘beyond.’ Places viewed this way are open and porous” (1994, p. 5). Other scholars, including urban sociologists, architects, and communications researchers have echoed these insights, arguing for the need to see places as constructed through the convergences of many kinds of networked connections, including economic transactions, information loops, and the movement of people. We need not concede the continued importance of physical location, or suggest that differences between places have been dissolved. It is possible to arrive at a more restrained conclusion: that choosing a field site has always meant a choice of immersion within particular networks and connections, whether it has been expressly acknowledged by the researcher or not. For my research, then, my interest was to choose a field site and be immersed in a material, geographical place.

Importantly, focusing on Philadelphia allowed me to look in-depth at a limited context and also enabled a combination of online and offline qualitative work. The choice of Philadelphia was partly practical—when I started the dissertation project I was already splitting my time between Ann Arbor and Philadelphia. More fundamentally, I chose Philadelphia because I wanted a research site that had a diversity of neighborhoods, was dealing with a range of recognizable city problems, and had an active online presence of actors who were talking about those problems on and offline—neighbors, neighborhood associations, interest groups, individual place-focused bloggers, political groups. To a greater or lesser extent, Philadelphia’s distinct neighborhoods support an extensive

organizational structure in the form of neighborhood and civic associations, community development corporations, neighborhood planning councils, and a range of ad hoc civic groups. Some of this structure transferred to an online environment as early as the mid-1990s¹⁰ with many neighborhood-based groups supporting websites, distribution and discussion email lists (and rival neighborhood groups supporting splinter lists), and later Yahoo! groups, blogs, and Facebook pages.

In addition to an online presence by traditional organized civic groups, marketing research suggests that the online population of Philadelphia is similar to the national average for their use of online message boards (about 20% of Philadelphians use online message boards). Approximately 43% of Philadelphians report that the internet is the first place they look for information and 26% read online newspapers or magazines—both of which are slightly lower than the national average (SRDS, 2011). When I conceived the project there was a growing online blogosphere representing what Jay Rosen identified as one of the more active blogging cities in the country (Oxford, 2005). There have also been several successful attempts at aggregating Philadelphia’s hyperlocal online writing and commenting. Homegrown PhillyFuture.org has a “Philly wire” service that compiles online writers, blogs, and commentators in the Philadelphia region. The later developed multi-city everyblock.com collects news articles, blog entries, and other civic information and maps it to a geographic location claiming to be the “geographic filter for your neighborhood.”¹¹

¹⁰ See, for example, Ed Schwartz’s (Schwartz, 1998) description of the Neighborhoods Online project in which the Institute for the Study of Civic Values attempted to connect and disseminate information about neighborhood organizations.

¹¹ Everyblock.com, started in Chicago, is now in 16 cities. It was originally funded with a two-year grant by the Knight Foundation and now is wholly owned by msnbc.com. <http://www.everyblock.com/about/>

Internet use in Philadelphia is complicated, however. Philadelphia has some specific demographic trends, described in greater detail in the next chapter, that have an impact on Philadelphians' online presence. Philadelphia has one of the highest poverty rates of any urban area in the country. Nearly one out of four Philadelphians lives at or below the poverty line. Moreover, the city's poverty is concentrated by geography and by race. In some neighborhoods in Philadelphia nearly 39% of the residents live at or below the poverty line, of those 54% are African American and 18% are Hispanic (*Philadelphia Freedom Rings: Public Computing Center Proposal*, 2010). Nationally, there is a link between income, race and internet use: African Americans, Hispanics and those with an annual income of less than \$30,000 lag in home internet adoption rates (Jansen, 2010; Rainie, 2010). In the city of Philadelphia, approximately 78% of residents own a PC, but it is estimated that anywhere from 36% to 41% of Philadelphians do not have internet access in the home (Harris, 2011; Rappoport & Dalbey, 2010).¹² And in the most underserved neighborhoods, that number is closer to 52% of Philadelphians without internet access at home (*Philadelphia Freedom Rings: Public Computing Center Proposal*, 2010).

A range of initiatives have tried to bridge this digital divide in the city. But, in the end, studying internet practices anywhere in the U.S., and perhaps particularly in Philadelphia, means that certain parts of and residents in the city are not participating or are not participating at the same rate. This problem is potentially compounded by research which indicates that those who are less politically motivated, have lower

¹² There is considerable difference between internet penetration rates within the city of Philadelphia (coterminous with the county of Philadelphia) and the Philadelphia regional market which includes the entire designated media area (DMA). Broadband penetration rates for the Philadelphia DMA is closer to 89% (comScore, 2010).

incomes, and less education are less likely to participate in politics and political discussion (Verba et al., 1995). For my project this has meant the need to combine online and offline methods as a way to triangulate the kinds of talk that is occurring across the city. Ultimately, however, race, economic class, and geography are still factors in public talk online and off and this study is not immune from those trends.

1.2 Seeking an entry point to the field: Phillyblog as intercept

My reading and observation indicated that Philadelphia was a rich site to study internet-enabled community discussion spaces; however, I still needed to define a manageable field site based on what originally motivated the project: sustained, interactive public talk among a range of city residents who articulate, bring into focus, and hash out collective concerns via discussions of daily topics of urban life. Moreover, I had as a field site a geographic space, but my study examined virtual spaces which articulated but did not necessarily fit the Cartesian properties of that geographic location. In other words, I wanted to understand internet-enabled practices as related to a geographic place, but not reify those geographic boundaries.

In constructing the field, Burrell (2009) advises that a researcher seeks entry points rather than specifically bounded sites. Likewise, Hine suggests the ethnographer “might still start from a particular place, but would be encouraged to follow connections which were made meaningful from that setting” (2000, p. 60). In this approach the researcher has to make decisions about what position to take in the network rather than deciding that the field site is: (1) coterminous with the researchers’ movements; or (2) is a site that is pre-packaged in a bounded way (e.g. a newsgroup, blog, or café). In Burrell’s work, internet cafés were the starting point from which she traced paths of users

to different locations in the city and argues that such an approach provides a richer sense of the ways in which places in the city, user's lives and their use of the internet are deeply interconnected.

Early in my research, I looked for an entry point by tracking neighborhood discussions. I looked at email lists from different parts of the city including: Queen Village Neighbors Association; Bella Vista Town Watch; Pennsport Civic Association; Northern Liberties Neighbors Association; University City Neighbors Mailing List; and the South of South Neighborhood Association. Each was a neighborhood experiencing or had recently experienced significant development and had an active online neighborhood presence. I also signed up, read, and participated offline in an anti-casino campaign. I read a popular progressive Democrat discussion forum, Young Philly Politics. I tracked neighborhood redevelopment and development groups (Plan Philly and Skyscraper). I looked at the reader comments sections to the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* online component, philly.com and Philadelphia's public media's (WHYY) online civic engagement site "Its Our City." And I looked at some individually-authored blogs which provided place-based accounts of neighborhood life.¹³

In delimiting the study, however, I was looking for sites of talk which supported sustained and interactive discussion among a variety of citizens rather than one-way broadcasting or elite-to-citizen discourse. Many of the sites I was looking at were broadcast email lists and my interest was in sustained, back-and-forth discussions among city residents. The University City neighbors listserv was conversationally active but the

¹³ I looked at single authored blogs, such as: Fairmount Dog Stories, <http://dogstories.wordpress.com/>; PhilaFoodie, <http://www.philafoodie.com/>; and Brendan Calling <http://brendancalling.com/>. The no longer active watchdog website, <http://www.hallwatch.org>, monitored news in city hall. I also followed WHYY's previous website, Its Our City, <http://why.org/blogs/itsourcity/>.

other email lists tended to be distribution-based or sporadic. In the case of the *Inquirer* and WHY?Y, the sites were institutionally sponsored so discussion was initiated based on readers responding to already authored articles, rather than participants creating their own topics. Furthermore, since my interest has been in public talking ground in the more mundane talk of everyday life and among people who were not necessarily specifically trying to talk politics or do public work, I was interested in looking at sites which supported the discussion of a range of issues with varying viewpoints rather than studying single issue or single ideology forums (e.g. anti-Casino development or the progressive Democrats forum).

Based on interviews and observation, an active site for the discussion of neighborhoods was a large, multi-topic threaded message board entitled Phillyblog.com. As described in greater detail in the next chapter, Phillyblog was founded in 2002 by four Philadelphians involved in technology and marketing. It was partly an experiment in creating an online community to have a “constructive, positive, productive dialogue about the city” and partly a technological experiment in creating local blogging software. Phillyblog employed a threaded conversational structure composed of threads and replies to those threads. Discussion threads could be initiated by any registered user and there were a nearly endless array of city topics covered—public transportation, city corruption, tensions between neighbors, neighborhood history.

Importantly for my work, Phillyblog was a location where a range of neighborhood groups, citizens, elected officials, police officers, and journalists talked about the city and its issues. It became a central component of my inquiry based on initial fieldwork and an early appreciation of the scope, diversity, volume and discursive

activity in the site; its recognition in the city as a location to talk and get information about neighborhoods and city-wide concerns; and the variety of information it manifested. When I started fieldwork, the site had about 35,000 registered users who had authored approximately 52,000 threads. Phillyblog threads were being quoted in local news media, including *philly.com*, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, the *City Paper*, and *Philadelphia Weekly*. Neighborhood civic associations in different parts of the city were posting neighborhood announcements, meeting agendas and the results of those meetings via Phillyblog. Even some local police detectives were using the site to raise awareness about local crime, getting involved in questions about car break-ins in certain neighborhoods in the city, and overall patterns of criminal activity (Spikol, 2006).

Borrowing from Burrell, I saw Phillyblog as an “intercept point”—an intersection through which different lines of the city flowed. The discussion of neighborhood problems, changes, and concerns on Phillyblog made visible the convergence of trends and forces at work within the city—migration, neighborhood gentrification, crime, and political reform. As I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, the larger demographic and development forces at work in Philadelphia—increasing home prices, modest migration back into the city’s downtown area by “empty nesters,” neighborhood redevelopment by the so-called “creative class,” efforts in city political reform, and persistent crime—were manifested in public talk via the forums. Phillyblog experienced a constant circulation of users and topics. As users moved in and out of the site I followed their hyperlinks where appropriate and practical, paying attention to the ways in which Phillyblog participants used the Phillyblog forums to annotate information available on other online sites, such as the Mayor’s Office, the Licensing & Inspection office, or in

organized neighborhood groups. And, as I discuss in Chapter 6, Phillyblog discussions were mapped on top of, mediated by the material spaces of the city, and made visible some of the underlying tensions at issue: class tensions, changing neighborhood populations, gentrification, competing individual and group interests, and economic growth or contraction.

2. Data

The arguments I advance are based on data drawn from a mixture of sources—primarily semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observation, and an analysis of digital content in the form of threaded discussions on Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks. My fieldwork took place during an 18-month period starting in March 2008 and ending in the late summer of 2009. Informally, it began earlier when I moved to Philadelphia in 2007 and continues as I write the dissertation. What follows is a description of the different types of data collected.

2.1 Online participant observation

As part of data collection, I spent a significant amount of time reading and observing online Philadelphia-specific sites. As described previously, I checked a wide range of sites—city newspapers, blogging sites, neighborhood listservs—several days per week. And on most days I scanned Phillyblog and (later in fieldwork) Philadelphia Speaks. I read or scanned through thousands of threads on the two sites. Based on my understanding of public concerns, I paid the most attention to those discussions in which participants tried to demonstrate that an issue was not receiving awareness or concern, was believed to be a purely private matter, was an existing issue that was under- or mis-addressed, or was a problem without any agreed upon solution, should be a matter of

broader collective concern. These discussions took various forms in terms of topics, occurred in multiple forums, and might emerge (and also fade out) at different points in the discussions. Many of the discussions I analyzed emerged from Phillyblog's neighborhood forums and revolved around crime, neighborhood gentrification/development, the future of the city (what it should do, what we would like it to do, what it shouldn't do), sustainability, city political reform and corruption, and persistent issues with quality of life.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, when Phillyblog was beginning to have considerable technical problems, I followed participants as they found or founded other sites to discuss the city. Because most of the active participants moved to a successor site, Philadelphia Speaks, I moved there as well. I also joined Facebook groups for Phillyblog, Philadelphia Speaks, and one of the most active neighborhoods on Phillyblog—Southwest Center City. During interviews, I asked participants where else they discussed the city and followed those links where possible.

My approach to participant observation was different than it is often conventionally understood in online ethnography. Ethnographers who have studied online communities have made a point of becoming active participants in the sites they analyze—and that commonly means posting to the site. Researchers have noted that such participation is an important part of their data collection and analysis; allowing them to develop rapport, create visibility, and make it easier to contact participants later for further conversation (Baym, 1993). On the other hand, if the researcher joins an online venue as an active participant there is a question of the authenticity of participant interaction.

My decision was not to post to Phillyblog or Philadelphia Speaks during my fieldwork; rather, I directly interacted with participants using the private messaging system and in face-to-face encounters including social functions and interviews. My participation was seeing myself as an active and engaged reader. On Phillyblog, this was sometimes called “lurking,” which was an accepted practice. For instance, in an interview a Phillyblogger described himself as an “active lurker”—being an avid reader of the site, talking about what he had read to friends, and attending social events organized by a group of site participants. I followed the same type of practice. I used the private messaging system to speak with informants. I attended Phillyblog, and later Philadelphia Speaks happy hours, when I was in Philadelphia. I joined the Facebook groups for Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks through which a few participants continue to be in contact with me about the project. I also continue to speak to participants via email and social events. And, like many participants, I used the site to learn about and become involved in the city. When I formally started my fieldwork, I was a new resident of the city. As such, I saw myself as legitimately part of the audience of Phillyblog. Like other participants, I incorporated my message-reading into my daily life. I used what I read to become acquainted with Philadelphia, discovering an insider’s view of the city. When I walked by my neighborhood streets, I knew which ones had experienced recent muggings or car break-ins. And I knew that one of the newly-developed buildings near my house was the subject of complaint.

As a researcher, I did not encounter the threads in the same manner as Phillybloggers might. Unlike a single newsgroup or fan site, Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks were conglomerations of city-wide and topically wide-ranging discussion forums.

Phillyblog, for instance, was divided into more than forty broadly-defined neighborhood and topical forums, the largest of which had nearly 6,000 threaded discussions. From the outset, I was interested in looking across multiple forums rather than concentrating on one or two specific ones (e.g. one neighborhood and one topical). The reason for my interest was that discussions about civic and political life would occur in conversation threads where you might least expect them; for example, on more than one occasion an announcement about a new restaurant opening turned into a discussion of appropriate neighborhood development. While Phillybloggers did make a practice of posting across multiple boards (a topic I return to in the succeeding chapters), being an active and, more importantly, *legitimate* participant in all the boards did not seem feasible.

Not only were the sites topically and architecturally massive, Phillyblog had been operating for more than five years when I started fieldwork. I wanted to analyze Phillyblog conversations within this context—as discussions that existed over time and possibly re-occurred. This was not necessarily how a typical participant would encounter the site. On occasion old threads would be revived by participants and thus “bumped” back onto the landing page. However, it would have been out of context for me to post to threads that had long since died.

There were inevitable tradeoffs made in my approach to participation. In terms of my role as a researcher, I became all but invisible to most posters on the site. I would never have been able to make all site participants aware of my existence, but not posting decreased my visibility. This concerned me in terms of participant’s privacy expectations while interacting online. To alleviate this imbalance in visibility, I was transparent about my identity and purpose during my interactions. I created a user profile that contained my

full name, a link to my university email address, my neighborhood location in the city, a link to my website which described the project and had contact information for my dissertation advisor and the university's Institutional Review Board. When sending private messages, I included links to the same information. (I take up the topic of privacy expectations in more detail in the section that follows.)

The other possible drawback of not posting to the site was that recruiting interview participants may have been more difficult. I was eventually able to recruit and interview a range of participants. Despite trying to be transparent about who I was and including links to my institutional website, many Phillybloggers either ignored me or checked with others on the site to make sure I was legitimate. Recruitment became easier when key informants assisted in snowball sampling. For example, two primary and active interview participants allowed me to use their names when I sent out recruitment emails. Another informant sent emails to a group of 30 users on my behalf. It is possible that even if I had been an active poster, users would have still been suspicious or uninterested. Gaining access to interview participants through other active participants was the way I chose to negotiate this challenge.

2.2 Data collection: Digital content and managing volume

Phillyblog played a central role for online observation and collecting digital content. In addition to observation, I was interested in more deeply analyzing conversations occurring across the site and over time. My unit of analysis for digital content was a whole conversation thread: the original post and subsequent posted responses all contained within one conversational topic. A thread could be started by any registered user, in any forum, and on any topic. Subsequent responses were posted and

displayed in chronological order. Threads ranged widely in length of content, longevity, and intensity of interest. On average, threads contained 16 posts (the original post and 15 replies), but there was wide variability from zero responses to 3135 responses.

I chose to focus on the thread rather than a single, discrete post or poster. This focus did have methodological tradeoffs. In the analysis of online content I did not develop full cases of specific posters. I do spend time in the dissertation providing background and contextual information for those Phillyblog participants I interviewed. However, the specificity of that might be attributed to a specific poster as they posted over time, how they did or did not change their perspectives, or even identity development is not addressed in the dissertation via the development of cases by posters. I could not, for example, say in a more definitive way all the points at which a particular person changed behavior, made a decision, took action based on their discussions online.

Because of my interest in the multi-authored, multi-vocal, and sustained nature of conversations on the site, I felt the choice was justified. When we shift focus to the ongoing and developing conversations rather than the discrete posts of particular individuals, it is possible to see how people discursively make sense of the city's issues; how experiences and information accumulate into composite impressions of the city; and how people start to define, delineate, and redefine issues of common, public concern. Part of the reason I forward the term networked public talk is precisely to signal a focus on interaction among participants rather than any specific user. In other words, this is a study about the collective talk of public life.

One of the primary challenges for qualitative internet researchers is how to conduct an in-depth study (the hallmark of qualitative research) of sociotechnical

practices when the volume and interlinked nature of data is nearly endless. And Phillyblog was a large and active site. When I started my fieldwork, the site had been in existence for five years; there had been approximately 52,000 threads and 750,000 posts contributed; and nearly 25,000 usernames had been registered to the site. Even if I weren't interested in the historical content of the site and confined my analysis to current activity, there were approximately 50 new threads and hundreds of new comments posted to the forums each day. It was impossible to follow every thread or every participant who used the sites, so I developed strategies for following different dynamics that took place without reading all threads or following all participants. Initially, I followed a typical practice in studies of online discourse sites and confined my observation to a specific time period—observing two forums on the site over a six week time frame. Such an approach was not adequate in that it did not allow me to look at the site across topical forums and over time. I broadened my scope to look at the entire site which brought with it the challenge of how to examine the site in an in-depth way without being subject to “cherry picking.”

My strategy was to use a stratified random sample of threads as a way to enter into the site's content and supplement that sample with threads referenced in interviews or that I read or searched for after the original sample was pulled. At the start of fieldwork, I downloaded and created a database of all the threads that were publicly accessible on the site's archive system (52,000). This was the universe of available authored threads and included everything except those threads which had been deleted by the site's administrators (spam, commercial advertisements, and personal attacks were deleted). From the nearly 52,000 threads I downloaded, I pulled a sample of 4,000. I used

a stratified random sample, as opposed to simple random sample, in order to ensure that I would sample across time and forums. I over-sampled threads that were more discursively active (had more responses), I over-sampled the most recent threads (2008 and 2009), and I proportionally sampled boards (e.g. the larger the board in terms of number of threads, the larger the sample from that board).

In Phillyblog, each thread was assigned a unique identifying number based on the order in which it was created. That identifying number corresponded to the thread's URL. Because each thread had a unique and sequential ID number, I was able to use a random-number generator to select a subset of threads. Inevitably, some of the threads in the sample had been deleted. Others were theoretically uninteresting (quick questions with no responses or advertisements). I did not keep quantitative measures of the ones I discarded. My intention in sampling the threads was not to make statistical inferences about the data; rather, it was a strategy to systematically enter into the data set. Because of the timing in which I started reading Philadelphia Speaks and the far smaller size of the site, I did not randomly sample threads on that site. Instead, I followed the most active threads or threads that were referenced in my interviews.

The sample of threads was an entry, not ending, point of my research. Over the course of fieldwork, I also downloaded and saved hundreds of threads that were not part of the original sample. I downloaded threads which were referenced in interviews. I also searched the universe of threads for specific usernames, particularly those I interviewed, so I could read some of their threads prior to and as a way to follow up from interviews. I also searched the universe of threads looking for particular keywords that were either surfaced in interviews or through my reading of the site (e.g. gentrification, garage fronts,

dog parks, user banning, site censorship). And on occasion, I moved in the other direction, looking for threads regarding topics that I knew were of debate in the city (e.g. casinos, waterfront planning). I chose threads for additional analysis based on my idea of public talk, paying the most attention to those discussions in which participants articulated, defined, or demonstrated that an issue was worth broader collective discussion. I was particularly interested, and the site was full of discussions of, neighborhood issues such as development, redevelopment, crime, and nuisance (trash, noise, graffiti). Since I was interested in the ways in which online public talk gets embedded into and remediates material places, I also paid attention to threads in which residents debated the character of their and other neighborhoods and the ways in which Phillyblog participants geographically referenced their discussions. In addition, I more deeply analyzed threads in which user conversational norms, site rules, or details about the history of the site were discussed—analyzing threads in which users discussed what they saw as site censorship or problematic user banning (see Chapter 5 for more detail). Where applicable, I also followed hyperlinks embedded in posts, both internal and external, to get a sense of the range of sites and topics being discussed in the forum.

In the end, theoretically significant threads from the original sample, additional searching, and observation serve as the basis for data analysis. My online data collection for Phillyblog ended naturally when the site ceased operation in July 2009. I continued to follow participants as they moved to other sites (primarily Philadelphia Speaks) as part of fieldwork until September 2009 and informally throughout the writing of the dissertation.

2.3 Interviews

From February to August 2009, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews. Interviews were an important component of the data because they helped me triangulate the data I was collecting online. Interviews also allowed me to further probe into the reading and writing practices users employed, more fully explore how users interpreted their own use of the site, how they situated that participation in their daily lives, and if their participation in the forums made them think differently about the city or their neighborhood.

In total 50 interviews were conducted with 41 individuals (I conducted 9 follow-up interviews). The length of interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours, with most lasting 45 minutes to one hour. When possible, interviews were conducted in person, though constraints of time and my changing geographic location made it necessary to conduct a portion by telephone (approximately half) and a few by email and private messaging. The bulk of interviews (85%) were conducted with Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks users. Of those, 30 were current and active users (e.g. they posted or read the site at least weekly). I interviewed four moderators on Phillyblog; two site administrators; and the two Phillyblog owners and two Philadelphia Speaks owners. Also interviewed were two categories of users that were less active posters: (1) those who had once been active on the sites but for various reasons had stopped posting and/or reading the sites; and (2) less active participants (e.g. they posted or read the site less than once per month). In addition to these, several interviews were conducted with a mix of “others”—people who informed the research, were involved in community organizations or community information provision in the city, but were not active on either of the online sites that were central parts of the project. These included a journalist, two

academics focused on civic participation in Philadelphia, a city blogger, and community organizers. While I tried to get a diversity of demographic characteristics within my informants, those I interviewed seemed to be more reflective of the active users on the sites: 65% of interviewees were male; 75% white; 9% Asian; and 6% African American. I did not ask respondents their age, but most referenced their age range during interviews with 90% of those interviewed being between the ages of 25-50. Of those I interviewed, 60% had moved to the city in the last 10 years; 20% had lived in the city for 20-35 years; and 20% were native Philadelphians. Even within the longer-term and native residents interviewed about half had moved into a new neighborhood within the last 10 years.

Interviews were often followed by one, and sometimes more, rounds of email or private messaging exchange, initiated by me and in a few cases by my informants. This additional correspondence was a valuable way for me to check my understanding of what respondents said during interviews. It also allowed informants to expand upon or add additional information that had occurred to them after the interview. In several cases I also conducted follow-up interviews. I conducted in-person follow-up interviews (lasting 1 to 2 hours) as well as email and private messaging exchanges with 11 informants. My reasoning for follow-up interviews was two-fold. First, it allowed more in-depth discussion of topics that were not addressed, or only briefly addressed, in the first interview. It was during follow-up interviews that I spent the most time walking through threads with participants, allowing me to get a better sense of the practice of posting and reading the sites and how informants viewed their and other's writing. Second, follow-up interviews allowed me to follow developments that were ongoing over the course of the research—specifically the ultimate demise of Phillyblog—enabling me to follow actors'

movements to other sites. Finally, in some cases, follow-up discussions allowed me to test emergent ideas with key informants who were actively involved in the practices I was studying.

I used a range of recruitment techniques. In terms of interviewing site participants, I relied on direct contact with users through the private messaging system as well as snowball sampling. I messaged all twelve active forum moderators. I also accessed the user profile section of Phillyblog and sorted those profiles by total number of posts and sent private messages to 50 top posters; 50 middle-range posters; and 50 low-range posters. Throughout the course of research, I private messaged users on Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks that I came across during observation or analysis of threads. In total, I sent private messages to 325 users. The majority of those recruitment messages went unanswered. Of those that were answered, all but two agreed to be interviewed. Some seemed surprised that I would be interested in their use of the site; others expressed doubt that they had anything to contribute but were willing to talk. On at least three occasions that I am aware of the messages were viewed suspiciously and the message recipient contacted other Phillybloggers to make sure I was legitimate.

Recruitment was far more successful when key informants assisted in snowball sampling. For example, two key informants allowed me to use their names when I sent out recruitment messages. Another informant sent emails to a group of 30 Phillyblog and non-Phillyblog users on my behalf. After each interview I asked informants if there was anyone else they thought I should talk to and followed up with those people. I was also interested in interviewing people who were not as active on the site, had stopped being active, or were lurkers. These less active users—particularly those who are totally

silent—are particularly challenging to incorporate into the analysis since they leave no obvious trace of their activity (Hine, 2000). Here snowball sampling became critical—I asked informants if they knew people that were less active, previously active, or were readers but not posters to the site. Due to the issues with finding these users, this is a far smaller portion of my data set than those who are in the active user category. For those who were not active participants in the sites but were active in the city, I leveraged offline and online contacts—particularly academic relationships I had established. All in all, the recruitment procedures enabled a range of participants who were engaged at different levels of involvement and in different kinds of internet-enabled civic activities.

Methodologically the interviews took the form of semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1 for the interview instrument). I approached each informant with a template of questions and topics I hoped to address. However, I neither imposed a strict ordering nor uniform syntax to the questions. Unlike a survey-based method, I was not trying to standardize questions across respondents. Rather, my goal was to elicit the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees in as naturalistic way as possible. I followed topics as they came up over the course of interviews—redirecting, probing, and also closing down certain paths. My questions were open-ended which enabled me to uncover and reshape the nature of the research as it progressed. This adaptive, iterative process is a trademark of qualitative research, particularly ethnographic work. It was particularly important for my project given my interest in understanding the practices of users from their own perspective, rather than trying to test a particular theory or hypothesis. Indeed, the findings in this dissertation emerged in the course of analysis of threads and were further refined and reshaped during interviews. The interview format evolved as the

research progressed. The earliest interviews were more exploratory. The format then became more focused on information-gathering, mapping the field of online city discussion, and trying to understand posting and reading practices at a more rudimentary level. In later interviews the framework was more interpretive—I tested my own emerging analytic framework and probed informants more deeply about their practices (often with the aid of thread data).

I asked informants to choose where they wished to be interviewed: I interviewed in coffee shops and restaurants; at civic centers; in universities; or at their places of employment. Prior to each interview—whether in-person, on the phone, or via email—I sent participants an email describing the research project and the broad topical areas I would be asking them about. In the email I explained that their participation was completely voluntary, that I would protect their confidentiality, and described how I planned to use the data in the future. Additionally, I provided information on how to contact me, my dissertation chair, and the Institutional Review Board office at the University of Michigan. The entire project, including interviews, had been ruled exempt from ongoing IRB review. I still wanted to ensure that participants had contact information in case they had any immediate or future concerns. Where consented to by my respondents, in-person interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed—either in whole or in part—by myself or a professional transcriptionist. Only in one instance did the respondent ask not to have their comments audio recorded, in which case I relied on notes taken during and following the interview. During phone interviews I took detailed notes on my laptop, quoting participants directly where

possible. Phone interviews were not audio recorded. Email and private message interviews were recorded as text documents.

2.4 Presenting data collected from different sources on and offline

The analysis in the dissertation stems from data collected in interviews, via observation and through the in-depth study of digital content. I wanted to make sure I was able to collect and triangulate data that I encountered online and offline. I was a participant observer of the site and therefore collected data in the form of digitally-born Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks postings. I lived in the city of Philadelphia and was collecting and analyzing artifacts I encountered in my own “offline” realm (e.g. newspapers, community bulletins and meetings, etc.). Finally, I conducted interviews via three different media: in-person, via the telephone, or over email.

In empirical analysis, I combined data from all sources—regardless of how it was collected. Indeed, I cannot distinguish if interview data, digital thread data, or observation was more or less influential in specific parts of my analysis since, ultimately, my understanding emerged from observation and analysis of threads, was reformulated based on interviews, and then became more nuanced when I looked at additional threads. As a result, I opted to treat the data similarly in analysis. In other words, I did not assume that interview data was more valid or “real” than data I encountered digitally. (I was not focused on whether or not people were truthfully representing their identities.)

The data sources are different, however, in how involved I, as the researcher, was in structuring them. As such, I do distinguish them when providing empirical examples in the course of writing and also as a way to point to how the data triangulates. This practice is in keeping with Bakardjieva’s (2009) argument that the online/offline data distinction

could be more usefully replaced with other distinctions such as: naturally-occurring data versus researcher-elicited data; interview data versus computer-captured data. In the examples that appear in the succeeding chapters, I use an in-line citation style that I developed which indicates the source of the data: interview; Phillyblog (PB) thread; or Philadelphia Speaks (PS) thread. For interviews, I also include the pseudonym I gave to the informant (these are the pseudonyms I assigned to informants, not their Phillyblog username). In the case of digital content collected on Phillyblog or Philadelphia Speaks, I also include the thread reference number that was produced by the site itself. (In the case of Phillyblog, a hyperlink to the thread would be irrelevant.) I also include the post number. So the citation, “PB thread 1213, #13” indicates that the data was gathered from thread number 1213 and it was the thirteenth post in the thread. This citation style was developed so I could more clearly distinguish data that I elicited from interviews versus that which occurred on the sites themselves.

3. Additional Complexities of Online Data

Another challenge I faced was how to collect and present online data encountered through ethnographic observation while ensuring the ethical treatment of research participants. This is a question that faces all researchers, but again is differently complicated when observing online practices because of the overlapping and shifting nature of what is considered public and private, the sometimes ephemeral and other times durable and traceable nature of online discussions, and the relative ease of observing internet practices without the researcher being seen by participants. In particular, informed consent can be difficult in online environments because there may be far too many people simultaneously in an online setting to allow a researcher to inform them

individually and because participants move easily in and out of online environments it may be impossible to contact users who have left a site or have used a pseudonym (Sveningsson, 2004). The relevant question then becomes: is the online environment under study public enough in order to conduct research without informed consent? (Elm, 2009)

My project was submitted and determined to be exempt from ongoing Institutional Review Board review because I was observing practices that were publicly accessible and I was asking questions in interviews that were not sensitive, embarrassing or potentially harmful. In my project, there were three primary challenges I had to confront: (1) while the content I observed was publicly accessible was it public enough in both content and context to be observed without informed consent?; (2) the online spaces I observed were large, active and existed over time making it impossible to make my visibility known to all participants, as such, what was my responsibility in presenting that data in analysis?; and (3) what were my responsibilities in archiving (or not archiving) that data?

3.1 Issues of Public and Private

Taking the first challenge—was the data I collected public enough in both content and context to be observed without informed consent—Elm (2009) argues researchers have to come to grips with at least two different views of privacy: one “based on how easy it is to access the site,” and the second “how private users *understand* their contributions to be.” In essence, we need to understand both the context as well as the kind of content we are studying. In terms of context (our sites of research) Elm suggests internet researchers are faced not with a binary choice between determining whether or

not a site is public or private; rather, public and private are better conceived as a continuum in which there are varying degrees. She categorizes those into public, semi-public, semi-private and private environments and suggests the researcher ask:

How exclusive is the environment? Is it possible for anyone to access the content, or is any form of membership required? If so, is membership available, or are there any formal requirements or restrictions as to who and how many are allowed to become members? (p. 74).

As such, the continuum of public to private exists along axes of openness, availability and accessibility. For example, a public environment is one that is open and available for anyone with an internet connection and does not require forms of membership. A private online environment, on the other end, is one that is hidden or restricted with only invited guests able to access the site.

3.1.1 A public context

In reality, most online environments are a kind of hybrid of public and private in which publicly accessible spaces exist alongside private or semi-private ones made up of user-controlled or site-controlled areas such as private messaging or user management of profiles. I classify Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks as public sites with very small sections that would fall into the semi-private category. The largest part of the site was the neighborhood and topical forums which included the threaded discussions. It was in this area that I observed and collected data. Within this public part of the site, anyone was able to read content and could search the site without becoming a registered user. Reading and searching was publicly accessible; posting did require that a person register to the site. The barriers to registration were low—registrants were asked to supply an email address, create a username and password, and agree to the site's Terms of Service

(TOS). There was only one level of registration—you were either registered or you were not.

The only parts of the site that would be considered semi-private were viewing user profiles, which required that you be signed in. Profiles varied in how much information was supplied, with most only containing the person's username, post count, join date, and if the participant allowed a link for sending a private message (common) or email (rare). Some users, including myself, included "about me" information: biography, location, occupation, and website address. I did access a range of user profiles in order to recruit interview participants. I also used the profiles to compile limited aggregated data on participants. Overall I erred on the side of caution in my use of these semi-private areas. When I did access a profile, the participant either knew I had accessed it because I subsequently contacted them for an interview; or, I aggregated profile data by join date and overall number of participants, stripping away any identifiable information. The only access I had to locative information on participants was if they provided it in their user profile. That location data, if supplied, also showed up next to the person's username in all their postings. I ended up not using that data mainly because it was inconsistently available and often said nothing about the person's geographic location. I never had access to IP addresses in the particular, but got a sense of location in the aggregate through interviews with site administrators.

There were two small private sections on the sites: the private messaging system and forums dedicated to site administrators and moderators. I used private messages to recruit interview participants, had follow-up exchanges with informants, and in one case conducted an interview via private messaging, with the participant's consent. I did not

have access nor ever ask to see others' private messages though some participants talked about the content and use of private messages during interviews. Similarly, I did not have access and did not ask to see the moderator forums, though in interviews and even in their own postings to the site, different administrators and moderators explained the function and topics of conversation that occurred in those forums. I did not feel that seeing any of those private sections of the website were important for analysis.

3.1.2 Content with a public frame of reference

While I felt my online observation was justifiably in a public context, researchers have pointed out that participants in online forums may indeed be conducting themselves in public sites but might not be aware of *how* public that content actually is. For example, boyd's (2008) ethnographic research on teen's use of social media sites like MySpace and Facebook indicated that teens did not necessarily restrict adult's from viewing their profiles but they did not expect adults would actually view what they wrote. Furthermore, among non-teen and teen users alike, much of what is posted online is durable in that it can be archived and retrieved long after production. So in addition to determining whether online environments are public enough to study without informed consent, the content of the communication also matters—how sensitive is it and for whom was it originally intended?

Because of the nature of my work, the content in this dissertation and most of that I observed, was publicly-oriented in that the threads I was looking at were written for a potentially wider audience and were focused on city or neighborhood issues of collective concern. This does not mean that people never spoke of their own personal lives. It would be difficult to conduct a study about public talk as grounded in everyday activities

without interacting with people who gave some level of detail about their jobs, their kids, their homes, and their day-to-day activities. Rather, the threads I analyzed revolved around public issues and debates: trash removal, a neighborhood's historic name and geographic boundaries, appropriate use of public parks, a neighborhood's resources and character, crime reports, or debates about political candidates. Overall, most of what I observed was the kind of often mundane conversations you would expect to hear among neighbors or in some cases were similar to letters to the editor of a local newspaper.

In addition to the content having a public frame of reference, the audience for that content included me, as a resident of the city. I knew I was included in the intended audience through my fieldwork—posters to the site would pose general questions to other residents in the city (e.g. does any know who to call about licensing and inspection, neighbors are urged to attend the zoning hearing), would “call out” their neighbors for neglecting to pick up their trash, or would opine about local and national politicians or political elections. I also assumed I was in the intended audience because I asked people. One methodological approach, suggested by Stern (2009), to determine participant's privacy expectations is to ask them, or people like them, directly. The point is not to assume you will solicit every single person's perspective, but that such a line of questioning can help to provide a deeper and broader understanding of privacy expectations that might not be otherwise acquired through online ethnographic observation. I created a research design in which I was able to broach this topic in interviews. I did not ask anyone about their privacy expectations as a direct question, rather I used the interview to inquire into who they believed the audience of the forums to

be (e.g. who they imagined or even wanted to read their posts) as well as their perspective on maintaining or not maintaining anonymity.

Interview participants talked of the audience in two primary ways. Most participants conjectured that local journalists and politicians read but would not necessarily post to the sites. Participants made a distinction between who they were writing to and who they expected was reading their posts. Many talked about writing to others on Phillyblog or Philadelphia Speaks, particularly the regular users they had interacted with over time. Those same participants also understood that the sites maintained active readerships and seemed to assume that “lurkers” or others they didn’t know read their posts. A smaller group of interview participants consciously used the site to connect with a larger and more diffuse audience—there were those who used the site for political organizing and campaigning or to get noticed by those who were influential in the city (e.g. journalists, politicians).

From both the perspective of content and context, I saw my research project as being public in nature. However, there was no single standard user of the site. A few participants posted diary-like journal entries about their lives, including medical and personal issues. Interview participants spoke differently about their anonymity—most did not see themselves as being anonymous, there were however users who expressly participated in these forums so as not to expose details of their identity. Indeed, the general practice on both sites was to use a username rather than a given name (though many users signed their names, connected with each other on Facebook, or otherwise provided identity information).

3.2 My visibility

The second challenge in terms of ensuring confidentiality and privacy revolved around my invisibility to many users on the sites (both current and historic). The online observation component of my research was designed to analyze the site over time and across multiple boards. The forums were vast, active and in the case of Phillyblog existed over a seven-year time span. As a result, it was impossible to make my presence known to all current and historic participants. In addition, as discussed previously, I was not a poster to the site but instead in the online component of the research project, I was a participant in terms of reading the content and attending social functions with a group of Phillybloggers and Philadelphia Speaks participants. I felt the decision to not post was justified analytically and practically. It did contribute to my invisibility and I worked to alleviate this challenge by being transparent about my identity and purpose during my interactions. Before commencing research, I discussed my project plans with the two site owners in order to ensure they understood my research interest and determine any discomfort. Neither expressed uneasiness, both were interested, though never active, in the project. When I registered to the site, I used my first initial and last name as my username. I also created a profile that contained my name, a link to my university email address, my location in the city, a link to my website which described the project and had IRB information about the project. In all private messages during recruitment I included the same information.

Given my near invisibility to many participants, I decided to treat this public data cautiously in analysis and presentation. I analyzed a range of threads, but when using examples in the chapters that follow I scrub the threads for any identifying information—specifically people’s full names, their family’s or neighbor’s names, or a person’s exact

locative information (e.g. their street address). This precaution has had very little effect on data analysis. I use pseudonyms for interview participants—names I created, not their Phillyblog usernames. In terms of Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks users, I make attempts to protect users by disguising usernames that are (or appear to be) a person's full name. In terms of online data, initially I was not sure whether or not to disguise the identities of online users since the bulk of users have *already* adopted a pseudonym as their usernames. Moreover, those who use their given name when posting do so purposefully. In the end, because of my invisibility and because Phillybloggers did not engage the site knowing that it would become the subject of a research project, I decided to err on the side of caution and either use pseudonyms or not reference their username at all. This decision has had more of an impact on analysis and presentation since usernames do confer data about a person's interest and identity. It also gives up the precision that more specific attribution would, in some cases, provide. However, in the case of my particular questions and interest, I felt the tradeoff was justified.

3.3 Durability, traceability and archiving data

The third complexity was to consider what my responsibilities were in archiving (or not archiving) data for analysis. Researchers have noted the mediated nature of public content online has a different quality than its offline counterpart so that in fleeting public situations the repetition of a direct quote is unlikely to cause harm, but because of the persistent and searchable nature of online content it becomes extremely easy to trace a digital conversation back to its source (boyd, 2008). The discussions I observed were durable and traceable in the sense that the forum threads were archived, indexed, and then optimized in order to be easily findable on search engines like Google or Yahoo! Many

participants were aware that one of the site administrators ran a search optimization business and talked matter-of-factly about how well the site showed up on Google. Participants did not necessarily participate in the site knowing that it would become the subject of research, however. Throughout the dissertation, I directly reference and provide a URL link to content that is clearly meant for mass consumption, such as published newspaper or blogging articles. In terms of citing Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks threads, as noted, I make attempts to protect users by disguising usernames that are (or appear to be) a person's full name and scrub the examples for identifying information. I reference the thread number, however, and I do not change the content of examples so as to make them unsearchable. I realize that such content is still potentially searchable and findable by those who are particularly interested or motivated. In order to draw the line, I do not directly reference any content that seems intended for a small audience, is potentially harmful to the author, or was edited or retracted by the author.

While durable, in this dissertation case, the discussions I observed were also ephemeral in the very real sense that one of the main online sites of research, Phillyblog, ceased operation toward the end of my fieldwork. As a result, at the time of writing the dissertation, Phillyblog threads were only partially "findable" via public search options (e.g. Google cache or the Internet Archive). At the start of my fieldwork, while Phillyblog was still in operation, I downloaded and created a database of approximately 52,000 threads which were publicly available on the site at that time. I also saved threads during the course of fieldwork. I draw upon this data source in the chapters that follow and use the Phillyblog thread reference numbers when I cite the threads (there is no reason to use a URL since they are all inoperable).

When the site stopped operating I found myself in a problematic position in having a large data set that was no longer so clearly publicly accessible. The vast majority of threads I downloaded are not part of the analysis in the dissertation. As noted, I sampled and then read a range of threads, keeping only those which were theoretically relevant. I also downloaded and analyzed threads referenced during interviews. Prior to Phillyblog's demise, I analyzed threads in the aggregate in order to get a descriptive account of the site—including number of threads, reply counts, weighting of different forums, and average word count. Because of the shifting nature of the publicness of the data in my dissertation, I am choosing to treat the thread data in a similar manner as the interview data in terms of data storage (password protected on a fileserver that is behind a firewall). I have deleted the database of 52,000 threads and am storing the sampled threads.

4. Conclusion

Using a multi-sited ethnographic approach and constructing my field site using an intercept was critical for practical reasons—the public talk on Phillyblog and Philadelphia Speaks moved to physical locations that would have been difficult or impossible for me to travel because of my own limited resources of time. They also moved outside the geographic boundaries of Philadelphia, but practically I was able to maintain a relatively stationary position in following the flows on the site. One of the primary rationales for using multi-sited ethnography in digital ethnography is that it can help break down a methodologically pervasive, but theoretically problematic separation of online and offline. But, as described in this chapter, seeing the field site as constituted as a network that is moving or in flow, can also allow for an understanding of where

flows of activity intersect and where they become set in a place. Analytically, then, constructing a multi-sited field site and collecting data from multiple sources via a range of data collection techniques makes it possible for me to analyze a social phenomenon rather than a specific piece of technology.

The idea of Phillyblog as an intercept is also based in the notion that broader trends, characteristics, and forces in the city of Philadelphia were also manifested in the public talk online. Within the context of Phillyblog, those issues of public concern were commonly connected to or emerged from the lived experience of participants. As such, the tensions in the city—population trends, neighborhood development or gentrification, a growing city budget deficit, and persistent concerns about crime and safety—were all also tensions and topics of discussion on Phillyblog. In the next chapter, I locate Phillyblog within the context of larger trends occurring in the city of Philadelphia. I categorize Phillyblog within the larger genre of social media and describe it as an online urban forum. The chapter then turns to a fuller description of Phillyblog, the structural attributes of the site, and the ways in which participants used the site, specifically practices of reading, writing, and maintaining.

CHAPTER 3: Social Media, Online Urban Forums, and Phillyblog

The whole reason I got involved in Phillyblog wasn't to be on an internet board. There are thousands of these internet boards and I don't do any of the other ones. I am there because of its relationship to the city. And I think most people are probably that way on this board. At least the regulars are there not because it is a board, but because it is related to the city they live in.

- Frank, interview

Founded in 2002 by four Philadelphians involved in technology and marketing, Phillyblog was partly an experiment in creating an online community to have a “dialogue about the city” and partly a technological experiment in creating local blogging software (PB thread 34561). That blogging functionality never took off, however, and posters gravitated to the discussion sections instead. As an internet forum, Phillyblog was divided into more than forty broadly-defined boards that covered geographic neighborhoods and topical categories (e.g. politics, spirituality). At the height of its popularity in 2007 and 2008, there were approximately 80,000 unique viewers per month and approximately 1,000 registered users would log into the site on peak days.¹⁴ Similar to other online forums, Phillyblog employed a threaded conversational structure composed of threads and replies to those threads. Discussion threads could be initiated by any registered user and nearly 1,300 new threads and 18,000 posted replies appeared on the site each month.

¹⁴ Data on the number of registered user logins was provided by a site administrator via email and in-person interviews.

From a functional perspective, Phillyblog can be summed up with that basic description. But Phillyblog was far more dynamic than such a portrayal allows. In this sense, Phillyblog has proven to be particularly “good to think with” because of its own historical trajectory marked by dynamism and coherence along with a purposeful relationship to a physical place. As Frank described, Phillyblog participants were motivated by the fact that the site was “related to the city they live in.” Phillyblog had a beginning and an end. Operational from November 2002 to July 2009, in a number of ways the July 2009 Phillyblog shared little resemblance to its November 2002 version. Over its nearly seven-year lifespan, the technical platform and board structure evolved; users, administrators, and moderators rotated through the site; topics of discussion sparked, fizzled out, and sometimes re-emerged; and conversational norms were negotiated. Even its name, Phillyblog, was a vestige of the original intention (blog aggregator) but almost immediately altered focus of the site (forum). Nonetheless, there was coherence in Phillyblog’s life story. The userbase adopted an interactive, threaded forum platform early on. And there was a set of users who remained active for several years and contributed content, moderation, and an institutional memory of the site and the city itself.

In this chapter I carve out a space for Phillyblog in the larger genre of social media. I categorize it as an online urban forum, comparing online urban forums to a genre of place-focused social media called “placeblogs.” I also locate Phillyblog within the context of larger trends occurring in the city of Philadelphia so as to better locate the kind of talk that was occurring on the site. The chapter then turns to a fuller description of Phillyblog: its evolution from an aggregator of individual blogs to one of the largest

multi-participant forums in Philadelphia. The structural attributes of the site—the information design, user categories, and conversational architecture—are also detailed.¹⁵ The ways in which participants used the site, specifically practices of reading, writing, and maintaining are described. These conversational practices are taken up in further detail in Chapters 4 and 5. The chapter ends where Phillyblog ended: the shutdown of the site in July 2009 and the emergence of successor sites particularly Philadelphia Speaks.

1. Social Media & Online Urban Forums

This dissertation looks at a form of social media that, for lack of an existing standardized terminology, I am calling online urban forums. Online urban forums fit within the larger genre of social media, defined broadly as the “set of tools, services, and applications that allow people to interact with others” (boyd, 2008, p. 92). My interest in such forums is not so much based in the distinctiveness (or the familiar aspects) of the applications themselves; rather, I address them in order to understand and contextualize the larger focus of the dissertation—public talking in internet-enabled settings.

Online urban forums are similar to previous discussion media such as Usenet or computerized bulletin boards in that communication is many-to-many; aggregated over time into topical areas; participant generated; traceable; and publicly visible. The asynchronous quality of discussions in online urban forums and their durability in terms of archiveability and searchability makes this technology distinct from instant messaging or chat-based applications. The fact that the communication is publicly visible and occurs

¹⁵ Phillyblog and its main successor site, Philadelphia Speaks, form the hub of inquiry for this dissertation. As described previously, I started my fieldwork with Phillyblog and therefore provide the most detailed description of Phillyblog. However, the site design of Phillyblog was replicated on Philadelphia Speaks and many of the users moved from Phillyblog to Philadelphia Speaks. As such, much of the description applies to both sites.

among multiple participants, both writers and readers, differentiates this type of online discussion from one-to-one email or social networking sites that are semi-private or private. Online urban forums also differ from blogs where comments are posted in response to a single article or author and the control of the site as well as the discussion is primarily in the hands of the blog author. Importantly, online urban forums can support sustained, many-to-many, and interactive discussions among citizens themselves rather than broadcast-only forms of communication, such as announcement email distribution lists or other forms of digital one-way communication.

The urban, place-focused component of such online forums is a critical aspect of what makes these technologies a distinctive type. These forums support public talk that is directly linked to lived spaces, focused on a multiplicity of urban topics, and is provided in a manner that is geographically referenced. My interest, then, is not only on how social media technologies connect people to each other, but also how such technologies become embedded in and actually help sustain lived places (Crang et al., 2007). These place-based, neighborhood, or urban-focused technologies can link to and help remediate local events (Madge & O'Connor, 2002), facilitate contact between residents (Hampton & Wellman, 2003), support participation in community development (Srinivasan, 2004), support the discussion of local issues (Hampton, 2001), and provide information on local services (Burrows et al., 2005).

Online urban forums also fit into a suite of internet tools that have become increasingly popular in how Americans communicate and keep informed about their neighborhoods. According to a 2010 Pew Internet & American Life Project study (Smith, 2010), 20% of all adults (27% of internet users) used digital tools such as blogs, email,

text messaging, and social networking sites to talk to their neighbors about their community. Email and community blogs were the most common neighborhood-focused digital tools. Thirteen percent of internet users exchanged email with neighbors about community issues. Neighbor email exchange was popular among the same groups that used face-to-face interaction: college graduates; people aged 30 and older; and parents. Among email users 15% of whites, 9% of African Americans, and 9% of Hispanics exchanged email with neighbors. In terms of community-focused blogs, 14% of internet users reported that they read such a blog. That reading practice was higher in urban areas where nearly 17% of urbanites read a blog dealing with neighborhood concerns. According to the study, online whites (14%), African Americans (18%), and Hispanics (13%) are equally as likely to read community blogs. There was also little variation based on income and education, though community blog reading was more popular among young people: 18-29 (16%); 30-49 (15%); 50-64 (13%); 65+ (9%).

Less prevalent than blogs were online forums: 7% of online adults (5% of all American adults) reported they belonged to an electronic mailing list or discussion forum for their neighborhood, a number largely unchanged from 2008. Online forums and listservs were particularly popular with college graduates and high income homes. Thirteen percent of internet users with a college degree belong to such online forums and listservs (compared to 6% with some college and 3% with a high school degree). Among internet users, 15% with household incomes of \$75,000 or more belong to online forums or email lists, compared to the 2% with household incomes of \$50,000 or less. Unlike other digital tools for community information, women are more likely than men to belong to online neighborhood groups (9% women, 5% men). The Pew study also found some

variation around race: 8% of online whites, 8% of online African Americans, and 3% of online Hispanics participate in online neighborhood forums or listservs. Furthermore, participation from those in urban and suburban areas was more common than in rural sections of the country. Among internet users, 10% of urban residents, 7% of suburbanites and 2% of those in rural areas belonged to a neighborhood list or forum.

According to the survey, face-to-face encounters still remain the primary way people stay informed about community issues: nearly half of all Americans surveyed (46%) talked face-to-face with neighbors about community issues. Face-to-face interactions with neighbors is linked with factors such as age, socio-economic status and race: Hispanics, 18-29 year olds, people without a high school diploma and those with household incomes of less than \$30,000 per year are the least likely to speak to neighbors face-to-face about community issues. And people who know fewer of their neighbors by name are less likely to discuss community issues face-to-face. Importantly, people who don't know their neighbors by name are just as likely to read community blogs or join a community-focused online group. Moreover, a relatively large number of young adults and minorities use digital tools for talking about community issues. These groups, in particular, are less likely than older Americans and whites to talk about community information via the telephone or face-to-face. This opens up the possibility for those who don't know their immediate neighbors, who are new to neighborhoods, who are younger residents, or who are minority residents to engage in community-focused talk using digital media tools. That said far more Americans talk about community issues face-to-face than by using digital tools. Moreover, income, geography, and education levels remain factors in talking to neighbors via digital tools as well as face-to-face.

1.1 Online urban forums and placeblogs

Participants in online urban forums deliberately and regularly invest attention on a specific neighborhood, city, or region. This place-based focus is best understood within the broader debates concerning the impact of the internet on everyday life. Our daily lives and problems continue to be located in a place. Indeed, a number of scholars have suggested that the internet has become “more local” in its content, in its uses, and in who it connects (e.g. Davies & Crabtree, 2004; McCullough, 2004). As Davies and Crabtree write, “while locality may no longer be a rich source of identity, it is still a constant source of everyday problems which require co-operative solutions. At the neighborhood level, it is shared problems that link ‘space’ to ‘place,’ that relate individuals to local communities” (2004).

An explicit concern with “whereness” parallels larger trends in other urban-focused media including the growth of “hyperlocal,” “local-local,” or “microsite” professional and amateur journalism devoted to “the stories and minutiae of a particular neighborhood, ZIP code or interest group within a certain geographic area” (Shaw, 2007). This place focus has also extended to the blogosphere, as a geographically diverse network of blog authors who ground their writings in the experience of place has been growing in both size and self-awareness (Lindgren & Owens, 2007). Due to their place-based focus, online urban forums are congruent with this genre of “placeblogs,” “local blogs,” or “hyperlocal blogs” in the explicit concern and regular investment of attention and reflection upon the places in which the writer lives (Lindgren, 2009; Lindgren & Owens, 2007).

Commonly, placebloggers are the sole authors of an online journal devoted to observations about their local surroundings, whether a city neighborhood, suburban

subdivision, small town, or rural county. Simon St. Laurent, who started a blog about local issues in his town, Dryden, NY, wrote about the practice of local blogging in a series of articles for O'Reilly Media. As he explains it, he saw a need for blogging that was neither about national politics nor about one's personal life. Local blogging was something in between those two ends in that it was blogging about particular places (2004). St. Laurent explained:

When the Internet and the Web first appeared, they seemed like great ways to reach large numbers of people who weren't already connected to each other. People who lived in California could talk to people in Germany, Bangladesh, South Africa, and New Hampshire, about common interests they couldn't have easily shared before. In the past few years, though, it seems that we're learning about how these technologies can help us communicate on a much smaller scale, helping us look beyond the walls and property lines of our homes to connect with our neighbors (2007).

Extensive listings of individual placeblogs can be found at aggregation sites like Placeblogger.com, which describes placeblogging expansively as a “blog about the lived experience of a place. . . The ‘lived experience’ can be the local political news of a place, the social news of a place, the arts news of a place, etc.” (Placeblogger, 2010).

In his analysis of place blogging, Tim Lindgren usefully situates place blogging in a continuum. “Essayistic place bloggers,” draw upon nature and diary writing as a way to foster a personal sense of place. As such, essayistic place bloggers tend to “write *about* place but not *for* place” in the sense that their audience is not necessarily their geographic neighbors. On the other end of the continuum are what Lindgren terms “journalistic place bloggers,” who rely more heavily on genres of local journalism and write both “*about* a place and *for* an audience in that place”(Lindgren, 2009, p. 68, emphasis original). The goal of journalistic place blogging is more focused on sharing local knowledge or

encouraging members of a shared local audience to become civically engaged in their communities.

In a critical way online urban forums are similar to placeblogs in that discussion is *about* a place, *for* and *with* an audience in that place. Like Lindgren's category of journalistic placeblogs, online urban forums can facilitate the sharing of local knowledge or civic information about a specific locality—sustaining attention in, encountering different perspectives located within, and ultimately remediating relationships with that particular place over time. There are key differences between online urban forums and placeblogs in that forums accumulate discussion among multiple participants over time. Even in placeblogs of a more journalistic variety, the design of those sites is around a group of authors who post content (articles or essays). Discussion forums, on the other hand, are more akin to conversation through which ideas develop over the course of interaction. This is more than a technical difference between threaded discussion forums and blogs. Forums rely upon multiple participants who contribute, often small amounts of content, over time. The focus of discussion can be initiated by any forum participant. Due to the distributed nature of authorship the focus on place is multi-perspectival and the site layers the varying relationships that participants have with the locale.

1.2 Phillyblog and the City

The context of this study is the examination of one primary online urban forum in the city of Philadelphia. The connection between Phillyblog and Philadelphia is an important aspect of my analysis. Indeed, according to site owners, one of their stated motivations for starting Phillyblog was to provide a digital medium for Philadelphians to talk about Philadelphia—“the good, the bad, and the ugly” (PB thread 51261). My

argument is that the work of networked public talk is to articulate, attempt to bring into focus, and also make sense of shared public concerns. Within the context of Phillyblog, those issues of public concern were commonly connected to or emerged from the lived experience of participants. More than simply the context of Phillyblog, the tensions in the city—demographic changes, neighborhood development or gentrification, a growing city budget deficit, the power of long-time political elites and political parties, persistent concerns about crime and safety, and recurring discussions regarding quality of life issues such as trash, parking, and green space—were all also tensions and topics of discussion on Phillyblog. While Phillybloggers talked about a nearly endless array of subjects, there were certain concerns that occupied a significant amount of space: neighborhood and population change; city politics and services; and crime, safety and quality of life. Each was an online reflection of the trends and issues happening more generally in the city.

1.2.1 Philadelphia Population Trends

When Phillyblog started in late 2002, the city of Philadelphia had seen five consecutive decades of population loss. The city's population peaked at more than two million residents in 1950 and then saw a steady decline until 2007 when the population started to increase—very slightly—to 1.54 million in 2009, though still far below its 1950 height (See Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Portrait of Philadelphia, 2009

Total Population	1,547,297
Demographics	
• Under the age of 18	23%
• Age 18-24	11%
• Age 25-44	30%
• Age 45-64	23%
• Age 65 and older	12%
• African American	42%
• White	44%
• Hispanic	12%
• Asian	6%
• Two or more races	2%
Income	
• Median household income	\$37,158
• Percent of people below the poverty level	25%
• Percent of households with annual income of	
Less than \$35,000	48%
\$35,000 to \$74,999	30%
\$75,000 to \$149,999	17%
\$150,000 or more	5%
Residency	
• Born in Pennsylvania	69%
• Born in Philadelphia	57%
• Moved to Philadelphia within the last 10 years	14%
• Foreign born	12%
• Speak a foreign language at home	21%
Housing	
• Median value of owner-occupied units	\$150,000
• Vacant units	14%
• Units built since 1990	5%
• Moved into household 2000 or later	58%
• Moved into household 1980-1999	25%
• Moved into household 1979 or earlier	17%
Education	
• High school graduate or higher	81%
• Bachelor's degree or higher	23%
• Not graduated from high school	19%
Labor force (top 5 industries)	
• Education, health care and social assistance	29%
• Professional, scientific, and management	11%
• Retail	10%
• Arts, entertainment, and recreation	9%
• Manufacturing	7%

All data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2009 American Community Survey, except data on “Born in Philadelphia” and “Moved to Philadelphia within the last 10 years” which are from The Pew Charitable Trusts’ Philadelphia Research Initiative (Ferrick, 2009).

Population trend data, in the form of an analysis of migration data from the Internal Revenue Service conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia Research Initiative, has shown that the number of people moving into the city has increased at a faster rate than the number of people moving out (Eichel, 2010a). While out-migration continues to exceed in-migration, the net outflow has slowed.¹⁶ In 2008, 42,250 people moved to Philadelphia as compared to, for example, 31,837 in 1993—a 33% increase over that period. In the same time period, there was only a 9% increase in out-migration. And if newly-arrived immigrants are included in the population, there is no net outflow from Philadelphia in 2009 but a modest inflow.¹⁷ Foreign-born residents increased from 9% in 2000 to 12% in 2009. Furthermore, the net outflow from Philadelphia to the four neighboring Pennsylvania suburban counties (the prime location for people moving out of the city) declined 42% from 1999 to 2008. In fact, the migration trend reversed—from 1993 to 2008 there was a 29% increase in people moving *from* those four suburbs *into* the city.

On a smaller scale, Phillyblog appears to have been influenced by such larger migration trends. Phillyblog seemed to have more new residents active on its boards than it did Philadelphia natives. Of those I interviewed, 60% had moved to the city in the last 10 years; 20% had lived in the city for 20-30 years; and 20% were native Philadelphians. Even within the longer-term and native residents interviewed, about half had moved into

¹⁶ According to the Pew study, “Many cities show a net outflow in the IRS migration data and still have growing populations due to other factors, including the relative numbers of births and deaths as well as migration from other countries.” In 2008, the birth rate exceeded the death rate in Philadelphia and the city netted 5,560 residents from other countries.

¹⁷ The IRS data tracks year-to-year address changes by individuals who have filed tax returns, as such it under-represents people who do not file a tax return and recent immigrants. The use of the IRS data is a way to indicate trends in population changes rather than estimates of actual population rates which is provided in Table 3.1: Portrait of the City.

a new neighborhood within the last 10 years. As described in the last chapter, my intention is not to make a claim that my interviewees are statistically representative of the Phillyblog population as a whole. However, as reported in ethnographic interviews and observed online, there was a clear focus in the discussion on newcomers. When I asked informants, many thought the split between new residents and native Philadelphians was about two-thirds “newcomer” and one-third “old timer.” And within the forum, it was clear that Phillyblog was a resource for many new neighbors or new-to-be residents. It was common for participants to post that they found Phillyblog by searching for resources in their new neighborhood or because they were looking to buy a house. In fact, neighborhood moving advice became so common that a long-time Phillyblogger created a FAQ for users so they could standardize the questions about “where should I move” – a topic I take up in more detail in Chapter 6.

These macro-scale migration trends have to be placed against another trend in Philadelphia: it has less population turnover than other major metropolitan areas. “Philadelphia is often depicted as a place which long-time residents rarely leave and to which outsiders rarely move” (Eichel, 2010a, p. 5). While population churn has increased in the city, it is still lower in comparison to other urban areas. According to IRS data the total number of people coming and going out of the city in 2008 was 6.1% of the city’s population compared to an average 8.3% for other urban areas (Eichel, 2010a). Second, the city is heavily populated by people born in Pennsylvania (69%) according to Census estimates. There is also a high concentration of Philadelphia residents (57%) who were born in Philadelphia (Ferrick, 2009).

The site's focus on transplants (either Philadelphia long-timers and natives who moved to a new neighborhood or wholly new residents) in a city that has less than average population churn most likely changed the nature and content of the discourse. There were tensions expressed via Phillyblog between self-labeled long-term residents and newcomers regarding the nature and even name of neighborhoods, concerns about gentrification or neighborhood development, discussions about neighborhood and city history, and even a sense of optimism versus realism (or perhaps pessimism) about what the future and possibilities of the city could be. George, a Philadelphia native but new neighborhood resident, explained in an interview:

When the wide-eyed optimists come in and post about all these great transformations to bike lanes or green initiatives, I just know they will go against a brick wall of corruption and inefficiency in city government. I know that this is the way the city is. I have some built-in cynicism from having lived in Philadelphia. The government rarely comes through in Philadelphia. If something is going to change here, the government will rarely help and sometimes will undermine it. The wide-eyed optimists who move here after college lack that perspective. I try not to post too many things to take away their enthusiasm. But there is a limit to the amount of change you can get done in Philadelphia because of the politics. I kind of align myself more with the hipster, left people, even though I am not one of them. But I like them better than the old cynics. But I know them [cynics] too because I grew up here, but I like having my foot in both doors (George, interview).

George pinpoints a larger trend in attitudes about the city and the tensions between them.

According to a Philadelphia Research Initiative poll conducted in January 2011, Philadelphians were split in their optimism about the city. Forty percent of residents believed the city was headed in the right direction while 39% said it was going in the wrong direction, down from a more optimistic outlook in 2009 when 46% said the city was headed the right way (Eichel & Zukin, 2011).

1.2.2 Neighborhoods and housing

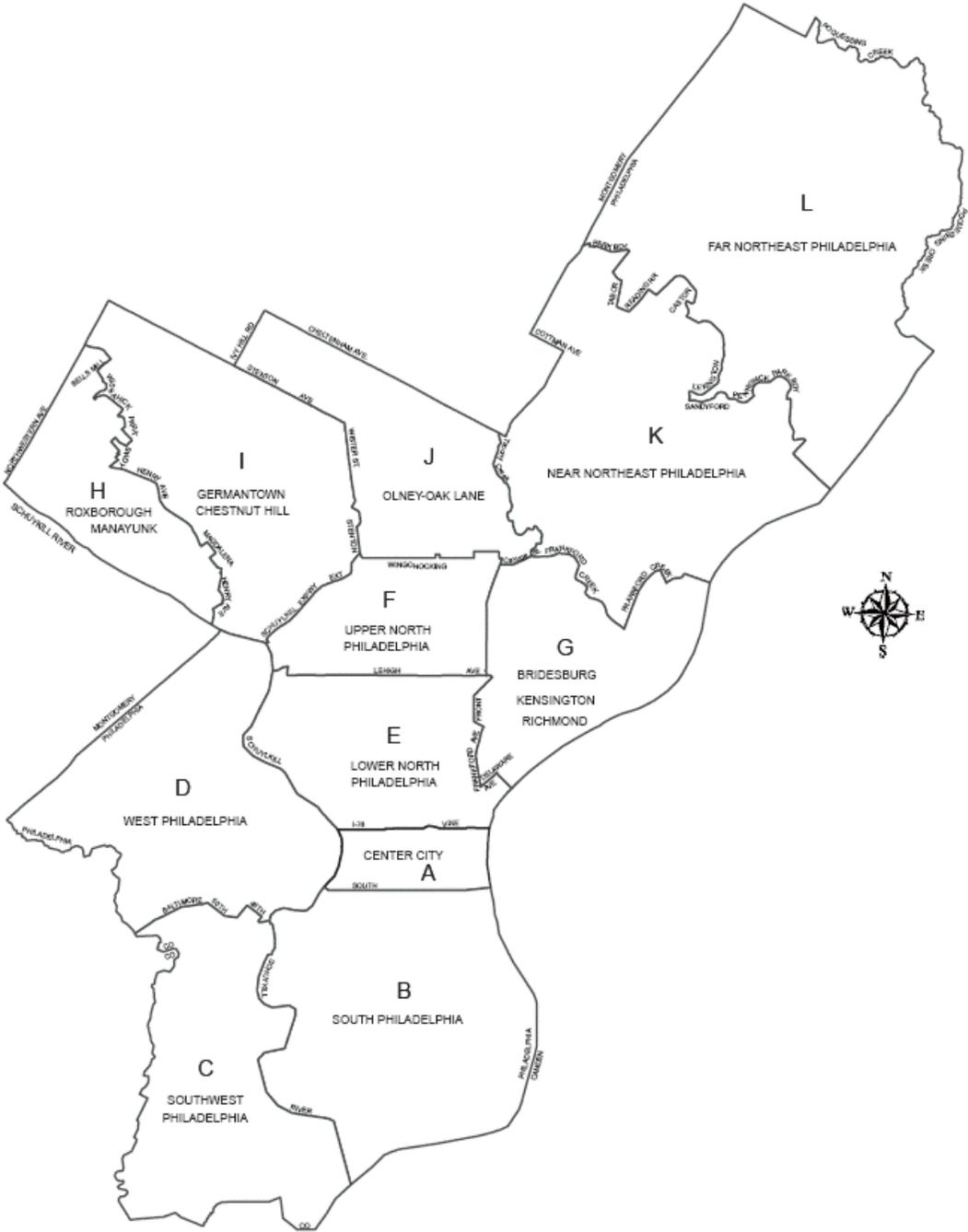
Philadelphia has seen an increase in both new housing development as well as the median cost of housing prices. In 2000, a 10-year tax abatement program for all new and residential buildings went into effect citywide. From 1995 to 2000, there were a total of 4,700 new residential units built in the city. From 2000 to 2005, that number almost tripled to 12,019. While the pace of building has slowed, Philadelphia neighborhoods have certainly been changed by development in the last 10 years. The median sale price of existing homes also rose considerably: 64% from 2003 to 2008 (Ferrick, 2009). Despite increasing prices, Philadelphia remains affordable for many homebuyers compared to its peer cities. In fact, Philadelphia has one of the highest homeownership rates in the country compared to other major cities (Tatian et al., 2007) and is a bargain compared to neighboring Northeastern cities such as New York.

Philadelphia's neighborhoods are differentiated by geography and are seeing different growth patterns (See Figure 3.1 for neighborhood map). There is a strong residential component in the downtown (Center City) neighborhoods. And Philadelphia has the third largest downtown residential population in the nation (Whiting & Proscio, 2007). That Center City population has a higher percentage of college graduates, higher median incomes, and higher median home prices than the city as a whole. Center City also has higher proportions of whites (74%) than the city as a whole. Similarly Northeast Philadelphia, Germantown/Chestnut Hill, and Manayunk neighborhoods on the edges of the city have some of the highest property values in the city. North Philadelphia (Upper North in Figure 3.1) and sections of West Philadelphia, on the other hand, see low property values, some of the highest crime rates, and highest poverty rates in the city. Similarly, the city continues to have racial/ethnic segregation based on neighborhood.

Levels of racial/ethnic segregation have decreased in the city, but Philadelphia continues to have one of the highest black/white spatial segregations compared to other metropolitan areas (Tatian, et al., 2007).

Philadelphians often identify with their neighborhood as much as or more so than the city as a whole. In a city of 1.5 million people and covering 135 square miles, neighborhoods matter. Almost now cliché, people have long referred to Philadelphia as a “city of neighborhoods” (Adams et al., 1993). The 1995 edition of the *Philadelphia Almanac and Citizens’ Manual* documented 395 different names for various neighborhoods throughout the city—200 of which are still used (Finkel, 1995). A 2009 Pew survey found that 63% of Philadelphians rated their neighborhood either as an “excellent” or “good” place to live. When asked if their neighborhoods have changed for the better or worse in the last 5 years, 27% say better, 24% say worse, and 44% say the neighborhood has stayed the same (Eichel & Zukin, 2009). Satisfaction about neighborhoods varies by geography, as does much of the data on Philadelphia neighborhoods. According to the Pew poll, residents in West Philadelphia, South Philadelphia and Northwest Philadelphia (Roxborough, Chestnut Hill) are as satisfied with their neighborhoods as Philadelphians generally. North Philadelphia residents, however, have a much lower satisfaction with their neighborhood with only 46% giving positive ratings to the neighborhood.

Figure 3.1: Neighborhood Map of Philadelphia¹⁸



¹⁸ This map is composed of the 12 broad planning analysis sections used by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission (*The Political and Community Service Boundaries of Philadelphia*, n.d.).

In terms of Phillyblog, one of the least active neighborhood boards was North Philadelphia which is also one of the neighborhoods with the highest poverty rates and highest concentrations of African American residents. In contrast, Center City was highly active, though it was clear that it was not reserved to discussions about the residential neighbors but also those who worked in the downtown area. Some of the most active neighborhood boards were in those neighborhoods which were seeing significant development, in particular Southwest Center City (bordering between Center City and South Philadelphia), South Philadelphia, and Fishtown/Northern Liberties/Kensington.

This is related to an issue that was raised in the previous chapter regarding poverty, race, and internet use in the city. In Philadelphia, 25% of individuals and 33% of children live at or below the poverty line. And since the city's poverty is partly concentrated by geography and by race, in some neighborhoods in Philadelphia, such as North Philadelphia, nearly 39% of the residents live at or below the poverty line, 54% of those living below the poverty line are African American and 18% are Hispanic (*Philadelphia Freedom Rings: Public Computing Center Proposal*, 2010). Nationally, there is a link between income, race and internet use: African Americans, Hispanics and those with an annual income of less than \$30,000 lag in home internet adoption rates (Jansen, 2010; Rainie, 2010). And this trend exists in Philadelphia. It is estimated that anywhere from 36% to 41% of Philadelphians do not have internet access in the home (Harris, 2011; Rappoport & Dalbey, 2010).¹⁹ As a result, certain parts of and residents in the city were not participating or were not participating at the same rate online—either in

¹⁹ As noted previously, there are considerable differences between internet penetration rates within the city of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia DMA – internet penetration for the DMA is closer to 89% (comScore, 2010).

Phillyblog or in any online discussion site. In terms of Phillyblog, participants were aware of and discussed this dynamic. For some, they knew many of their neighbors that participated online. For others who were in neighborhoods with lower internet penetration rates, older neighbors, or lower incomes they didn't know of any of their neighbors who were using Phillyblog.

1.2.3 City politics

Philadelphia is a majority Democratic city. In the 2008 general election there were approximately 1.1 million registered voters in the city: 78% of those were registered Democrat; 13% Republican; and approximately 9% were registered with other parties (*Philadelphia Voter Registration Totals 1967 – 2008*, 2008). While the city was majority Democratic, Phillyblog was not. Both within the forums and in interviews, self-described liberals argued that the site was dominated by conservatives. Similarly, participants who identified as conservative described the site as being dominated by liberals. The reality of the forum was that there were stronger conservative voices in Phillyblog than one might have expected in a city that is 78% registered Democrat. And some of the most highly active Phillyblog posters were involved in some manner in Republican politics in the city. Moreover, within those who described themselves as Democrats, many identified themselves as reform or progressive Democrats located outside the traditional and powerful Democratic party politics of the city. Phillyblog participants, for instance, leaned more towards the reform mayoral candidate early in his campaign. There was an organizing effort conducted through Phillyblog to lobby for anti-corruption legislation (the elimination of so-called “pay-to-play”). And there were common complaints from neighbors about what they saw as entrenched, overly powerful civic organizations. By

and large, Phillyblog participants were not necessarily directly linked into existing political elite structures of the city.

Phillyblog participants were also preoccupied by the same kinds of debates that were surrounding the city regarding government services and city government ethics. Like many U.S. cities, Philadelphia has faced significant budget shortfalls due to weaknesses in the local economy and city tax receipts. In November 2008, facing a projected budget shortfall of \$1 billion by 2013, Mayor Michael Nutter announced a first round of city budget cuts which included closing libraries and swimming pools, suspending planned tax reductions, and cutting jobs and salaries for some city administrators. In January 2009, Mayor Nutter announced his administration would need to cut additional monies with the target being to close a second \$1 billion shortfall that could develop over the next five years. As a result, the budget for the city's neighborhood-based services (e.g. parks, street repair, trash collection, recreation and libraries) were cut—in adjusted dollars those services were funded at a lower level in 2008 than in 2001 (Ferrick, 2009). Reductions in city services are combined with some of the highest (and according to some studies *the* highest) business and personal tax burdens in the country (Ferrick, 2009).

1.2.4 Crime, safety, and quality of life concerns

Consistently, when asked, Philadelphians rank crime as one of their major concerns about the city. Major crime, which includes murder, serious assaults, rape, robbery, burglary, and theft, has dropped 15% over the decade of 2000 to 2010 (Ferrick, 2009). Nevertheless, crime is still a significant problem in the city. In 2008, almost 80,000 suspects were arrested and charged with some kind of offense (anything from

murder to shoplifting). And in a 2009 poll published by the Philadelphia Research Initiative, almost half (45%) of Philadelphians mention crime or violence as one of the factors that they like least about the city. When asked if crime is a serious problem in their neighborhood, 64% of residents surveyed said it was either “very” or “somewhat” serious. The study also points out that by far the most cited reason why people say they want to leave the city is because of crime and safety (36%), not high taxes (2%) or concerns about schools (8%). When asked if residents feel unsafe outside in their own neighborhoods at night about one-third (37%) say they do not feel safe—a number that does not change significantly based on the neighborhood in which one lives (Eichel & Zukin, 2009). Crime is not distributed evenly among the city’s neighborhoods—nearly 60% of all major crimes are committed in 10 of the city’s 25 police districts (Ferrick, 2009), concentrated in the North and Southwest sections of the city.

Other quality of life concerns also rank high among concerns of Philadelphians. In an open-ended question, survey participants were asked to list the factors they like least about the city. After crime (45%), the next six most common concerns included: dirty streets/trash (8%); politics/lack of integrity (6%); drugs/alcohol (5%); taxes/high taxes (6%); poor educational system (5%) and unemployment/lack of jobs (6%) (Eichel & Zukin, 2009).

2. History & Evolution of Phillyblog

Phillyblog went online in November 2002. There were four original founders/owners of the site. Two owners were with the site until 2009, the other two

owners left a few years after Phillyblog was established.²⁰ Both of the owners had full-time jobs, and Phillyblog was operated in their “spare time” (owner, interview). Of the two remaining owners, one was named Phillyblog “Executive Director” and along with site administrators was responsible for the technical operations of the site. The Phillyblog Executive Director was a technology entrepreneur and during the time of Phillyblog’s growth he was developing a business in search engine optimization. A frequent contributor, he was less active on the site (in terms of posting) in late 2008 and 2009. Along with another administrator, he was responsible for developing one of Phillyblog’s successor sites, Philadelphia Speaks. The other owner was a marketing professional. She was responsible for administration, advertising, and public relations. A less frequent poster, her visible activity on the site decreased by late 2008 and 2009 with many moderators reporting in interviews and in the forum that she would not return emails or private messages, had not logged into the site since late 2008, and was generally absent.

The site had different funding models. In its early years (2002 and early 2003), the owners invested their own money and there were some users who donated money to support the site’s operating costs. In 2004, Phillyblog applied for non-profit, 501(c)(3) status, but abandoned the idea in 2006 because it had become “just too complicated” of a structure (administrator, interview). By 2004, Phillyblog had started selling banner ads. Later, the site was also supported through Google AdSense advertising (Google placed advertising which was related to the content on the boards). In general, participants saw the need to support the site in some manner, either through direct donation or advertising. Nevertheless, advertising was a topic of debate throughout the site’s lifespan. Some

²⁰ I interviewed the two active owners at the outset of fieldwork and was in occasional email contact during fieldwork. When Phillyblog shut down, neither would talk about the shut-down. One site administrator explained that it was due to a pending lawsuit, but I could never confirm that with owners.

participants saw the advertising as “annoying” (PB thread 4708). At another point there was a participant who complained when the site had women’s lingerie advertising (PB thread 23915). On a few occasions participants questioned the motivations of site owners, claiming that the site was part of their marketing and technology businesses and that it was simply composed of “paid shills” who were trying to promote their own business and the city. In defense of his own position and motivation, one owner posted:

I wanted to develop a community where people could exchange ideas and share in their love of Philly. The other local message boards were lackluster so we built it, and about 10 of us talked to each other for the first 6 months. As for as using PB to promote my business, you'll see I never do, it wouldn't be impressive. Since [his company] already works with some large recognized brands, me using phillyblog as an example would be useless, it would add no credibility. . . . If you are with most of us here that want to promote philly, and discuss its good bad and ugly, please stick around (PB thread 51261, #85).

While calls for transparency in advertising revenue and site operations were made by posters, full disclosure was never made by the owners—either in the forums or in my interviews with the two owners.

2.1 From blog aggregator to discussion forum

The website was originally designed using a weblogging software platform. Like many standard blogs, articles were posted by a set of registered users and administrators and an open commenting feature was made available for any reader. In 2002, the landing page of Phillyblog resembled a traditional blog in the sense that each article was posted in reverse chronological order, tagged into twelve topical categories, and archived by date (See Figure 3.2).

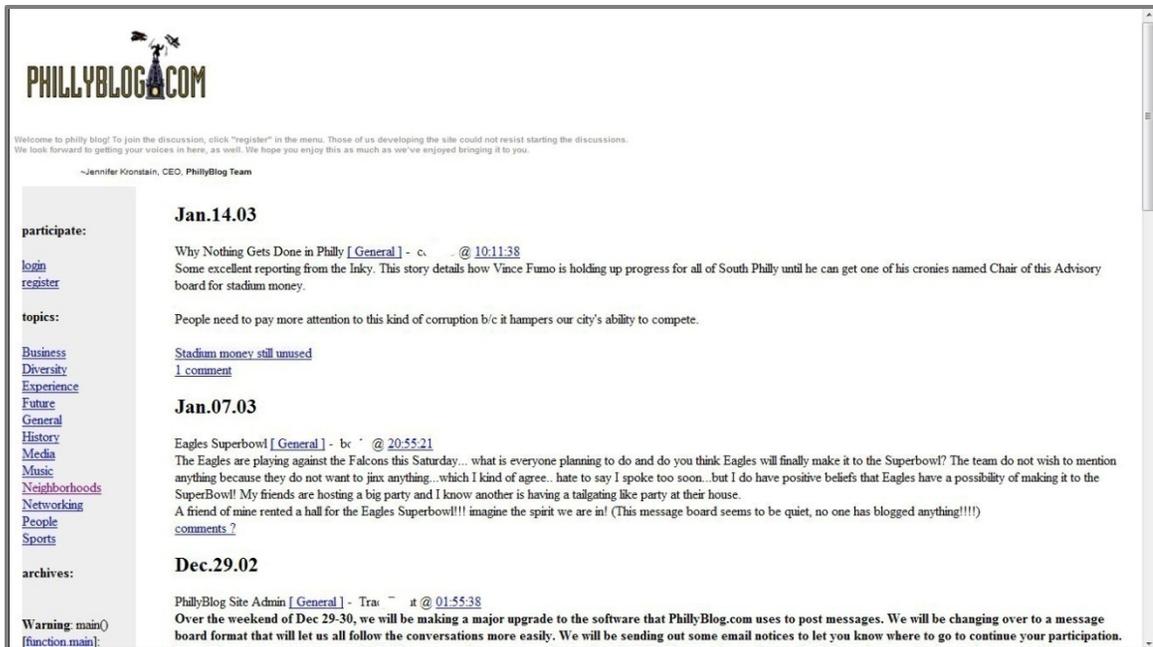


Figure 3.2: Early Structure of Phillyblog (Archived), January 2003

Despite the blog name and early design, Phillyblog users did not use the site to author individual articles. Even in its earliest manifestation, posts were more characteristic of a conversation than a full-length essay. Posts were written to elicit other people’s responses. The convention was to write short posts generally between one and two paragraphs and it was common for early entries to end in open questions calling for response: “what are your thoughts?,” “what would you recommend?,” or “what do you think?”

The early site architecture did not easily lend itself to interaction among participants and two months after it was launched, Phillyblog converted to message board (forum) software because, according to administrators, “a blog doesn’t support the level of conversation that was developing.”²¹ The misnomer was not lost on participants, in an

²¹ On December 29, 2002 Phillyblog administrators posted that they would change to message board software in order to allow people to follow the emerging conversations more easily. At that time they wrote that they would re-develop the blog in the future, assembling a group of columnists to blog in the “regular way.” (Internet Archive: <http://web.archive.org/web/20030316212441/http://phillyblog.com/blog/?cat=1>).

early thread, a user remarked simply: “a forum is not a blog.”²² But the Phillyblog name had stuck and while a blog feature was reintroduced and existed alongside the forum software, those blogs remained mainly dormant. Even the heaviest Phillybloggers had only one or two blog entries versus having authored thousands of posts. In interviews a number of participants brought up the choice of the blog name, explaining that a single-author blog was not the type of engagement participants wanted. Elizabeth remarked: “it developed primarily as bunch of people who wanted conversation and blogs aren’t really conversations; blogs are essays. Nobody thought about it as a collection of blogs.”

Phillyblog remained an active and highly trafficked throughout its lifespan. Each year there was an increase in content in terms of new threads initiated (See Figure 3.3).²³

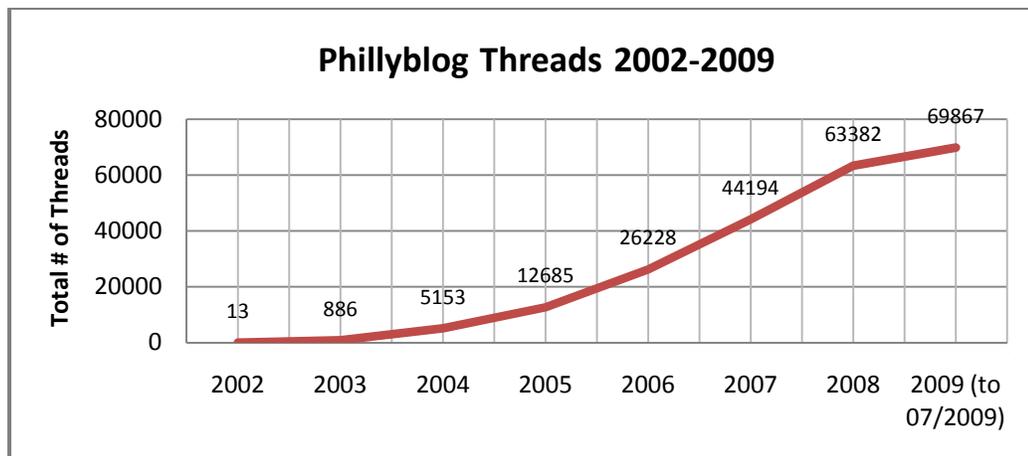


Figure 3.3: Phillyblog Threads 2002-2009

In all of 2005, for example, 7,532 new threads were contributed to the site; that number almost doubled one year later with 13,543 new threads being contributed in 2006. The

²²<http://web.archive.org/web/20030421051938/phillyblog.com/blog/index.php?m=20021115>.

²³ The data on threads represents the number of threads initiated minus the spam that was deleted by moderators.

pace of increase between each year slowed, but each successive year saw an increase in thread contribution with the year 2008 having nearly 20,000 new threads initiated.

3. Forum Structure

Phillyblog used a tree structure to organize content. At the top level there were broad subject categories: (1) Where We Are; (2) Who We Are; (3) Community Resources & Happenings; (4) Phillyblog Lounge; and (5) About Us. Within those broad categories there were sub-forums or boards that covered geographic neighborhoods, topical areas (e.g. politics, spirituality), miscellaneous/catch-all subjects, classifieds, and site administration. Those sub-forums were made up of threads (conversations on a topic of relevance to the board) that are themselves composed of individual posts or replies.²⁴ The landing page of the Phillyblog forum listed the categories and sub-forum boards. A link to the most recent post and the post author was indicated next to the sub-forum name along with basic statistics—including the number of threads and posts (Figure 3.4).

Forum	Last Post	Threads	Posts	Moderator
Private This is a default category for private imported forums.				
Updated 12/08 ... READ THIS FIRST: PhillyBlog Rules of the Road / How to Report Posts Welcome to PhillyBlog! Check out our forum guidelines before you start posting.	Never	0	0	Jan
Where We Are				
Philly Photos (1 Viewing) Life in philly, in pictures	Street Photography by mp 06-26-2009 11:39 AM Go to last post	1,080	9,530	
Center City (27 Viewing) Market East, Wash West, Chinatown, Loft District, Logan Sq, Ritt Square, etc.	Bad Landlords/Rental Agencies by ACG Today 08:02 AM Go to last post	3,815	82,697	Swinefeld
Fairmount / Art Museum / Brewerytown (19 Viewing)	no parade on pkwy? by gone down south Today 07:03 AM Go to last post	3,163	48,524	ni
Fishtown / Northern Liberties / Kensington (10 Viewing)	Northern Liberties Recycling by Hank Yesterday 08:30 AM Go to last post	3,069	30,113	brc
Germantown / Mt. Airy / Chestnut Hill (9 Viewing)	East Walnut Lane by bi Today 07:58 AM Go to last post	2,334	17,373	thoi
Manayunk / Roxborough / East Falls (26 Viewing)	Thumbs up Slow Down on Umbria... by brianfm Today 08:29 AM Go to last post	3,570	43,134	Valley Twin

Figure 3.4: Phillyblog Forum Landing Page, July 2009

²⁴ A general description of internet forums can be found at http://www.vbulletin.com/forum/faq.php?faq=vb3_board_usage#faq_vb3_forums_threads_posts and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_forum.

3.1 Geographic neighborhood boards

In the early years of the site, Phillyblog included a catch-all board labeled “neighborhoods.” As the site grew, specific neighborhoods were added based on user requests and activity. Specifically, large geographic areas were refined into smaller areas. In 2006, there were ten neighborhood boards and by 2009 there were 14 geographic sub-forums which broadly but imperfectly represented the city’s neighborhoods and surrounding region (see Figure 3.1 for a neighborhood map of the city). Table 3.2 lists all sub-forums on the site. As an indication of size and activity, each forum’s total number of posted threads is listed along with the relative size of the forum in comparison to the whole site. For example, the geographic forum, South Philly, had a total of 4,158 threads posted from 2002-2009, representing almost 6% of all content on the site.

Table 3.2: Phillyblog Sub-forums (July 2009)

Category	Forum Name	# Threads	As % of all site content
Geographic Neighborhoods	South Philly	4158	5.95%
	Northeast Philly	3950	5.65%
	Center City	3815	5.46%
	Manayunk / Roxborough / East Falls	3570	5.11%
	Fairmount / Art Museum / Brewerytown	3163	4.53%
	Fishtown / Northern Liberties / Kensington	3069	4.39%
	Germantown / Mt. Airy / Chestnut Hill	2334	3.34%
	Queen Village / Bella Vista / Hawthorne	2223	3.18%
	University City / West Philadelphia	2220	3.18%
	South West Center City	1961	2.81%
	The Burbs	1350	1.93%
	Old City/Society Hill	1001	1.43%
	North Philadelphia	408	0.58%
	New Jersey Shore Points	105	0.15%
Topical & General Discussion	Politics	5675	8.12%
	General Discussion	4132	5.91%
	Nation	3204	4.59%
	The Lounge	2663	3.81%
	Ask a PhillyFriend	2425	3.47%

	Food and Drink	2375	3.40%
	Getting Around Philly	1576	2.26%
	Sports	1569	2.25%
	Parenting & Education	1469	2.10%
	Culture	1348	1.93%
	Philly Photos	1080	1.55%
	Business	845	1.21%
	World	791	1.13%
	Architecture and Urban Planning	684	0.98%
	Spirituality & Faith	656	0.94%
	Philadelphians	422	0.60%
	Working in Philadelphia	387	0.55%
	History and Tradition	315	0.45%
	Strange and Wonderful Places	241	0.34%
	Health and Fitness	227	0.32%
	Volunteer	223	0.32%
Classifieds & Administration	Events	1544	2.21%
	Classifieds	1342	1.92%
	Philly Tech	936	1.34%
	Suggestion Box	356	0.51%
	Phillyblog History	29	0.04%
	Forum Policies and Announcements	27	0.04%
	Total Boards	41	
	Total Threads	69,868	

The 14 geographic forums were neighborhood composites of multiple, smaller neighborhoods. The neighborhood categories were not mutually exclusive and boundaries between neighborhoods overlapped. The less than perfect neighborhood categorization reflected a reality in the city. There is no single or definitive neighborhood map of Philadelphia. There are at least ten neighborhood maps, each developed for a different purpose and distinguishing different boundaries, size and total numbers of neighborhoods.²⁵ Furthermore, residents do not always agree where one neighborhood ends and another begins or what their neighborhood is named. Rather than attempting to

²⁵ For example: the City Planning Commission (109 neighborhoods); the University of Pennsylvania Library (203 neighborhoods); the Police Department (152 neighborhoods); Planning Analysis Sections (12 neighborhoods); Neighborhoods Online (96 neighborhoods); and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (57 neighborhoods).

represent each distinct neighborhood with its own board, Phillyblog included neighborhood areas and added or refined neighborhood boards based on user demand.

The site designers never successfully incorporated a geographic application that could map user-generated content to Cartesian coordinates. There was one attempt to have people “pin” their location using a Google map application, but it was sparsely used and its ultimate purpose was unclear. The geographically-based forums on Phillyblog, however, served an important purpose for the ways in which users navigated and posted to the site. Imperfect and shifting, the neighborhood categories allowed participants to post content, share information, and ask questions of those who they saw as being in their same geographic area. Even though the site architecture was not more geographically specific than the 14 broad neighborhood designations, users commonly provided a more granular “mapping” by including specific coordinates in their posts. For example, threads such as: “Anyone know why two helicopters were flying over around 50th and Chester last night around 11pm?” (PS thread15765, #1), were common in their inclusion of specific coordinates (e.g. 50th& Chester).

The popularity of the neighborhood forums, as measured by number of threads, varied. The South Philly board, the second most active forum on the site, covered an immense geographical area composed of dozens of smaller neighborhoods, thereby helping to account for its varied activity. Boards also had different lifespans (introduced later in the lifecycle of the site) that helps to account for their size. Some neighborhoods maintained heavily used neighborhood listservs and may have preferred those to Phillyblog. University City, for example, had an active mailing list called UC_neighbors as well as a Live Journal group. The activity on the neighborhood boards was also likely

a result of the city's internet usage patterns. North Philadelphia, which was one of the least active neighborhood blogs, is also one of the city's poorest sections and internet penetration rates are reflective of that.

3.2 Topical and general discussion boards

In a similar fashion to the geographic neighborhoods, the topical and general discussion boards emerged over time based on user feedback and a changing technical architecture. By July 2009, there were a total of 21 topical and general discussion boards (see Table 3.2). Phillyblog's initial forum architecture was designed with one general/catch-all discussion and ten topical boards: Business; History; Sports; Music; Networking; People; Diversity; Experience; Future; Media; and General Discussion. Four of those boards remained active until 2009 (*Business, History, Sports, and General Discussion*). The original "Music" board was expanded and renamed *Culture*. The "Networking" board was replaced with *Working in Philadelphia*. And the "People" board morphed into *Philadelphians*. Phillyblog topical areas can usefully be grouped into five categories: (1) Negotiating, navigating and consuming the city; (2) City infrastructure and history; (3) Politics; (4) Civic volunteerism; and (5) Off-topic, random, catch-all discussion.

3.2.1 Negotiating, Navigating and Consuming the City

The original "Diversity," "Experience," "Future," and "Media" boards dissolved and were ultimately replaced with six topical boards focused on negotiating, navigating and consuming Philadelphia. *Food and Drink* was primarily first-hand accounts of restaurant reviews and openings, food-related events, or requests for restaurant recommendations. The *Parenting & Education* board included discussions of primary

and secondary schools and school policy along with advice, warnings, and suggestions regarding day care centers, toddler dance classes, or playgrounds. *Sports* was dedicated to discussing the highly popular professional sports teams in the city. The less active *Culture, Health and Fitness*, and *Strange and Wonderful Places* boards included, in order: music, theater, or art event listings and discussions; first-hand accounts of fitness centers and requests for healthcare provider recommendations; and a sort of *Rough Guide* travelogue of off-beat but noteworthy sites in the city and surrounding region.

3.2.2 *City Infrastructure and History*

There were four topical boards focused on various aspects of the infrastructure and history of the city. *Getting Around Philly* included discussions of transportation infrastructure, history and policy as well as advice on how to “get from here to there.” *Architecture and Urban Planning* focused on a combination of urban development policy discussion, the exchange of news and hearsay about building development, and home renovation advice. This board also saw discussions of historical city architecture and the growth, development, and gentrification of neighborhoods. A discussion of the history of the city—both personal narratives as well as references to historical photos, texts, and maps—made up the bulk of the *History and Tradition* board. Finally, the *Philly Photos* board was akin to a Flickr site for the posting of current and historic Philadelphia photography.

3.2.3 *Politics*

A discussion of local, city politics found its way into any number of boards—from the neighborhoods to Food and Drink. But there were three boards focused primarily on political discussions. Defined differently, in reality the content on each of

the boards was relatively indistinguishable (e.g. national politics was discussed on the politics board, global issues were discussed in the nation board). The *Politics* board was the most active board (as measured by number of threads) on the site, and was a mix of local, state, regional and national political discussions. The *Nation* was described on the site's landing page as: "the impact of national issues on Philadelphia." The *World* board was described as "global issues and how they impact Philadelphia."

3.2.4 *Civic Volunteerism*

There were two boards that served a civic volunteerism function. The aptly named *Volunteer* board was similar to a classifieds listing of volunteer opportunities and requests; as such there was very little discussion. The very popular *Ask a Philly Friend* board was more discursively active and served as part FAQ, part old-fashioned welcome wagon. Primarily it was a question/answer forum and contained advice about navigating the city, transportation hints and "secrets," or places to live. Phillybloggers would answer each other's questions about finding an apartment, babysitter, contractor, or hairstylist. There was also a fair amount of city boosterism found in the board—many Phillyblog participants would talk positively about why people should move to a particular neighborhood, how to find resources, or other assets of the city.

3.2.5 *Off-topic, Random, Catch-all Discussion*

There were three catch-all discussion boards. *Philadelphians* was a hodgepodge of discussions about Philadelphia population trends, famous Philadelphians, and dating requests. *General Discussion* captured discussions that the original poster deemed of city-wide or Phillyblog-wide interest, including for example: discussions of local media, urban park systems, real estate taxes, home security questions. *The Lounge* was the

location for “off topic/random posts.” The Lounge did not have a designated moderator and the tone tended to be humorous, entertaining and sometimes rude. Lounge posts included word games, poetry, and posts telling others what they were making for dinner.

Like in the neighborhood boards, the categorization lines that distinguished topical boards were fuzzy. In part, it was due to the way users chose to post to the site. For example, two of the top ten most active boards were general, catch-all discussions. In addition, the site designers’ and users’ definitions of categories were often different. Site architects, for example, thought the Nation board should be focused on national policy and its effect on the city, but users interpreted the board as a discussion of national politics which was simultaneously occurring in the Politics board. As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, discussion topics often emerged out of first-hand observation. As such, many of the discussions were context specific in the sense that conversations about restaurants, transportation policy, or city politics emerged in the neighborhood boards based on a neighborhood event or problem. This also meant that there was always the potential for public talk focused on politics or civic volunteerism to suffuse any section of the site, never simply limited to those distinct boards in Phillyblog.

3.3 Consolidating neighborhoods and topics

One of the critical aspects of Phillyblog’s technical architecture, and a feature I take up in more detail in Chapter 5, was that it consolidated the city’s geographical neighborhoods along with topical areas into one single web space. It was unique in that it was neighborhood-specific as well as regional; thus it enabled topic-specific and general discussions. A number of neighborhood-based groups supported websites, distribution and discussion email lists (and rival neighborhood groups supporting splinter lists), blogs,

and Facebook pages. There were also a few neighborhood-specific discussion forums in the West Philadelphia, Northern Liberties and Fishtown neighborhoods.²⁶ These various tools served as digital communication mediums among active neighbors and covered similar discussion topics as Phillyblog—civic association news, development updates, and neighborhood hearsay and gossip.²⁷ But unlike Phillyblog, these were *single* neighborhood discussion spaces, rather than the connected network of neighborhoods. Philadelphia also had several regionally-focused online discussion forums: the nationwide city-data.net supported one Philadelphia board and the Pennsylvania-only Talk Pennsylvania had a single Philadelphia discussion forum.²⁸ But because of their larger regional focus, these sites were not set up to allow for specific neighborhood discussions. Similarly, the city supported countless issue-specific listservs focused on a particular topic.

The unique contribution of Phillyblog was that it allowed for granular discussions of the nitty-gritty of neighborhood life. It also allowed for city-wide discussions on shared topics of concern. One of Phillyblog’s founders told a local technology news site: “When you have a city of neighborhoods, it’s hard to find one site that covers that phenomenon. . . We figured we’d create that around a kind of interaction, instead of the

²⁶ West Philly News (<http://www.westphillynews.com/west-philly-message-board.html>); Fishtown.us (<http://www.fishtown.us/tracker>); and Northern Liberties Forum (<http://johnnymyers.com/phpBB3/viewforum.php?f=1>)

²⁷ During the course of fieldwork I signed up for and read neighborhood mailing lists from Queen Village Neighbors Association; Bella Vista Town Watch; Pennsport Civic Association; Northern Liberties Neighbors Association; University City Neighbors Mailing List; and the South of South Neighborhood Association. I registered for the Southwest Center City’s Yahoo! Group and their less active Facebook page. I also read issue-specific lists, including: PlanPhilly (a sustainable development organization) and CasiNO (an anti-casino development movement).

²⁸ City-Data’s Philadelphia forum (<http://www.city-data.com/forum/philadelphia>); Talk Pennsylvania’s Philadelphia Forum (<http://www.talkpa.net/philadelphia-f62.html>)

one-to-many platform of a blog” (Wink, 2009). The kinds of things that people talked about on Phillyblog could be found in other city-focused online forums, blogs, and listservs. But Phillyblog was different because it gathered together those discussions and discussants in one online realm.

4. Users

Users of the site ranged from those who were actively involved in producing content to those who were occasional readers. Participation requirements were minimal; as such the barriers to enter and exit the discussion space were low. Structurally threads could be initiated by any registered user and in practice a range of participants started new conversations though, unsurprisingly, thread initiation was the most common among a group of regular, active users. Registration required that a user supply a username, password, and email, as well as agreeing to the site’s Terms of Service (TOS). Like most aspects of Phillyblog, the TOS evolved over time and in response to user behavior and misbehavior. Ultimately, the terms prohibited certain forms of discourse, such as not posting or linking to any content that was “unlawful, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, tortuous, defamatory, vulgar, profane, obscene, libelous, invasive of another’s privacy, hateful, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable.” Also prohibited was the posting of pornography, engaging in non-approved commercial activity, repeated personal attacks, registering under more than one username, and using “creative spelling” to skirt the anti-profanity software filters.

The most common practice was for users to participate pseudonymously, using aliases rather than their full names. Many Phillybloggers did use markers of identity in their posts. As seen in Figure 3.5, that included a user-selected image or avatar; an

optional signature line with links to personal blogs or websites; and identifying information such as where the user lived or worked, and their full name. In addition, the system software automatically included the user’s join date, post count, and a field called “location” which was used inconsistently—some users included their neighborhoods and others simply noted that they were in Philadelphia.

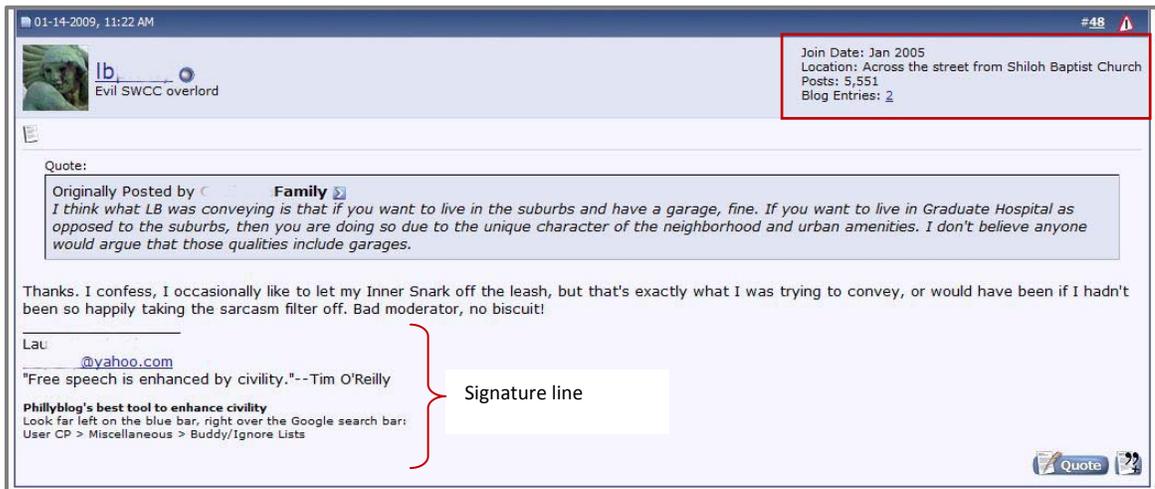


Figure 3.5: Phillyblog Post

There were complications to user pseudonymity and anonymity, particularly for those who were active posters in their neighborhood forums. These posters often knew each other offline or at least knew generally where others lived. For some this was a natural extension of using the forum for neighborhood information, civic association news, and community building. In an interview Julia explained that knowing that her neighbors were also posting to Phillyblog “created a difference,” because it was a way to regulate behavior, “if you are talking to somebody and you know you are going to see them at the play date or the community clean-up or what have you, you tend to think twice, and I think that is nice” (Julia, interview).

4.1 Types of Phillyblog users

Table 3.3 summarizes the different types of users mentioned in the dissertation.

The user categories are relatively flat—there were registered users and anonymous users.

In addition, there were board moderators and site administrators.

Table 3.3: Types of Phillyblog Users

User Type	Description
Registered Users	Phillyblog users who have created accounts on the site. These users may read, initiate threads, post comments, send private messages, and view other users' profiles.
Anonymous Users (guests)	Phillyblog users who do not create accounts. These users may read and search the site. These users were commonly referred to as lurkers.
Moderators	Registered users who volunteer to moderate the sub-forums. Moderators can edit, delete, merge, close, or move threads within their own sub-forum. They can warn users and recommend disciplinary action against registered users—specifically banning a user. They can not ban users themselves. Not all sub-forums had an assigned moderator.
Administrators	Registered users who volunteer to administer the site. Administrators have the same powers as moderators (editing, deleting, merging and moving threads), but can do so in any sub-forum on the site. Administrators can ban users.
Owners	During the time of study, there were two owners of the site. They were active users on the site and served as administrators.

In 2008, the site was averaging about 2,000 new subscribers per month (owner, interview). By July 2009, the site statistics indicated there were a total of 40,900 registered users. On peak days, approximately 1,000 registered users logged into the site (site administrator, interview). But there was significant diversity within the registered user category. Of those who registered, 40% posted and 60% had a registered username but never made a post. That doesn't mean these registered users didn't read the site, only that they didn't post after registering.

One interview participant classified Phillyblog users into two categories: the “quiet edge” and the “loud middle.” The “quiet edge” was comprised of a continuum of activity. There were anonymous or “guest” users who read the site but never registered

(thus are not included in the 40,900 registered user total). The quiet edge also contained users who took the time to register but never posted to the site. Finally, there were those who were single-time or infrequent users—those who may have come to ask a question and then never engaged through posting again.

The “loud middle” was composed of return users, those who read and posted to the site on a regular or semi-regular basis. Of these return users, there was a subset who had met each other through Phillyblog and organized monthly happy hours that were advertised via the forum. There were others in the loud middle that never met socially, but were active on the site through their posting and reading activity. Combined, the loud middle was responsible for producing the bulk of the content on the site. Phillyblog experienced trends similar to other online content production where a small proportion of the registered users produced the bulk of the content. On Phillyblog, the top 200 most active users, in terms of post count, had produced approximately 52% of all content. But even within this group of return users there was significant variability in the amount of content each produced. Many users had been active on the site for several years and their post counts reflected that activity. The user with the highest post count had authored nearly 24,000 posts since joining the site in 2003. It was more common for longer-term active users to have anywhere between 1,500 to 4,000 posts. The mean post count for registered users who had one or more posts was 72.

4.2 Estimated Audience Profile

Participation on Phillyblog did not require that a person register to the site. Anyone could read the site without registering and that audience profile was estimated by the site owners using Quantcast.com. Quantcast is an internet traffic measurement

company which during the time Phillyblog was being analyzed used a combination of panel-based audience measurements and cookies to determine traffic and demographic data. Online audience measurement has been notoriously complicated (Story, 2007), so the Quantcast data is considered an *estimate* of who was coming to the site, but it was an estimate that one of the owners considered to be the “official stats on the site.” In February 2008, Quancast estimated Phillyblog had an audience profile that was primarily male (54% male/46% female); working age adults (33% aged 18-34 and 45% aged 35-49); educated (42% college and 23% grad school); and white (74% white, 15% African American; 5% Asian; 3% Hispanic). Obviously, these demographics do not correspond to the demographics detailed earlier for the city as a whole. Notably, however, the African American audience was larger than the average for all internet sites (by 86%), at least according to Quancast data.

5. User Practices: Reading, Writing, and Maintaining

Phillyblog employed standard internet message board software that influenced the ways in which people read and wrote to the site. The default setting for each of the subforums was that posts were listed in reverse chronological order so users would see the most recent conversational activity when they logged into the site. This chronological sorting was based on the last post to a thread, not the date on which a thread was initiated. As a result, threads that were initiated months or even years before may still appear in the “top of the fold” if there had been recent conversational activity. This is a different type of structure than blogs in which each original post is listed in reverse chronological order regardless of comment date.

The only threads that were consistently displayed at the top of the page were “sticky” threads (See Figure 3.6). Stickies were selected by moderators and tended to be categorized as stickies because they were recurring or hot button topics. Several neighborhood sub-forums, such as the Fairmount board pictured in Figure 3.6 had a crime and security sticky so neighbors could report crimes or disseminate police reports.

Threads in Forum : Fairmount / Art Museum / Brewertown						Forum Tools
Announcement: Reporting Bad Posts UndeCranky (Pay to Play Master)						
	Thread / Thread Starter	Rating	Last Post	Replies	Views	
	Sticky: Crime and Security issues (1 2 3 ... Last Page) merkin		Yesterday 05:51 PM by johnnie	967	79,229	
	Sticky: What is Fairmount / Art Museum? (1 2 3 ... Last Page) Eagle Scout		09-12-2008 12:51 PM by Rapsallion	47	12,215	
	Sticky: What makes it great? (1 2 3 ... Last Page) Steve		07-02-2008 02:13 PM by gordman	31	10,604	
	What Bubble?! merkin		Today 08:08 AM by merkin	0	1	
	Spring Garden clean-up April 5? gone down south		Today 08:00 AM by PhillyChik	7	8	
	26th and Girard Daniel335		Today 07:47 AM by merkin	1	2	
	Moving into Brewertown, Thompson & 29th Ziro		Today 07:42 AM by merkin	2	3	

Figure 3.6: Sub-forum landing page

Also pictured in Figure 3.6 are a series of envelope icons that indicated the status of the thread. A sealed, blue envelope showed that there were no new posts added to a thread since the last time the user logged in. “Hot threads”—threads that were active (with more than 15 replies or 150 views)—had a red envelope, thereby indicating the most popular threads.

Threads were not rated or ranked by users, even though the software made it possible to do so. A thread rating system was discussed among participants on the forum, but there were disagreements as to its necessity. Participants expressed concern about such systems, explaining that rating systems were “just bad ideas” because they had the effect of “scaring away newbies” (PB thread 3560, #13); another asked, “what would be

the point other than a popularity contest? i think it could discourage some people from posting” (PB thread 45176, #2), and another Phillyblogger echoed:

A few years ago, someone suggested adding a rating system here. Viewers would have the option in the control panel to only view posts above a certain threshold. At the time I thought that would do more harm than good by discouraging posts (PB thread 71704, #51).

Part of the ethos of the site, which I discuss in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, was that Phillyblog was viewed by its participants as a location for a varied, open, and broad discussion. Participants seemed concerned about making sure that Phillyblog was open to newcomers, to new perspectives, or to “new blood.” The content on the site that made it to the top of the sub-forum page (with the exception of stickies) was not selected by moderators. Nor was that content selected by users via a ranking system. Sub-forum pages simply listed what had been added or discussed most recently, regardless of the content of the post.

5.1 Reading the forums

Informants showed variation in how and how often they read the site. Some interview participants reported only looking at the site once a week. Others read the site in “fits and spurts.” Most of the participants interviewed described their reading patterns as brief but frequent visits to the site on most days—with some checking in as much as 10-15 times per day for very brief periods. Many checked the site during the day from their office. Informants also differed in how they travelled the site. Out of those interviewed, only two reported that they never or rarely ventured out of their neighborhood forum. Another two participants reported that they spent almost all of their time in the politics forum. For most, however, they moved across multiple boards.

One of the main reading practices was to use the “new posts” feature. I will talk about this practice in more detail in Chapter 5, but technically, “new posts” was a search function which returned any threads that were new or updated since the user’s last visit. What new posts allowed is that instead of entering the site through a particular forum (e.g. a neighborhood or politics), users would come upon the new posts page and be presented with discussions from all boards that had been initiated or updated since their last visit. This is important because it was a way that users by-passed the subject categories on the forum. Many users traversed the site based on the content rather than on the neighborhood or topical categorization. As such, participants reported reading neighborhood forums which were not their own or getting involved in discussions that may not be in a forum category that they frequented.

5.2 Writing to the forums

Writing to the site took two primary forms—initiating new thread conversations and replying to threads already in progress. It was more common for users to respond to threads already in progress rather than initiate wholly new ones. Users could initiate or respond to a thread in any sub-forum on the site and similar to the way users read the site, some Phillybloggers would post in any board while others limited themselves to one or two sub-forums. There were two primary posting restrictions: users could not post commercial advertising nor could they have duplicate threads (e.g. users had to pick a sub-forum and post only in one place). The writing convention was to author short posts. There was a 10,000 character limit on posts, but the average was far smaller—closer to one to two paragraphs for both the original post as well as follow-up comments. There was an expectation that the writing was to be more similar to a conversation than to an

essay format. As such, there was some sense that the writing style should match the subject of the discussion. One poster explained:

[A] wordy and very well written post that has been massaged to death can instantly put the reader to sleep. Sometimes, on here, too much information can look silly on a thread about dogs eating in restaurants or who makes the best cheesesteak. I'd say that there is room for a lot of different styles here. If everyone wrote posts that gave the googled history of the subject at hand, this place would be almost unreadable (PB thread 42281, #18).

“Quoting,” a writing and technical practice common in internet forums, was frequently employed on the site. Quoting allowed a poster to include a direct quote or excerpt from the thread into their reply. A seemingly basic feature, quoting and threading discussions was a critical technical attribute for users because it allowed them to read a thread as a discussion rather than a series of responses to one single original post. Posters could see who was posting to whom, allowing them to talk to each other, rather than only to the original poster.

5.3 Moderating and maintaining

The conversational structure was also constructed through the site's approach to administration and moderation. During my fieldwork, there were between 10-20 listed volunteer moderators (moderators started defecting by late 2008) and between two and four active administrators. Administrators included the two owners of the site and two volunteers. Administration was conducted on a volunteer basis by registered users who had been active on the site. Both of the volunteer administrators had been moderators of their neighborhood boards. One administrator explained that she “wanted to help out” and spent most of her time deleting spam. Administrators could edit, delete, merge, close, or move any thread in any sub-forum on the site. They could warn users if they were in

violation of the site's Terms of Service. They could also ban users—blocking the user's IP address and username and thus disallowing the user from logging into the site.

With less power than administrators were the moderators, also registered users who volunteered to moderate. The moderators had all been active on Phillyblog for several years and had either been asked by administrators to moderate or had volunteered to do so. The neighborhood forum moderators I interviewed were all active in neighborhood-based organizations (civic associations, zoning committees, parent organizations). Moderators in the topical forums said they moderated because they were interested in the topic and wanted to help the site. The role of the moderators was focused on maintaining the site—deleting spam within their sub-forum and enforcing the site's Terms of Service. Terry explained his role as a moderator was to:

Mainly police the discussions on the board and make sure nobody is violating the rules of decorum. To keep a look out for spam and illegal commercial advertisements. To warn people if they are stepping over the bounds (Terry, interview).

Like administrators, moderators could edit, delete, merge, close, or move any thread within their own sub-forum. They could warn users if they were violating the Terms of Service. They could also recommend disciplinary action against any registered user. Unlike administrators, however, moderators only had powers in their own forum: "I can clean the sidewalk on my block, but I can't go into the center city forum and clean up the spam" (Julia, interview). Moderators could not ban users.

In terms of monitoring discussions, moderators would warn users, private messaging the offender asking them to "tone it down or edit their posts" (Belle, interview). Moderators would also edit and delete posts and on the rare occasion they would close threads, thus disallowing any additional posting. Moderators tried to

maintain conversational cohesiveness, with one explaining: “We try to err to the side of leaving every post, unless it is complete spam. The problem is that once it gets posted, people respond to it. So if you delete something that has been posted, you have to delete the responses. And then people have read it and ask where it went and people get confused” (Catherine, interview).

Despite attempts for cohesion, moderators did not necessarily see their role as directing conversations in any particular way; instead, many took Catherine’s approach in trying to let “conversations go organically. . . a conversation may not go where you thought it would, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t worthwhile” (Catherine, interview). Ben described the fluidity of conversations in a similar fashion:

Somebody can be responding to a topic and then throw in a line and then people start responding to that throw away line and the direction of the conversation changes, you can start off talking about the mayoral election and then end up talking about restaurants opening up near Temple’s campus or something. It’s very organic and it develops in a very organic way (Ben, interview).

The main, and ultimate, disciplinary action on the site was user banning. Banning meant the user’s IP address and username were blocked from logging into the forums. According to site administrators, banning regular users was rare—approximately 4 to 6 bannings per year. (It was common to ban IP addresses of spammers.) Users got banned if they repeatedly violated the site’s Terms of Service. But banning was controversial, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. A moderator, Tom, explained: “a judicial system that has only the death penalty is hesitant to take action in little cases and tends to dole out far too fierce a penalty when it does decide to act” (Tom, interview). Users also moderated the site. Informally, Phillybloggers might redirect conversations—joking to lighten the mood, ignoring posters, suggesting people take their issues offline via private

messaging, explaining the rules, or rebuking. Participants could also report posts to moderators and administrators, providing “a second eye” to moderation.

Moderating changed over time, varied by sub-forum, and was a continuous source of debate. Early in the history of the site, when there was less content, moderators and administrators put more effort in removing or moving posts to keep the discussion “on topic.” Administrators reported removing posts that were not focused on Philadelphia or splitting posts into topical areas. The result was time consuming and confusing to participants. There was a certain amount of backlash on the site to such efforts and posters expressed discomfort with attempts to keep people “on topic.” In early 2005, an administrator proposed that off-topic posts, defined as any post that “deviates from the topic at hand,” would be moved to the Lounge or deleted. There was a strong negative reaction by posters who thought that it was both an unnatural as well as unnecessary approach to moderation, one poster explained:

It's a losing battle trying to keep people's thoughts tightly focused on a given topic. And it's also not very natural - that's the way the human mind functions, one idea spins off a whole series of associations, some of them not directly related but of interest. . . . I admit that my interest in this board rests almost entirely with the Philadelphia-related stuff, and so I rarely post on "national" or "world" issues, but again, it's all organically related. American foreign policy can have a direct impact on Philly, especially if (God forbid) it leads to an act of terrorism here. So all things connect (PB thread 2270, #8).

During my fieldwork it was common for moderators to talk about their moderating approach as having a “light touch” or being as “hands off as possible.”

6. Death and Resettlement

Phillyblog remained active and highly trafficked throughout its lifespan. Despite its popularity, Phillyblog was troubled. The owners stated they had different visions for

the site. Phillyblog's Executive Director and main technical administrator was interested in putting more into the technical infrastructure and explained that he wanted to "experiment with more ways to connect people than just a forum." He partnered with another Phillyblog administrator to start Philadelphia Speaks and posted to the site that he had been spending "too much time with not enough support" on Phillyblog (PS thread 1482, #1). There were rumors swirling about a legal battle brewing between the owners—but neither owner would comment on the details either online or in interviews. Users were complaining about spam, slow server speeds, and inaccessibility. Moderators were defecting, explaining that the remaining owner was not responding to private messages, emails, or Facebook messages. On July 8, 2009 the site went black.

There was no statement made in advance or posthumously that the site was to close. There was no warning of its impending end; nor was there a public explanation of why it died. The two volunteer administrators didn't even know the reason for its ultimate closure, joking that they were like "crypt keepers there" but "really didn't know what was going on" (administrator, interview and PS thread 2453). One of the volunteer administrators said the site was being attacked by spam-bots, was not being properly archived, and had lost most of its technical expertise so that its technical problems were not being properly addressed (administrator, interview).

The ultimate reason for its death is the subject of debate and speculation, but most likely was based in a combination of technical instability, owner conflict, neglect, and the emergence of alternative locations of discourse. According to users and the administrator I interviewed, the issue with Phillyblog was not financial. Reports from site participants

were that Phillyblog was sustaining itself through advertising revenue.²⁹ The closure was reported on in a local technology blog, but with little details because the owner told reporters that he “could not speak on just what precipitated its shuttering” (Wink, 2009). The *City Paper* simply reported that Phillyblog had an “odd blackout” (Lazor, 2009), and one of the local gossip blogs reported with a level of snark that Phillyblog had left neighbors “complaining and alone” (“Phillyblog is down,” 2009).

For some users, the death of Phillyblog seemed unexpected. In its waning days, users expressed confusion and made pleas to save the site. On June 28, 2009, ten days prior to its final outage, a user posted: “We depend on PB rather heavily in this ‘hood and use it effectively - anyone know what’s happening and if there is something we can do to stabilize the site?” (PB thread 106042, #1). Users lamented the loss of the “great volume of information” (PS thread 2682, #7) and asked if the threads could be transferred to a new site (PB thread 106042, #6). One month after its closure, when it became clear that the site was not coming back, one user posted to Philadelphia Speaks all the different ways Phillyblog threads could still be viewed through Google cache or the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine.

In reality, however, the decline of Phillyblog was slow. By early 2009, the site was becoming technically unstable. There were stretches of time when it was either inaccessible or so slow as to be unusable. Not properly archived, patched, or updated, Phillyblog was experiencing server overloads and daily spam attacks. Like its life, its death was the subject of mockery. On one of Phillyblog’s successor sites, Philadelphia Speaks, one user posted:

²⁹ I could not confirm the amount of revenue produced by the site with the owners. There were second and third hand accounts that the site was at least self-sustaining and some thought profitable.

We should have some sort of public ceremony with speeches, food, bands, dancing, effigy burning, poetry readings, a 5k run, a silent auction, and a memorial. We can all line up to a podium and take turns reading off what each of us would want our last PB post to say. Then we can all fold the papers up into boats, light them on fire, and let them float down the river (PS thread 2842, #6).

In the last few days of Phillyblog's life, moderators started encouraging participants to move to PhiladelphiaSpeaks.com. On Phillyblog's Facebook group page contributors directed other participants to start posting on Philadelphia Speaks. Casually looking at Philadelphia Speaks it would be hard to have known how it was different from Phillyblog. The site architecture was nearly a mirror image of the forums on Phillyblog. There were the same geographical neighborhood boards. There were nearly the same topical boards (though Philadelphia Speaks hosts more). Moreover, many of the same users on Phillyblog also posted to Philadelphia Speaks, using the same usernames.

7. Conclusion

There was little preordained about Phillyblog's development or its death. Never a totally agreed-upon artifact, Phillyblog was interpreted and used differently by its participants. The site also tests an assumption about digital communication: that its persistence creates an internet that never forgets. Certainly online content leave digital traces that are archived and searchable. In the case of Phillyblog, however, there is surprisingly little left. For the most expert or motivated, parts of the site are findable. Sections from 2006, 2007, and 2008 are archived on the Internet Archive's Wayback machine; though, deeper levels of the content were never indexed. There were attempts to move neighborhood resource threads from Phillyblog to the alternate site Philadelphia Speaks, but that movement was limited. For a lay person limited in motivation, Phillyblog is effectively gone.

But perhaps ironically the death of Phillyblog—the very apex of its instability—best highlights its coherence. The habits and modes of interaction on Phillyblog outlived the site and moved elsewhere. As Phillyblog was waning, groups of users travelled together to alternate locations of discourse that maintained a similar technical architecture, conversations and patterns of behavior. Many of the familiar discussions, recurring debates, and persistent personalities have re-emerged on Philadelphia Speaks. This suggests two preliminary conclusions that can be drawn from the case of Phillyblog. First, that while internet sites may wax and wane in popularity, participation, and the publicity that follows, their longer term implications may be at a level of setting expectations for modes of interaction. There is reason to think that the social practices that develop around a particular use of the web may transcend a specific site or application—may even come to change expectations and outlooks beyond the realm of digital communication.

The second conclusion is that the social trends and tensions that emerge from change in a city like Philadelphia, and the public discourse that develops around those trends and tensions, exist in conjunction with and are felt more permanently than the involvement in any particular website. This is a powerful illustration of the value that can be had from viewing sites like Phillyblog as intercepts. During its rather short life, and even after its functional demise, Phillyblog made visible the convergence of trends and forces at work within the city—migration, neighborhood gentrification, crime, and political reform. The public talk which manifested through the site allowed for different articulations of what was at issue within a changing city. And in exchange with their

fellow city residents, there were attempts made to form a sense of what those changes might mean.

Next, I turn to ways in which Phillyblog participants called attention to and sustained awareness in the city and its problems. These practices of attention were more than simply “paying attention” to what was going on. In the next chapter, I focus on a wider notion of attention. I use the verb form, “to attend,” which implies a sustained commitment, presence in, and disposition to support caretaking. Attending connotes two things: attention, listening or awareness as well as care for public life. It includes pointing or alerting people where or at what to look—calling attention to problems or resources; amplifying civic and political information; or highlighting and personalizing local news. At other times, attending serves a way to form sense of problems: sustaining interest; working through urban issues; or creating opportunities for alternative conceptualizations of problems.

CHAPTER 4: Attending in Networked Public Talk—Calling and Sustaining Attention

I mean, I'm sure businesses have opened up in places where the people didn't know it was going to open up and it causes them pain and grief. The debate about Sidecar brought people out. . . . And I wouldn't have known about it unless there was that discussion [on Phillyblog]. I mean, I go to Sidecar about once a week. But they're not advertising: "we're having issues." So Phillyblog is how I found out about it and that's how I am participating and helping to do my part and voice my opinion of what I agree with and what I disagree with and so forth.

- Jared, interview

1. "They're not advertising: 'We're having issues'"

Jared is a resident in Philadelphia's Southwest Center City neighborhood, now considered one of the city's more desirable places to live. On the neighborhood's western edge is University City and the site of the city's largest private employer, the University of Pennsylvania; a few blocks north sits one of Philadelphia's toniest areas, Rittenhouse Square; and within one mile is the city's downtown commercial district. Southwest Center City is perhaps best known as a neighborhood that transformed blight into desirability. Through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the neighborhood suffered from the departure of affluent African American professionals as well as redlining by private lenders and the federal Home Owners Loan Corporation. Crime and high vacancy rates further depressed property values. Then things began to turn around: by 2010, the median home price was \$282,000, a staggering 526% increase from 1998 (Kerkstra, 2010). A

more telling indication of the neighborhood's "renaissance" or rapid gentrification has been the reduction in its abandoned buildings and vacant lots, falling from 554 in the late 1990s to 80 in 2010 (Kromer & Kingsley, 2010). Travelling through the neighborhood, the pedestrian is hard pressed to avoid sidewalks blocked by contractor scaffolding, refurbished row homes with street-level garages, or new, hip restaurants, bars and retail shops.

The Sidecar Bar and Grille is a poster child for this redevelopment. Renovated in 2005, Sidecar was transformed from what some neighbors described as a "dive" or "nuisance" bar to one of the neighborhood's favorite gastro-pubs. In 2009, Sidecar petitioned the city for a permit to allow outdoor sidewalk seating. News of Sidecar's proposed expansion began appearing in Phillyblog's Southwest Center City sub-forum, with posters providing first-hand reports of the expansion news as well as links to neighborhood information on zoning and civic association agendas. The expansion was not an issue of city-wide notice and received minimal attention in the city's mainstream media. But it was hotly debated in the neighborhood. The issue was also highlighted, argued, and explicated in the discussions on Phillyblog. Some neighbors were concerned about noise, sidewalk blockage, wheelchair access, and generalized concerns of gentrification. Neighbors supporting the permit expressed the desirability in terms of neighborhood development, economic growth, and positive quality of life.

The Sidecar owners did not post to the site but neighbors active on Phillyblog who knew them provided information about the expansion and served as conduits back to the owners, passing along "any thoughts anyone wanted to offer" and urging "let's discuss!"(PB thread 83236). As people began talking about the Sidecar controversy,

residents in favor of the expansion started getting organized. Neighbors used the forum to mobilize support—from a letter writing effort to urging people to come out for city meetings. Residents against argued such a development would be detrimental to the neighborhood because of increased noise and nuisance. As the expansion was further described, posters indicated the issue was “bigger than The Sidecar Bar & Grille” (PB thread 86656): it was an issue of local employment, potential development, and fundamentally, what the future of the neighborhood would or could be. As one poster wrote:

While peripherally this may seem like not much of a big deal, when we take a deeper look at the holistic issues impacting the South of South neighborhood, we see that the fight between old neighbors and new touches the core of class, racial, and socio-economic challenge that have plagued this neighborhood since community redevelopment in Southwest Center City began (PB thread 87670, #1).

Sidecar’s expansion was only one of many development issues occurring in the neighborhood. For the most motivated and involved—those who followed the civic association’s zoning meetings or development news—the Sidecar controversy was well known. However, for those less intimate with the day-to-day details of neighborhood zoning, Phillyblog provided an important location to raise, become aware of, and sort through the issue. Or as Jared, a Philadelphia native I quoted at the beginning of the chapter explained, he saw the role of online discussion and, in particular, the Sidecar debate as a way to call attention to issues and problems in the neighborhood that may not have been otherwise clear. As Jared notes, it wasn’t that Sidecar was advertising “we’re having issues.”

Essentially, the discussions on Phillyblog, intersecting with similar discussions occurring in the neighborhood civic association, city zoning meetings, and the planning

council helped to call attention to the controversy. But more than alerting that there was an issue, in the case of Sidecar, such talk resulted in forms of organizing and action in the institutionalized governmental bodies in the city (zoning boards, civic associations, city councils). The talk also served as a way to highlight that there was far more at stake than some sidewalk tables. The discussions helped bring attention to something that was at issue, giving shape to what it was, and articulating who and how others also understood the problem.

This is, by some measures, a classic Deweyan instance of public emergence in the particular sense that publics emerge through a process of identification and definition that there is something at issue. Moreover, democratic publics emerge when others recognize their shared problems. In the case of Sidecar, the specific issue was triggered by a complex set of problems in the neighborhood: new development, gentrification, questions about the appropriate use of public space, colliding visions of the neighborhood's character. Such problems were being highlighted and addressed by a range of institutions that each defined them differently: as a zoning problem, as a safety problem, as a regulation problem. What the Sidecar debate exemplifies is how the gathering of concerns, the expression of alternative perspectives, and the commanding of attention on a particular issue can help to articulate that something is problematic and the things that make it so.

As I argued in my introductory chapter, part of what is public (and political) about networked public talk is that through talk people demonstrate and call attention to something that they see as being worth discussion, notice, and possibly action. Part of the work of networked public talk is to attempt to bring into focus and also make sense of

shared public concerns. I characterize this as partly an attention practice. But more than paying attention to what is going on, the verb form of attention—to attend—implies something more. It is also about a sustained commitment, presence in, and disposition to support or put effort into caring. Instead of focusing only on paying attention, I use the term “attending” to connote two aspects: attention, listening or awareness as well as care for public life. As such, I see attending resting between two of the primary lenses used to understand the relationship between information, news, and public participation. On the one hand, deliberative democrats theorize a proactive public and set high standards for public participation and corresponding requirements for quality information about public issues. Democratic realists, on the other hand, envision the public as more reactive, participating in response to news and information on the most acute collective problems.

Attending is simultaneously *proactive* and *reactive*. It includes pointing or alerting people where or at what to look—calling attention to problems or resources; amplifying civic and political information; or highlighting and personalizing local news. At other times, attending serves a way to form sense of public concerns: sustaining interest; sorting through urban issues; or creating opportunities for alternative conceptualizations of problems.

In this chapter, I first lay out some theoretical ground. Referring back to the deliberative and realist theorists discussed in the first chapter, I outline the ways in which I see networked public talk existing in a liminal space that is more discursively interactive, citizen-initiated, publicly-oriented, and intentional than many analyses of online political discussion have allowed. Yet it is also more discordant, tenuous, and

unwieldy than visions of highly-structured public talk would like. The chapter then moves to a description of two aspects of attending: attention and sustained interest in public life. First, is *calling attention* to something of possible public concern by recording first-hand, personal experiences or by posting and annotating news coverage or information published in other venues. The second form that attending took was that of *sustaining attention*, giving further articulation to issues and creating a public through the engagement in the back and forth of ongoing talk. This included creating openings for other conceptualizations of an issue or opportunities for others to participate through the use of humor, sarcasm, and satire. These two activities correspond to two critical aspects of public construction: first, the emergence and possible recognition of public issues and therefore an awareness that others are jointly implicated in those issues; and, second, the means through which discussion of public issues can be developed and enlarged.

2. Between Deliberative and Realist Democracy

For advocates of strong democracy, attending may seem a tepid form of democratic activity. Participatory democrats, particularly those influenced by deliberation, see a healthy democratic life enacted via citizen-to-citizen discussion that “involves judicious argument, critical listening, and earnest decision making” (Gastil, 2000). For them, attending will seem weak and insufficient. From an alternative perspective, democratic realists have long questioned the feasibility, desirability, or historical accuracy of the vision of (ideal) citizens engaging in such a heavily participatory public life. The public needs information about the most acute problems rather than general and ongoing news about issues that pose no immediate threat (Zaller, 2003); the role of the citizen is reactive rather than proactive—a monitor of civic life that

scans their environment and keeps “an eye on the scene,” ready for action if action is necessary (Schudson, 1998); and, at its most basic level, citizens may not *want* to be actively involved in political life, at least not providing input to those who make political decisions (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). For the realists, attending may set too high a bar—more information intensive and interactive than most of the day-to-day practices of citizens.

The notion of attending exists in a liminal space between deliberative and realist visions of democracy. Simultaneously proactive and reactive, attending is more discursively interactive, citizen-initiated, and intentional than realist constructions of democracy have envisioned. At the same time, attending is more inchoate and unwieldy than deliberative democrats have theorized. Importantly, the idea behind attending is to take into account the emergent nature of public concerns. It does not assume that public issues are already defined and universally agreed upon prior to discussion. Rather, how problems are described, who defines them as problems, and how they are categorized, all become critical features of political life (Mathews, 1999). With surprising consistency, however, in empirical research and practical efforts in deliberation, the substance of public life—the collective concerns upon which the public is asked to deliberate—is often presented at an already formed stage. People gather together to discuss the health insurance crisis or gun control and are provided with or pointed to information about the problems, their potential effects, and possible alternatives.

This is an understandable starting point for designed experiments in public deliberation which usually have explicit end goals and rules of discussion. Moreover, though consensus is not a necessary endpoint of deliberation, deliberative discourse tends

to be outcome-driven with binding decisions as a goal (even if such an ideal can't always be practically met). Consistent with these deliberative roots, such efforts have prioritized the centrality of rule-governed, rational, and informed public discourse. Due to the strict normative requirements of deliberative theories, such efforts overwhelmingly occur in organized, formal settings and deploy rules and techniques to encourage deliberative discourse. Rather than spending public effort in defining the primary issue, many deliberative efforts start with a problem, focus on processes and techniques for deliberation, and have an end goal for the discourse (decision, policy influence, education).

For many deliberative efforts, then, the focus is on how we might address issues in general, rather than a focus on any particular issue (Jacobs, et al., 2009). Advocates and practitioners, for example, have organized a range of experiments to provoke people to deliberate together. Nonprofit organizations such as the National Issues Forums, Everyday Democracy, and America Speaks all use formalized background materials or “issue books” developed for pre-named, often federal, issues and employ moderators trained explicitly to facilitate forums (Gastil & Levine, 2005; Ryfe, 2002). “Deliberative polling” experiments have attempted to solicit public opinion by designing ideal conditions—using technical experts to provide high quality information to deliberative participants (Fishkin et al., 2000).

Likewise, online deliberative experiments have concentrated on institutionally-sponsored, consciously-designed, time-constricted, issue-specific, and rule-bound discourse. Often online deliberative experiments embed rules of discussion in the code or the information architecture of the site, such as the use of moderated forums,

requirements for registration, rules of order, and hyperlinks to information resources. In the academic-led project, Unchat, there was a collaboration of deliberative theorists and software engineers who attempted to implement ideal procedures for small-group deliberation including accessibility, accountability, equality, and moderation. Using a web-based platform, participants could choose different styles of public discussion, including “speaking,” “shouting” or “whispering” their messages (Noveck, 2004). In another case, the nonprofit Web Lab partnered with civic groups to solicit public input on the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site post-9/11. In Web Lab dialogues, participants are required to register by providing contact information, screen names, and a descriptive biography. While participants can use any name they choose, Web Lab requires the biography as a way to “reduce anonymity” and “raise the level of accountability.” Web Lab discussions are also observed by a monitor to alert to “problems developing in groups.” Ultimately, they argue their approach avoids:

The pitfalls and weaknesses of typical computer bulletin-boards: the “drive-by” postings encouraged by the Internet’s easy anonymity and fluid boundaries; the assertion of polarized positions where the give-and-take of civil discourse would have more social value; and the pandering to appetites for quick sensation rather than the creation of a real forum (Adams & Goldbard, 2000).

Online deliberative experiments are also similar to their offline counterparts in the way in which they foreground the need for high-quality, vetted information resources. The organization Information Renaissance sponsors online forums that convene, “members of the public to learn about a complex issue and discuss it with subject experts, public advocates, and policy makers.” Information Renaissance uses extensive information gathering techniques to prepare for the forums including the development of a “briefing book of thought-provoking online background material” and participants are urged to

become familiar with the material prior to discussion ("Information Renaissance Model for Online Dialogues,").

Critics of such heavily participatory democratic life have long questioned the informational and normative obligations as well as desire of citizens to engage in such forms of focused discourse. This was key, for instance, in Walter Lippmann's critique of the "omnicompetent" citizen and John Dewey's subsequent responses. In Lippmann's account most day-to-day public decisions should be left to experts. For the public affairs in which a private citizen did not have a direct interest, the citizen's role was to be limited to issues of leadership selection, mediation, and procedure. Lippmann wrote:

The broad principles on which the action of public opinion can be continuous are essentially principles of procedure. The outsider can ask experts to tell him whether the relevant facts were duly considered; he cannot in most cases decide for himself what is relevant or what is due consideration. . . . He can watch the procedure when the news indicates that there is something to watch (1922, p. 251).

Contemporary democratic "realists" have likewise been wary of deliberation's assumptions of selflessness, reserve, caution, and rationality (Sanders, 1997). For them, deliberative democracy's conception of the good citizen is both unobtainable and for many, unattractive. In other words, a deliberative democracy, "is quite simply not a place that most people would want to live" (Gardner, 1996).

Rather than envisioning an ideal of the "good citizen," Michael Schudson (1998) suggests that public life, and citizens' role within it, has always been more constrained in practice than ideal forms of democratic rule imply: the early New England town meetings were not democratic Eden, but rather exclusive, poorly attended and conflict averse. Like Lippmann's omnicompetent citizen, Schudson's argument targets the ideal of the "informed citizen" who has in-depth knowledge of a range of public problems. While the

ideal holds a cherished place in our image of public life, Schudson believes it requires modification. His recommendation is for a more realistic notion of the “monitorial citizen.” The monitorial citizen is a scanner. Instead of attempting to follow all political events and issues, such a citizen engages in “environmental surveillance more than information-gathering” (1998, p. 311). Monitorial citizens sit in a defensive position. Schudson analogizes the monitorial citizen with a parent watching a child at the public pool:

They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else (1998, p. 311).

Extending the idea of the monitorial citizen to the news media, John Zaller (2003) argues the informational standards for both professional media and citizens are impossible to meet and that such high levels of participation may be unnecessary. Civic duties, he contends, need only require that citizens hold politicians accountable. As such, he proposes a “burglar alarm” standard for news and situates the burglar alarm against a similar attention function: the “police patrol.” News should highlight acute problems (burglar alarm) rather than a constant monitoring of the vast range of issues that do not necessarily pose an imminent problem (police patrol). Only in times when something has gone awry (e.g. in Schudson’s terms it is when the child at the pool gets hurt) is full attention, participation or information gathering required. Zaller is particularly interested in the role of professional journalism and organized citizens in sounding the alarm: “it is the job of reporters—in cooperation with political and interest groups—to decide what requires attention and bring it to the public” (2003, p. 121).

Despite their differences, democratic realists and deliberative democrats share a critical assumption: the one-directionality of public attention. In Zaller's construct, for example, it is the role of experts or organized political actors to determine what is worthy of attention and then bring it to a waiting public. For deliberative practitioners, the focus is so intently on outcomes (decision, action, information) and legitimate processes that what is at issue is likewise assumed to be apparent by all parties. But there is more bi-directionality to public attention—something that deliberative and realist theorists may recognize in the abstract but seem to ignore in practice. What is lacking in both constructs are the critical ways in which political life is enacted through the emergence and recognition that something is even *at issue*. As explicated in the introduction chapter, John Dewey (1927) made this argument nearly a century ago, contending that what triggers publics to emerge is the recognition of their shared problems. In a similar vein, Herbert Blumer (1971) wrote that social problems are the product of a “process of collective definition,” meaning that they only take on the status of problem because people have defined them as such. Blumer advocates a better understanding of “the process by which a society comes to recognize its problems” (p. 300). As practiced in a venue like Phillyblog, calling attention is precisely about this process.

3. Calling Attention

Calling attention is a way to initiate focus on a possible public concern. It is composed of activities that point users where to look, what to look at, or even why to look there. In the case of Phillyblog calling attention was commonly accomplished through two primary means: (a) first-hand reporting of neighborhood news or personal observations; and (b) posting and annotating news coverage or information published in

other venues. Due to the networked nature of the site, postings which called attention to particular issues were aggregated and organized over time. They were also often recurring discussions that, when accumulated, provided a visible articulation of persistent neighborhood problems and resources.

3.1 Calling attention: First-hand observation and reporting

Phillyblog contributors often initiated new threads based on personal observation or first-hand reporting of neighborhood news. It was common for these posts to revolve around nuisance, disturbance or crime. On a thread concerning gunfire in the Southwest Center City neighborhood, a poster originated a thread typical on the site: “There were about six shots fired at 22nd & Fitzwater at ~6:30. A guy was shot in the leg” (PB thread 16963, #1). Over the course of six days, 134 replies were authored in response. Initially, the neighborhood posters proposed that the incident was inevitable because of increasing drug activity on the corner: “This was bound to happen as many people have posted over the past few months that suspicious characters seemed to be congregating at 22nd and Fitzwater” (PB thread 16963, #5).

The trajectory of the thread changed by the seventh response, however, when a neighborhood poster solicited thoughts from others about what could be done:

Anyone have any ideas as to what we might do to curb the loitering and associated problems on the stretch of 22nd between Fitzwater and Catharine? (PB thread 16963, #7).

In the successive posts, the discussion moved to what neighbors would do collectively:

One participant researched and posted a list of the abandoned buildings in the area; another disseminated phone numbers for the public housing authority and community

police; still another organized a letter writing campaign providing sample text for others to follow; and letter writers posted responses received from city council members.

Importantly, in the networked environment of Phillyblog, threads devoted to the reporting of neighborhood crime aggregated. People posted to the site in an immediate and regular manner. These snapshots of first-hand reports and observation accumulated over time. In fact, crime and safety reporting became so common that several of the neighborhood forums established crime “sticky” threads (threads which would always show up on the landing page of the forum), thus organizing these reports into a constantly updated list of safety issues in the area. These sticky threads were part police monitor and part town watch—a location where crime events were recorded, read, and oftentimes reported to city officials and community police.

In the case of the shots fired at the corner of 22nd and Fitzwater, the process of reporting on the incident initiated something more than a discrete report of a neighborhood event. Certainly, threads like this could help residents identify the blocks or intersections to avoid. But from a less instrumental perspective crime reports served as an invitation for Phillyblog participants to assemble micro-histories of a street, street corner, or building from the fragmentary evidence of individual experiences. People who may have previously felt that a problem was particular to them or their street corner could see that others were also concerned. Thus, Phillyblog discussions made visible others who were similarly implicated in, concerned about, or at least frustrated by events in the larger neighborhood.

As described in the previous chapter, Philadelphians rank crime as the primary concern they have about living in the city—more than taxes, political corruption, failing

schools, or unemployment. Crime, broadly conceived, is something Philadelphians register as a problem. Calling attention to a specific location and the ways in which people were concerned about crime in that location played an important role for residents. Some might argue such specificity breeds parochialism, an over localization at the expense of the political act of connecting your local issues with wider patterns of poverty, opportunity, housing, or racial tensions. While that might be an important kind of public talking, calling attention to specific concerns and what make them concerning is also critical for public construction. In this case, neighbors learned that others were aware, implicated in, and were sometimes willing to participate in thinking about what to do about crime at 22nd and Fitzwater. The public display of crime reporting was, according to some a “mixed bag,” because some said that the neighborhood could come across as being “scary.” But Jared explained that calling attention to crime and nuisance was a way to inform those in the neighborhood, explaining:

You’re going to have people; you’re going to have crime. So people are going to go to the forums and, at least if it was me and I’m looking to buy in the area and I see, ‘Oh, there’s a forum and they talk about their neighborhood and their crimes.’ Well, I think, ‘maybe they’re a little bit more watchful of the area and people sitting on porches are reporting things.’ It tells me people are concerned and people care. Not that there’s crime. I knew there was crime. I didn’t need a forum to tell me there was crime (Jared, interview).

This is a kind of public emergence—the awareness that something is at issue, how it is at issue, and that others recognize it as a shared problem in which they are collectively implicated. Dewey suggests that something becomes a public’s issue when existing institutions are unable to deal with the problem. In the case of neighborhood discussions on Phillyblog, the emergence of concerns as a public issue was less the result of existing institutions being unable to deal with problems. Rather, Phillyblog posters often indicated

that existing institutions—the police, the Streets Department, the Office of Licensing and Inspections—were overwhelmed, unresponsive, or only able to deal with extreme crisis.

The problem at 22nd and Fitzwater is perhaps a more obvious example of the emergence, recognition and action taken when an issue is seen as a problem and requires a collective to address it. In this case, an acting public started to emerge based on the recognition of a specific collective concern: (micro) decisions were made, neighbors were mobilized, tradeoffs were weighed, who was responsible was debated. Far more common on the site, however, were subtle examples of calling attention.

Thread initiation also often took the form of a question prompted by an observation or change in the neighborhood. A Phillyblog participant in the Fairmount neighborhood of the city started a thread on January 21, 2007 entitled: “What’s going on across the street from Corinthian Ave?” The post continued:

I was wondering what they are doing to the property on Fairmount Ave between 20th and 21st, across the street from Corinthian Ave. There is scaffolding in front of the building and looks like construction work has been going on. I've only been in this area for about 3 months now but doesn't look like much has improved. Looks to me like those buildings are close to collapse!!! Anyone know what's going on? (PB thread 30259, #1)

This particular property was a persistent eyesore and source of previous neighborhood discussions on Phillyblog, earning it the label of “Leaning Tower of Fairmount.” Other posters responded to the question with their own observations, hearsay, references back to previous Phillyblog discussions, and questions. In the first response to the original post, the poster wrote what he knew and also had questions about the problematic scaffolding, wondering if the neighborhood civic association would get involved:

Good Question...this was discussed before, I think the consensus was that nothing was happening to the leaning rowhouse but I have noticed that the two structures to the West of the rusted, collapsing scaffolding now have no roof. They removed that a couple days ago and looks like

they are putting a new one on now. Also someone tagged the roll-down doors about 2 weeks ago and it was painted over the next day, so somebody's giving some love to those buildings. As for the scaffolding, why can't something be done about that? Is that something FCA [Fairmount Civic Association] can do anything with (Is it still in Fairmount or is that the first property in Francisville?)? Its an eyesore and walking into the street when using Fairmount Ave is potentially dangerous (PB thread 30259, #2).

The thread ended with advice from a third poster, a regular Phillyblog participant and community activist:

The building with the scaffolding does indeed look dangerously close to collapse. I think the thing to do is call L&I [Licensing & Inspection] and ask that they come out and take a look. Anybody can do that - it doesn't have to be the FCA (PB thread 30259, #3).

The conversation was typical of threads on Phillyblog. It was brief—unfolding over the course of 12 hours and made up of the original post and a few responses. The thread had about 500 views (people who had read but did not write to the thread), indicating a much wider audience of readers than writers. The observations were about a micro-local issue, concerns about an identifiable building on a specific block within the city. Again, like crime, development and building inspection were broadly recognizable as concerns in the city. However, the leaning tower itself was not an issue focused on by the professional, or for that matter, amateur media.

The thread was also typical in that it called attention to a recurring problem at that location. What was happening and what to do with the “leaning tower” was pointed to again four months later, in April 2007, when the neighborhood Community Development Corporation solicited feedback from Phillyblog participants about how to “beautify” the Fairmount business corridor (on which the leaning tower was located). The discussion of the building and its problems moved from Phillyblog to Philadelphia Speaks when the Fairmount Civic Association’s November 2009 agenda was posted, announcing the

association would be addressing “repairs and improvements to distressed properties” which elicited a Philadelphia Speaks (and previous Phillyblog) participant to respond: “You mean like the Leaning Tower of Fairmount? When is someone with some power going to call that guy on the carpet about his disaster of a building in such a visible retail/commercial area of the neighborhood?” (PS thread 7215, #3).

The problem of the leaning tower was not solved over the course of discussions in Phillyblog (or later Philadelphia Speaks) in the specific sense that the building was not renovated or torn down. But beyond alerting to a pressing problem, participants were active. It was a different kind of activity than the neighbors who talked about and mobilized around crime at 22nd and Fitzwater, but it was active nonetheless. Some found and shared the phone number for the Licensing & Inspection department. There were calls for and attempts to publicly put pressure on neighborhood institutional actors like the civic association—urging them to do something. And critically, the public talk regarding the leaning tower served to call attention to locations and happenings in the neighborhood where something was even at issue.

The discussion of the leaning tower or the corner at 22nd and Fitzwater served as a visible articulation of granular, sometimes unnoticed, neighborhood issues. Donath and boyd (2004) have argued that participants in online social networking sites, such as Facebook, create self-descriptive profiles that include links to other members, thereby creating a visible network of their personal connections. They label this visible articulation: “public displays of connection.” Networked public talk is a similar kind of visible articulation. It is not a display of personal connections, but a public display of the webs of concerns—the problems and observations—that can articulate everyday

neighborhood issues. Ultimately, in the public talk regarding the leaning tower, like that about the corner on Fitzwater, participants found out that other neighbors were also concerned and took some forms of action. This is the way in which attending is both about paying attention, being interested in, and also caretaking. And via a series of micro-actions regarding the leaning tower, there are traces of a public being constructed through an attention to and taking care in the neighborhood. The identification of a possible issue and the discussion around that is at an early stage of public emergence. And when people start to engage around a problem, that is the beginning of public construction.

3.2 Calling attention: Posting and annotating information from other venues

A complement to observation and first-hand reporting was the activity of linking to or excerpting news and information from the commercial news media or other recognized civic institutions, including city government, neighborhood councils, and zoning boards. In so doing, contributors called attention and introduced that news and information into a space where others might respond to it, annotating it with additional comments or perspectives. Even in instances where information would be widely known by forum participants, including it in Phillyblog gave fellow participants the opportunity to discuss it in a space where they might expect a different kind of response than what was permitted in the news media, or in formal settings such as board or council meetings.

On Phillyblog, information and stories pulled from other Philadelphia media was made pertinent to the local area, and in the process was consolidated into a discussion space focused on a single neighborhood. Because of the caretaking activities of others, neighbors need not look for civic association meeting agendas or police crime reports in several different locations—they could find much of that information posted to the

neighborhood boards of Phillyblog. Describing why she started reading Phillyblog, Lydia explained in an interview:

I didn't have to find information about Old City, unless I was interested in Old City, it seemed like other news sources focused in the city as a whole and this allowed me to know more about like who are the players in Queen Village, what is the neighborhood association up to, that kind of stuff, so it was much more targeted (Lydia, interview).

More than bringing information into Phillyblog as a way to publicize it, people were often trying to introduce it into a space for active reader response, annotating it with additional comments, perspectives, or contextualization. Frequently participants would start threads by linking and excerpting an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, or using other local media news sources to advocate for and bring in additional information on an issue. In a thread entitled, “Budget-busting property tax hike?” a poster provided a hyperlink to a recently created database developed by the *Inquirer* that allowed people to look up a property and get an estimation of what the tax would be when the new assessments were adopted. After testing her property, the original poster wrote:

In my case it's a more than 500% increase. . . .try it on your own property:
http://www.philly.com/inquirer/online_extras/44184787.html (PB thread 84666, #1).

Property taxes were a big story in the city. Following journalistic convention, local newspaper reporters tried to humanize and personalize this policy issue focusing on the individual struggles of “representative Philadelphians.” But what tax reassessment really meant to city residents was a discussion that, for many, was occurring in Phillyblog. Once again, this was in part due to a feeling that the recognized institutions were unresponsive. *Philadelphia Inquirer* stories were “brought over” to Phillyblog in part because the newspaper was not providing a space for people to talk about the issue. Moreover, participants indicated their interest in a more personal response to what the

news meant. An active Phillyblog user who was heavily involved in local city politics explained why he got involved in the “budget-busting property tax hike” thread: “*The Inquirer* puts information out there but they don’t—but it’s not like they’re answering questions for follow up. So here is a way to ask more detail and people with some knowledge can get back and forth and flush out ideas. . . so I think people get a better understanding of why something is taking place” (Kurt, interview).

Personalization and localization of news stories also took the form of calling attention to why or in what ways they were important. George described that what the *Inquirer* provided was information and analysis, but it was a “bit dry—the straight up news,” going on to explain, “you don’t get the emotion you get on a discussion forum.” He explained why emotion and personalization was important to him:

Emotion shows you the impact in the real world. If someone is all up in arms about something, you see that it isn’t just a statistic. The *Inky* may write a story about cutbacks and that the city is closing 70 swimming pools and six fire departments and that this will save \$2 million. That is an unemotional fact in the news story. But for someone where it is affecting their particular neighborhood and the fire station down the street is going to close - you get to localize it. You get the man in the street, “slice of life” kind of information. Sometimes you get that in the news reporting and sometimes you don’t, but it connects you to how things are affecting the actual citizen (George, interview).

Linking to news and then talking about what that news actually meant to people in their daily lives, helped to contextualize how an issue like property taxes or budget cuts were at issue—indicating what was at stake for people.

The fact that the commercial media seemed to take increasing note of the conversation threads on Phillyblog offers some evidence of the site’s role in capturing the way people were discussing and making sense of issues in the city and the still nebulous reactions and responses made to emerging issues and concerns. It was clear that the local

news media scanned and sometimes quoted Phillyblog conversation threads (though attributions were vague). In interviews, Phillyblog posters reported being contacted by local journalists who were researching neighborhood issues. Philadelphia's news media increasingly took note of neighborhood trends and events reported on the site, and professional reporters were drawn to the site as a barometer of local sentiments and a quick means of locating *vox populi* opinion. On occasion, writers would also use the forums to solicit sources. A feature writer who was writing about Philadelphia's attempt to establish a low-cost, city-wide Wi-Fi network asked: "I am interested in hearing from past or present subscribers to Earthlink's Wi-Fi service in Philadelphia. If you are interested in sharing your positive or negative experiences for this story, please contact me" (PB thread 49873, #1). And journalists used backchannel communication (such as contacting moderators or using private messaging) to solicit opinions. During the 2008 presidential race, one of the *Inquirer's* reporters invited four of the more active Phillyblog participants (two Republicans and two Democrats) to discuss the candidates, posting the interview to the *Inquirer's* website.

Phillyblog posters also republished news from civic sources such as neighborhood associations, city agencies, or other nonprofits—amplifying it by placing it into a forum in which it was discussed. In 2008, for example, the Queen Village Neighborhood Association developed a plan to designate the neighborhood as a Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD).³⁰ Not as strict as a historic district designation, the NCD set design and renovation rules so as to "preserve and protect the historic nature of the community." When the final plan was announced after meetings and discussions in the

³⁰ Queen Village is a central city neighborhood in one of the older sections of the city and made up of 18th and 19th century rowhouses.

civic association, a Phillyblog participant excerpted and posted a hyperlink to the report and the neighborhood association website. For those who weren't following the discussion or weren't attending civic association meetings, the rules seemed to be new news. In Phillyblog, posters questioned how this would affect them and their properties: "Some of this can't possibly be legal, can it? Burglar bars may not be sightly, but how can any quasi-government entity tell property owners they can't have them?" (PB thread 53746, #2).

In an interview, Elizabeth explained that when issues came up in the civic association they would also be discussed on Phillyblog, but often with people who were not attending the civic association meetings. While there was support for the NCD in the civic association, there was increasing opposition to the NCD as expressed by residents on Phillyblog. Elizabeth explained that neighbors talked back and forth about the issue online and that she ended up attending a hearing in city hall to testify against the designation. As she understood it, "I may have never put out the effort—going to city hall, going to the council meeting" if it hadn't been the for the proposal discussion on Phillyblog, she went on to explain:

I don't know if I would have done that necessarily if there hadn't been a lot of discussion about it on Phillyblog. Like what do these rules mean and really a group of people picking apart the proposed rules. If I had sat in my house and gotten the little flyer, I would have said, 'oh damn, they are not going to let people change their windows any more.' But, it really kind of developed into a very healthy discussion online in what these rules could actually do and what they meant and how they would really affect people in the neighborhood. It encouraged a lot of people to get involved in that. We lost anyway, but to really do something about it (Elizabeth, interview).

Like the recording of first-hand observations, calling attention through reposting information so as to more clearly highlight its importance (and the ways in which it is of

import) is a way that attending moves beyond paying attention to a transformation of an individual response into a collective activity of working through what such issues, rules, or events actually meant to residents.

4. Sustaining Attention

Phillyblog participants called attention to problems and used the forum as a space to talk about and interact around those issues. As such, the site generated more than a running tally of Philadelphia issues. There was also a set of user norms and ethos of interactivity that helped to sustain and enlarge public talk. In Phillyblog, sustained attention in public talk was fostered by: (a) a demonstrated commitment to interactivity and willingness to “stick with” conversational threads; and (b) creating openings to enlarge that public talk through the use of humor, sarcasm, and satire. Combined, this fostered a sustained attention in talk, thus giving a chance for further articulation or alternative conceptualizations of issues as well as a way to continue to construct and enlarge a public interested in that talk.

4.1 Sustaining attention: Engaging in ongoing exchange

As discussed in Chapter 3, Phillyblog as it was initially conceived was not intended as a forum but a site to aggregate individual blogs. While many Phillyblog participants referred to themselves as “bloggers,” they identified the site as a discussion space rather than a location where one or two author opinions dominated. Frank, for example, described the forum as a “real conversation” where “a group of people sat around a room and tossed around ideas” (Frank, interview). And in the context of wide-ranging digital media habits, when informants compared Phillyblog to other digital media sites they depicted Phillyblog as having a different character—more focused on

interaction among participants. The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* digital component, philly.com, allowed for user commenting. And many of the news sites and blogs that Phillybloggers linked to in their posts also supported commenting features. But Phillyblog was viewed by its participants differently, one described the site as “100% interactive” and another remarked that Phillyblog was more than a location for information; it was a place where he could engage in “participatory discussion.”

Interactivity is one of the favorite buzzwords for internet communication. In terms of political discussion, this has been particularly appealing because of the potential of such discussion to move beyond one-way broadcasting or small group talk to a multi-participant, sustained dialogue (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009; Shane, 2004). Rafaeli, one of the early investigators of interactivity in mass media environments, defined interactivity in computer mediated technologies as: “The extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages” (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Studying threaded messages, Rafaeli and Sudweeks argue that interactivity is not based simply in reacting to the original post in a threaded discussion. Rather, interactivity encompasses relating and interpreting messages to each other and as they develop. The authors argue that “interactivity places shared interpretive contexts in the primary role” and “describes and prescribes the manner in which conversational interaction as an iterative process leads to jointly produced meaning.”

Interactivity and iteration were frequently described by Phillyblog participants as having a “back-and-forth” conversation. A regular reader of Phillyblog and the *Inquirer's* philly.com, Jessica found the comments on philly.com unsatisfying because they often

appeared to her as posters who just wrote “here’s my thing and I am just going to say it, and I don’t care” (Jessica, interview). For many of the users, Phillyblog was not a location in which they “parachuted” in to initiate a thread never to come back again and they were critical of sites in which that kind of practice dominated. Comparing Phillyblog to the newspaper’s online site, *philly.com*, Brian remarked that in many ways they were similar in that there was an original post with comments, “but that is where the similarity ends because on Phillyblog the person who first posted remains involved and responds to people whereas on *philly.com* you don’t usually get the *Inquirer* writers responding to people’s posts” (Brian, interview). To Phillybloggers like Brian, the fact that forum participants had a longer commitment to the issue or discussion was an important part of Phillyblog’s appeal.

This does not mean that all threads got a response. Approximately 14% received no replies and 9% received only one reply.³¹ Still, informants who used the site on a repeat basis reported an interest in following or staying involved in a discussion. After initiating a thread, participants could “subscribe” to that thread—a technical feature that alerted them when someone had posted a response. As a reading practice, Phillyblog participants expressed frustration when other participants didn’t commit to reading the entire conversational trajectory prior to posting. Describing what constituted a “bad” thread, Ben declared that a general template of something that is consistently frustrating to read is if “somebody doesn’t read what they’re responding to. . . or misinterprets what someone else is saying because they didn’t read closely enough or just skimmed the first sentence. That detracts from a productive conversation” (Ben, interview). A frequent

³¹ It is important to note that no response or low response threads were so with good reason. Some posts, such as announcements, events, or classifieds did not require a response. And instrumental questions often only required a single reply to answer.

admonishment was when Phillyblog participants perceived that others weren't reading the entire conversation thread. One poster chided: "As I said in my last post people 'I have a feeling people skim through posts and then respond to them. I think it is best to read the post, form a thought and then respond.' I think YOU ought to read the WHOLE thread" (PB thread 11097, #35).

Interactivity was also evidenced in Phillybloggers writing practices and an intentional awareness by some that they were writing for other readers. In this particular way, Phillyblog participants both wrote *about* the city but also *for* other city residents. Instead of posting long essays focused on their own opinion, participants reported being interested in hearing what other people had to say or seeing what other people were going to do. Other than making an announcement for events or meetings, informants reported a desire to get others to respond to their threads. Samuel noted: "With me, if I am going to ask a question, if I am going to post a thread, I want to at least know if I got any replies, whether there is an interaction. If there is I want to respond in some fashion" (Samuel, interview). Amorphous and unclear exactly who might be reading the forums, for Samuel, he was writing for his fellow posters, describing that when he wrote, he had in mind other Phillybloggers, thinking: "Oh, they would appreciate this. So I write for that." Others imagined a group of readers that extended beyond Phillyblog repeat users. Kurt, who was heavily involved in local city politics, compared his writing on the forums to letters to the editor in which he was not just responding to the person writing the editorial, but he was writing because "you want everyone else who reads the paper to read your comment too" (Kurt, interview).

Finally, there were ways in which Phillyblog participants could choose not to interact. Phillyblog had a built-in function that allowed users to put others on their “ignore list,” in essence blocking content that the user posted. However, in interviews Phillybloggers expressed mixed feelings about whether or not to deploy the function, or at least to keep the feature enabled for any length of time. Informants talked about being “tempted,” but couldn’t “make themselves” use it. In interviews, I asked participants if there were people or posts they ignored. Elizabeth told me:

Elizabeth: See, I would love to be able to put people on ignore, but I don't. But I just don't, I don't.

DW: Why not?

Elizabeth: Because my curiosity always gets the best of me and I un-ignore them anyway so why go through the effort. . . This guy [user] is like the biggest right wing kook. . . but it is like a train wreck, even though I know he frustrates me and he's not worth my time, I will still read a post by him (Elizabeth, interview).

For Elizabeth, seeing what other people were going to say—even the “kooks”—was part of her interest in the site. There was a curiosity and also spectacle in observing the threads. People seemed to want to know how other people were going to react, even if that reaction was bizarre. But to write off Phillybloggers as simply onlookers of spectacle would too easily dismiss their own perception of their interactions. For many interview participants what they were ultimately interested in was a sustained engagement with others about what they thought was important, or interesting regarding the city.

4.2 Sustaining attention: Humor, sarcasm, and satire

Common to Phillyblog were moments of frivolity, satire, and humor. Labeling an eyesore and problematic building the “Leaning Tower of Fairmount” was one way participants used humor. There were users who were described as “comic posters” and

wrote stories about the city or about Phillyblog participants themselves. Some informants reported that while they didn't necessarily start reading the site because it was entertaining, they enjoyed the "goofy, but fun, and playful threads" (Emma, interview). In one instance, Phillyblog hosted an ongoing compilation of 600 Phillyblog haikus. In another instance, there was an additive thread, the "three word story," in which each successive participant added another three words to the previous three.

Despite its lighthearted appearance, humor has a role to play in the discussion of public issues. Sustained interest in public life and an ongoing discussion of public concerns is a hopeful ideal of active, participatory politics. In terms of deliberation, for example, Gastil (2004) argues that participation in organized deliberative forums can strengthen civic habits over the longer term and have the possibility of indirectly altering participants' subsequent discussions. As such, deliberation is more than a discussion of issues—it is a sustained commitment to talking about issues and coming to expect a particular kind of public discussion. In the context of informal public talk, rules and boundaries of discussion are far less prescribed. In the case of Phillyblog, equally prevalent to serious discussions about crime, taxes, or gentrification were moments of frivolity, sarcasm, humor and satire.

Frivolity and playfulness sit uncomfortably in conceptions of democratic life, particularly theories of deliberation and other models of political communication that emphasize rational exchange. Feminist scholars, in particular, have questioned delegitimizing passion and emotion as components of communication (Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1999, 2000; Young, 1996). The ideal of dispassionate speech, critics suggest, serves to exclude parties and viewpoints that are too easily dismissed as self-interested

and emotional. Iris Marion Young's (2000) critique of deliberative democracy goes further in arguing for the importance of the rhetorical elements of conversation, not just the facts, evidence, and assertions of the content. Along with passion and emotion, Young also suggests the value of wordplay and the styles and modes it produces—humor, irony, parody, and mockery.

Henry Jenkins (2006) has explored the constructive role of parody, humor, and mockery on the internet. Jenkins argues that while the content may look frivolous on the surface, in the course of making creative contributions participants are learning new skills and new ways of interacting in an online setting. Moreover, humor and parody as forms of exchange may open up and invite more participants to a discussion. Reflecting such a stance, one Phillyblog poster explained that humor served a critical role of sustaining attention and interest in the discussions: "Nothing can hold attention if there's not at least some humor laced in it. . . . Everyone likes to be entertained. . . . So a website, no matter how literate it is, if there's not a certain amount of humor in it, it might hold some people's attention, but overall you're not going to expand your audience" (Ian, interview).

The use of satire and humor was also a way to initiate alternative conceptualizations of issues. In a thread regarding the dangers of the central business district of Philadelphia, the original poster started a thread by posting:

I am amazed reading people's blogs here about the great, Cultured Life in Center City Phila without ever talking about the dangers and threats the area presents. . . there's tons of people everywhere, bumping into me and I have no idea whether they're reaching into my pocket to steal my wallet, going to stab me, or just getting violent in general. . . . I'm happy here in Downingtown. . . . I don't need to feel like I'm going to be stabbed, raped, and left for dead on the street like an animal just so I can "experience the culture" of a city (PB thread 44671, #1).

Unsurprisingly the post engendered a wave of scorn, starting with the first reply, “Suburbanites are so cute :)” to the less innocuous “I don’t think you should be allowed out in public without supervision.” Early in the thread, respondents seemed to take the thread more or less seriously and were willing to take up the substance of the post—in particular the city’s homeless and crime problems. Later, posters began to dismiss the original poster as a “troll,” someone purposely trying to cause ferment.

Whether the original post was sincere or not, respondents used humor and satire to lay open what they saw as exaggerations by outsiders (in particular suburbanites) of the problems of the city: “Give [original poster] a break. I was stabbed 5 times and looked at funny by 10 homeless people during my lunch break today.” Users posted photos of a pristine downtown Philadelphia with captions reading “The horror! Eek:” Another user posted a photo of the bombed out city of Sarajevo, claiming it was a picture they took downtown the night before. The thread culminated in a parody of the song “Downtown” by Petula Clark in which the poster rearranged the lyrics to relay a story of the suburban area of Downingtown:

When you're alone and life is bland and vanilla,
It's because you're in... Downingtown
Philly's got worries, all the noise and hurry
But we like it slow in... Downingtown
Just listen to the rants about strange people in the city,
Linger at the strip mall where the neon signs are pretty
No dark-skinned hues.

The entire thread, including the ode to Downingtown, could be read as city boosterism, internet snark, or sarcasm. But underlying the thread were real tensions in the city between suburbanites and city dwellers. In a 2010 poll of suburban residents, those surveyed indicated that Philadelphia was a good place to visit but 55% rated it as either “only fair” or “poor” place to live. The primary concern among 72% of them was the

belief that public safety in the city had either stayed the same or worsened over the past five years, despite official statistics indicating that major crime declined. Nevertheless, suburbanites saw that what happened in Philadelphia had a strong impact on the entire region (Eichel, 2010b).

In part, the role of humor in the thread about the suburbs was to push back on particular definitions of the problem. Even trolls were, at times, looked on favorably because of the ways in which they could force discussion. One poster wrote, “please remember that, as with all things, trolling can be done well or poorly. Done well it can be quite entertaining and even thought provoking” (PB thread 46100, #18). In another way, humor created openings for multiple people to get involved in a discussion. In an interview, Todd compared the whimsy of Phillyblog to the more commonly accepted forms of civic discussion such as the public hearing. He contrasted the two, explaining:

I have spent enough time at public hearings to know . . . it's a very structured way of talking about something and therefore it can be—it's incredibly dull. So yeah, I mean if we were all talking about stern republican virtues and talking in a public square about issues only that matter, yeah, that's great. But how long would you hang out there? You'd be there for a while but the fun people would drift off to the bar after a little while. . . it attracts lots more people so then when you do have a substantive discussion, I think you have a lot more diversity of opinion, there's a lot more kinds of people, a lot more perspective and a lot more people looking and weighing in. . . .And I think Phillyblog had an advantage just because that atmosphere brings together more kinds of people and keeps them and hooks them (Todd, interview).

This kind of sustained attention cannot be easily dismissed. In the case of Phillyblog, humor and frivolity helped to keep a “critical mass” of diverse people attending to the various issues which emerged through the site. People talked, thought, and learned about public issues.

5. Neither Deliberative, Nor Realist

At the outset of the chapter, I argued that attending exists between deliberative and realist visions of public life and participation. Often users were criticized as calling *too much* attention to neighborhood events. After Phillyblog stopped operation, one of the city's gossip and media blogs, *Philebrity*, posted a story about the occasion: "Phillyblog Is Down, Leaving Hundreds Of Neighborhood Busybodies Much As They Were In The 1990s: Complaining, Alone, Weird." In a response comment, a poster rejoiced: "THANK GOD! I always love the headlines for the postings such as 'Did I hear gunshots???' of course the op [original poster] of the said alarmist article finds out the next day their neighbor just took out the trash with such intensity that it sounded like shots to their ears" ("Phillyblog is down," 2009). Likewise, users objected to the sheer volume of content where people were calling attention to happenings in the city. Art, an early and active user, said he rarely checked the site because the "signal-to-noise ratio" had made it difficult to find anything worth reading. "There's just so much information that gets posted there it becomes really difficult to find useful pieces. . . . if you have a helicopter sighting, why do you need 20 threads on helicopter sightings?" (Art, interview).

In this sense, I believe the realists are right—there is a limit to what people can be called upon to attend to. Participants were living with a whole range of daily concerns, some of which were more acute than others. And commonly, those things which were called to others attention simply didn't get picked up on. Moreover, participants disagreed about the ways in which, or even need to, solve issues. In a thread entitled "Sick of graffiti," a poster tried to rally neighbors to start taking cell phone photos of tagged buildings and uploading them to a website the poster was creating. In response, a Phillyblog user remarked that graffiti can easily be remedied: "it's actually one of the

only things the city does well,” instead of taking a photo with your cell phone, he recommended people should just use their phone to call the city’s graffiti hotline (PB thread 38270, #5). The original poster pressed on, arguing the problem was broader than the neighborhood’s properties:

Look... I am looking for people who are interested in spending a little time and energy to do something good in the community. Making phone calls is a big part of what I want to do. But not as individuals, as a cohesive semi-organized mass. When taggers "give up", they just go somewhere else. I want to stop them altogether. I know that is nearly impossible, but I think it is a goal worth striving for (PB thread 38270, #8).

Another participant disagreed with the feasibility and even pressing nature of the issue. One simply responded “good luck.” And another remarked, “I don’t want to diminish it as a problem—it certainly is—an ongoing problem in most major cities. . . . However, Philly does do this well, as another poster has already pointed out. . . . It is not at the top of the list of problems the city has” (PB thread 38270, #11).

The discussion of graffiti occurred in the Southwest Center City neighborhood, that same neighborhood where residents had rallied behind reporting crime at 22nd and Fitzwater, had mobilized around the Sidecar bar expansion, and had organized a cleanup committee for a city-owned recreation center. Neighbors were not apathetic, nor lacked a “sense of agency.” They were engaged. But that engagement did not mean that all, or even most, issues called to the attention of participants gathered a public around them. And frequently, it wasn’t the most acute problems that were picked up on. In other words, it was not always what the institutional media was highlighting as problematic. It was often, as Dewey argues, those problems that became understood as collectively at issue, but inadequately addressed by institutional actors, that sparked a public to emerge.

In this way, I think the realists only partially capture the nature and work accomplished by everyday public talk online. But an alternative perspective, deliberation, too only sheds partial light on networked public talk. Indeed, there were traces of a deliberative ideal, if not ideal deliberation within Phillyblog discussions. The site was grounded in a commitment to mutual attention. Participants showed a willingness and ethos of interactivity: reading each others posts and staying involved in discussion. And in many ways, Phillyblog users reported sharing the same goals for their discussion interactions as theorists and practitioners of online dialogue. When participants compared Phillyblog to other digital media they used, for example, they talked about how Phillyblog was a more interactive environment. When participants explained why they spent time on Phillyblog—as opposed to a number of other city-focused online sites—many interview participants described the ways in which they would engage with people that they would otherwise never meet and with perspectives and experiences that they may not otherwise see.

These different perspectives and experiences as well as the sustained nature of the interchange played an important informational role and was a way the site “self-corrected” misinformation or more commonly incomplete information. In many neighborhoods, residents along with police officers, local journalists, amateur and professional city historians, city employees, attorneys, developers, political officials (some of whom were also neighborhood residents) were participating. In response to crime postings, for example, Elizabeth explained that in her neighborhood the local cops would post to the forum and explain: “what actually happened, this is the actual police report, this was what was taken” and as a consequence they would “fill in the missing

pieces” regarding crimes. Lydia further explicated that participants were willing to tell posters that they were wrong, or had gotten the information wrong: “there would be enough interchange and feedback and going back and forth where you felt like, some level of truth or fact actually emerged because you had enough people chiming in to say ‘oh yeah, no that’s wrong’” (Lydia, interview). This, I believe, is where deliberative practitioners can capture, and ultimately help foster, the need for multiple perspectives and willingness to engage in sustained discussion as a way to sort through public problems.

This did not mean that participants agreed, came to consensus, or made wholesale changes in their perspectives. Phillybloggers may have had a mutual agreement to sustained interaction and even willingness to listen, but that did not necessarily translate into mutual respect. At times, interactivity was in the form of personal attacks, baiting, or following a user from thread to thread—topics I will return to in detail in the next chapter. Many Phillybloggers, as a result, shared similar frustrations of online discussion as deliberative theorists. Users critiqued the tone and tenor of discussion, complained about too much “noise,” and were concerned about a lack of civility.

As a way to alleviate these problems, by 2009 some Phillyblog users started moving to alternative discussion locations, the primary being Philadelphia Speaks. In one of the earliest posts to Philadelphia Speaks, a former Phillyblog participant remarked: “I posted my goodbye letter to Phillyblog. . . I just repeated the same things we all subconsciously think while cruising PB. PB has turned into USENET. And I don't have time for USENET” (PS thread 140, #38). The founders of Philadelphia Speaks were partly interested in creating a forum that took advantage of more of the technical features

available in the forum software. But the technical and architectural features weren't the main focus of early Philadelphia Speaks settlers. In one of the first threads posted to the site, users discussed their hopes and doubts about the possibility for discourse on the site: "Is there a strategy for not letting the board crumble the way it did in the politics forum over at the other place? Or will any such forum crumble under the weight of the era's vitriolic online politics?" (PS thread 140, #5). Another user, responding to a Philadelphia Speaks administrator explaining that the forum would not fall "under its own weight," commented:

That's what I'm holding out for—a well-moderated forum, with adults or adult-behaving older teens, exchanging ideas, and the occasional zinger, that doesn't devolve into one-upsmanship and primadonnas screaming for attention over one another, rather than even momentarily contemplating what's gone on before them (PS thread 140, #7).

In these and other posts, previous Phillybloggers/new Philadelphia Speakers expressed a desire for a different kind of discursive space than what they perceived Phillyblog was or had become. And early Philadelphia Speaks users expressed relief to have gotten rid of the worst of the "flame throwers" and "race baiters." The site was smaller and thus more manageable. Some explained the discussions seemed to be "more mature." Indeed, participants understood the arguments against internet discourse as being nothing more than people shouting at each other, trolling, and practicing one-upsmanship. They too sought out a space where conversations about the city and its issues could be more thoughtful and respectful. But users worried Philadelphia Speaks was "cliquish," contained a "more distilled group" and had become overly focused on policy discussions. Informants' comments suggest that some felt regret at having lost the vibrancy, informality, unpredictability, and occasionally immoderate qualities that characterized many Phillyblog threads. These users recognized a continuum between

deliberative and realist and sometimes worried that they had pushed the discussion of public issues too far in one direction.

6. Conclusion

Deliberative visions of democracy have conceived of democratic talk as a dialogically interactive process that is grounded in a set of discursive rules, high-quality and rational information, and norms of mutual respect. Such discourse is also goal-driven and purposeful with hoped-for outcomes ranging from learning civic skills to making collective decisions. Contemporary versions of realist democracy such as Schudson's monitorial citizen provide an alternative role for citizens that is focused more on environmental surveillance—being ready to “spring into action” when there is a problem—rather than pro-active information-gathering. In the context of the everyday publicly-oriented talk that is the focus of this study, neither realist nor deliberative perspectives of democracy adequately capture the work accomplished by public talk online. While sharing aspects of deliberative and realist notions of democracy, attending is less structured and purposeful than deliberation. At the same time, it is more deliberate and active than the environmental surveillance implied by monitorial conceptions of citizens.

The important point shared by networked public talk and deliberation is the view that citizens, in discussion with each other, determine what is at issue and the ways in which it is at issue. One of the strengths of deliberation is that it theorizes a citizen-centered form of politics. It is through discussion among citizens, rather than elite-only dialogue or the aggregation of individual preferences, that political life is enacted. Through the back-and-forth of dialogue, people come to know what is at stake and what

is in conflict. Ideally, through discussion, participants weigh tradeoffs, test ideas, and find points of negotiation. While deliberation in practice is generally more rule-governed than the talk studied in this dissertation, the focus on citizen-led talk is a point shared between the two.

What is gained by the concept of networked public talk is a more thoroughgoing analysis of the emergent part of citizen-to-citizen discussion. As noted throughout the chapter, calling and sustaining attention in public concerns is a critical part of public emergence. As discussed in the first chapter, part of the work of networked public talk is to articulate and bring into focus what are its collective concerns. This is fundamentally a practice of attention. And, critically for the framework set forth here, it is a critical aspect of public and issue emergence as originally theorized by Dewey. Calling attention to public concerns helps to bring into focus public issues and can foster an awareness that others are jointly implicated in those issues. Sustaining attention is way in which the discussion of public issues can be developed and enlarged.

I have argued that Phillyblog is a good object to study because it defied easy characterization. At its best it exposed how and what Philadelphians were concerned about, motivated action, and kept people informed. Phillyblog also points to the ways in which informal talk is neither idle chat nor ideal discourse. As the examples above demonstrate, attending on Phillyblog operated at different levels: sometimes pointing or alerting people where or at what to look by drawing attention to public problems or resources and thus pointing to what is problematic but also to what was unknown, unnoticed or undetected. At other times, attending served a sense-making function: sustaining interest; bringing into or linking to institutionalized forms of public life; or

organizing for civic action. When taken together, the key components of attending as practiced online connote care, sustained commitment, and the nurturing of civic life.

The above discussion suggests an additional point: that the goal of democratic discourse should not be to eliminate mess, either in the ideal or as practiced. For their part, deliberative theorists have a structure for discourse, one which is focused on the formal properties and rules of participation rather than on the content itself. To participate meaningfully, one follows norms of reciprocity, turn-taking, reasonableness, and mutual respect. Meanwhile, the realist version of the public's role also depends upon a particular sense of coherence, one which is more about the content than the form; realists assume that people know where to watch or what they are watching for. A site like Phillyblog, however, operates somewhere between both of these models because it is comfortable with a certain amount of incoherence, misunderstanding, and irrelevance. It does not have pre-determined agenda for its content, does not assume that people know what they are looking for, nor does it insist that they talk about it in a particular way. In some ways even the experiences of those who found fault in Phillyblog but were equally concerned about the cliquish and more unified perspectives of the early Philadelphia Speaks, reinforce the point about the perceived value of a less structured, controlled, or prescriptive deliberative space.

Phillybloggers could never be quite sure that what they suggested was going to be focused upon, or the ways in which they defined what was at issue were what everyone else would see. Ultimately, there were multiple, overlapping, and shifting groups of participants, as such calling and sustaining attention were always tenuous activities. When others actually looked, took up, or paid attention it was an accomplishment. And

this is one aspect of the work performed by networked public talk: the commanding of democratic attention, focusing on the critical ways in which political life is enacted through the emergence and recognition that something is even *at issue*.

One result of tolerating a certain level of mess was that Phillyblog became multiuse—it was a space to review restaurants, post neighborhood news, organize events, complain about neighbors, find a barber, and vigorously debate national politics. The site supported a multiplicity of activities, interests, and perspectives and thus drew a range of people into it. Encountering that variety—in people, topics, and experiences—was one of Phillyblog’s virtues. It also caused much of its conflict.

In terms of an active and participatory public life, encountering difference is widely considered a key virtue. It is the normative political ideal of being exposed to or co-existing with different people, perspectives and experiences. It is also something that internet discussion spaces have not generally been considered to do well, whether because of increasing mechanisms to control online communication or concerns of fragmentation. I explore encountering as an aspect of networked public talk in the next chapter. My focus is on the ways that an information architecture, user practices, and established participant norms within online urban forums both support and constrain an often serendipitous encounter with a varied set of interests, perspectives, as well as ideologies. I also describe how encountering was regulated or “tamed” on Phillyblog through the differentiation or zoning of the online space, techniques to delete or filter content, user banning, and participant practices of rebuking and calling foul.

CHAPTER 5: Encountering—Difference, Serendipity and Control

Phillyblog was just fun. It's like walking down the street and meeting people. There were just some really interesting people there, and it was the only place to go where they were all wedged together. There were intense neighborhood people, there were animal rights crusaders, and there were lots of little circles that sort of intersected in different places or didn't. . . But it was an amazing diversity of people. From drooling idiots to geniuses, they were all there. And since Phillyblog has blown up, these people have either gone away or drifted off to other places, and I think it's fragmented more into like-minded people. . . Sure, it was a self-selecting group to a large degree, obviously, and so I'm not going to pretend like it was the complete panorama of Philadelphia. But I think it forced the people who took the time to do it and were interested in doing it—they weren't as like-minded as you'd think.

- Todd, interview

1. “All Wedged Together”

Todd's account of the “wedging together” or the encountering of different people, perspectives, and geographic locations on Phillyblog is a position I want to further explore in this chapter. A freelance journalist, Todd started using the site in 2008, approximately 18 months before it closed. Because the digital discussion space of Phillyblog supported a variety of activities, interests, and perspectives, it drew a range of people into it—from the “intense neighborhood people” to “animal rights crusaders.” At times myriad affinity groups intersected, at other times they remained separate as lines between topics and neighborhoods constantly shifted.

In this chapter, I will explore encountering as an aspect of networked public talk. I have chosen the term encountering because it asserts two primary ideas: the sometimes serendipitous coming upon of new or different people, locations or perspectives; and a coming upon that is often mired in and worked out through conflict.

Encountering difference is a critical aspect of most visions of participatory public life and informed citizenship. It is the normative political ideal of engaging with, being exposed to, or co-existing with different people, perspectives and experiences. It is also something that urban life is theorized to do particularly well. In the first part of this chapter, I lay out imaginings of a political life of difference through the vision of the city as a space of encounter. I build upon Iris Marion Young's city life as a normative ideal in which she envisions a form of public life defined as the encounter with and being together of strangers. In particular, I am interested in the four virtues of city life she identifies: differentiation without exclusion, variety, eroticism, and publicity. Forming the basis for Young's ideal for public life, these virtues provide a useful starting point for understanding what might constitute the norms, user practices and conditions of an information architecture of encounter. Extending Young's notion to a digital environment, I conceptualize Phillyblog as a space of encounter and describe the ways in which the site had an ethos and information architecture that supported a variety of activities, interests, and perspectives and thus drew a range of people into it.

Cities may be normative sites to engage difference, they are also the locations that are perhaps "the greatest challenges to democracy" (Massey, 2005b) precisely because they are heterogeneous, complex and diverse. Phillyblog's information architecture, established norms, and user practices all contributed to the serendipity, heterogeneity, and

variety that were the site's greatest strengths. And yet, they also posed some of its greatest challenges. Phillyblog users reported being turned off by what the range of perspectives and experiences sometimes brought into the discussion—"rumor mongers," "race baiters," and "trolls." In the second part of the chapter, I describe conflicts users saw regarding what constituted a legitimate use of the site, and I detail how encountering was regulated or tamed. There were a number of practical accommodations deployed: the differentiation or zoning of the online space; official moderation; participant practices of calling foul and rebuking; and user banning. These taming strategies were themselves another source of conflict. Some users reported that such constraints were too extreme, arbitrary, or unnecessary and charged censorship, asking for public explanations for user bannings. At the same time, others claimed being equally constrained by ideological rants, off-topic posts, or personal attacks that disrupted discussions. In response, they reported exiting the site, reading but no longer being willing to respond to threads, or disregarding posts or posters.

The chapter concludes with this issue of balancing serendipity and control. Online discussions spaces, similar to any location of public discourse, are never without control. Rather, in as much as they work as spaces of public discourse at all, they do so by using techniques to regulate the discourse rather than completely control it—to provide some level of what urban communication scholars Gumpert and Drucker (2002) call "controlled unpredictability."

2. Spaces of Encounter

Most, if not all, normative notions of deliberation have as one of their critical precepts that people must be exposed to alternative and opposing political viewpoints in

order to insure a vigorous democracy. Difference introduces a broader range of opinions, values and perspectives; disagreement forces more careful consideration through the challenging of viewpoints (Price et al., 2002). The act of encountering difference is more than exposure to or conflict over a multiplicity of ideas, it is also access to and serendipitous coming upon different kinds of people, perspectives and experiences. It is through our “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005b) with others from different backgrounds, genders, races, and ethnicities co-existing in proximity that we have the opportunity to come into contact and enter into an ongoing state of negotiation of difference.

Building a political theory around difference and conflict, Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2000) asserts that well-functioning democracies are based in confrontation between differentiated positions. In other words, it is through conflict that political positions, tenuous negotiations, and perspectives are (or are not) worked out. Mouffe is emphatic that democratic politics cannot overcome a “we/they” opposition; rather, the we/they relationship has to be constructed in alternative ways. So while antagonism can never be eliminated, Mouffe envisions that it can be “tamed” through an alternative relationship which she labels “agonism” (2005). In agonism, people are seen as adversaries rather than enemies—people whose ideas we struggle with but “whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question” (1999, p. 755). “This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place” (2005, p. 805). As such, Mouffe advocates that there are certain rules to political discourse, in the sense that “adversaries” adhere to some “ethico-political” principles of democracy (the right to speak, norms of

civility); and the purpose of politics is not a stable unity or full consensus, but a consensus that will always be temporary, conflictual, and accompanied with dissent.

2.1 City Life as Normative Ideal

Cities force the very pragmatic question of how we live together as strangers, which James Donald argues is the central question of the political (1999). Donald contends that we do not need to share cultural traditions with our neighbors in order to live alongside them, but we do need to be able to talk to them while accepting that they are and will remain strangers. What is political about the city, then, is that it both forces and supports strangers working out how to live together in their difference, or as Jean-Luc Nancy offers, the political is a “community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing” (quoted in Donald, 1999, p. 161).

Iris Marion Young (1990) was one of the first theorists to celebrate the city as a site of difference. Rather than using a biological metaphor to describe political life (e.g. the body politic), Young employs a geographic metaphor: the good city. In her essay “City Life and Difference,” Young sets out an ideal of public life that she claims cannot be captured by the two dominant but dualistic views of politics: liberalism and communitarianism. Each tries to bring “multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity.” And both deny and repress difference, though in opposing ways. Liberal individualism denies difference by “positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by anything or anyone other than itself,” while proponents for community deny difference by “positing fusion rather than separation as the social ideal” (p. 229). Young proposes a “third way” out of the dualism and sets out a vision for city life as not only a modern reality but also a desirable ideal. She defines city life as “the being together of strangers,” and while that

being together necessarily entails sharing common problems and interests, it does not mean that city dwellers create a single community based on reciprocity and shared goals. Her vision is for the unoppressive city—a place where difference is accepted and there is openness to “unassimilated otherness.” Young explains:

In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness. City life is composed of clusters of people of affinities—families, social groups networks, voluntary associations, neighborhood networks, a vast array of small ‘communities.’ City dwellers frequently venture beyond such familiar enclaves, however, to the more open public of politics, commerce and festival, where strangers meet and interact (Young, 1990, p. 237).

Young’s ideal of city life is characterized by four primary attributes. First, affinity groups exist but they operate without exclusion so that groups overlap and mix without becoming a single entity. This differentiation without exclusion is represented by geographic borders that are porous and malleable, such as neighborhoods with strong ethnic identities that have members of other groups also dwelling within them. Second, the city is structurally and interactionally good at bringing different groups together because of the variety and multiuse nature of the social space. Young describes city life as supporting a mixture of uses within the same social space thus bringing various groups into those spaces. Third, due in part to this variety, city life engenders an erotic attraction and excitement, in the broad sense that eroticism is an attraction to the other (p. 239). This erotic dimension has always been an aspect of what is feared about the city, but it is also one of the allures of living in a space where there is the possibility of coming into contact with the unfamiliar. Finally, city life has the value of publicity in that the public spaces of cities are realms in which one enters always with the potential risk of encountering those who are different and have different opinions and ways of life.

Young recommends a normative conception of public life modeled after the city that can, potentially, serve as the basis of a genuinely democratic politics. Young admits her proposal of the city is an ideal rather than empirical description, but her vision forces a different conceptualization of the public and the public sphere. Rather than a location where we come together as citizens, and only as citizens, and where differences are bracketed out, Young defines public life as being open to, and as negotiating among, unassimilated difference. Public life is thus necessarily full of variety, surprise, and diversity. Moreover, her understanding of city life as “the being together of strangers” is important for rather than understanding a democratic public as composed of people who share a common consciousness and are transparent to one another, Young sees democratic publics as consisting of actors who will always remain unknown and unknowable to one another but will have to communicate across their strangeness.

2.2 Encountering on Phillyblog: Malleability, Multiuse, and Publicity

In addition to a political defense of the city, the virtues Young enumerates are the city’s interactional and architectural assets. It is in this particular sense that I would like to extend Young’s work to a digital environment and offer up Phillyblog as a space of encounter. Young’s work is characterized by a thoroughgoing and necessary respect for otherness, willingness to openness, and even enthusiasm for difference. Rather than seeing a space of encounter based in a normative vision of the wholehearted embracing of difference, encountering in Phillyblog was at a more mundane level, grounded in an information architecture and participant ethos that supported and insisted on a variety of discussion topics and allowed great flexibility in how users responded to that content. Moreover, established norms and user practices supported a negotiated openness to

diverse perspectives. In the following section, I translate Young's virtues of city life into the concrete characteristics of Phillyblog, focusing on three primary features: malleability, multiuse, and publicity.

2.2.1 *Malleability*

Young argues that in the good city borders between neighborhoods are "open and undecidable" in the sense that distinctions between groups or areas of the city remain intact but when we cross between them we don't always know "precisely where one ended and the other began" (1990, p. 239). Architecturally Phillyblog employed a standard information scheme used by many online discussion forums that categorized information into sub-forum topics and within those boards content was separated into threads. How the site was used in practice revealed a structure that was malleable within that overarching structure. Distinctions between boards were often blurry, and the ways in which users posted to and read the sub-forums changed depending on how topics intersected. The result was that people in different parts of the city or with different specific topical interests would, on a semi-regular basis, cross between geographic and topical areas in their reading and posting behaviors.

Flexibility could be accounted for, in part, by the wide-open and variable vision of Phillyblog founders. At different points in time they described the site as media outlet, visitor guide, engagement tool, social network, feel-good story generator, online community, peer-to-peer information exchange, and location for honest discussion. The numerous ways in which participants interpreted and used the site, combined with Phillyblog owners' elastic vision for it, both extended to the site's design. Phillyblog adapted to and was adapted by user suggestions, interests, and disappointments.

Even at the structural level, lines between sub-forums were always shifting as the sub-forums themselves were seldom mutually exclusive. For example, the geographic boundaries between neighborhoods on the site overlapped. Southwest Center City maintained its own sub-forum, but geographically it could be included in the larger South Philly or Center City board. Similarly, discussions of city political topics could be found in the Politics forum, the Nation forum, or even the World forum since the actual content in each of those boards was almost indistinguishable from the other. Finally, topics of crime, property taxes, trash, zoning, or development were often located within and mapped to a specific neighborhood and therefore discussed within that neighborhood sub-forum. However, such topics could and did move to questions about city and regional policies and were discussed by participants who lived in parts of the city outside the neighborhood where the topic originally emerged.

Maintenance of the information categories was also always in flux. Threads were posted and classified into the sub-forums by the users themselves. Any registered user to the site could post in any of the sub-forums on Phillyblog, as such the content on the site “went wherever the writer takes it” (PB thread 32817, #34). There were efforts made by site administrators and moderators to re-categorize content into specific sub-forums. Threads were occasionally moved—threads initiated in one forum would be placed in another if the moderator deemed it more topically fitting. Threads were also merged together so that similar topics would all be grouped in a single thread. As discussed in the previous chapter, several of the neighborhood sub-forums had “sticky” threads on commonly occurring topics: neighborhood resources and crime to name two prominent

ones. However, categorizing content at the level of the thread was difficult, which accounts for why moving and merging threads was not a frequent activity on the site.

Moderators were not always able to, or interested in, keeping thread discussions focused on the topic of the initial post. As described in Chapter 3, moderating practices changed over time and varied by sub-forum, but most moderators saw their role as being hands off. A moderator of the University City/West Philadelphia neighborhood board explained that one of the problems of trying to “steer” conversations on the board was they would often circle back on themselves: “If the topic is about affordability of housing in the neighborhood. . .the topic would generally steer towards crime or people would start bashing the city nonstop about how much crime there is” (Brian, interview). Brian was sometimes frustrated with such thread drifts, especially since there was a thread established specifically to talk about crime. However, he saw his role as being hands off and described such discussions as “organic,” reflective of how people ended up talking about issues of affordable housing, crime, and frustrations with city bureaucracy.

Malleability was also evident in the ways in which users navigated the site. Reading across multiple sub-forums was a common practice of return users. Tom, one of the site’s more active members and a moderator of the politics board, explained that active users moved around in their posting and reading. In addition to reading and posting to Politics, the Nation, and the World, Tom would regularly “go into the Lounge and start a thread about the best album of the 70s. And check out food and sports, obviously. And then maybe go to Culture, and talk about why *Lost* sucks” (Tom, interview).

The site employed a “new posts” feature that enabled participants to browse thread titles rather than enter the site through a specific sub-forum. Technically, “new

posts” was a search function allowing people to see discussions from all boards initiated or updated since their last visit. People used new posts to enter the site by discussion, rather than through a particular forum (e.g. a neighborhood or politics). Rob explained why he used the new posts feature rather than going through his neighborhood board (South Philly): “I don’t go to South Philly specifically because there is a lot of bleed between neighborhoods; there is a lot of stuff that just crosses” (Rob, interview). For Rob, that “bleed” was events, restaurants, or activities going on in other neighborhoods that he wanted to know about, which may not show up in the South Philly sub-forum.

Participants also posted across multiple board categories. While talking about a thread in the Southwest Center City board regarding a proposed property tax increase, Kurt described why he entered into the conversation even though it was not the neighborhood in which he lived:

I don’t look at the actual; I don’t go through the actual forums. I hit new posts. So where the post is located doesn’t make a huge effect on if I get involved or not. . . . this was about the tax policy going on with the city, so it was still a sort of city-oriented policy, too, so what happened there is going to have an effect throughout the whole city (Kurt, interview).

The malleability of the categories and the catholic use of the forums was an important aspect of what Phillyblog participants reported as valuable about the site. Some informants even argued that reputations were built based on people’s willingness to post across topics. Rob, for example, decried “single issue” posters—in particular those who only responded to political threads—as not “using the forum for what it was meant for. There are a million political forums out there and probably a million political forums about Philadelphia. It has a mission—it is a resource for all things Philadelphia.” Rob went on to explain that he weighed the value of a post based on whether the poster engaged in the site in its entirety:

Like a person may have different political views from me, but maybe they have also posted really good reviews about restaurants or they recommended an electrician that was really good. That user for me is more valuable than those who just post in the political thread about political stuff (Rob, interview).

For Rob, the site was a place where one engaged in the city as a whole and users and their opinions became more valuable when they discussed multiple topics and interests.

2.2.2 *Multiuse*

Iris Marion Young theorizes that the interfusion of groups in the city occurs in part because of the “multiuse differentiation of social space. What makes urban spaces interesting, draws people out in public to them, gives people pleasure and excitement, is the diversity of activities they support” (1990, p. 239). This is directly related to her claim that city life instantiates difference as the erotic, the novel, strange, or surprising (p. 239).

Phillyblog was a multiuse space in the specific sense that it was topically wide ranging and there was an expectation by users that any topic was fair game: “the state of the neighborhoods, politics, crime, schools, issues of behavior, taxes. You name it, if it is something that people talk about in Philadelphia, they will talk about it there [on Phillyblog] too” (Terry, interview). Within a single day, Phillyblog users posted new threads that touched on topics from neighborhood news and classifieds to sports, restaurants and word games. The format of the site provided the “room to talk about your neighborhood stuff, talk about your restaurants, to talk about, ‘What your favorite record album is’ or whatever” (George, interview).

Architecturally, Phillyblog was able to support the multiuse structure by consolidating the various boards into one large forum. The site was one of the first and remained one of the few digital forums in the city to combine neighborhood boards and

topical discussions in one location.³² Some of the most popular discussion forums in Philadelphia had a singular topical focus (e.g. sustainability) or ideological perspective. Since Phillyblog didn't, it could, and did, support a variety of affinity groups—sports fans, foodies, neighborhood activists, politicians, animal rights activists, culture enthusiasts, parents. This multiuse nature, and the people that such variety attracted, became more evident after Phillyblog ceased operating. In describing the difference between Phillyblog and the early months of Philadelphia Speaks (Phillyblog's primary successor site), Todd, the Phillyblog user with whom I opened the chapter, explained that Phillyblog had reached a "critical mass" of people who were willing to start discussion threads on neighborhoods, restaurants, stores, and politics. But in the early versions of Philadelphia Speaks, most of the primary users only initiated discussions about politics and policy, thus creating a discussion space that was more fragmented into similarly-interested people:

These guys who are now on Philadelphia Speaks wouldn't have started a neighborhood discussion, but they might have weighed in on it. And I am the same way. I probably never start a restaurant-based one but I would be very interested to weigh in on it if I know something about it. And I think what's happened is the guys like me have gone over to Philadelphia Speaks, and we would never start that discussion; where Phillyblog, someone else would and then we would join in. . . .It is not that we agree ideologically, but it is like the same mindset, like it is the people you would expect to come to a policy-oriented site. And so, it is less diverse. It's much more like-minded groups or the kinds of threads we start are the ones that interest us (Todd, interview).

It is important to point out that fragmentation into "like-minded groups" was not based on ideology. Rather, in the early life of Philadelphia Speaks, there was a concentration of people who were interested in the same kinds of things. The result was a homogenization of the sorts of discussions that would occur. The multiuse nature of

³² This architecture was replicated by at least four other forums in Philadelphia: Philadelphia Speaks, Philadelphia Freedom Forum, New Phillyblog, and PhillyForum.us.

Phillyblog, however, allowed enough room to post about varied content and subject areas, attracting a range of people who were focused on different aspects of the city.

2.2.3 *Publicity*

The city, according to Young, has the virtue of publicity in the sense that it is made up of accessible spaces, spaces whereupon entering we inevitably risk encountering those who are different in terms of their opinions or experiences. “In such public spaces people encounter other people, meanings, expressions, issues which they may not understand or with which they do not identify” (1990, p. 240). Critically, public spaces are locations where anyone can both participate and witness. It would be a misstatement to claim Phillyblog was public in the sense of being non-commercial. More critically, however, the site never brought together an audience as diverse as the city itself. As detailed in Chapter 3, Philadelphia is a majority minority city, but indications were that Phillyblog was not. Furthermore, the city has a 25% poverty rate, which connects to the city’s internet penetration rates. Within Phillyblog, informants themselves were quick to tell me that Phillyblog was not an accurate representation of Philadelphia as a whole—based on race, geography, or income. In a thread, “Phillyblog’s statistical page,” Phillyblog members discussed the audience profile data of the site supplied by Quantcast, noting that if the data was accurate then the site was far from “a true slice of Philadelphia demographics” (PB thread 42619, #15). As such, Phillyblog was not immune to the trends that affect any internet site: demographics continue to point to correlations between ethnicity, age, income and level of education and access to and use of the internet.

While not a full representation of the city as a whole, multiple groups existed on the site. Participants explained that they saw themselves interacting with people who had diverse opinions and life experiences. One poster explained, “I haven’t been on this site too long but so far I like to hear people’s viewpoints from different backgrounds. Especially when you factor in the different sections of the city” (PB thread 32817, #23). Precisely because the site attracted users from different parts of the city, with different tenures in Philadelphia and different experiences, informants reported they came into contact with a wider set of people, perspectives, and information than they would have in their normal activities or daily life. Lydia, a new home owner, explained, “In terms of neighborhood stuff, Phillyblog exposed me to a broader range of perspectives and a broader range of people than I would have been exposed to in other parts of my life” (Lydia, interview). Ben, in his mid-twenties, had used the site for several years and become friends with Phillybloggers who were in their 40s and 50s and politically active in the city. “I would never have talked to a lot of the people—well, honestly I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t have met, wouldn’t have interacted with those given people, but I probably wouldn’t have even met people of their ideological or personal background had it not been for Phillyblog and Philly Speaks” (Ben, interview).

In threads, posters would occasionally express appreciation for alternative perspectives: “good points...that’s what I like about it here, sometimes I get different perspectives on things, keeps me from being totally bull-headed on everything” (PB thread 1568, #25). Others used Phillyblog’s commitment to being a forum that supported wide-ranging opinions to defend less popular posts. In a thread where a poster was rebuked by fellow participants for being overly confrontational, other Phillybloggers

defended his right to disagree: “This forum will contain people you agree with, and people you won’t. Isn’t that the beauty of Phillyblog? What good would the board be if there weren’t different opinions to it?” (PB thread 6177, #24).

More than differing positions, posters had opposing perspectives. In a thread about Philadelphia’s local television media, participants disagreed about the extent to which reporter appearance influenced local news reporting. At one point a local television reporter got involved in a back-and-forth with another poster explaining (and then defending) the nature of reporting in a commercial news business. After multiple heated exchanges, a participant in the thread stopped to reflect:

I actually think this thread has touched on some really serious issues about what each of us put into and get out of discussion here on Phillyblog - for this we should all (yes I am actually going to say it) thank both [participant A] and [participant B] for their input in what I find to be an entertaining and challenging exchange of ideas. To me the back and forth in this thread was exactly what I value about Phillyblog and despite some theatrics and pompous tones on both sides I feel like an enriching dialog occurred as a result. Thank you one and all for making me think and laugh (PB thread 9711, #50).

Later, another poster responded similarly:

Phillyblog is a unique creature in that we have all sorts of crazy opinions and people shooting their mouths off on here. I have actually learned a lot and had my eyes opened to a lot of different perspectives and experiences as a result of being on Phillyblog and because of our motley crew. Some users used to make my skin crawl and now they’re friends (PB thread 9711, #75).

Posters who anticipated that they might be the only, or one of the few, dissenting opinions entered into the fray nonetheless. In the thread, “Graffiti in Our Area,” the original poster complained about graffiti in his neighborhood, to which other posters responded by providing information on city phone numbers for graffiti control (PB thread 25583). Twenty posts into the thread, a participant began: “I know my opinion isn’t going to win me any popularity contests around here, but I had to say something.” She went on

to argue that graffiti is an art form and what makes an urban area interesting and exciting is the expression of multiple subcultures. She then posted a photo of graffiti in the city, commenting, “This was just a blank wall once. I think it looks better now.” Her perspective was met mostly with disagreement, which she had predicted.

Phillyblog participants also reported encountering people of different political ideologies. As noted in Chapter 3, the city of Philadelphia is predominately Democratic: 78% Democrat; 13% Republican; 9% other parties (Philadelphia Voter Registration Totals 1967 – 2008, 2008). But in the site itself, there was a larger conservative voice than what would be expected in the city as a whole. Lydia, a self-described liberal and registered Democrat, said: “the only time I would interact with Republicans or read Republican stuff would be on Phillyblog” (Lydia, interview). Indeed, some of the most highly active posters were involved in some manner in Republican politics in the city, providing a space for a stronger conservative voice in the forums than you might have otherwise expected in a majority Democrat city. Elizabeth, who described herself as liberal, remarked that one of Phillyblog’s strengths was that it gathered together people with different political viewpoints:

Phillyblog, I think one of its strengths. . . . is that it really does have people of different political views contributing equally. There are thoughtful conservatives on there and there are thoughtful liberals on there. I find that most message boards usually end up attracting like-minded people, and so you have ultra conservatives or all liberals patting each other on the back. And within that, you can have some very robust discussion. . . . They definitely have value. But one of the unique things I think about Phillyblog is that there can be and there is robust discussion from different political spectrums (Elizabeth, interview).

In describing her interaction on the site, Belle—who identified herself as a Democrat—laughed, “I mean I have never been friends with so many Republicans in my life” (Belle, interview). But conservatives also saw diversity of opinions. George, a self-described

Libertarian, remarked that he would never have read the “far left, ultra-progressive point of view” in his other media habits. He explained, “Sometimes it has opened my eyes to other points of views and sometimes it hasn’t. But you get the diversity of points of view. It depends who shows up. You really don’t know what point of view you are going to read until you open the thread” (George, interview).

3. Regulating Encounter

Normatively, the value of encountering is to come into contact with people and issues that we don’t understand or with which we may not identify. The virtue of encountering is not in the construction of unity, mutual understanding, or consensus, but in potentially working through, tolerating, or better understanding differences. Recognizing that conflicts are often inherent to such encounters is an equally important aspect to consider. The notion of disagreement as productive rather than obstructive is a key point in Mouffe’s notion of agonistic politics. Mouffe recognizes that antagonism and conflict are inescapable in a pluralistic society; therefore, the point of public discussion is not to remove the possibility of conflict, for it is through such conflict that difference gets expressed and negotiated.

It is possible to see in Phillyblog instances of conflict that resulted in productive, but difficult disagreements about differing perspectives. A thread that started with Philadelphia’s predicted demographic trends in the year 2020, indicated that a significant portion of the city’s white population would leave the city. Over the course of the first fourteen replies, posters talked about white out-migration to the suburbs, the changing ethnic makeup of the city itself, the problems with demographic predictions, and the costs of commuting. Then, in reply #15, a poster wrote:

I love how people use code words and vague terms to call things different from what they really are. Here is the blunt truth. Middle-class Whites do not want to live with minorities. They do not want to live with Po' White trash. When they can move with their own, they do. . . Most of the people who are active in this blog are professionals who move here to get an inner-city feel. You buy homes, raise the value of property taxes and force out the natives. These people do not disappear from the Earth. They move into different neighborhoods and subsequently lower the property value there. What you have is a bunch of liberal Whites with small or no families and poor people (mostly minorities) who take more money out of the city than they put into it. Services and schools suffer and that adds to the number of Whites who make the mass exodus out of the city. . . Now let us discuss the subject that is the biggest taboo for liberal inner-city dwellers. Black people in the city commit brutal crimes at a disturbingly large rate. . . .When you call a neighborhood "hip" or "an up and comer"; when you talk about whether a neighborhood is "safe"; when you say that a certain area was "bad, but is getting better", do not justify what you really mean. You are talking about race (PB thread 60201, #15).

The debate evolved into a discussion between what some labeled the “realists” (those who saw the trend in out-migration as being an irreversible one) and those who held a more “optimistic” view of the future possibility of Philadelphia as developing resources and an infrastructure to support, attract, and retain different socio-economic classes and races. At another point, a poster provided another corrective, remarking, “The frankness of this discussion is refreshing but everyone seems to imply that ‘black = bad’ and ‘white = good.’ I’m definitely no fan of political correctness but that seems simplistic. There are lots of better ways than mere demographics to measure the vitality of a population, such as poverty rate.”

Although people disagreed over the implications of the demographic projections, different ideas about the issue were aired. Part of the value of encountering, then, is to come into contact with different ideas, question them, and possibly come to some kind of mutual tolerance. In a thread complaining about some of the negativity on the site, a poster argued, “I disagree with lots of the posts I read on this site but I’ve always found them enlightening. Whether they cause me to re-evaluate my beliefs or simply reinforce

them, the exercise is valuable either way” (PB thread 1483, #22). Similarly, according to those I interviewed, it was not common for people to completely change their minds about a specific issue. Rather, they reported coming to a more “nuanced view” of an issue, seeing other perspectives, or at least being exposed to an alternative viewpoint.

Julia explained that she became more “aware of things” and that her discussions on the site occasionally made her “more tolerant of other people’s positions, even if I think they are dead wrong” (Julia, interview). Kurt said that he couldn’t recall a situation where “my view on something was headed over here and then just swung the whole other way, but I have definitely shifted on certain ideas and also new ideas as well. It wasn’t that I necessarily changed ideas, it was that I was exposed to new ideas” (Kurt, interview). And Troy described Phillyblog as a place that “wakes you up to other people’s perspectives”:

And that is the benefit. And the con is that it gives some pretty angry, nasty people an outlet. But you do get exposed to different ideas. There is this guy [user]. I don’t agree with a lot of what he says. He is a libertarian, but he is consistent. He writes well. He is obviously very intelligent and a couple times I reached like an understanding of him. You know what—he has a point. I don’t know if I am buying it, but it makes some sense (Troy, interview).

Troy’s quote also highlights a tension in encountering—while the strength of Phillyblog was that it put participants into a discussion space with varying viewpoints, it could also be an outlet for “some pretty angry, nasty people.” Indeed, returning to the ideal of the city, they are diverse, heterogeneous, and erotic, and they are also noisy, cramped, irrational and misanthropic. Cities bring people together in a range of combinations; those groupings, however, do not necessarily sit together comfortably—they “jar and scrape and rend” (Thrift, 2005). James Donald argues that many normative visions of the city as public life seldom capture the “wiliness, the aggression, and the

everyday paranoia which are inescapable features of sharing urban turf” (1999, p. 157). In other words, the very attributes that make the city a space of encounter also make it a space for misunderstanding, rejection, and withdrawal.

A similar phenomenon could be seen on Phillyblog in that the same information architecture, established norms, and user practices that supported malleability, multiuse, and publicity also sparked conflict about the legitimate use of the space. And at times Phillyblog broke down. The difference in perspectives, interests, and ideologies was bringing in what one poster described as a high number of “trolls, jerks, and hotheads” who derailed threads (PS thread 1422, #4). Consistent complaints emerged regarding personal attacks. It was a violation of the site’s Terms of Service to attack someone personally or to follow a person from thread to thread. Such practices were commonplace, however. Posters hurled insults and called each other “stupid,” “asshole,” “ignorant,” “moron,” “racist,” “jackass.” There were posters who told others to go “eff” themselves (thus bypassing the profanity filter). And posters mocked that others were “losing it,” “crazy,” or “certifiable.”

A more serious concern was posts and posters who demonstrated thinly veiled or patent racism, misogyny, homophobia, and general intolerance. The Phillybloggers I interviewed were particularly concerned with what they saw as “blatant racism,” which they felt increased during and after the 2008 Presidential election. Prior to being banned from participating in Phillyblog and establishing an alternative discussion forum called Philadelphia Freedom Forum, one user wrote that “black people in the US act like degenerates” (PB thread 50958, #14) and that “black people are a national problem” (PB thread 45681, #25). Race and class often intermixed, and posters claimed that middle or

lower middle class white neighborhoods were being destroyed by neighborhood diversification. “North and West Philly were white and nice to live in at one time. The whites had to flee when the blacks moved in and destroyed those neighborhoods” (PB thread 45197, #1). There were posters who diminished violence against women, who expressed hatred for gays and lesbians, and who denied the Holocaust. These posters were in the minority of Phillyblog users and their comments rarely (and in the threads I analyzed, never) went unchallenged. Even though such posters were small in number, their impact on discussion threads could be great. Todd reflected, “It’s amazing the degree to which the dynamic can be shaped by just one or two or three people. I guess it makes sense because in group dynamics one person can completely color the temper of the group. . . And that’s true on a big scale in Phillyblog” (Todd, interview).

3.1 Regulating Encounter: Taming Mechanisms on Phillyblog

The challenge for Phillyblog was always to balance between being an open space for public talk that accommodated multiple voices and being a space where extreme voices became so disruptive as to shut down talk completely. In reaction to a Phillyblog participant’s multiple postings denying the Holocaust, posters called for regulation (in this case outright banning). One person wrote: “I’m generally not for kicking people off the blog, but some civility and decency are required, as in any civil society. Someone who constantly tries to bait bigots and the objects of that bigotry into angry postings hardly aims to participate in civil or decent discourse” (PB thread 30705, #42).

Banning was usually reserved as a measure of last resort. Rather than trying to completely control the discussion, more frequently, there were attempts to tame it. Limits to what was considered acceptable discourse were achieved through user interaction, a

constantly negotiated set of discussion norms, and some unique ways of differentiating the discussion space. As users pushed boundaries, some new rules of behavior were also codified into the Terms of Service. But more commonly, formal and informal regulations emerged fluidly through users, both posters and moderators, challenging poster behavior and the regulation of that behavior.

Regulation is a fundamental, though less discussed, component of Mouffe's agonism. Unlike deliberation's focus on consensus, commonality or mutuality as a way to contain discourse, Mouffe does not see antagonism ever being eradicated. Rather, she sees the possibility of it being tamed, thus shifting from a struggle between enemies to one between adversaries, writing:

Once the ever-present possibility of antagonism is acknowledged, we can understand why one of the main tasks for democratic politics consists in defusing the potential antagonism that exists in social relations. . . How could conflict be accepted as legitimate and take a form that does not destroy the political association? (2005, p. 805).

According to Mouffe, in order to not wholly destroy the association, participants need to engage in a discussion where they acknowledge that others are legitimate participants in that discussion, even if one disagrees with their positions.

In Phillyblog's most extreme cases, that legitimacy was called into question and participants wondered whether it was possible to acknowledge another's legitimacy without also giving some implicit credence to his or her beliefs (for example, in the case of those who were purposefully trying to "bait bigots"). It was more common, however, for participants to insist that others had the right to express their opinion but had to do so within the rules of the site. Rather than seeing Phillyblog as a space of encounter based on a normative vision of the embracing of difference, my argument is that encountering

on the site was at a more mundane level, based on low-level doings of togetherness and acts of sharing information. This basis for interaction required small-scale, practical accommodations or what Ash Amin (2002) has called “prosaic negotiations.” Thinking in terms of the established norms, user practices, and architecture of the site, there were several practical accommodations deployed on Phillyblog: the differentiation or zoning of the online space; official moderation; participant practices of calling foul and rebuking; and user banning.

3.1.1 Zoning: The Dump and The Lounge

Robert Ellickson (1996) explores the issue of misbehavior and the social controls of persistent misconduct in the city’s public spaces. Ellickson argues open-access public spaces are critical because they enable cross-cutting communication among city residents. However, the very definition of an open-access space is that anyone can enter it. Ellickson focuses on chronic street nuisances, which he defines as a person who regularly and over a protracted period of time behaves in a public space in a way that annoys, but no more than annoys, most other users of the space. While cities have adopted ordinances that authorize universal controls on street misconduct, he contends that a city’s codes should be allowed to vary spatially.

Ellickson proposes a hypothetical division of city public space into Red, Yellow, and Green zones. Similar to traffic lights, the zones would signal extreme caution for red zones, some caution in yellow zones, and a promise of relative safety in green zones. In Ellickson’s red zones, occupying 5% of the city, normal standards for conduct would be significantly relaxed with tolerance for noise or public drunkenness but no tolerance for violence. Yellow zones, occupying 90% of the city’s public spaces, would be zoned in

order to encourage a diversity of uses; there would be constraints on disorderly conduct but not so much control as to keep out the “flamboyant and eccentric.” Finally, green zones occupying the remaining 5% of the city’s public spaces would enforce significant controls on behavior for the “unusually sensitive,” such as the elderly, parents with toddlers, or unaccompanied grade-school children.

Ellickson points a way to negotiate behavior and misbehavior by differentiating acceptable behavior through spatial zoning, rather than simply denying a diversity of behavior and misbehavior. Over time, Phillyblog came to employ two primary zoning techniques of its own: The Dump and The Lounge. *The Dump* was a moderating technique introduced in one of the neighborhood sub-forums. Rather than deleting or editing posts, the moderator created a thread entitled “The dump: off-topic posts, trolling, etc.” (PB thread 34581) and then moved posts that were “wildly off topic, inflammatory, nasty” (moderator, interview). She explained that posts that ended up in the Dump “may or may not be delete-worthy” but they were “certainly clutter.” What the Dump allowed was for people to continue to read and respond to the (dumped) post without derailing the primary conversation thread. The moderator explained that she was “lenient” in moving posts to the Dump, explaining if someone looked like a “troll” or if a conversation got “really, really, really personal” she would move the posts. There was no narrative line to the Dump; rather, the Dump thread became an ever-accumulating list of off-topic posts or personal attacks. The Dump was replicated in the Philadelphia Speaks architecture, where the site owner created a “Master Dump,” to house “any/all personal and pointed off topic bickering from relevant on topic threads that isn’t worthy of being deleted. It will also be a dump for way off topic BS placed in threads” (PS thread 2706).

In the case of the Dump, it was the moderator who determined what would be moved to another section of the site. There were also cases of more informal zoning. As highlighted previously, the *Lounge* was described as being the location “where off topic/random posts go.” One of the most popular forums on the site in terms of thread initiation, the Lounge housed anything from reports about what you were making for dinner to word games. According to users, the tone and purpose of the Lounge was different from the neighborhood and other topical boards and tended to be more random, flippant, entertaining, and unfocused. A frequent Lounge poster, William, explained: “The Lounge is supposed to be anything goes, and the neighborhood is supposed to be about neighborhoods. I kind of envision that’s where people go for serious stuff, to find information. I try not to clog up their view with nonsense. And there are also people that come there for complete nonsense. So each place has its spot” (William, interview).

The Lounge never had a designated moderator, and users posted that they appreciated and expected that the discourse would be less, or at least differently, governed there: “I like that in a couple of the forums (i.e. The Lounge) people are allowed to go off and post on what they like” (PB thread 2305, #14). Moderators explained they would encourage posters who wanted to post long-winded or random thoughts to do so in the Lounge. One of the owners posted: “There is a place for banter and troll-ism, it is the lounge for the most part” (PB thread 51261, #25).

On the occasions when moderating was exercised in the Lounge, there was user opposition. In the thread, “The Lounge Haven or Hell?,” the original poster questioned why a thread had been closed by Phillyblog moderators and administrators, writing: “I was told to put some of my silly threads in here because it was a free-for-all and it didn’t

interfere with the set-up of the site. The thread was placed in the furthest recesses of this site in an unmoderated place for the exact reason that it exists....as a place where members of this site can blow off steam and say what they think” (PB thread 29188, #1). There was agreement from many, but the administrator who closed the thread publicly disagreed and explained that “off-topic/random posts” were not the same thing as free-for-all, continuing: “the Internet is not a free-for-all, when you signed up, you agreed to a terms of service. There are rules everywhere you go, whether you’re in the workplace, McDonald’s, WalMart, on the Internet, or in court” (PB thread 16776, #8).

3.1.2 Moderating: Redirecting, Warning, and Deleting

A second strategy for regulation was through volunteer moderators. These designated moderators had an official regulatory capacity that was most commonly expressed through redirecting discussions, warning users (either within the threads themselves or in private messages), or deleting content. Moderators would ask participants to “stay on topic” and not “hijack threads with endless off-topic discussions” (PB thread 30441, #11). If moderators thought discussions were becoming too personal, they would warn users to “tone it down” or threaten to close the thread. Other times they would call out those persistently problematic users. In a thread discussing the architectural aesthetics of one of the University of Pennsylvania’s buildings, participants coincided in its ugliness. Another poster challenged: “Why do we care if you think it’s ugly? . . . Maybe people think you are ugly and that’s why you have no friends and thus tons of time to spend on Phillyblog?” (PB thread 24853, #15). Others responded that the post was adolescent and unhelpful, and the moderator urged: “I have to say that you seem

to be spending a lot of time attacking other people, which doesn't really contribute much to the Blog. How about some positive posts?" (PB thread 24853, #25).

Deleting content was another technique moderators employed. Deleting spam, in the form of Viagra advertisements or pornography, was common. Moderators also deleted posts they deemed were in violation of the site's Terms of Service, including personal attacks, duplicate posts, or wildly off-topic responses. In one instance, a moderator both deleted content and closed a thread, explaining, "Folks, when this conversation shifted to the personal habits of a former member, I believe it's time to close the thread. I've also deleted a number of the more recent postings" (PB thread 18059). As a general practice, moderators would send private messages to participants warning them of a complaint or what they saw as an infraction of the rules. Some moderators asked participants to edit the content themselves, while others just deleted the post outright.

The deletion of content led some to ask moderators to defend their moderating approach. In the Spirituality sub-forum, a Phillyblog user initiated a thread urging the moderator be removed because "he/she seems to only stifle proper discussion and apparently has a pro-Roman Catholic agenda and will remove posts that fit his/her own agenda. . . . You are the worst sort of censor, one who thinks they are doing good when they are just doing bad" (PB thread 78933, #1 and #15). The moderator responded with his own policy regarding moderating:

I seek to be even-handed in my warnings and infractions and use them judiciously as a last resort. If it is an observation or critique that is not a direct attack against a religion or its followers I generally let it go. If someone wants to post about some seemingly outrageous spiritual or religious belief- I let it go. I seek to cultivate mutual dialogue amongst and between people of diverse and divergent views and backgrounds. However, when I get complaints from 3 or 4 or 5 people from a particular faith tradition, or even one or two if it is blatant enough, who are offended and feel their faith or religious belief system has been attacked or unfairly

slurred or impugned, then I will take appropriate action as the situation seems to warrant (PB thread 78933, #17).

In this case that action included warning the user via private message with the message that the poster had insulted another member and explaining that the post would be removed from the forum.

3.1.3 *Calling Foul and Rebuking*

Warnings regarding the rules of discourse weren't initiated solely by official moderators. It was equally common for Phillyblog participants to employ their own strategies, often using humor: "Now let's get this thread back on topic, what was that again?" (PB thread 49197, #22). They talked around problematic posters, either by ignoring them outright or by never addressing their comments. Participants also articulated to others what the norms of acceptable speech were and when they were being breached. Such strategies of "calling foul" often involved restating the site's codified rules or Terms of Service. In threads, posters accused each other of personal attacks "violation #4 of the TOS," of copying and pasting an entire publication, or of posting under more than one username. In many cases when users invoked the site's TOS, they did so by reading back those rules: "Have you created yet another new identity? It is a violation of the Terms of Service. Let me show you those again: 'REGISTRATION: We require a registration process so that you may choose one member name. . . .You may not have more than one account or user name, and only one email address for your use of the service'" (PB thread 54320, #18).

Calling foul also occurred when participants doubted the information of a poster: "I can't find evidence of any such thing, I'm calling BS on this one" (PB thread 23221, #7). Other times posters asked for additional proof, "I really would like to see the source

of those numbers” (PB thread 2247, #19), or more incredulously, “Are we to believe your so-called facts are true? Where are your facts and statements coming from? What source is cited?” (PB thread 23392, #10). Asking for a citation for a poster’s interpretation of census data, a participant argued:

What, I'm supposed to do your work for you? You're the one who made specific assertions about census data. You're a big boy; can you stand by what you said and actually **prove it**, or is it just BS? (Hint: statements like "I drove through the ghetto and saw unwed welfare mothers destroying the fabric of society with my own eyes" and "I totally work in the blacks-are-destroying-our-society 'industry' so I know all about it" do not constitute actual support for your statistical assertions (PB thread 24421, #14).

Importantly, the expectation from most participants was that posters were responsible for their own statements and for providing some evidence, proof, or citations for the most controversial of their positions.

Articulation of the norms of discussion also occurred when users engaged in rebuking other posters: admonishing others for being out-of-touch, extreme in their perspectives, or self-absorbed; reprimanding participants for name calling; or chiding users that were seen as overly negative about the city. In a discussion thread regarding gentrification, Phillybloggers disagreed about whether and in what ways an influx of middle-class homeowners into predominately minority or working class neighborhoods positively or negatively affected those areas. One poster disagreed with another, accusing the other of being “on an illegal substance when writing the post.” He then wrote that other participants were “ignorant” for misunderstanding demographic data and that everyone on the board was “beneath his level.” Frustrated, another replied:

[S]o stop posting and set up your own blog so you can engage yourself in yourself. i dont understand why you need to make things so personal and pick fights. if you would stop passing judgement on people then maybe we could HEAR what you are saying. i think that you probably have some

interesting things to say, just get over the jerry springer crap and move on (PB thread 29398, #54).

Participants reprimanded others for name calling, personal attacks, and being overly-confrontational. “Is it just confrontation that turns you on for confrontation sake? I can’t see any other purpose for your posts. Calling a person a racist and other names hardly helps the discussion” (PB thread 34124, #10). Another poster adopted a more level tack, writing a participant needed to “tone down their rhetoric,” and that we all “need to put animosities aside. . . I’d like to hear you opinions and would hope that you would be willing to respect us enough to listen to ours” (PB thread 27645, #65).

In a particularly Philadelphia-focused condemnation, some posters were chided as being overwhelmingly negative and pessimistic, garnering them the label “Negadelphian.” One poster criticized another who was consistently posting about the problems of the city without offering any actions, or analysis: “You rant and complain without offering any solutions besides moving. I don’t get the sense that many people contributing to this message board are going to leave Philly because of what you are telling them. . . So, what are you doing to take action and what would you like others to do?” (PB thread 29975, #18). Joking that Phillybloggers would have nothing to talk about after the mayoral election, another participant posted mockingly that Phillyblog participants would talk about how:

SEPTA Sucks. Cars suck. Cyclists suck. The Phillies Suck. Comcast sucks. Verizon sucks. That restaurant I went to last night sucks. The Quizzo team sucks. Guns suck. Gun-haters suck. Bush sucks. Rendell sucks. Liberals suck. Conservatives suck. That neighborhood sucks. That PB happy hour sucked. PB sucks. PCs suck. Macs suck. The Northeast sucks. The rest of the city sucks. The suburbs suck. Jersey sucks. Quit plantin’ those trees, ‘cause they suck. The Eagles suck. Tall buildings suck. Casinos suck. Condos suck. Rowhouses suck. The Air sucks. Developers suck. Chain stores suck. Passyunk Avenue sucks. The smoking ban sucks. Smoking sucks. I-95 sucks. The Schuylkill sucks. The

stadiums suck. Driving sucks. My commute sucks. (PB thread 36323, #17).

Such rebuking was often aimed more generally at bettering Phillyblog discourse rather than aimed directly at any individual poster. It was a statement of what was and was not appropriate behavior, a way to articulate to the larger audience of users about where lines of behavior would be challenged.

3.1.4 User Banning

The ultimate regulation on the site was user banning. Banning meant the user's IP address and username were blocked from logging into the forums. According to site administrators, banning active users was rare and was taken seriously. Banning required that a user had repeatedly violated the Terms of Service, was being reported by other users, and was deemed by moderators to be detracting more than contributing to the conversation space. Regular and contentious users who suddenly stopped posting often prompted speculation that they had been banned. On one such occasion, one of the site owners posted a rationale for the ban:

I probably get 3-5 reported posts a day, and when I see the same person getting reported over and over again by different people (including mods) I get concerned. After reading many of these posts, I realize they are pretty low value. Phillyblog was built to HELP people talk about philly. . . Insulting people, and raves is not what phillyblog was founded for. . . I am saying we just don't want that here REAPEATEDLY from the SAME people. We all get pissed off here, but we don't use this forum as a way to launch PERSONAL attacks. We will continue to ban people (we average about 1 banning every 2-3 months, out of about 2k new subscribers monthly). We are pretty hands off, trust me (PB thread 51261, #23).

And it was in the banning of users that disagreements were most clearly articulated about what users saw as appropriate regulation versus the legitimate use of the space. In a thread entitled "Adieu, [username]" (PB thread 27647), Phillybloggers engaged in a long debate about the appropriateness of the recent banning of an active, but

controversial user. Many posters agreed with the decision: “If what she did constituted being warned by the admins and she continued to do so, then she deserves to be banned” (PB thread 27647, #6). Others challenged the ban, with one poster arguing that the point of a forum is for points of view to be aired in public: “isn’t that what a FORUM IS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! She has the right to express her opinions just as I do and as you do” (PB thread 27647, #10). And still others asked for a public accounting for the banning decision: “i would like for someone to point out and show evidence that [username] is bannable. . . . this is not a communist regime” (PB thread 27647, #15).

The issue for some was that with the exit of the extreme, fringe, loud, or eccentric voices the discussion space itself became less interesting. Starting a “campaign” to reinstate one of Phillyblog’s banned posters, a user complained banning Phillybloggers “hurts us just a little bit” because:

It keeps us talking about the mundane, the trivial, and hell, it results in a thread about Macy's that makes the *Iliad* seem like a pamphlet. . . When I walk out of my door on a regular basis in the Market East area, I am confronted daily with an assortment of odd-balls, weirdos, malcontents, racists, jerks, and really nice people. We could turn this site into the Donny and Marie site and then everyone could exchange vanilla comments to one another followed by sweet "I love you" xxx's and ooo's. That doesn't mean that I don't have deep divisions and disagreements with some of what gets written here. But again, like walking out my door each day in this fine city, you don't have to agree with everyone and everything to love it here. Every voice counts.....even when some of the voices hit the wrong note a lot (PB thread 27691, #22).

But another poster vehemently disagreed: “He harrassed people, he threatened them. . . You can call that ‘diversity’ if you want, but I will continue to call it being an uncivil jack@ss” (PB thread 27691, #40).

User banning, like all the taming mechanisms used on the site, was controversial. Users publicly debated, and often disagreed, about how much nuisance they were

collectively willing to accept before the space became so regulated as to be “boring” or simply less useful to them. After having a post removed, one poster responded that he was being censored and exhorted that if the site was intended as a public forum then his words should not be deleted: “We all pay for censored speech. The fact is that this site is presented as a forum for public discussion. Are you saying that you don’t care about censorship and its effects?” (PB thread 51729, #5).

Others bristled at the moderating, arguing that it was arbitrary, inconsistent, and unnecessary. In the third year of its life, Phillyblog administrators started deleting content they deemed was not focused enough on Philadelphia or wasn’t considered “family friendly.” There was a backlash from users. One of the site’s heaviest users stated: “It is important to recognize that the quality and quantity of diverse posters is important. . . but maybe some threads shouldn’t be deleted unless they are clearly bad for the blog (ads, etc)” (PB thread 2305, #12). Another appealed to the self-moderating ability of the participants themselves: “Moderators should remember that we, for the most part, are all adults and can talk frankly and tastefully about a wide range of subjects - some that concern ideas outside of Philadelphia. . . it should be about Philadelphia (area) but also by Philadelphians about subjects that have only tangential concern to the city and suburbs (national politics, sports, arts, etc.)” (PB thread 2305, #20).

3.2 Silence & Exit

While some users felt their public talk was constrained by the site—claiming censorship, unnecessary moderating and banning—others felt just as strongly that regulation was necessary in order to provide a space for public talk. Many users saw as the necessity for some degree of regulation. Without some controls, people were equally

constrained in their public talk due to what they saw as a chaotic and even treacherous discussion space. Throughout Phillyblog's lifespan, there were calls for tighter moderation and clearer posting guidelines in order to keep the "forum more usable" (PB thread 14813, #41) or focused primarily on the city of Philadelphia (PB thread 2305). And concerned with an increase in personal attacks one moderator explained frustrated, "When people personally attack each other it adds nothing to the forum. It creates a sense of chaos. It doesn't foster a sense of freedom to post (Catherine, interview).

In interviews, posters explained that they were ignoring posts that seemed intent on taunting people politically or "baldly race baiting." Some indicated that they would read, but no longer respond to threads. Within threads, posters who seemed to feel that they were being at best questioned or at worst attacked would defend themselves and then state that they were "bowing out" of a thread. Other posters reported avoiding boards altogether or reading them less frequently. Tom explained, "the bad chased out the good, a lot of the people who had been more interesting participants participated far less frequently" (Tom, interview). Ian said simply, "I might still read, but I don't sign in and I hardly ever post anymore" (Ian, interview). And Elizabeth said that while she "loved talking politics," a group of people who she saw as not interested in discussing but rather in arguing took over many of the national political threads during the 2008 presidential election season, "and it just kind of cut off all discussion." Instead of delving into topics or boards, she avoided parts of the site where she thought the most aggressive posters would show up:

I think a lot of people have left, or a lot of people are like me, they kind of maybe pop in once a day and if there's something that they want to post about that won't raise those kind of people then they will. For example, right now people are just finding out about school placement for charter schools and magnet schools and things like that. So, I will pop into the

parenting forum and say something like, “has anybody gotten their letter.” But, I am not going to pop in say, what do you think about the Somalia pirate, did he really know what he was doing. You know that is not going to get me anywhere anymore (Elizabeth, interview).

Long-time, regular posters also exited the site. In interviews, moderators described spending less and less time on Phillyblog or leaving the site completely. In December 2008, an active user posted his farewell to Phillyblog, “I am leaving Phillyblog for good. Ciao.” He commenced the thread by contending that Phillyblog was “old and tired” because the software which operated the site had not been kept up-to-date. The technical problems, however, were only part of the issue:

When I *can* get on Phillyblog and not wade through Chinese Mandarin spam once I arrive, the signal to noise ratio of this place has deteriorated tremendously from some of its own posters. . . This spam continues unabated at an exponential pace it starts to resemble phl.* newsgroups—something only worthy of searching and not actually reading in-depth. . . . These folks, when pressed about their deleterious trolling, usually retort “well why don’t you get a life?” That’s rich considering they’re wasting their life spewing trash (Phillyblog thread 71704, #1).

Posters were frustrated and concerned about the tone and quality of discourse on the site. But many were deeply ambivalent about how to deal with those problems. Kathleen posted to the site that she worried: “Many newcomers are being scared away by some of the rudeness/attacks here. . . But I think a wide diversity of opinion here is one of the best things that PB has to offer. So, I am glad to see people who cross lines like go away, though I still have mixed feelings about that. . . Hopefully this means we’ll start seeing more people feel they can join the discussion. The more the merrier, I say” (PB thread 51261, #45).

4. Conclusion

Urban life and its geography have long been seen as a ripe arena for encountering difference. The city's public spaces are thought to be sites for visibility, mixing, and chance interaction and therefore for the negotiation of diversity. For this reason, cities have played a central role in the envisioning of a normative politics that can deal with difference (e.g. Amin, 2006; Binnie, 2006; Donald, 1999; Sennett, 1994; Young, 1990).

Encountering difference is a critical aspect of most visions of participatory public life and informed citizenship. Deliberative theory, in particular, has paid a great deal of attention to ensuring that a variety of viewpoints are represented in any public dialogue. It is only through the exposure to different and oppositional viewpoints that public decisions can be sound. This chapter has shown the ways in which networked public talk has a contestatory function rooted in the encounter with and negotiation of difference. As argued, I conceive of networked public talk as political because it is through talk that citizens demonstrate that an issue should be a matter of common concern. In other words, there is an emergent and definitional function to public talk online focused on making sense of public issues. Publicly-oriented talking constructs matters of common concern.

One reason that deliberation as a public practice has developed rules to govern the dialogue is precisely because difference is conflictual and in order for there to be any discourse we need to find ways to talk across and about our disagreements. In this sense, networked public talk shares common ground with deliberative theory. But in the case of Phillyblog, rules and regulations for discussion were always open to debate and negotiated over time. Structures of discussion also allowed for the relaxation of regulation, as in the case of the Lounge in which moderation was almost non-existent.

The concept of networked public talk points to the locations in which there is always an ongoing tension of encountering in any kind of public talk: balancing between serendipity and control. Attempts to tame the discussion space of Phillyblog were always fragile. Some users felt constrained by the site—claiming censorship, unnecessary moderating, and the need for uninhibited, free-flowing conversations. But too much openness was equally constraining, alienating and excluding some users from the discussion space. Like any location of public discourse (on or offline), Phillyblog was never wholly uncontrolled, never wholly public. It was space of exclusion as well as inclusion. Contributors were allowed into the space and also kept out of it, and there were large parts of the Philadelphia population that were not represented by it. But an openness to encounter—even a fragilely negotiated one—contributed to the site’s “publicness.” The very public nature of space, according to Don Mitchell, is defined by a constant negotiation of competing visions about that space, “the ongoing opposition of visions that have been held, on the one hand, by those who seek order and control and, on the other, by those who seek places for oppositional political activity and unmediated interaction” (Mitchell, 1995).

In as much as Phillyblog worked as a space of public discourse, it did so by using techniques to tame the discourse rather than completely control it. These techniques required a certain openness to mess and conflict, a willingness to engage in an ongoing debate about what was considered legitimate and non-legitimate use of the space, and participants who were committed to the engagement. Urban communication scholars Gumpert and Drucker (2002) have made a similar point about the digital city. The authors argue that communication technologies may help us “transcend locality” but they

also demand control and predictability. Recognizing that cities have always been configured by communication technologies, they write that the digital city should be viewed as more than a “simple electronic connection because as the media environment of the digital city is technologically reconfigured, so too is the fabric and quality of life of those that inhabit that space” (p. 28). Their concern is that a certain amount of care needs to be exercised when balancing between control and the possibility of the unexpected, or what they call the need for “controlled unpredictability.” I cite Gumpert and Drucker here because they point to this critical balance between control and serendipity. Their argument is broader than my own, looking to the structures of the city itself and the ways in which people have adapted such structures to both control interactions as well as to enable a certain amount of unplanned and accidental encounters. Ultimately, however, they are concerned about the ways in which digital technologies and the physical city interpenetrate.

This is the point at which I move to the next chapter. In this chapter my focus was on the ways in which Phillyblog—its user practices, information architecture, and norms—both enabled and constrained public talk. In the next chapter, I direct attention outward from the site itself and towards the city, thinking about the ways in which public talk in online urban forums can locate and make visible publics and public issues in material spatial terms and re-imagine places as locations of public connection. In the chapter, I describe two aspects of the relationship among place, publics, and internet discussion. First, I think about the ways in which public talk helps to construct and publicize places by characterizing them as one thing and not the other, and through that process, makes visible political tensions at work within the city. Second, I think about the

ways in which places and the networked discussion of places help to construct publics by locating issues, and by imagining locations that invite public involvement. My point is not to suggest that these two aspects are somehow totally separable. Rather, my argument is that online talk, place, and publics are interrelated and exist in a reciprocal relationship.

CHAPTER 6: Grounding the Public and Imagining the City

I feel like I know a lot more about the city than I would have as a resident who lived here 3 ½ years and didn't read Phillyblog. I feel like I understand differences from neighborhood to neighborhood. . . . In some respects I can see what neighborhoods have different communities, like if they have community spirit. And some really straightforward things: I know that Queen Village is a nice family neighborhood because I know they have a very good school and people move there for that. I can now form opinions of places, whether accurate or not, that I wouldn't form opinions of or that I wouldn't ever really think about. You know, I really wouldn't think about Bridesburg. And from my impressions on Phillyblog, it is a very safe but very insular and white area and not very accepting of outsiders. I am forming opinions based on stuff I have read that aren't necessarily good opinions to have formed . . . but there is information on there that I wouldn't have known otherwise; unless I started hanging out in Bridesburg.

- Justin, interview

1. “I really wouldn't think about Bridesburg”

Justin stakes out some territory I want to cover in this chapter. He describes forming opinions of places in part through his reading of Phillyblog. The city and its neighborhoods are characterized as “family friendly,” “safe,” or “insular.” Some are imagined as community spirited, others closed off. As a relative newcomer, having lived in the city less than five years, Justin tells of a familiarity with the city because of his participation in the forum. He feels he knew more about Philadelphia than a comparable newcomer. Recognizing that the representations and his imagination of places were not necessarily all positive, as he explains, he simply would not have thought about nor had an opinion of those places at all unless he started “hanging out” in them. At times these

conceptions had material effects. Justin talked about traveling to different places—restaurants, neighborhoods, parks—based on his reading of the forums. And he said that reading about his neighborhood on Phillyblog helped him decide to buy a house in that particular location. At other times, these conceptions influenced Justin’s perception of the city and his involvement in it. He described feeling more “connected” to his neighborhood because of his participation, explaining that he wouldn’t have “ever thought to devote as much time to the neighborhood” if it weren’t for talking with neighbors online: “It sounds goofy, but it [Phillyblog] definitely had an effect on my life and on my involvement in the city in general” (Justin, interview).

The focus of this final chapter is the relationship between networked public talk, publics, and the physical places of the city. In the previous chapter, I used Young’s spatial metaphor to explore how networked public talk has a characteristic of encountering. I focused on the information architecture, user practices, and established participant norms within Phillyblog and how they both enabled and constrained public talk. Now I want to direct attention outward from the site itself and towards the city, thinking about the ways in which public talk in online urban forums can ground and make visible publics and public issues in concrete spatial terms and re-imagine places as locations of civic connection.

Such an argument necessarily starts with the assumption that space and place are socially constructed, rather than being the static, pre-constituted, or empty backdrops against which human activity plays out (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005a; Soja, 1999; Thrift, 1999). Space does not exist outside social processes. Rather, it is an active component of social life, producing and being produced by social relations. This

perspective has become so prevalent in critical theory, human geography, and urban studies that it is now an article of faith. Nonetheless, it is a perspective that is particularly important to articulate when thinking about research in internet technology and political communication. Often, in these lines of scholarship, space and place are seen either in terms of abstract metaphors for social activity (“the theater of politics,” “the online public sphere”), or taken for granted and envisioned as the fixed background against which “the real stuff of history and politics is enacted” (Shome, 2003).

These tendencies can be seen, for example, in the once-popular assumptions that the global internet created a means to transcend material space, which was viewed entirely in terms of an impediment or limitation to social interaction. Nicolas Negroponte famously predicted place would become irrelevant in the information age, as the limitations of geography were removed: “Digital living will include less and less dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time, and the transmission of place itself will start to become possible” (1995, p. 165). In this account, place is an inert collection of pre-formed and easily transmittable objects, rather than an actively constructed part of social life. The virtuality of cyberspace was envisioned as the creation of a parallel dimension, independent from the world of physical spaces.

Within discursive theories of politics, there has long been a connection between space, publics and democracy. Indeed, the very idea of democracy is “inseparable from that of public space” (Hénaff & Strong, 2001, p. 35). Famously, Habermas (1989) drew the connection between spaces of assembly and the rise of the public sphere. Locating the apex of the public sphere in the 17th and 18th centuries, he partly links its emergence to semi-private urban spaces and institutions, specifically London coffee houses and

Parisian salons. Still, though Habermas traces a historical and spatial basis for the public sphere, his efforts to extend these specific conditions produces a normative ideal that is not locatable (Crang, 2000). The normative public sphere—those criteria that will make democracy work as it should—is a universal and abstract realm in which democracy operates, but its materiality is “immaterial to its functioning” (Mitchell, 1995).

This chapter asserts that the role of place in politics is more than a conceptual ideal or metaphor for public activity. How places are constructed, who occupies them, and how they are perceived are all matters of crucial importance since, as Mitchell argues, space and place constitute the “ground within and from which political activity flows” (1995). Conversely, it can also be said that political activity constructs place. In short, democracy is more than ideas, arguments, reasons, and positions: it happens somewhere and is mediated through physical places and material stuff (Gieryn, 2000; Latour & Weibel, 2005; Parkinson, 2009).

In the chapter, I turn first to scholarship that considers how places are constructed and acquire identities. As a starting point, I use Thomas Gieryn’s definition of place as being physical, locatable and imbued with multiple meanings. Such a framework insists that rather than being settled or internally coherent, places (like publics and public issues) are comprised of multiple and often conflicting understandings and representations. I deepen this perspective by highlighting recent research that focuses on the layered, synergistic relationship between digital technologies and physical place. The chapter then moves on to analyze how thinking about place is relevant to conceptualizing publics, public construction, and online talk. In the remainder of the chapter, I describe two aspects of the relationship between place, publics, and internet discussion. First, I think

about the ways in which public talk helps to construct and publicize places by characterizing them as one thing and not the other, and through that process, makes visible political tensions at work within the city. Second, I think about the ways in which places and the networked discussion of places help to construct publics by locating issues, and by imagining locations that invite public involvement. My point is not to suggest that these two aspects are somehow totally separable. Rather, my argument is that online talk, place, and publics are interrelated and exist in a reciprocal relationship.

2. Places as Physical, Locatable and Meaningful

Thomas Gieryn (2000) argues that despite claims of the transcendence of place by technology, place continues to be a persistent and constitutive element of social life. He lays out three definitional parameters to describe place. First, places are defined in their physicality. This means that places are compilations of things and objects at particular locales, and that our social processes happen through these built, designed, and assembled material forms. Second, Gieryn posits that places are locatable, meaning that a place is a “unique spot in the universe.” As such, places have finitude, and one can include as well as exclude from place. Importantly, however, the boundaries around places are elastic and nesting: a place can be a room, neighborhood, city or nation, and an everyday site like the kitchen table can occupy all of these simultaneously (p. 465). Third, places are invested with meaning. What makes a place a place is that it is named, identified and represented by ordinary people and through everyday practice. From this perspective, places always have dual constructions: they are physically built and imbued with shared meaning and value.

Gieryn specifically states that place cannot be found online: “virtual it is not” (p. 465). Gieryn’s point is consistent with much of the critical and theoretical commentary on the impact of the internet on our social lives which has overtly or more subtly set up a dichotomy by placing “virtual” spaces against “real” physical space (see Crang, et al., 2007). And indeed, the materiality and locatability of place would appear to sit uncomfortably with the “online” talk that I am studying. But more recent internet scholarship has begun to challenge this assumption. The proliferation of social media has forced a further examination of the connection between online networks and place, suggesting that those we interact with online are often those we have a pre-existing relationship with in offline settings. New conceptions of layered (Zook & Graham, 2007), heterarchic (Menser, 1996), augmented (Aurigi & De Cindio, 2008) or hybrid (de Souza e Silva, 2006) spaces have emerged. Each of these constructions indicates that information and communication technologies do not create a parallel universe. Rather, there is an ongoing interpenetration between digital technology and physical place. The result is the physical world is categorized, imagined, and located through online spaces which form layers of information, interaction, or meaning tied to—or in the case of still newer geolocative technologies, embedded in—material places. As such, urban places are neither only physical nor only digital but an overlapping, interrelated combination of the two.

Focusing on the ways in which information and communication technologies are increasingly embedded in everyday neighborhood interactions, Hampton argues the internet holds as much potential to reconnect as to distance us from place (2002). Using ethnographic and social network analysis of a wired Toronto suburb, Hampton and

Wellman (2003) conclude that information technology actually enhances a sense of neighborhood by facilitating contact between loosely connected residents. Compared to the non-wired residents of the suburb, those who had internet access and subscribed to the local online discussion group both knew and talked with more people. They also observe the internet facilitating the discussion of, and at times the efforts to organize around, local issues. In understanding a shared interest in a particular location, research like Hampton and Wellman's reminds us that everyday lives and problems continue to be based in and mediated by place. Moreover, the public life of places is in part constituted through information and communication technologies.

A number of scholars have also suggested that the internet has become "more local" in its content, in its uses, and in who it connects (e.g. Davies & Crabtree, 2004; McCullough, 2004). Davies and Crabtree argue that locality is still a "constant source of everyday problems which require co-operative solutions. At the neighborhood level, it is shared problems that link 'space' to 'place,' that relate individuals to local communities" (2004). Indeed, as users take a more active role in the collective understanding of their locality whether by sharing restaurant reviews on a site like Yelp.com, or by pooling information on a Google map tracking bicycling hazards, the result has been a more reciprocal, recursive, or "synergistic" relationship between the city and its residents (Hardey, 2007). Gordon and Koo (2008) suggest that participatory media allow groups to form through communicating a shared sense of "who we are" by means of a "mutual understanding of someplace." They argue that rather than creating separate online and offline worlds, with the online slowly supplanting connections to physical place, social media have revealed how the connections can, in fact, be deepened: "Networks need not

degrade, nor merely coexist with, but can augment the capacity of a place to find meaning” (2008, p. 208).

This leads into Gieryn’s third characteristic of place: places are invested with meaning and value. Places are filled with practices, objects, representations, and people, and consequently, they are always “interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood and imagined.” Places aren’t just located on a map, they are sensed. Gieryn explains:

Places are made as people ascribe qualities to the material and social stuff gathered there: ours or theirs; safe or dangerous; public or private; unfamiliar or known; rich or poor; Black or White; beautiful or ugly; new or old; accessible or not. . . . The very idea of ‘neighborhood’ is not inherent in any arrangement of streets and houses, but is rather an ongoing practical and discursive production/imagining of a people (p. 472).

This is a rich description of place in that it forces an understanding of place that is replete with meaning, values, representations, and imagination. But, it is important not to view these qualities as fixed. As Gieryn points out, places always support multiple interpretations: “the meaning or value of the same place is labile—flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested” (2000, p. 465). Place is relational, produced through daily practice (technological or not), and “in an infinite state of becoming” (de Freitas, 2010).

The interrelated, multiple nature of place has been theorized extensively by geographer Doreen Massey. For Massey, places are always the product of interrelations and therefore necessarily also the “sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity.” (1994, 1999). Like Iris Marion Young (1990), part of Massey’s project is to envision political space (and therefore political life) that can accommodate and is comprised of more than one voice. For Massey, places always have multiple identities and support multiple narratives. From this perspective, she argues places are best

conceived as “cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism. Most evidently this is so because the social relations of space are experienced differently, and variously interpreted, by those holding different positions as part of it” (1994, p. 3). As such, places are sites of disruption and conflict. They are open to multiple meanings and rival interpretations of what they are and what they are not, as well as what they were and what they were not (Massey, 1995).

Starting from the position that, rather than simply *being*, places *become* sites that people actively interpret, narrate, describe, project, and categorize, I want to think about the relationship between online activity on Phillyblog and the construction of place. From the outset, I have argued that place is an important component of online public talk. Indeed, categorizing Phillyblog as an online urban forum is a deliberate attempt to highlight the relationship of online discussion and lived spaces. Part of the argument in the third chapter was to locate Phillyblog within trends and issues in the city of Philadelphia: neighborhood and population change; the city’s political environment; and crime, safety and quality of life concerns. These different trajectories were the “context” for understanding why certain topics of discussion seemed to be particularly prevalent in the forums, how Phillyblog was influenced by the same population migration trends as the city itself, and in what ways Phillyblog was not immune to trends that affect any internet medium, including geography, technological access, and income. But my larger argument—which I am emphasizing most in this chapter—is that the city is more than the context, or container, within which Phillyblog operated. The city is also actively constructed via public talk online. These trends and trajectories of the city were in a real

sense articulated and brought into being for debate through the narration, description, and construction of place, as it was occurring within venues like Phillyblog.

3. Constructing and Publicizing Places

Phillyblog supported a fine-grained focus on the daily routines and local affairs of city life. Through its neighborhood forums, the site's information architecture replicated many of the geographic distinctions at use in everyday conversation among city residents. As a result, discussions about place were mapped to specific neighborhoods or locales, as well as sorted into geographically indexed sections of the site. The first-hand reports that constituted a large portion of posts were regularly grounded in place, as they frequently included specific coordinates within the city such as cross-streets (e.g. 17th & Brandywine), districts (e.g. the Italian Market, Independence Mall), or landmarks (e.g. city hall, Geno's Cheesesteaks). These location markers functioned as a form of bottom-up classification or folksonomy—in this case, a sorting of neighborhood spaces as the residents themselves understood them. Through these processes of grounding and orientation, the city became an active map on which users told stories, shared experiences, and found information about specific places.

Like other public exchanges on Phillyblog, discussions of place were cumulative and open to the contributions, interpretations, and reinterpretations of multiple readers and writers. In this sense, places and their descriptions, categorizations, and remembrances were publicized and made accessible to anyone, whether located in one neighborhood or the next, the city or its suburbs, the Philadelphia region or a distant country. For example, one Phillyblog participant interviewed was a Philadelphia native now living in the Midwest who monitored the conversations taking place in his old

neighborhood. Another interviewee lived in the Southwest U.S. He had never been a resident of Philadelphia, but was interested in the city and became active on the site. Thus, the local knowledge and descriptions of city places shared and generated within the forums—and exposing a multitude of histories, representations and experiences with a place—became accessible to all, resident and nonresident, newcomer or lifelong native. These depictions of place became part of what Eric Gordon calls “network locality,” a repository of formerly local knowledge that through its public availability on the internet has become globally “ready-at-hand” (2008).

But there is another aspect of “public” I would like to highlight in this section and chapter. As might be expected, the descriptions, depictions, and even memories of the city or neighborhood that came into being on Phillyblog sometimes aligned and at other times were antagonistic. Therefore, in describing the characteristic ways Phillyblog participants constructed place, I want to pay attention to two aspects of place which Massey highlights: 1) places are always comprised of multiple narratives, and 2) places may have boundaries, but they are not closed systems. To view places otherwise, according to Massey, robs place of “one of its most creative and disruptive characteristics: its happenstance arrangement-in-relation-to-each-other of multiple narratives” (1999, p. 283). Places are always open to multiple meanings and, at times, force the acknowledgement of multiple, or even competing, narratives. For this reason, when constructing places through online talk, those places were also being made public in the sense of making visible, sometimes in a very inchoate form, the intangible forces at work within the urban setting: class tensions, changing neighborhood populations, gentrification, competing individual and group interests, and economic growth or

contraction. In some instances, those broader forces were brought to the surface to become the subject of further collective debate.

3.1 Everyday practices of constructing place

As the third chapter described, the city of Philadelphia has recently seen a modest uptick in population after decades of decline. The basis for that population increase also points to change, as it was centered in increasing Hispanic and Asian populations and corresponding decreases in white and African American residents (Gammage & Duchneskie, 2011). The growth in the city is also unevenly distributed in terms of its neighborhoods. Some of the neighborhoods surrounding Philadelphia's Center City saw the largest increases in population, while some West Philadelphia neighborhoods saw population decline. Phillyblog operated during these years of change, and concerns about dislocation, gentrification, and newcomers were prevalent on the site. As previously noted, Phillyblog itself seemed to have a preponderance of new or newly transplanted residents active on its boards. Participants registered with usernames indicating their recent arrival or movements within the city, adopting online handles using some variation on "newcomer," "newbie," or "new to ____ neighborhood." Within the forums, it was common for participants to explain their presence by describing how they found Phillyblog by searching for resources in a new neighborhood, or first came to the site because they were looking to buy a house. While less visibly numerous, long-time residents and Philadelphia natives were active in every geographically-indexed forum on the site and often shared their history with the neighborhood, reminisced about what it once was, weighed in on its boundaries, and imagined its possible futures. It was within

this mix of newcomers, migrants, established neighbors, and city natives that depictions of, and conflicting perspectives on, place were often articulated.

Even as they bring tensions around class, poverty, race, and visions of the future to the fore, trends such as population change, development, and growth are abstract and incremental. One means by which these pervasive but ineffable issues find form is through a process of describing and narrating places. On Phillyblog, the abstract forces and submerged tensions of urban life emerged in the context of questions that were based in more mundane, day-to-day experiences. Three characteristic and commonplace patterns of discussion on the forum focused on geographical concerns or “whereness”; the three can be summarized as 1) questions about where one should live, 2) explanations of why where one lives is the way that it is, and 3) and reminiscing about where one lives.

Phillybloggers, for example, had some of their most detailed conversations about place when they responded to people who were asking advice about which neighborhood to move in to. Moving advice became so common that a long-time Phillyblogger created an FAQ for users so they could standardize the questions about “where should I live?”—including questions about whether the poster preferred public or private schools; bustling activity or calm and quiet; had kids or no kids (PB thread 22556 and 24270). In many of these mundane discussions, the relative character and merits of a neighborhood were compared and contrasted to others. Posters asked participants to tell them about the safest and most dangerous neighborhoods in the city, the most and least diverse, those that were the hippest or most kid-friendly. Posters initiated threads asking the difference between two neighborhoods they were considering: Queen Village or Pennsport, Northern

Liberties or Center City, Lawncrest or Lawndale. In threads answering these requests for advice, neighborhoods were described, delineated and depicted, as public debate emerged about what a neighborhood was like, or even where the neighborhood boundaries lay. As additional stories and information were layered on top of these spaces, they became categorized in a multitude of ways: safe, scary, family friendly, white, diverse, tolerant, good for kids, bad for dogs, insular, developing, thriving, or in decline.

In one instance, a Phillyblog poster who had recently moved to the city asked about the “most/least racially harmonious philly neighborhoods,” explaining that his perception was that “Mount Airy was racially diverse, Roxborough was working class but very mixed, and Fishtown was the least tolerant of non-whites moving in” (PB thread 7991, #1). In the successive posts, some respondents agreed that Roxborough was “white and conservative,” while Mount Airy was known for “harmonious diversity.” But what Mount Airy was depended on your location and your previous experience within it, as another poster explicated: “There really are two distinct Mt. Airy’s, and people who aren’t from there should know that, especially when talking about the diversity factor. I grew up in what I know as East Mt. Airy, and there has only been one non-black family on my block since I moved there 17 years ago” (PB thread 7991, #15). Similarly, in a thread discussing the merits of moving to Fishtown or Fairmount, posters described Fairmount as “more gentrified,” while Fishtown was “coming up” and “quiet,” with more abandoned properties but less crime (PB thread 23394). In another thread posted to the neighborhood board, a poster interested in moving to Fishtown wanted to know if it had a good mix of generations, cultural diversity, and friendly neighbors. In response, a resident declared that the neighborhood had “every political and racial mix you can

imagine.” Another chimed in that Fishtown had a lot of long-time residents who took great pride in their area. But having a mix of residents, and having a mix who co-existed easily were different things, as another poster demonstrated by asking: “racial mix? It is like warring factions. . . I am all for pride for your neighborhood, but I don’t believe in white pride” (PB thread 45781, #18).

Sometimes the discussions that emerged within threads of this kind transcended their initial purpose of characterizing a Philadelphia neighborhood or locale. An example can be seen in the evolution of a thread entitled, “Up-and-Coming Neighborhoods.” The initiator of the post stated that they were moving to Philadelphia and wanted to buy a property in an “up-and-coming neighborhood” (PB thread 30786, #1). Another poster replied:

City Hall is the de facto center of Philadelphia. Gentrification radiates out from there. Center City Proper was essentially gentrified, except maybe a few small pockets, by the end of the 1980's. The first ring of neighborhoods around Center City (including University City, Powelton Village, Fairmount, Spring Garden, Northern Liberties, Queen Village, Bella Vista, and Graduate Hospital) is largely gentrified now. The question is, to what extent, will we develop a second ring of gentrified neighborhoods beyond the first ring and whether some of the hardened ghettos beyond the first ring can be changed. *Old Kensington*: This is probably the healthiest . . . it never had the crime issues that are prevalent in other parts of North Philadelphia. . . *Northern Point Breeze*: This area was almost exclusively African-American until maybe two years ago and is still in the very early stages of transformation. The crime issue is more serious than in Old Kensington. . . *Brewerytown*: This area is a hardened North Philadelphia ghetto. The only reason it stands a chance is because of developer investment in its western fringe. . . *East Kensington*: It is racially mixed with a large population of marginal Caucasians with drug or welfare dependencies. It will improve, but I see it as too far from Center City to be transformed quickly (PB thread 30786, #3).

This thread was posted in the Architecture and Urban Planning board, rather than in a specific neighborhood, and respondents from all over the city joined in. At first, the posts agreed with the initial respondent’s suggestion of a potential “second ring of

gentrified neighborhoods,” but squabbled about the nature of the neighborhoods named. One claimed that Northern Point Breeze was “statistically safer” than Old Kensington. Another took issue with the assessment that Graduate Hospital was “largely gentrified” since there was still significant amounts of empty housing stock, but that “we’re on the way up.” A Brewerytown resident (described as a “hardened North Philly ghetto”) disagreed: “I am on a block with bike-riding artists, bus-riding Temple students, beemer-driving yuppies...all coexisting with the old-timers and a few PHA [Philadelphia Housing Authority] properties. If this is ‘the line’ then the line is a great place to be” (PB thread 30786, #5, #9, #13). The thread eventually turned to questions about the need for new or rehabbed housing stock as a way to change the future of the city. A poster argued that it was jobs that fixed cities, not “high end housing.” Another disagreed, explaining that high end housing meant a higher tax base and a more attractive city for new workers. “If you look at where things stand right now, we have about 25% of the population living at or below poverty. Those people require services that their tax money can’t support. So you either raise taxes on the rest of the dwindling middle-class population (like what happened in the 70s) or you attract more new people (and jobs) to re-build the tax base and gradually lower taxes” (PB thread 30786, #42). But posters were aware of the trade-offs involved in any kind of urban development, some drawing upon their experiences living in neighborhoods which were changing and were being significantly affected by the increase in property taxes, dislocation, racial tension, and “hipster,” “yuppie” or “urban frontier” neighbors. Having grown up in Fishtown one sardonically observed that because it was “just a white working class neighborhood...the yuppies felt more comfortable rescuing it” (PB thread 30786, #64).

Threaded exchanges often moved beyond advice and explanations about where to live, to explore the underlying social and cultural history of the city. Participants in such exchanges argued about why where they were living was the way it was. Neighbors tracked the appearance and projected course of neighborhood problems—even if, on the surface, the logic of those problems was unclear. A recurring question for newcomers on Phillyblog (and to the city) was to question why there was a lack of street trash cans in many of the city’s neighborhoods. Indeed, after crime, the second most cited concern Philadelphians have about their city is its dirty streets and trash—more than taxes, a poor public school system, or lack of jobs (Eichel & Zukin, 2009). And street litter is one of those public problems that seem thoroughly fixable if there are locations in which to throw away the trash. As Phillyblog contributor Kathleen joked in an interview, “any newbie coming to Philadelphia thinks ‘How crazy is this city without trash cans?’”

The thread, “Solving trash problems...Geno’s,” posted in the South Philly neighborhood forum was initiated by a post questioning why trash receptacles couldn’t be installed in a park across the street from one of Philadelphia’s most famous cheesesteak stands (PB thread 8397). Several of the initial responses were focused on action: calling the sanitation department, attending neighborhood association meetings, or otherwise ending the “whine, whine, whine.” A Philadelphia native then posted and explained that trash cans were irrelevant because Philadelphia has always been dirty and Philadelphians always ignorant. “It is a sad thing but it exists and it always has” (PB thread 8397, #9). Undeterred, the original poster asked: “So tell me in four lines why getting more trash cans on the park side of Geno’s would be detrimental?,” which garnered the response:

I don’t think four lines is enough. On the one hand, it would be great to have the cans so that anyone walking through the neighborhood has a place to toss their wrappers and such. On the other hand, they are often a

lightning rod for illegal dumping. Some folks would rather toss last night's chicken carcass there rather than hold onto it until trash day. . . Even when a trash can is removed, the illegal dumping continues in that very spot. Much of the population just doesn't seem to be aware that littering is nasty and creates a bad image for the city overall. The immediate neighbors have approached Pat's/Geno's about the trash issue over the years, but the two shops have not been very receptive. They have their own trash cans for their patrons on their premises, and they empty them quite often (PB thread 8397, #18).

Drawing on firsthand knowledge of past attempts to solve the problem, this post suggests why solutions have been ineffective even as it creates a public archive of neighborhood actions.

In such assessments about why the neighborhood was what it was, participants reminisced about the neighborhood and what it used to be like. For example, in the example above the poster argued that the city had always been the way that it was and there was no real hope in changing it. At other times, participants used the site to reminisce about their neighborhoods. Some posted photos of street corners, old restaurants, and houses. In the Southwest Center City forum, participants started a thread devoted to relating history of their neighborhood. One of the Phillybloggers who grew up in the neighborhood posted his memories of properties neighboring the old Naval Home, a 20 acre historic landmark, which was built in 1833 and then went vacant in 1976. In 1988, the property was purchased by the developer Toll Brothers who re-developed the property into homes and condominiums ("Naval Square: History Meets Modern Luxury," 2011).

I remember (i am giving my age here) that used to be a diner, and a great one at that. The guy who ran it his name was Gabe, he was a crazy bugger, but a decent fellow, we use to pack it not only on Sunday morning after mass at St. Anthony, but also during the week, during the week we would bend our elbow at Kelly's and go to Gabes to eat, the good old days, yes it is well kept, i would love to see it kept as is, but progress seems to be more important (PB thread 30083, #4).

Other neighbors who also remembered the diner (and Gabe), talked about going there as kids, using the local swimming pool, or selling parking for Eagles games. Another respondent posted a link to a photo from the city's Department of Records of the street in 1935 and wrote: "I find the old pictures of the neighborhood striking for two reasons: They truly illustrate a vibrancy that I didn't quite understand before, and they show that the trash problems started many, many years ago" (PB thread 30083, #15).



Figure 6.1: Historical Photo of Grays Ferry Ave & S 23rd St

In a series of posts about the history of the neighborhood and what it is like now, through multiple developments, the neighborhood is carved out as having a particular and historic character. But in no way does any place in the city have a seamless or coherent identity that everyone shared. These multiple narratives could be a source of richness, of illustrating the vibrancy of the place. And they could also be a source of conflict. Such as in one poster's nostalgic writing about his South Philly neighborhood:

We went out last night on Passayunk ave. to drop 10 bucks on a couple of gelatos. As we left the joint the sound of a woman singing Opera graced the air. Across the street was a bunch of oldtimers. The young lady sang 2 songs to much applause from bystanders and people walking by. Then out of the crowd came a Asian dude, This guy could sing! It was remarkable to see a Asian guy sing Italian Opera. Talk about a blend of the cultures. The point is, this was the kind of commeradery that flowed thru most of South Philly for years, when people who don't know each other are all of a sudden having a good time. As I looked around at the crowd, most were oldtime residents. The thing I noticed about todays new residents, they are stuck up and elitist. What is sad that 90% of them

won't even respond to a "hello" as they walk their dogs, they won't pass you by and look in your eye and drop a smile or friendly nod. I hope some of you witnessed a 20 minute glimpse last night of how South Philly was many years ago. I know I did. ;) (PB thread 41134, #1).

The original poster had earned a reputation for being less than welcoming of new people into the neighborhood. And the first respondent replied, “way to generalize, that’s like me saying all the oldtimers are (fill in the blank with any negative south philly stereotype).” The original poster defended: “I just want to remind you that you moved into this n’hood, so try to fall in with the culture,” with the response from another:

Yeah, I moved into this neighborhood, partially because of the history and the culture, but also because of its proximity to work, the subway and, affordability. I respect those who have lived here for a long time, but it is my neighborhood, too. Please don’t tell me to fall in line with the culture, because there are certain parts of the “culture” that personally I don’t like....like when some old guy called me a “colored fellow.” Anyway. You can’t expect to keep the neighborhood the way it was 15-20 years ago when people have been moving to jersey in droves, selling their modest houses for profit. Abandonment left space for new people to move in, people who bring their own culture, customs, and style (PB thread 41134, #6).

South Philadelphia may have had a character and culture of its own, but it wasn’t coherent across residents or their experiences of the place.

So what does this mean for thinking about place, publics, and online talk? At times, and in often inchoate ways, characterizing and describing places as one thing and not the other served as a way to make visible political tensions at work in the city and to locate those tensions where they were being felt most acutely. In some instances, this led into broader discussions of taxation policies or debates about neighborhood development. Other times, it was just a way to generalize and air some tensions that existed in neighborhoods that were (and have always been) in transition. But these discussions also had their real material effects. People reported in interviews and on the forums that Phillyblog discussions influenced their decisions about where, or if, to buy a house. On a

more mundane level, people talked about going to new neighborhoods because they sounded interesting or fun. People tried new restaurants or traveled the city differently—using public transportation, finding alternative bus lines, or going to train stations that they had previously perceived as threatening. For example, Belle described in an interview how she was afraid of going to a transportation center in one section of the city, but through learning more about the general area she decided it “wasn’t so bad—people get shot there, but people get shot here too” (Belle, interview). Similarly, neighborhoods were characterized as scary, full of dog-haters, or “hardened ghettos.” Some Phillyblog participants even implied that their fellow forum participants were attempting to influence migration patterns and drive up housing prices, wryly observing that some contributors tried to “oversell” their own neighborhoods, so as to make sure that they weren’t alone in buying an expensive home in an “up-and-coming” neighborhood.

4. Grounding the Public and the Public’s Issues

Phillybloggers’ characterizations, comparisons, and efforts to explain the present nature of city neighborhoods lay bare the active qualities of place highlighted by Gieryn: “flexible in the hands of different people or cultures, malleable over time, and inevitably contested” (2000, p. 465). Online discussions of population change and neighborhood development also reveal how powerfully place operates as a means for bringing the submerged tensions and abstract forces of urban life into sharp relief. In this section, I wish to extend these points to suggest the important role of place in conceptualizing the public—in particular, a definition of the public that is based upon their emergent understanding of what is at issue. In addition, I wish to explore the deeper significance of a pervasive theme that ran throughout my interviews with Phillyblog informants, many of

whom talked about imagining the city as something that they were connected to. This felt sense of connectedness, attributed in large part to participation in the online forum, represented a change in the respondents' perception and attitude towards the city as a whole, despite its sprawling geography, scattered neighborhoods, and intractable problems. The city became a place to participate in, and to be involved with.

4.1 Places, issues, and constructing publics

As I underscored in the first chapter, Dewey conceived of a public emerging as a group of actors became aware of a problem in which they were jointly affected, then organized to address it. In this sense, issues and publics are always co-constituted. Here I would like to consider the ways in which material places become the medium through which publics can come into being. In this sense, places become the gatherings or the points of reference around which a public is constructed. It might even be said that at times, physical places are the issues themselves—they are the “*res* that creates a *public* around it” (Latour, 2005, p. 15). Physical places and the debates that circulate around their meaning, use, and legitimate claimants, bring people together because what places are and what they should be divide people. Because places exist, in Massey's words, “in relations of paradox or antagonism” (1994, p. 3), they are fertile grounds from which publics and issues emerge.

To demonstrate this point, I elaborate upon two of the many possible examples from Phillyblog discussions: debates about dog parks and debates about garage fronts. In both instances, a specific spot in the world comes to be identified as something that is at issue, as networked public talk becomes grounded in place.

4.1.1 *Dog Parks*

Dog parks, dog owners, dog waste, and dog runs were topics of surprising frequency and resonance on Phillyblog. Threads were initiated by neighbors venting about dog owners negligent in their clean-up duties. There were “dog poop etiquette” threads. And there was information shared on where (and why owners don’t use) neighborhood dog runs. At times Phillyblog was used by neighbors trying to organize support for new dog parks, while still other threads focused on trying to kill those same efforts. The topic of dogs, dog parks, and dog waste were so common, that the mere mention of any of them was the subject of parody on the site.

While not generally regarded as an issue of grave public concern, dogs and dog parks almost always engendered passionate debate on Phillyblog. Beneath a surface appearance of routine urban hassle and cranky internet rants, exchanges about dogs highlighted issues of civility, scarcity, property values, old and new residents, and even who has right to public space. It was in the generally quiet Queen Village neighborhood, home to small pocket parks and at least one designated dog run, in which a particularly feverish debate about these issues took shape. In a thread entitled, “Weccacoe Tennis Court is not a dog run,” the original poster initiated a discussion similar to many on Phillyblog asking, perhaps rhetorically: “Why do so many people run their dogs in the tennis court at Weccacoe playground? It ruins it for tennis players who have to dodge (and get splashed by) puddles of dog urine. . . What will it take for cops to start writing tickets to these inconsiderate pet owners?” (PB thread 18921, #1). Weccacoe is a multi-use recreation area that contains a full-size gated tennis court, playground area, and enclosed recreation center. The park is owned by the city, but the recreation center is

leased by the Queen Village Neighbors Association, who uses it as an office and supplies the volunteers who maintain the playground.

Immediately following the initial post about Weccacoe, there was consensus in the disdain for the “inconsiderate pet owners” and general support for keeping the park space for tennis players only. Posters bemoaned lazy dog owners who weren’t willing to walk the extra few blocks to a designated dog run located in another park. Other participants vented about a lack of responsibility by pet owners and their responsibilities to clean up, claiming such residents shared a lack of civic pride, were generally uncivil, and were distinguished by their selfishness. There was such seeming agreement that by the tenth post, the original poster wrote: “thanks for all the agreement on this.”

But the debate soon started to turn to the issue of the scarcity of public space and who had the most right to use it. One participant argued that dog owners and tennis players co-existed just fine, and that the neighbors needed to work out some kind of compromise to keep the space multiuse. Many disagreed with this claim, and argued that by definition, the space wasn’t multiuse since it was one of the few full-sized public tennis courts in the city, and that dog runs and tennis courts should remain separate. Meanwhile, a dog owner made a different claim to the space—arguing that the courts were under-utilized by tennis players and there was no justification for reserving that space for a single purpose.

I don’t take my dog there very often and only in the winter when it’s a completely WASTED use of precious city space. . . There isn’t enough civic space for all of us, blame Penn if you like, but I don’t see tennis enthusiasts being able to cordon off that much space for their exclusive use all year while they wait out a harsh winter in repose (PB thread 18921, #24).

As the discussion continued and became more heated, the dividing line revolved around who had the *most* right to the space. When one poster argued that dogs had no reason whatsoever to be on the tennis courts, another disagreed: “There are plenty of reasons for a dog to be in an enclosed space in this city. Parks are public spaces, not your own personal front yard, and successful parks cater to a diversity of community needs” (PB thread 18921, #38). The poster further explained that it was the dog owners who “respected and cleaned up the space” more than the tennis players who consistently left trash and “other junk.” Fellow dog owners soon agreed: they were the residents who cleaned up the spaces of the neighborhood, and were out several times a day keeping watch on the area. But the majority of residents were not convinced, arguing that public spaces were for everyone and loud dogs with inconsiderate owners were making public spaces like Weccacoe less accessible: “The way that this works for everyone is that people who enjoy public areas shouldn’t do so at the expense of other people. Using a tennis court as a dog park is not its intended purpose, and therefore hurts the public good” (PB thread 18921, #65).

Nearly 200 replies and eight days into the discussion a Phillyblogger posted, “This argument’s still going on? Seriously? In what universe is it okay to let your dog poop and piss on a tennis court? It doesn’t seem like a complicated argument.” Still, what to do with the Weccacoe tennis court and playground was obviously more complicated than that. In a city with dense housing patterns and limited green space, its existing public parks, recreation centers, and playgrounds become increasingly important to city residents. And, as such, what to do at Weccacoe was a political problem that was not

being addressed by existing institutions—therefore, an issue that was fundamentally the public’s problem. In an interview Elizabeth summed up the debate elegantly:

I mean people get passionate about should dogs be allowed on the tennis courts when nobody else is using them. It sounds stupid to get passionate about it. But the fact is: You’ve got dogs, you’ve got people. What are you going to do with them? (Elizabeth, interview)

After much online discussion—and at least in part, *because* of this public discussion—the issue finally moved into the neighborhood’s institutional civic organizations, specifically QVNA. Neighbors formed a committee to make a decision about Weccacoe as well as to think about creating alternative dog parks. Ultimately, the neighbors association made the decision that dogs were no longer allowed on the courts. In addition to the dog park committee, a new committee on dogs in Queen Village was formed.

But the problems and tensions grounded in Weccacoe did not fade easily, and the thread about it continued to operate as a potent means of bringing competing interests and simmering resentments into view. One enterprising Phillyblogger started taking and posting photos of residents who violated the no-dog policy. Forum participants applauded this tactic as a way to police the area; others thought it was just “creepy.” Defending his photos, the Phillyblogger wrote that his intention was to: “introduce individual accountability into this situation and create a discussion regarding this developing issue” (PB thread 18921, #221). At this, a long-time resident balked: “Where were you with your handy camera when the park was a haven for addicts and hookers? I venture to guess you didn’t live near there then” (PB thread 18921, #222). In another instance, the thread’s initiator came back online weeks after his original post to argue that not allowing dogs in the tennis courts was also fundamentally an issue of property values. “If you want

young families to continue to spend a half mil or more to live in queen village, there needs to be unthreatening, clean parks. right now weccacoe doesn't qualify. . . makes me want to move to voorhees [New Jersey]" (PB thread 18921, #229). But one long-term resident found this line of reasoning indicative of larger problems in the neighborhood: "I was happy with my property values before young families who think they own everything moved in. Perhaps you should have done your homework before you spent over half a mil thinking weccacoe was your personal playground" (PB thread 18921, #230).

Some saw the recurring discussions of dogs, dog parks, and dog waste as just "ridiculousness." One poster laughed that Phillyblog "may have jumped the shark" with the Weccacoe tennis court thread. For many, it was a relatively straightforward issue of civility or following the commonsense rules that made city life tolerable. For others, the whole incident and the many like it were an occasion for reflection about what is at stake in disputes about the uses of finite city space. Mulling over the intensity of debate about dog parks in an interview, Catherine explained:

There is a lack of city space everywhere. You are constantly going to have issues of scarcity and issues around who has more right to the space. Who is properly taking care of it and therefore who has more right to it. This is a theme. Whether it is dog poop, a playground, or the right to have a festival in a park. We are so limited on green space (Catherine, interview).

More immediately, dog parks—and that specific dog park in that specific place—was a grounded public issue that occupied the neighbors in more fundamental ways, and an occasion for networked public talk. In an interview one Queen Village resident provided some context, explaining that dog parks had a long history of debate in the neighborhood. Indeed, the whole issue had caused a "split between dog owners and non-dog owners. . .

For a good five years, walking dogs was one of the most heated topics in Queen Village.” She then commented to dog park threads, and the debate over them, in the Fairmount and Fishtown neighborhood boards. What happened in the Phillyblog threads was, in this way, a means of making a local concern accessible and available to all, an opportunity to draw connections to one’s own neighborhood concerns and a form of local knowledge made near at hand.

4.1.2 *Garage Fronts*

In neighborhoods that were redeveloping, garages were an issue of frequent concern—specifically if new or refurbished houses should be allowed to construct garages and their necessary curb cuts, which also reduced the amount of available on-street parking. In Southwest Center City, the garage front debate was highly charged as it focused on the use of limited public space (in the form of on-street parking), countered by the desire to develop the residential stock of the neighborhood. A developer posted to the site indicating that he would be presenting a proposal to the zoning committee for a single family dwelling with a garage and roof deck at a specific location. A resident responded:

Garages are a net loss to the neighborhood, and a gain to the owner. In other words, it's giving away a public asset to a private owner. . . . you can sell a house there for over \$600K without a garage, you bought for \$100K, you've got plenty of room for construction costs, interest, and profit without asking neighbors to subsidize your project (PB thread 73811, #9 and #28).

Others argued that garages and their related curb cuts detracted from the neighborhood and made it less walkable. But the “garage-haters” were challenged by neighbors who were looking to be in houses where they could park their car easily and “safely”:

Decreasing the walkability"? Uhhh, ok. I've never had any problems walking anywhere in this neighborhood whether the entire BLOCK was

garages or not. Seriously folks... do you need an adult to hold your hand when you cross the street too? Use some common sense. Maybe start worrying about the crime and issues that force people to park their valuable belongings somewhere SAFE. Not all of us drive an '83 Tercel that we can just write off when it gets demolished by some ***** who most certainly will not be leaving a note on our windshield (PB thread 73811, #31).

Garage fronts exist in a space that isn't easily assumed to be public or private; rather, they are an instance of private construction that has ramifications for a public space. Such concerns are common in many urban neighborhoods and often never become issues of public debate. But on Phillyblog, debates about the infringement upon public space or the use of public space were catapulted to the status of the public's concern because enough people were gathered around the issue. Of course, garage fronts were discussed in other venues as well, most notably the neighborhood's zoning board meetings, where the ultimate decisions about authorizing garage fronts were made. But on Phillyblog, the discussion of the garage fronts unfolded over time, allowing residents to form opinions, test and refine persuasive reasons, and build support for more formal actions. Once again, the issue itself might have been one of the more mundane concerns of urban life, but Phillybloggers explored its potential ramifications in painstaking detail. In so doing, issue, place, and public coalesced for a time, during which participants practiced a particular means of discovering what was at issue.

4.2 Imagining a public in place

James Donald argues that ways of seeing and understanding the city inform the ways in which we act upon its spaces, with consequences that produce a modified city—one which is in turn, perceived, understood and acted upon (1999). Part of Donald's project is to understand the interplay between our imaginings of the city and the material

urban spaces that make up its fabric. Our symbolic constructions of places, he argues, have measurable and material consequences. As I noted previously, the construction of Philadelphia, its neighborhoods, and its places on Phillyblog had everyday material consequences for its participants, who altered routines, selected neighborhoods, supported candidates and policies, and participated in community organizations based on what they encountered in forum discussion. At a different level, the construction of place through a process of imagining what the city was also had an effect on the ways in which people talked about themselves, as well as how they perceived their involvement and participation in the city.

Informants talked about the city becoming a place where they could, or wanted, to be involved. Informants explained that they felt more “connected” to the city and to their neighborhood. Developing theory along similar lines, Schatzki has argued that one of the roles of constituting a place is that it makes certain activities intelligible: “When a tree is understood as something to climb, for instance, it becomes a place at which climbing is intelligible. . . . In this way, beds are understood as places to sleep, tables as places to eat, and bus stops as places to catch the bus. A place X is a place where it is understood that X-ing occurs (Schatzki, 1996 as cited in Thrift, 1999).” Making the city intelligible as a place one could be connected to was, I believe, one of the more profound aspects of the site and certainly a prominent theme in the way participants talked about it. One Phillyblog participant posted online that she felt “more like a part of the city” after spending time on the site. Another told me that she thought that Phillyblog gave her the feeling of living in a small town because she knew more of the areas of the city; she reported that “it’s given me a sense of connection, more so than I’ve had anywhere else I

have lived” (Mary, interview). Similarly, Kathleen explained that by seeking information on Phillyblog and meeting neighbors there, she became more active than at any other point in her life, and now “know more neighbors than I have anywhere else that I have lived,” Online, a poster wrote, “Around the time I first moved to Philly, I remember thinking how isolated it feels to live in the big city. Phillyblog helped make the city real to me as a living, breathing organism and for that I’m ever grateful.” Still another forum participant, Charlie, further explained:

I feel a lot more connected to it. I didn’t grow up here and it can be a very strange place to get into as an outsider. I am from somewhere completely different than this and so it’s been very hard to get connected and tune into the city. I think it has tied me more to the city (Charlie, interview).

Some saw their participation as a way to see and be connected to a larger community of people who were interested in the city. Catherine reported that she started to see people across the city who “cared about and were engaged in their communities.” Frank said his participation in Phillyblog reinforced his belief that there was a larger community of people in the city who were “really dedicated to Philadelphia.” Other informants who were newer to the city, but understood some of the stereotypes about Philadelphians, said that on Phillyblog they saw more of the “hopeful aspects of the city, people who knew the history of the city, and knew the resources, knew that there was more than just battery throwing, snowball throwing [at a Santa during an Eagles game—a celebrated bit of lore used to characterize Philly fans], it really gave me windows to what was really out there” (Art, interview).

Participants also talked about the site as a way to see the city more broadly. Julia explained that her participation on Phillyblog “introduced me to new neighborhoods in the city that I probably would not have thought about. And it gave me a better feel for the

city overall. I think it has given me a broader understanding and a broader view of Philadelphia.” Others who lived in neighborhoods further away from Center City saw it as a way to be less isolated. Walt, who lived in the Northeast, explained that his neighborhood was so “disconnected.” While he grew up and lived in the Northeast and knew what was happening there, he was able to see what was happening in other neighborhoods as well giving him different perspectives of the city’s neighborhoods and the “struggles each of us face.”

This point was particularly important to Todd who explained that he knew more about neighborhoods outside of his own, which he argued was particularly important for Philadelphia as a city that is so neighborhood focused.

I mean people say it’s a city of neighborhoods; but it’s almost a city of fortresses. I mean it’s amazing to me how two blocks over can be totally unknown to you. So I think it’s good for at least some people to think more broadly and see what’s going on in other parts of the city and see that they’re having the same or different concerns. . . . At least you had the chance living in Fairmount to know what the problems are happening in Southwest Center City or what’s important to people way off in the Northeast, which might as well be another state. . . . You know the difference between walking somewhere and driving somewhere? You can drive through and know all the landmarks but you don’t really know it until you’ve just walked it and that makes a big difference in terms of how it smells and how it feels. I feel that way much more about Philadelphia after being on Phillyblog. I feel like rather than driving through it, I’ve walked through it. And I’ve gone places that I wouldn’t and probably never will go physically. But I know a little more about what people there talk about, what’s important to them, what isn’t important to them, how they sound. I mean I think it was really great in that community building sense. And I think Philadelphia could use more of a sense that it is one cohesive city. Because nobody looks up long enough here to see what it all means, or what we’re all like and how we’re alike and not alike. And I think it was a wonderful forum for that. I can’t think of another forum that does that. And I can’t think of another forum anywhere I’ve lived that did anything equivalent (Todd, interview).

Todd’s comments offer an eloquent summation of how participation in the forums could change felt perceptions of the city. Importantly, the respondents and posters who claimed

a greater sense of “connectedness” through Phillyblog were often also those who noted the many shortcomings of conversations on the site, the presence of extremists and trolls, and the predictable absurdities that took place within its confines. Nevertheless, they credited the site with having inspired in them a deeper sense of investment in the city, and with an optimistic realization that others were as deeply invested as they. At the end of the day, they took comfort in the realization that there were others like them who shared a commitment to talking about the city.

5. Conclusion

As discussed in the introduction of the chapter, recent scholarship on digital technologies and cities has provided a needed corrective, emphasizing that instead of creating two totally separate worlds there are important ways that technologies and physical spaces are interpenetrating. In the case of Phillyblog, participants took an active role in understanding, describing, remembering, and delineating their shared locality with the result being a more reciprocal relationship between the city and its residents. Such locally focused online sites can recast the city in a more intimate, comprehensible, and bottom-up form. The chaotic city is made more legible by those who explain what it is like and what it isn't like.

As might be expected, there are opportunities and risks associated with this process. As places become personalized and narrated with digital information, everyday decisions about where to shop, where to live, or what neighborhoods are problematic are shaped by user-generated data. And such everyday, nuanced choices about where to avoid or where to go have the possibility to further sort spaces into safe or scary, welcoming or closed off, diverse or insular. These perceptions have consequences, as

neighborhoods or districts become known as desirable or undesirable places to live for those who have the means to choose between options. Those who are limited in mobility might improve their standing, or suffer from the impact of how others come to perceive their place of residence. It is undeniable that Phillyblog disproportionately represented the interests of those with some means, who had some options in terms of where they chose to settle, invest, and exercise a commitment.

But I don't want to undervalue the importance of the portrayal of the city for Phillyblog participants, and for their felt perception of what the city could be—a location in which to be involved. Such a perspective was naturally more common for those who had moved to the city from somewhere else, and therefore those with more resources and mobility. Still, due to the networked, publicly visible nature of the discussions along with the fact that Philadelphia is a complex and constantly changing city, there were Philadelphia natives who also felt like they were more connected to the entirety of the city. Walt, a lifelong resident in the Northeast, felt like he knew more about other parts of the city. George, also a Northeast Philadelphia native, explained that these neighborhood discussions were good for everyone, because the city and its neighborhoods were very different places now than they were forty years ago when he was growing up.

This sense of civic connection is, ultimately, what many efforts in public dialogue try to instill in their participants. In addition to making decisions, taking action, or learning about issues, efforts in organized discussion or deliberation also have at their foundation the belief that when the public talks in meaningful ways, there are more profound and sometimes immeasurable results of those discussions: there is a sense of connectedness to public life. The analysis of networked public talk is a way to indicate

that connectedness to public life—in particular how public talk can foster a sense of civic connection and imagination of the shared lived space of the city and its problems.

Importantly, this (re)imagination of the city and felt sense of connectedness, which users attributed in large part to their participation online, represented a change in informants' attitudes and perceptions of Philadelphia. Ultimately, for many, the city became a place to participate in.

In addition, there is something to be gained in understanding the relationship between public issues and material spaces. Imagining the city and its problems took the form of seeing abstract urban forces coming into focus through a discussion of local spaces. From arguments about dog parks or garage fronts, these discussions became a way of surfacing—making visible the tensions between groups, or the conflicts that arose from changing demographics in the city and its neighborhoods. So in this sense, places and the discussion of them, helped to actually bring into focus what were the public's issues.

And there is also an important point to be made in thinking about the relationship between physical places and political discussion. As Massey emphatically points out, places are always, and by their very nature, disruptive. Places *open up* the possibility that multiple narratives of history and meaning both exist and always have. In the case of Phillyblog, the point of the discussions wasn't to describe the authentic Philadelphia: as off-the-cuff characterizations, such claims existed in abundance, but seldom were presented as definitive. Indeed, as the examples above clearly point out, there is no single Philadelphia and there never was, despite the city's many and storied characterizations by the established media. Rather, the many and competing characterizations of the city's

locales provide a means to ground, gather around, and help make visible emergent publics and public issues. I believe this is an additional way in which political communication and internet scholarship on place have something important to say to each other.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

Sure, it was troubled and wordy. But so is Philadelphia. It was just, I think it was a wonderful representation of Philadelphia in all its ugly, naked glory. And the magic of it, I don't know. I mean it's probably good that it died in a sense because you can do a rise and fall of Phillyblog. And maybe if you can come up with where it fits, some pithy summary as to what it says or draw a narrative out of it, then it's better than if it were an ongoing experiment. There's got to be a lesson in it somewhere. There just has to be.

- Charlie, August 2009 (interview)

In July 2009, after nearly seven years of public talk about the city, Phillyblog effectively came to an end. Owner neglect, spam attacks, software instability, and increasing user frustration regarding the tone of the discussion were all blamed for its death. The archive of talk, the accumulation of neighborhood resources, the word games, the haiku, the crime threads, the stories of littered streets, the race baiting posts, the Philadelphia photos, the restaurant reviews, and the debates about dog parks were gone by September 2009.

Like thousands of other online sites before it, Phillyblog may have simply reached the end of its lifespan. Some participants moved out of the city; others got bored. There were many casual users who never expected anything more from Phillyblog than a dentist recommendation or a place to sell their bike. In reality, online forums like Phillyblog are still new—the participatory internet is itself relatively new—and we don't yet know if

such sites tend to follow a predictable lifecycle. Still, the story of Phillyblog did not end the day its server went offline. There were several ways in which the public talk on Phillyblog outlived the site itself, having become embedded in social relations of city residents. As I discussed in the previous chapter, participants reported traveling the streets differently, changing their habits about where to eat or who to hire as a contractor, or even re-assessing their decisions about where to buy a house. In terms of civic participation, a feeling of connectedness, or imagining a community of Philadelphians, some Phillybloggers had come to see the city as a place to be involved, a feeling that transcended any specific site or technology. Many of the respondents I interviewed credited their participation on Phillyblog with altering their perceptions of Philadelphia, and teaching them new patterns of interacting with the city.

There is also tangible evidence that the desire, interest, and commitment to discussing the city and its issues outlived the site. Beyond Phillyblog, there are other online forums centered on Philadelphia where the dynamics of networked public talk can still be seen. The same discussions—garage fronts, dog parks, noisy neighbors, trashy streets, gentrification, tax burdens—re-emerge in these alternative locations of discourse. In the case of Phillyblog users, many moved to the deliberately reminiscent urban forum Philadelphia Speaks, employing the same user names, engaging in many of the same debates, and at times, asking many of the same questions. In both Phillyblog and in Philadelphia Speaks after it, there were moments where public problems emerged, where publics started to be constructed, and where collective issues were sorted out. More commonly, problems were re-articulated, new participants saw themselves implicated,

and different places became symbolic locations for what are the city's intractable issues, including racial tensions, poverty, dislocation, and development.

In this final section of the dissertation, I want to draw out what I see as the broader lessons and conclusions suggested by the analysis thus far. My first point is focused on issues of access and use of networked technologies in public life. My second is directed towards practitioners who are interested in supporting sites for public discussion. My third point offers my thoughts on how the work in the dissertation can speak to designers who seek to stimulate public talk. I end on a theoretical point, connecting the empirical chapters to the larger notion of networked public talk forwarded in the dissertation.

Access to networked technologies in public life

When analyzing how digital practices have augmented urban life, questions of access and participation loom large. However, the “digital divide” as traditionally conceived—unequal access to hardware, software, and broadband connections—is further complicated by a geographically-focused and publicly-oriented use of the internet. The reason can be seen in the work of Don Mitchell (1995), who argues that part of the political power of physical public spaces is that they are spaces *for* representation, locations within which “a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be *seen*” (p. 115). Part of the role of material public space is to allow for political visibility, enabling groups to make their claims public. We need not look far to see the occupation of material public spaces for political ends, from Tiananmen in 1989 to Tahrir in 2011. But, as Mitchell points out, it is hard for those without access to digital technologies to make themselves visible in online public space: “there is literally no room in [the]

Internet's 'public space' for a homeless person to live. Nor can their needs, desires, and political representations ever be seen in the manner that they can be seen in the spaces of the city" (p. 123).

Mitchell's point is crucial, both analytically and from a policy perspective. As a growing urban center in one of the world's wealthiest democracies, Philadelphia provides a strong case to challenge any assumption that the internet or wireless technologies are uniformly integrated into everyday habits, even if we have been told that they are ubiquitous and pervasive (de Freitas, 2010). One policy approach to this problem has been to support increased access to information technologies, building the physical infrastructure of connectivity. Another has been to launch initiatives that provide the education and information literacy skills required to effectively locate, evaluate, and produce digital content. Henry Jenkins (2006), among others, has focused on the latter concern, noting that a lack of digital literacy skills and of meaningful opportunities to contribute to online collaboration has resulted in a "participation gap" every bit as troubling as unequal access to technology. "One reason we see earlier adapters," Jenkins contends, "is that some groups not only feel more confident in engaging with new technologies but also some groups feel more confident in going public with their views about culture" (p. 258). Beyond these issues of access and participation, Constantin et al. (2006; Grigorovici et al., 2004) add two further concerns we need to consider when examining how digital practices have become embedded in urban life: the availability (or lack) of local, community relevant, and language inclusive content; and the contextual and socio-political attributes which affect information technology adoption and use (e.g. demographics, regulatory environment).

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for a more nuanced understanding of how digital information, discourse, and public talk become embedded in material urban life. But rather than alleviating Mitchell's concern, this interpenetration actually makes the problem even more pernicious. If digital and physical spaces interpenetrate in the ways in which public issues are brought into focus and in the ways in which people come to construct those places, then being excluded from digital technologies represents a further exclusion from public life. This newest iteration of the digital divide goes beyond connectivity or information literacy and aligns closely to Constantin et al.'s factors of content and context. Being denied access to technology and the ability to produce local digital content means that those who do not have the means to, suffer the impact of how others with digital access come to understand, describe, and perceive their (shared) locality.

In terms of public talk there is perhaps a layer of digital inequality that is more ephemeral—a sense of efficacy in producing publics and public life in a world augmented by digital information. Unequal access at all levels (connection, content, skill) produces a kind of participation gap as Jenkins describes, but one that compounds the already real concerns about a lack of political participation by certain groups. Where digital technologies increasingly become factors in shaping our material spaces, any exclusion will only serve to perpetuate inequality and add to a sense that these spaces are reserved for certain people, and not others. And where digital technologies are used more to define public life and advance concerns, this too only increases inequity. If groups are going to mount effective claims, or effectively use public space as a means of articulating their political views, then being prevented from full utilization of all the resources,

including digital communication, impedes them from making their fullest claim. The inability to mount an effective claim, in turn, threatens a further sense of alienation from public life.

Intersections between informal and formal political talk

My second point is a more optimistic one, directed towards practitioners—information technologists, deliberative professionals, philanthropists, scholars—who are interested in supporting sites of online public discussion. New information and communication technologies have caught the interest of many who focus on participatory democracy because of the interactive, multi-authored, user-centered focus that ICTs offer. The interest is understandable since the vision of lively, discursive, place-based political participation has been fundamental to our ideals of democratic life. In recent years, this dream of a participatory public has become even more alluring in its placement against one of the predominant narratives in current discussions about Western democracy—a crisis in participation and weakening citizen engagement in formal legislative and electoral processes. As indicators of this crisis, analysts have pointed to low voter turnout, declining knowledge of political issues, a loss in social capital and associational membership (Putnam, 2000), increasing skepticism about government (Lipset & Schneider, 1983), and a feeling of being pushed out of politics (Mathews, 1999). Paired with the development and growing use of ICTs, these concerns have helped expand the study of participatory politics, with information scientists, new media researchers, and technologists joining communication and political theorists to investigate how internet-based technologies may serve as new locations for political discourse, activism, and community building.

At the same time, there has been mounting interest within the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors to enhance democratic practice and ‘re’-engage the public in the political process. From public journalism to civic education to the creation of spaces for deliberation, an entire constellation of programs and initiatives has emerged whose focus is to strengthen discursive democratic practice. As I noted earlier, a whole host of national and local organizations regularly organize forums, town halls, and conversation groups to talk and think about public concerns. Part of the goal of such groups is to instill the means (method, technique, habit) to engage in public life—focusing on the airing of different perspectives, weighing policy options, and being involved in civil discussion. A report targeted to philanthropic funders, for example, listed an array of organizations working in the field of deliberation, each employing different “models” or “approaches” to facilitate discussion, including Question Formulation Techniques, citizen juries, Choice Dialogues, and 21st Century Town Meetings (Leighninger, 2009). Many of these efforts are temporary, one-time initiatives designed to help citizens address a major public issue. Others are interested in the ways in which deliberative practices initiated by formal techniques become embedded in a community’s institutions, organizations, and social practices—in essence, focusing their efforts on instilling deliberation as a community habit (Fagotto & Fung, 2008).

Whether their goals are short or long-term, the number of these groups and range of their projects continues to expand. The past two decades have witnessed a “movement” in public deliberation with a corresponding emergence of a profession of deliberative practitioners (Jacobs, et al., 2009). The National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), an organization of organizations involved in deliberation and

dialogue, touts a membership of 1,400 organizations and professionals. There is evidence that these organizations are beginning to connect with one another through consortia such as NCDD, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the Kettering Foundation.

In addition to connecting to each other, my research indicates the possibility and need for these organizations and professionals to find ways to also intersect with less formal locations of public talk. Those who see their mission as promoting civic dialogue may want to view their role less in terms of engineering wholly new spaces or new techniques for online discussion and participation, and more as thinking about the ways in which their projects intersect with existing, informal sites of discussion. On the surface this seems to be a natural extension of an interest in fostering public dialogue—seeking out locations where a community of users talks about their collective concerns, and thus defines those concerns and constructs publics. Indeed, if there is any lesson to be learned by efforts to create new locations for public talk (either online or off), it is that it is incredibly difficult to get people to actually go to those locations. It makes practical sense, then, to find those places where people already are actively talking and look for ways of interacting at those locations. There is also much to gain in “moving beyond the forum” and understanding moments of, or locations for, deliberation outside formalized, expert driven forms of discussion.

Yet in practice, there seems to be more of an interest in distinguishing “good” and “bad” discussion, rather than finding intersecting points between organized deliberation and informal public talk. Part of this tendency is based on the position that informal sites of discussion rarely mirror the same normative ideals as formalized methods of public dialogue. The value of informal public talk, whether online or off, is often in doubt—

leading some to insist that we need particular techniques or expertise in order to facilitate productive public talk (cf. Barker et al., 2010). Some have argued that high-quality public talk (e.g. deliberation) requires trained leaders to organize dialogue projects: “Good deliberation is not self-generating. The instances of poorly organized public participation that fall below the threshold of proper deliberation... far outnumber the properly organized deliberative encounters... In practice, a small group of self-selected leaders must actually organize any process” (Gastil & Levine, 2005, pp. 274-275).

There is some reason to question. Ethnographic studies of offline informal talk have had mixed findings, indicating that informal talk can help make sense of political concerns but can also be populated by discourse that is parochial, divisive, and homogenous. Walsh (2004), for example, conducted research on informal discussions among a group of “Old Timers”—retired, Midwestern, middle class whites—and their coffee shop conversations, revealing how informal talk can clarify and reinforce “politically relevant social identities.” At the same time, she found that informal political discussion can reify homogenous social identities and encourage exclusionary understandings of politics. Eliasoph (1996, 1998) studied small, relatively homogenous voluntary groups and found that the discourse was apolitical in everyday social settings with “free ranging public spirited discussion” in “backstage” spaces. The findings in this dissertation are consistent with these more mixed results from Walsh and Eliasoph. There are ways in which public talk is both supported and constrained in spontaneous locations of discussion. But these informal spaces of exchange should not be dismissed on the basis that the talk emerging through them does not always fulfill deliberative ideals, or even that such talk is sometimes counterproductive to those ideals. When, where and how this

talk plays a role in public life is worthy of our serious attention. And as I have underlined throughout my empirical chapters, these sites are an effective means through which a public comes to see what is at issue.

The findings in this dissertation also indicate that the kind of public talk I observed was not only happening online: people talked formally and informally about such issues in their neighborhoods, at civic association meetings, and in the institutional media. In other words, there were already intersecting points of discussion between Phillyblog participants and the institutions and experts who created policy and shaped opinion in Philadelphia. But a more purposeful attempt could be made to link the locations of discussion, building the participation of professionals and experts who are able to contribute their training and resources. In many neighborhoods, for example, civic association members and leaders posted agendas and announcements. Those with specialized knowledge or expertise could have contributed meaningfully to the public talk taking place within these contexts. From the other direction, the institutional media quoted Phillyblog conversations and found “person on the street” perspectives within the forums, introducing them to a broader audience—including those who did not venture online. The most meaningful linkages occurred when institutional actors became involved in ongoing discussions that were occurring on the site. Rather than simply reporting the news or presenting findings in a public hearing, the experts stuck around to talk to those with a stake in the story or an interest in the debate.

And for those trained and invested in the management of productive public dialogue, the opportunities are equally significant. As discussed in detail in Chapter 5, one of the points where the public talk on Phillyblog broke down was around difference

and opposing viewpoints. At these moments, some opposing viewpoints were mediated, both by users and official moderators. At other times, users simply left the conversation thread or ignored a poster. And there were many occasions when opposition of viewpoints turned into animosity—users hurled personal attacks, followed others from thread to thread, and generally stalled any movement in a discussion. Some of the self-trained moderators attempted to intervene early in the trajectory of the thread by moving the posts to another location and out of the flow of the discussion. But it may have also been possible for a skilled moderator to intervene at different points in the trajectory of discussion as a way to pause, reflect upon what had been said, and take “time out” to see what were the opposing positions. All in all, Phillybloggers did remarkably well in managing their community, but in some cases, might have gotten there without quite so much lost in terms of time, energy, or feelings of ill will towards those with differing opinions.

It may be prudent, therefore, for grant makers and practitioners not to see their jobs as exclusively focused on designing altogether new spaces for public discussion, but supporting and learning from them when they actually exist. Likewise, interested experts and academics who seek not just to study but to promote civic dialogue should expand their perceived role beyond bringing people to participate in controlled experiments or analyzing the discourse on discussion sites. They should also be open to opportunities to support and contribute their expertise to existing locations that foster public dialogue.

These forms of discussion—formal deliberation and informal talk—needn’t be opposed, but rather can and do co-exist in their difference and, thus, potentially learn from one another. The point of finding *intersections* between informal talk and formal

deliberation is so that there is reciprocity between the two kinds of talk. My argument is not that formal deliberation should be supplanted by informal talk. Organized, conscious, purposeful, and norm-drive discourse plays a critical role in making public choices, weighing tradeoffs, and coming to understand opposing perspectives. At the same time, deliberative practitioners shouldn't "cure" informal talk of its shortcomings, remaking it in their own image as rational, purposeful, and "civil" (often meaning polite) discussion. Rather, we should think about where informal talk and organized deliberation are successful, and where they both break down.

Designing sites for public discussion

It is worth wondering the extent to which Phillyblog was the product of a moment in time; emerging within a specific technological and political context. As I have noted throughout, Phillyblog had a technological infrastructure that was relatively old (in terms communication technologies). Phillyblog users themselves talked about the site as being "tired" or "Web 1.0." In this sense, I think it is unlikely that people would gravitate towards this specific architecture today if it were initiated as an entirely new city-wide discussion site. In particular, for a site that had such a critical connection to a physical place, Phillyblog was never able to successfully integrate geolocative data in a reliable way. Information was geographically referenced, but it was referenced by users themselves and in a manner that became aggregated by large geographic areas, not by specific and consistent coordinates. The result was that searching for and classifying information based on geographic coordinates was difficult (or impossible if you did not know the city and its neighborhoods). As new opportunities for location-specific content creation in other online venues increased, certain areas of Phillyblog seemed to diminish

in importance, or at least were not the first places where many looked. For example, the *Food* board was reported by some participants as being less useful as nationwide sites like Yelp.com became more popular.

Nevertheless, a site that looked very similar to Phillyblog—Philadelphia Speaks—did emerge and become a location of city discussion in 2009. At some level what was critical about the emergence of Philadelphia Speaks was not technological. The connections, networks, and relationships established on Phillyblog became a resource for many participants. They looked to others online to answer questions or solicited their opinions and established ways of communicating about their neighborhoods that were facilitated by the architecture of a threaded, city-wide, and also neighborhood specific forum. Moreover, the desire to talk about the city transcended Phillyblog itself.

Philadelphia residents who used Phillyblog were looking for locations to talk about and understand what was happening in their neighborhoods. The need to find out about good schools in the city, information about various neighborhoods and their civic associations, or a desire to talk about city politics with people around the region did not end because Phillyblog died or because the technology was a little “tired.” When Phillyblog became unstable, users tried to replicate their experience so they could continue modes of discussion that they learned through their participation on Phillyblog. And many moved to Philadelphia Speaks to keep the conversation going.

It is true that Philadelphia Speaks adopted technological features that Phillyblog did not have. Nonetheless, it too employed a kind of “antiquated” threaded discussion architecture. While it is not likely that someone would start a site that looked just like Phillyblog today, it is worth thinking about what endured—the principles that Phillyblog

embodied that site designers should consider and possibly imitate. Here I highlight three: a flat and interactive discussion structure; an architecture malleable to users; and a site that supported multi-usability.

The Phillyblog architecture supported non-hierarchical user categories and horizontal, back-and-forth discussions. The software enabled rating discussion threads, but users chose not to employ the feature. While reputations did develop, those reputations were not embedded in the code of the site through “super” users. In essence, the site had a relatively flat structure in terms of its users and an open system in regards to what was deemed worthy for discussion. Phillyblog was not a site whose sole purpose was to figure out what the best restaurant was in Philadelphia. It was a site that supported a wide variety of perspectives and content and strict use of a rating system would have been detrimental to that. It would have been beneficial, however, if Phillyblog employed ratings strategically in different sections of the site (events, the best of threads, restaurants) so as to highlight content.

In addition, the discussions were focused on horizontal communication. Users went to the site in part because it was interactive, comparing it to other locations in the city that did not as easily support such interactivity. In part, this communication was supported through an architecture that was familiar and easy to use. There wasn’t anything particularly complicated about its structure. There were no requirements to read background materials prior to engaging in talk. Phillybloggers didn’t need to install special software on their computers in order to participate, they could access the site from any connected computer, and there were low barriers to entry. Threaded discussion formats might be old, but they work and have been used in any number of “newer”

technologies from Facebook to blogs. As noted previously, Phillyblog originally started as a blog aggregator. That, however, was not what people were interested in and Phillyblog was able to recreate itself into a forum discussion site. The conversation aspect continued to endure.

Indeed, one of the great virtues of Phillyblog was its malleability and the way in which the architecture was responsive to user choices. The users of the site had a certain amount of control over its development, over its rules, and over its structure. Never pre-ordained to be a specific kind of discussion site, Phillyblog adapted and was adapted by user feedback and frustrations. Everything from the information categories to the codified rules of discussion evolved, were debated publicly, and were tested by participants. How the site was used in practice revealed a structure that was malleable within that overarching structure. Distinctions between boards were often blurry, and the ways in which users posted to and read the sub-forums changed depending on how topics intersected. The result was that people in different parts of the city or with different specific topical interests would, on a semi-regular basis, cross between geographic and topical areas in their reading and posting behaviors.

Flexibility could be accounted for, in part, by the wide-open and variable vision of Phillyblog founders. At different points in time they described the site as media outlet, visitor guide, engagement tool, social network, feel-good story generator, online community, peer-to-peer information exchange, and location for honest discussion. The numerous ways in which participants interpreted and used the site, combined with the Phillyblog owners' elastic vision for it, both extended to the site's design. Phillyblog adapted to and was adapted by user suggestions, interests, and disappointments.

Finally, and in part because Phillyblog was malleable based on user practices, Phillyblog became a multi-use site. There was an expectation and ethos that the space was multiuse. Most users expected the site to cover a whole range of topics about day-to-day living and they also expected that the site would have a certain amount of noise and nonsense. The site employed a relatively “hands off” form of moderation. The norms of writing led to individual posts that tended to be short and from multiple participants and the resulting conversations were generally multi-vocal, rather than single authored posts more typical of political or commentary blogs. There was also an ethos of posting and reading across forum categories, which led to a topically-diverse and wide-ranging discussion site where topics of discussion emerged from participants, discussion boundaries were permeable, and conversation trajectories could take interesting and unexpected turns.

Part of the multi-usability was that the site took entertainment and informality seriously. It wasn't a serious, sober site all of the time. There was always levity and frivolity in the site. Indeed, Phillyblog shows the ways in which the public's talk sometimes gets conducted through informal, humorous, and seemingly frivolous interactions. The site was as entertaining as it was edifying. As a result, Phillyblog was a location where people wanted to be, where a mix of participants were committed to taking care of the space (at least for some period of time) while still expressing frustrations about that space, and where a community of participants were mutually committed to discussing the city with their fellow residents. Instead of trying to completely control the mess, there were techniques to make it more manageable—as I described in chapter 5.

In the end, Phillyblog and spaces like it may have more in common with the *agora* than we may have been led to believe based on our idealized visions of such a participatory public location. The classical Greek agora was the place of citizenship, the geographic location where public affairs were conducted. But the agora was also a marketplace and a “place of pleasurable jostling, where citizens’ bodies, words, actions and produce were all literally on mutual display, and where judgments, decisions and bargains were made” (Hartley, 1992). The point is that even those spaces that we look to as being the democratic ideal were, in reality, locations in which a great deal of relaxation, transacting, and “jostling” took place. These spaces have always been filled with people who were selling, testifying, watching others, demonstrating, and disagreeing. These may not be activities that we imagine as the work of a self-conscious, acting public but they are perhaps activities that an acting public requires.

Another question about the particularity of Phillyblog is whether the site could have emerged now—in this particular political moment characterized by polarization and fragmentation. For many of us, there is a felt experience that political discourse in the U.S. has become increasingly polarized. The critique is certainly not new, and is not new to internet technologies. Indeed, at the same time Phillyblog was coming online, Sunstein (2001) had published a well-known critique of regarding the fragmented nature of the internet made it easier to avoid interacting with a diversity of viewpoints. Sunstein argued the internet would create an echo chamber, or “enclave” of communication among like-minded citizens, resulting not in the establishment of common ground or the give-and-take of ideal political dialogue but in polarization and “cyber cascades” of false information. In its lifetime, Phillyblog was not totally immune to the changing tone and

tenor of discourse in the U.S. Each political election cycle in the city brought new people into the discussion space of Phillyblog. And within those new users, some were interested only in ideological debates. Nonetheless, Phillyblog—or at least a subset of users on Phillyblog—was able to ride out some of the more contentious political moments because they had established discursive relationships in which they talked about everyday issues in their neighborhoods. For many, Phillyblog was not simply a site to have ideological debates. And Phillyblog participants, by and large, shared a common commitment to talk about the city. As described in the dissertation, participants were suspicious of users who didn't view the site as a location to talk broadly about the city. In other words, many participants were able to have a heated debate about the political climate but still may have been able to share information on a good electrician. Political discussion was commonly grounded in a shared endeavor: the day-to-day of Philadelphia. I am not suggesting that this never broke down. Rather, in as much as the site served as a space of public talk it did so with a set of participants who were commonly committed to the goal of talking about the city.

Networked public talk

My intention in forwarding the concept of networked public talk is to go beyond the particularities of Phillyblog, of Philadelphia Speaks, or even of online discussion in the city of Philadelphia to a theoretical and analytical way to examine informal, publicly-oriented discussion online. My argument is that there is a kind of everyday online talk—what I describe as networked public talk—that could be a critical part of the public's discussion. My point is that not all dialogue online—structured or informal—is necessarily political. Based in empirical work, I outline four principal characteristics of

networked public talk: (1) the primary activity is sustained discussion among citizens; (2) it is talk characterized by informality, not governed by procedural rules or a pre-existing agenda; (3) it is mediated through networked technologies and comprised of publicly-viewable discussions; and (4) it involves issues of collective concerns, rather than purely personal issues. I am not suggesting that the four aspects of networked public talk necessarily will result in the same outcomes as I analyzed in Phillyblog. Rather, my point is that these four aspects are necessary and work in conjunction to enable public discussion.

The value of the construct of networked public talk is that it foregrounds the relationship between informal public talk and a specific moment in public life in which the public is sifting through, articulating, and bringing into focus what are its collective concerns. In this sense, networked public talk is conceived as political because it is through talk that citizens demonstrate that an issue should be a matter of common concern. In other words, there is an emergent, contestatory, and definitional function to public talk online focused on making sense of public issues.

In the dissertation I have looked at three components of that process: the ways in which public issues are brought to attention, articulated, and sustained as focal points of conversation through the use of internet technologies as discussion mediums; how an information architecture and established participant norms both support and constrain a sometimes serendipitous encounter with a multiplicity of perspectives; and how the networked discussion and recognition of public issues is mediated through and helps to construct lived material places.

Each is related to larger goals of more formalized and rule-bound forms of political discourse. Like deliberation, networked public talk shares a focus on citizen-to-citizen dialogue as the location in which political life is enacted. It is through discussion that citizens can determine what is at issue and the ways in which it is at issue. They can come to see how and if others are implicated in problems. And, ideally, they can take action either through problem-solving, decision, or forms of mobilization. I argue that attention is a critical component of this. Rather than focusing on processes to support outcomes, I believe the idea of networked public talk allows for a more thoroughgoing analysis of the *emergent* part of the public's discussion. Calling and sustaining attention in public concerns are both crucial aspects of defining, articulating, or even being aware that there are collective concerns. Calling attention to public concerns helps to bring into focus public issues and also can help foster an awareness that others are jointly implicated in those issues. Sustaining attention is way in which the discussion of public issues can be developed and enlarged.

Similar to deliberative theories of politics, the work of networked public talk is to support an encounter with differing and opposing perspectives. Deliberative theory has a rich history in its focus on a multiplicity of perspectives in public dialogue. It is only through the exposure to different as well as oppositional viewpoints that public decisions can be sound. Indeed, it is deliberation's recognition that such difference is conflictual that an array of procedural rules—turn taking, mutual respect, norms of civility—have been developed and codified. In addition to supporting and controlling the encounter with difference, the concept of networked public talk urges us to think about the balance between serendipity and control. Public talk is never wholly unstructured. Indeed,

without attempts to tame the discussion it can become exclusionary of those who find the discourse too extreme. However, attempts to put the discourse under too much control can be equally problematic. A certain level of mess, the suspension or delay in coming to the point, and extraneousness is also a part of the work of the public.

Finally, like many efforts to initiate public dialogue, part of the work of networked public talk is to instill a sense of civic connection in its participations. When the public talks in meaningful ways there can be profound results in showing a sense of connectedness to and concern for public life. The analysis of networked public talk is a way to indicate that connectedness to public life—in particular how public talk can foster a sense of civic connection and imagination of the shared lived space of the city and its problems. Networked public talk also foregrounds the ways in which public issues and material spaces are co-constituting. More than a metaphorical construct, places and the discussion of them helps to surface what are the public's issues. Conversely, it can also be said that political activity constructs place. In short, democracy is more than ideas, arguments, reasons, and positions: it happens somewhere and is mediated through physical places and material stuff.

Networked public talk offers a way to ground our understanding of how technology factors into everyday political conversation. There have been noteworthy studies of informal political discussion in offline settings (e.g. Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz, 2006; Walsh, 2004). To my knowledge, however, mine is the only extensive study of informal political talk in an online environment. In a very particular sense, then, the findings in this dissertation differ from ethnographic studies of informal political talk such as Walsh and Eliasoph because the talk studied was mediated through digital

technologies. My point here is that “informal” does not equate to “unstructured” (either in internet or non-internet settings). In the case of networked public talk, those structures included rules, technical codes, information architectures, and participant norms that both constrained and enabled public talk. The larger point to be made is that publics are never populated only by people. There is no public without “protocols and technologies – even if these are as simple as chairs around a table and everyday conventions of conversational turn-taking” (Girard & Stark, 2007; see also Latour & Weibel, 2005).

This is a particularly important argument for those who study the intersection of information technology and public life and I think a location where John Dewey’s notion of publics and public issues is particularly compelling. If one understands politics from the perspective of gatherings of issues (of Deweyan publics), then the political world does not simply play out via legislatures or city councils; it also plays out in a variety of everyday contexts. Furthermore, as Bruno Latour (2005) argues, these publics are networks of both people and objects—the material stuff (technologies, architectures, events)—that gather together and represent political life. Such material things also constitute what makes it possible for publics to emerge—how an issue is presented, framed, disseminated, archived, and mediated and in what forum or via what media is it defined (blogs, newspapers, meet-ups, library meeting rooms). In this sense, networked public talk could also be important for the way in which we understand the role of information and communication studies in understanding or describing how socio-technical practices affect (improve or weaken) public life. How issues are presented, framed, disseminated, archived, and mediated are information and communication questions. Via what media those issues are defined is a question for information and

communication design. And, the product of those definitions (artifacts, websites, blog posts) are concerns for information science as well. If democracy is thought of as more than people and ideas, if democracy is thought of as people in association with technologies, artifacts, and other material things, then, I would argue, democracy is something information and communication sciences can have a part in describing.

There is another way in which I believe Dewey's emergent notion of publics and the concept of networked public talk are useful. A theme running throughout the dissertation is that networked public talk, particularly in the context in which I study it, exists in a liminal and ambiguous space. It is more discursively interactive, citizen-initiated, publicly-oriented, and intentional than many analyses of online political discussion have envisioned, yet it is also more discordant, tenuous, and unwieldy than visions of structured public talk would like. It is distinguished by its informality but is also structured through its technological infrastructures, user practices and established norms that enable and constrain public talk. It often operates at the interstices between public and private realms. And its purposeful connection to a lived space blurs the distinction between what has been traditionally seen as "online" and "offline." Furthermore, my concern has been that many definitions of political participation are overly-restrictive, either because they are normative and prescriptive or tied to specific forms of institutional practices (e.g. voting, lobbying). What those definitions end up ignoring are many of the emergent political practices occurring in non-traditional, distributed spaces (like online urban forums) by people who may not view themselves as particularly political. While on their surface these practices may not be traditionally valued as political discourse or engagement either by those contributing or those

analyzing the contributions, they are practices which, if conceptualized differently, potentially have political consequence because they are related to public (and therefore issue) emergence and definition.

As the previous chapters have made clear, networked public talk captures the emergent and contestatory role of publicly-oriented talking. My focus in this project has been on discussion as actually practiced in everyday, computer-mediated settings and I have been particularly interested in those moments in political life when everyday urban issues are articulated, contested, or brought into view as public concerns. Those who participate in informal forms of public talk generally do not claim that their motivation for being involved in such forums is political. They are not necessarily trying to make a decision about a public concern. As such, traditional models of democratic life can not quite get to the nature or work accomplished by such talk. But what happens in networked public talk is part of the public's discussion, rooted in day-to-day living rather than in a deliberate intention to "do politics." Increasingly, there has been an interest in accounting for these everyday discussions. These are the "fuzzy and ambiguous phenomena" that "fascinate empirical researchers—the row over gender politics in the living room, the heated conversation in the talk show, the incipient new social movements mobilizing online" (Livingstone, 2005). Mansbridge argues specifically for a view of political life and deliberation interacting within a larger ecosystem (1999). Similarly, Iris Marion Young argued for conceiving of deliberative democracy as primarily "de-centered"—not taking place in any single forum or bounded group but "occurring in multiple forums and sites connected to one another over broad spans of space and time" (Young, 2006).

Through my chapters, I have tried to present a more systematic means of thinking about everyday political acting, identifying both some of its requirements and some of its distinctive characteristics in place-based forums. These are not meant to be prescriptive categories, or norms that must be achieved, but rather patterns that may help future researchers in this area to think about and understand the patterns they discover in everyday discussion of public issues. Those patterns may or may not be similar in their nature, but my hope is that my work will alert researchers to the need to account for them, particularly when it comes to issue-emergence, rather than continuing to focus primarily on organized structured deliberation, organized political activity, or outcomes.

My argument is that people *are* engaging in public talk, even if it does not look like the ideal forms that some argue are the most beneficial for democracy. Indeed, the findings of this dissertation indicate that there were times when such forms of talk are counterproductive for democratic talk—where people felt excluded from discussion, where discussions broke down over unassimilated but perhaps unjustifiable differences. But networked public talk does not need to fulfill the ideals of deliberation in order for us to see where and in what ways it is valuable. My argument is that we start taking seriously the locations in political discourse in which the public is making sense of its issues.

Dewey argues that public life and democracy requires citizens to be able to understand complex problems and communicate their interests. We shouldn't dismiss the importance of informal talk in this process. That public talking about what is and should be our common concern is something worth attention. This kind of talk, using Mansbridge, is part of a larger political ecosystem even if it may never achieve the status

afforded to The Public. This kind of public talking may not look like what happens in formalized public deliberation, but public life needs for it to happen.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Instrument

Part One: Background

1. Gender F M

2. Location in the city?
 - a. How long at that location?
 - b. How long in Philadelphia?

3. How long have you been using Phillyblog/Philadelphia Speaks?
 - a. How often do you read the site?
 - b. How often do you post to the site?
 - c. How did you find out about it?

4. Do you regularly read or post/comment to other online city-specific sites?

<input type="checkbox"/> Philadelphia Speaks	<input type="checkbox"/> Philly.com
<input type="checkbox"/> Young Philly Politics	<input type="checkbox"/> Neighborhood listservs
<input type="checkbox"/> Others _____	

5. Do you maintain your own blog outside Phillyblog/Philadelphia Speaks?

6. Do you regularly use social networking sites?

<input type="checkbox"/> Facebook	<input type="checkbox"/> MySpace
<input type="checkbox"/> Others	

7. Do you belong or are you active in any local civic or political groups?

<input type="checkbox"/> Civic or neighborhood association	<input type="checkbox"/> Political campaign
<input type="checkbox"/> Grassroots organization	<input type="checkbox"/> Neighborhood watch
<input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer organization	<input type="checkbox"/> Others _____

Part One: Additional Background for Moderators/Administrators

1. When did you become a moderator/administrator?

2. How would you describe your role as a moderator?
 - a. How do you compare moderation on Phillyblog/Philadelphia Speaks to the other sites you referenced previously?
 - b. Strengths/Weaknesses to that?

Part Two: Experiences with and Impressions of the Forums

Reading

1. Can you tell me a little bit about the last time you read the forum? Why did you go there?

2. When you go to the site, where do you start (e.g. new posts, specific forums, other)?
 - a. Why there?
 - b. How do you decide what to read?
3. What makes you listen to people on the forums?
 - a. What kinds of posts do you take seriously?
 - b. What do you think makes others take you seriously?
4. Are there parts of the site, posters or kinds of posts that you ignore or avoid?
5. Why do you think some posts get widely read and cited and some don't?
6. In your view, what are the characteristics of a good post or thread?
7. What about a bad thread?
 - a. What happens to those threads?

Writing

1. What kind of posts do you typically respond to?
 - a. How do you make that decision?
2. How often do you initiate new threads?
 - a. When you start a new thread, what kind of response do you generally expect to get?
 - b. Are you ever surprised by the response you get?
3. Do you have a sense of who is reading your threads?
 - a. Do you know your fellow participants?

Disagreement

1. How well does the site deal with disagreements that come up?
 - a. What do you do in a case like that?
 - b. How do you respond to disagreements when you see them?

Forums within the city

1. Has your participation made you think any differently about the city? Or any particular issues?
2. Do you think that these forums make a difference for the city?
3. What makes you want to spend some of your time in these forums?

Snowball

1. Is there anyone else you would suggest I talk to?

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