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AMST 3500

Profs. Aronson & Cahill

17 December 2010

Neighborhood Blogging: How Localized Websites are Redefining Community

A blog is a website in which a person (or group of people) can regularly post entries on any subject of interest. Popular blog topics are current events, politics, pop culture or personal thoughts and writing samples. While blogs have existed since the 1990s (then known as web logs), the 21st century has seen a dramatic increase in the number of blogs on the Internet. Blog publishing websites, such as WordPress, Blogger and MovableType were all started between 1999 and 2003 and offer anyone with Internet access the chance to share their points of view with the world. In the last ten years, blogging has become commonplace on the Internet and there is a blog for nearly every topic imaginable. While some individuals choose to keep their entries private, others have made careers out of blogging. Arianna Huffington and Perez Hilton are two examples of people who have become international celebrities because of their blogs. Unlike newspapers and magazines, blogs do not charge subscription fees to access content, thus making them a cheaper way to stay up-to-date on current events. Many news pundits see blogs as a way to post their political opinions and interact with a wider variety of their readers and viewers over the Internet. Blogs are also appealing because they form a community environment by initiating ongoing conversations between bloggers and readers through the use of comments and discussion forums on the sites.

Technorati.com, a website dedicated to obtaining comprehensive information on blogs, found that in 2009, 28% of bloggers blog on a professional or corporate level. Of that 28%, 15% blog on a part-time basis as a way to supplement their income and 9% are self-employed and blog on a full-time basis.[1] The website also found that professional bloggers tend to be more affluent and educated compared with the general population, with 75% of professional bloggers having college degrees, 40% have graduate degrees and 50% having an annual household income of $75,000 or more.[2] They also found that most bloggers (hobbyist and professional) feel their blogs have benefited them by giving them more credibility and visibility in their particular industry, as well as "leading them to become more involved with things they are passionate about."[3] Whether bloggers are using their blogs as a means to make a living or simply as a way to blow off steam at the end of the day, they usually choose to write about topics that are important to them or affect their lives in some way.

Neighborhood blogs are a category of blogs that update regularly about a particular place or localized community. In the last few years, local blogs have become an extremely popular form of bringing a physical community together through posting entries about developments and issues involving the area. Jumps in crime, the opening and closing of businesses, local political campaigns and the dates and times of civic meetings are popular topics on most neighborhood blogs. Often serving as an interactive community posting board, residents of blogged about communities can use the sites as a way to learn about upcoming events and leave feedback. Neighborhood blogs are often staffed by members of the local community and tend to be written in an informal tone, which encourages dialogues to take place among site visitors. Former residents can use neighborhood blogs to stay up-to-date on local news and to join in on

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[1] Jalichandra, Richard. 2009 State of the Blogosphere. Blog World Expo. October 2009.
[2] Jalichandra, Richard. 2009 State of the Blogosphere. Blog World Expo. October 2009.
[3] Ibid.

discussions about current events with others in the area through commenting. Since most community blogs update frequently about neighborhood news, the sites have also become a rich archive for local news stories. Some blogs include their own search engines and bloggers will frequently tag keywords from their entries at the bottom of each of their posts, which makes searching for a specific topic extremely easy for readers.

One of the first local blogs to gain wide popularity on the Internet is the site, blogging.la. The website was started in 2003 as part the Metablog network, which is a massive local journalism and media project that began in Los Angeles, "when the concept of a group blog about a city didn't really exist." The site also considers itself to be "one of the first locally focused alternative news sources in Los Angeles"[4] Metablog is "the world's largest network of city focused blogs, covering local issues in over fifty cities around the world."[5] The site generates news stories from approved volunteer contributors, who post local stories about cities on their particular city's portion of the website. The site's homepage lists all of the cities across the globe that are covered and encourages people who log on to "visit a random city" while they are viewing the page. Metablog also explains on their site that it was created as "a throw back to the days when a local newspaper focused on local issues, and you could walk down to the corner coffee shop and chat up the reporters whose column you read earlier that day."[6] Although this may be a fantasized perspective of older forms of journalism, especially in an urban setting, the concept is very appealing to readers who feel that large media conglomerates do not care enough to cover small news stories.

Unlike blogging.la, some neighborhood bloggers had no intension of being part of a larger localized news movement when they created their blogs. Capitol Hill Seattle is one such

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[4] http://blogging.la/ (3 December 2010).
[5] http://www.metblogs.com/ (3 December 2010).
[6] http://www.metblogs.com/about/ (3 December 2010).

blog, which was created by Justin Carder in 2005. In a video on the website's about us page, Carder states he "started the blog as a way to occasionally post dates for neighborhood events." As time progressed, he began to update more frequently on other local news in the area and he began to view the blog "as an ongoing conversation" about anything from "debates over seniors' issues to which local restaurant has the best burger."[7] In 2010, Capitol Hill Seattle was voted the best Seattle blog by blogs.com and now receives over 50,000 views per month.[8] Similarly, the Brooklyn blog, Sheepshead Bites, was originally started by Sheespshead Bay resident, Ned Berke, as a "tongue and cheek satire of the neighborhood." It was not until he started attending local community board meetings, that he noticed the lack of Internet coverage of the neighborhood and began covering local news stories on his site.[9] In 2010, Sheepshead Bites was named "best local blogger" of Manhattan and Brooklyn by *L Magazine*.[10]

One important factor that differentiates neighborhood blogs from most other blogs found on the Internet is the fact that the majority of their readers live in or around the same geographic area. While it is possible for people to meet other members of their communities online, local blogs offer individuals the opportunity to discuss topics over the Internet and then possibly continue that conversation offline. On this topic, Berke states that since creating Sheepshead Bites in May of 2008, he has personally "met hundreds of people from the area, some of whom have become friends." He also explains how "it is almost hard not to meet readers at local events and meetings."[11] At some community events, Berke sets up a Sheepshead Bites table and converses with neighbors who regularly read the site. Similarly, Chris Cullen, a blogger and recent resident of Harlem, is quoted in a *New York Times* article stating he has "made at least 20

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[7] http://www.capitolhillseattle.com/aboutus (4 December 2010).
[8] http://www.blogs.com/topten/10-best-seattle-blogs/ (4 December 2010).
[9] Berke, Ned. Phone Interview. 2 November 2010.
[10] http://www.sheepsheadbites.com/about/ (2 November 2010).
[11] Berke, Ned. Phone Interview. 2 November 2010.

new acquaintances among local store owners and residents by blogging about [his] area." He further explains, "I blog so I don't have to take the subway on the weekends to hang out."[12] However, as Lorrie Lykins points out in an article on neighborhood blogging in St. Petersburg, Florida, local blogs also "give neighbors who may never ever meet or otherwise exchange ideas the opportunity to trade points of view."[13] While bloggers and actively involved readers cannot logistically meet everyone they communicate with on the site, the option to meet up with others is not always an impossibility.

Community activists have always had a difficult time getting their neighbors to take a stance on local issue, but local blogging has greatly assisted in spreading the word about neighborhood problems. By posting reminders and agendas of civic meetings on their sites, bloggers can now easily remind residents when to turn out for meetings and what the topics up for discussion will be. Since civic meetings are open to the public, bloggers can also record the sessions and post them on their websites for individuals who cannot regularly attend meetings, but still want to hear what happens at them. Comments on the posts about community meetings are also helpful in getting feedback from residents about what is taking place in the neighborhood. In an article from the *St. Petersburg Times*, Shannon Edge, the city's director of neighborhood and community relations, states "blogs are a great gauge for what residents care about" and they also assist in "alerting [her] to neighborhood issues." She continues by saying, "It's very helpful for us to keep a pulse on the community… blogs are a good way we can tune in."[14] Similarly, in an article from *Crain's New York Business*, Katia Kelly, creator of the local

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[12] Fung, Amanda. "Blogging on the Nabe; Local Sites Dish the Dirt About Everyday Life." *Crain's New York Business*. 23 April 2007: 35. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010.

[13] Lykins, Lorrie. "Online Neighborhood Sites Keep Residents Connected." *St. Petersburg Times*. 11 October 2006: 5. Lexisnexis. 1 October 2010.

[14] Zayas, Alexandra. "He Started a Virtual Movement." *St. Petersburg Times*. 29 September 2006: 1. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010.

blog, Pardon Me for Asking, about Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, is quoted as saying "It is a new day for community activism… the movement's strength lies in networking and cross-linking posts lets one person's message spread almost instantly."[15] The success of blogging has also prompted many politicians to begin creating blogs of their own as a way to communicate directly with the members of their districts. As Mary Reid mentions in an article from the *Local Government Chronicle*, "Blogging is helping some councilors bring a more accessible and personal tone to their communications, replacing the more formal and static content of traditional government websites."[16] Instead of pontificating about general social issues, residents and voters feel that when their representatives blog informally about the current state of affairs, they are speaking directly to them.

Wanting to reap the benefits of local blogging, the El Cajon Police Department, located near San Diego, California, started up their own community blog "to encourage residents to share community concerns with each other and the police."[17] The police want residents to feel free to comment and tell them what the department is doing correctly and where they could use the most improvement. Lt. Jeff Davis is quoted as saying, "the site is much easier than leaving written notes… and it's in real time."[18] The police blog includes an option to sign up for email alerts on crimes in the area and has logged more than 28,000 hits since it was started.[19] Residents of the community have been very receptive to the blog and the feedback the department receives can greatly assist those living in the area.

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[15] Buck, Andrew. "B'klyn Finds It Takes an Online Village; Carroll Gardens Activists Raise Rukus Via Blogs; Builders, Politicians Take Note." *Crain's New York Business*. 25 February 2008: 20. Lexisnexis. 1 October 2010.
[16] Unknown. "Keeping in Touch with Residents." *Local Government Chronicle*. 20 February 2008.Lexisnexis. 1 October 2010.
[17] Neely, Liz. "Neighborhood Web Watch; Blog Keeping Cops, Residents Informed." *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. 9 August 2008: EZ-1. Lexisnexis. 1 October 2010.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

Although local newspapers cover many of the same topics as neighborhood blogs, they do not have the same ability to be updated as frequently. New technologies and the ability to access the Internet from almost any location today make blogs capable of being updated and edited at almost any time or in any situation. Once verified information has been obtained, bloggers can quickly post an entry on anything from a time change of a meeting to a serious breaking news story. Stories involving major traffic accidents on nearby roads, as well as problems causing delays on public transportation can be updated at a moment's notice, which helps readers as they travel throughout the day. While a newspaper may be able to cover the story in the following day's paper, it does not assist the reader at the time that they are being effect by the issues. It is also very easy for neighborhood bloggers to quickly check up on tips sent in from readers, since most of those who blog live in the area that they are writing about. According to Ned Berke, "For the last three months, 90% of stories in *The Bay News* (Sheepshead Bay's local newspaper), are stories that have already been covered on Sheepshead Bites." He further explains that he is constantly beating *The New York Daily News* to local news stories and how the paper has contacted him on a number of occasions to use his material. He also mentions the fact that "many major news outlets use local blogs as a way to pick up on news stories in the New York area."[20] By checking these sites on a regular basis, reporters from large media outlets can use neighborhood blogs to tip them off to interesting local news stories that would have otherwise been overlooked.

Like newspapers, some larger local blogs have been divided into sections by topic. In the classified sections, readers can post items to sell as well as real estate and job listings in the neighborhood. Some blogs allow readers to post for free, while others charge a monthly fee for

[20] Berke, Ned. Phone Interview. 2 November 2010.

classified advertisements.[21] The popular blog for suburban Seattle, Capital Hill Seattle, even has lost and found, volunteering and friends subcategories in its classified section.[22] The friends subcategory is an interesting concept because it allows readers to reach out to neighbors who share common interests or need support. In one post from September 2010, someone even posted an advertisement looking for anyone who could assist his partner in getting an extension on his visa.[23] The Chicago-based blog, Chicagoist, has a main page of top news stories, as well as sections for news and events, food and popular topics. The popular section is defined as consisting of "posts that got people talking, ranked by your recommendations and comments."[24] The food section has posts that report on everything from local amateur bartending competitions to where to find "The Top Five Macaroons in Chicago."[25] Blogging.la has a similar layout and also includes a music section, which shows posts about upcoming concerts in the area and a rant section, where contributors have the ability to post any grievances they have about neighborhood problems.[26]

Since local blogs cover a relatively small area, there is almost no news story considered too small to cover. In an article from the *New York Times*, Gregory Beyer tells of an instance where Louise Crawford, author of the Park Slope, Brooklyn blog, Only the Blog Knows Brooklyn, saw a "yellow-throated songbird" on her way to work and it prompted her to write a post about the encounter. [27] While some may not consider this to be news worthy in any respect, others may feel it is instances like this that depict the charm of living in a certain area. In another

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[21] http://www.sheepsheadbites.com/classifieds/ (5 December 2010).
[22] http://www.capitolhillseattle.com/classifieds (5 December 2010).
[23] http://www.capitolhillseattle.com/classifieds/2010/09/26/help-i-need-to-find-a-way-to-keep-my-partner-in-t (5 December 2010).
[24] http://chicagoist.com/popular (5 December 2010)
[25] http://chicagoist.com/food/2010/12/ (5 December 2010)
[26] http://blogging.la/category/rants/ (4 December 2010)
[27] Beyer, Gregory. "Cracker-Barrel 2.0." *The New York Times*. 8 July 2007, late ed.: CY1. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010.

article from the *New York Times*, Andrew Buck explains how Bob Guskind, another Brooklyn blogger, posted a rendering of a future apartment building to be built on Smith Street in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn in his blog, Gowanus Lounge, without thinking much of the entry. He goes on to say that just a few days later, readers in the neighborhood "had zeroed in on the property… uncovering fresh details, including the luxury residential project's height of 70 ft, which would dwarf the surrounding brownstones." Community activists rallied around the issue and the building's developer quickly replaced the architect and modified the design.[28] Even just a few years ago, this level and speed of activism would be impossible without the assistance of community blogs. Buck quotes another local blogger, Lumi Michelle Roller, as saying, "We used to have to beg papers for coverage on local issues, and if we published anything ourselves it would be waved off as a rumor."[29]

This leads into an interesting question has to whether all local bloggers should be considered journalists. In the case of Ned Berke, he graduated from Rutgers University with a degree in journalism and worked for a few years for local newspapers and trade magazines in the New York area before starting Sheepshead Bites.[30] While not all neighborhood bloggers have degrees in journalism, most cover the same material and do the same work as journalists who work for major news outlets. On Capitol Hill Seattle's about us page, Justin Carder states that he "considers himself to be a citizen journalist" and that "journalism through blogging is a collaborative effort." He also has a photo of his media press badge from the Seattle police department uploaded onto the site with the blog's name on it.[31] However, in the *New York Times* article, "When Bloggers Make News", Jessica Mintz quotes Mickey Kaus, a former *New*

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[28] Buck, Andrew. "B'klyn Finds It Takes an Online Village; Carroll Gardens Activists Raise Rukus Via Blogs; Builders, Politicians Take Note." *Crain's New York Business*. 25 February 2008: 20. Lexisnexis. 1 October 2010.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Berke, Ned. Phone Interview. 2 November 2010.
[31] http://www.capitolhillseattle.com/aboutus (6 December 2010)

Republic and *Newsweek* writer, as saying, "The point of blogging is to say what you actually think, your opinion, not the traditional ideal of journalism."[32] Mintz also quotes Jason McCabe, co-founder of Weblogs Inc. as stating, "The nature of the medium is self-policing… blog readers can and do respond instantaneously. When I make a mistake, readers jump on me like a white blood cell to a germ." He also says that "if [he] does not correct an error, [his] reputation is going to suffer."[33] Mintz ends the article by advising readers of blogs to "Follow the same rules as one would walking down the street: Don't make eye contact with someone who seems crazy."[34] While some bloggers may use their sites as an outlet for their outlandish views, most (especially in the case of local blogging) are simply trying to report.

Although community blogs are prominent in most urban areas, there is an extremely large concentration of them in Brooklyn, New York. Almost every neighborhood in Brooklyn has at least one blogger covering local news stories. As Gregory Beyer states the *New York Times* article, "Cracker-Barrel 2.0", "Brooklyn, and particularly brownstone Brooklyn, has emerged as possibly the center of the 'placeblog' world." Beyer also mentions how Brownstoner, a Brooklyn based real estate blog, receives hundreds of thousands of visitors a month, making it one of the most popular local blogs on the Internet and demonstrating how community blogs are also read by individuals who live outside of the neighborhoods discussed in them.[35] Beyer quotes Robert Guskind, founder of the Brooklyn blog Gowanus Lounge, as stating Brooklyn "has more bloggers than any other part of the city, and more than anywhere else that I know of."[36] The article explains that the website Outside.in determined the neighborhood of Clinton Hill,

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[32] Mintz, Jessica. "When Bloggers Make News." *The New York Times*. 21 January 2005, late ed.: CY1. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Beyer, Gregory. "Cracker-Barrel 2.0." *The New York Times*. 8 July 2007, late ed.: CY1. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010.

Brooklyn as the "bloggiest" neighborhood in America. Guskind attributes this to the fact that "Brooklyn's abundance of charged issues, coupled with its rich culture and long history, have led to an exponential increase in the number of blogs devoted to covering its neighborhoods."[37] With millions of people living in a relatively small geographical space, the borough makes for an interesting area to cover journalistically. Although two neighborhoods in Brooklyn may be located extremely close to one another physically, the individuals who live in them may frequent different businesses, have very different cultural backgrounds or different complaints about the community. These differences make it almost a necessity to have a local blog for each neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Another contributing factor to Brooklyn's prominence in the neighborhood blogosphere is the abundance of gentrification that takes place within the borough. In the article, "The Latest Must-Have for Yuppies: A Blog About the Neighborhood", Maria Aspen explains that in many Brooklyn neighborhoods, "first come the renovated condominiums, the latte bars and the expensive baby strollers… next, apparently, come the bloggers."[38] Aspen believes a large reason local blogs are popping up so rapidly in Brooklyn is because people are interested in discussing and documenting the development within neighborhoods. The blogs allow for both new and old residents to debate the changes in the area while also making the discussions accessible to individuals who live outside of the neighborhoods to read and contribute to the online dialogue. The article also cites other increasingly gentrified neighborhoods, such as Harlem, as having a high population of bloggers.

While many neighborhood bloggers use their websites as a space to inform their neighbors of local news and events, some choose to use their blogs as a forum to discuss other

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[37] Ibid.
[38] Aspan, Maria. "The Latest Must-Have for Yuppies: A Blog About the Neighborhood." *The New York Times*. 30 April 2007, late ed.: C6. Lexisnexis. 1 October 2010.

aspects of their communities. The contributors of the popular Park Slope, Brooklyn blog, fuckedinparkslope.com (or FIPS), dedicate their site to poking fun at their neighborhood by pointing out its quirks and eccentricities. It blatantly states in the about us section of the site that it is a blog where "we rant, whine, bitch, moan and rant some more… about a pretty, gentrified, know-it-all neighborhood in Brooklyn."[39] Most of the posts on the blog are comical rants about developments in the area or making humorous remarks about celebrities who live nearby. The blog also boasts of an advice column written by (Not)Notorious B.I.G. called "Mo Money Mo Problems."[40] Brownstoner, created by Jonathan Butler in 2004, is another original blog that uses its site as a forum for Brooklyn residents who are in the process of moving or renovating their homes.[41] The blog is updated daily with posts about real estate listings and new apartment complex renderings, as well as features about popular Brooklyn restaurants. The blog is used as a tool for readers to learn about various neighborhoods in the borough before they make the decision to move. Those who contribute to the blog's discussions also use the space to post questions about home renovation and the moving process. In Beyer's "Cracker Barrel 2.0" article, he cites new homeowner Jeremy Sapienza as saying, "being a blog reader gave me a taste of Brooklyn life, and I liked what I saw and read so I decided to move to the borough." After moving in, Sapienza created his own blog and began writing about his own experience living in his new neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.[42]

While community blogs that cover urban areas are relatively easy to locate on the Internet, individuals who live in less populated parts of the United States may have trouble finding websites that feature local news stories on their areas. Websites, such as Outside.in,

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[39] http://www.fuckedinparkslope.com/about/ (4 December 2010)
[40] http://www.fuckedinparkslope.com/home/tag/mo-problems (7 December 2010)
[41] http://www.brownstoner.com/about/ (7 December 2010)
[42] Beyer, Gregory. "Cracker-Barrel 2.0." *The New York Times*. 8 July 2007, late ed.: CY1. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010.

collect online local news stories from 57,830 neighborhoods across the country and make them accessible through zip code or address searches on the site.[43] On his website, Steven Johnson describes his decision to create Outside.in with friends Cory Forsyth and John Geraci in 2006 as "an attempt to collectively build the geographic web, neighborhood by neighborhood." He continues by explaining that "There is a great surplus of data out there: the hyperlocal bloggers, review sites like Yelp and Judysbook, city government sites, and traditional media. The problem is: there's no single place that unites all those different voices, that grounds them all in specific locations."[44] In creating the site, the staff at Outside.in are streamlining the process of obtaining localized news on the Internet. As employee Esther Brown explains, the staff at the website do not do any original reporting, but instead "collect stories from of thousands of publishers and organize them by location and topic."[45] Once an individual searches a zip code on the website, a results page of top news stories in the area comes up with links to local blogs, major newspapers or features on local television station websites. A list of different categories is located on the side of the page to assist users who are searching for a specific topic. Outside.in is also different from other localized news websites in that it is not solely funded through advertising. As Esther Brown explains, the site is "backed by leading investors such as Union Square Ventures, CNN, Village Ventures, Betaworks, New York City Investment Fund and Milestone Venture Partners."[46]

What makes local blogs and neighborhood websites sociologically interesting is the fact that they blur the lines between virtual and physical communities. In his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson

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[43] Brown, Esther. Email Interview. 6 December 2010.
[44] http://www.stevenberlinjohnson.com/2006/10/introducing_out.html (6 December 2010)
[45] Brown, Esther. Email Interview. 6 December 2010.
[46] Ibid.

determines that all communities are social constructs that have been created by individuals who consider themselves to be members of a specific group. Neighborhood blogs are distinctive in that they reflect both a physical community and an invisible community that functions only over the Internet. Throughout his book, Anderson focuses in on the idea of a nation and finds that it is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[47] Following this logic, websites that offer a place for users to hold conversations and interact with one another can be considered imagined communities since they offer anonymity while still allowing for an individual to feel they are part of a larger group. Anderson describes these feelings of belonging as being nationalistic in nature. He believes that "Nationalism should not be understood through political systems, but rather, through cultural systems of power. Culture creates the nation."[48] A Neighborhood blog essentially creates culture for the place it reports on. It does this by functioning as a collaborative space for bloggers and community members to fill with the neighborhood's distinctive attributes. Local blogs are imagined communities in this sense, but they also allow for those who participate in online discussions to meet offline with essentially little difficulty, thus potentially removing the shroud of anonymity.

In his book, Anderson also spends a great deal of time discussing the history of print, the rise of the use of the vernacular in printed materials and the evolution from pamphlets to newspapers to novels. Following this, one can assume that online periodicals and websites, like neighborhood blogs, are the next phase of the print revolution. Anderson believes that "imagined

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[47] Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso. 1991. 225.
[48] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. 1991. 68.

communities can be formed through national readership", with people forming a common bond by reading the same material.[49] He explains this as being a "mass collective identity", which began with the mass printing of the Gutenberg Bible and forms "collective communities by drawing together a diverse populace with collective culture."[50] By rallying around a commonality, individuals can form a connection and thus create a shared identity. People who regularly read neighborhood blogs have formed an imagined community through that shared experience. Residents who read and contribute to these blogs are also reinforcing their shared identity as members of the physical community in which they live.

While local blogs highlight connections that have been made between residents of a community, some argue that in recent years, neighborhood involvement has been at an all time low. In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, published in 2000, Robert Putnam makes the argument that American neighborhoods are in a decline. Throughout the book, he cites countless surveys and polls, which indicate that there has been a rapid reduction in community and civic engagement since the 1950s. Almost every sector of community involvement from political parties and religious participation to bridge clubs and Boy Scout meetings has decreased. Putnam also cites a general social survey, which states "between 1974 and 1998, the frequency with which Americans spent a social evening with someone who lives in their neighborhood fell by from 30 times per year to 20 times per year."[51] Putnam feels that all of these things have happened because there is a lack of social capital in American society today. He defines social capital as "connections among individuals" which form "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness." He continues by explaining, that

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[49] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. 1991. 45.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 105.

social capital "is similar to civic virtue… and is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations."[52] Putnam refers to social capital as a quantitative form that can be increased and decreased depending on the amount of social interaction a person or group of people receive. The more frequently community members partake in social activities, such as attending community board meetings or simply going over a neighbor's house to eat, the more social capital they will have. Putnam feels that social networks are extremely important in a person's life and can be used for "finding a job, getting a helping hand, companionship or finding a shoulder to cry on."[53] In order for a neighborhood to function properly, a well-connected community is needed.

Putnam attributes this across the board decline in social capital to many different factors. He feels that the decrease in political party membership, as well as voter turnout at elections could be a result of "the long line of political tragedies and scandals since the 1960s."[54] After witnessing political assassinations and seeing the Watergate scandal played out on the news every night, Americans may have become cynical of the government and stopped making an effort to become politically engaged. In terms of religious participation, Putnam cites a church membership study which found that "in the last four decades, Americans have become about 10% less likely to claim church membership, while actual attendance and involvement in religious activities has fallen by roughly 35%."[55] Later in the chapter, he explains that Americans

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[52] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 19.
[53] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 20.
[54] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 19.
[55] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 72.

are "more likely to consider themselves believers than belongers."[56] One of the major contributing factors as to why Americans have become so less involved in their communities is the fact that Americans have increasingly less leisure time than they did in the 1950s. Putnam states, "in today's world, 67% of Americans work outside of the home and now feel more of a sense of community with their co-workers." He continues by saying, "the line at the copy machine has replaced the back fence."[57] When looking for support, Americans are more likely to talk to a friend at work than their neighbor down the street.

Putnam also explains how despite these changes in community, "human nature being what it is, we are unlikely to become hermits." [58] People need human interaction to survive and have a thriving life. However, he ends his book by warning Americans that "we desperately need an era of civic inventiveness to create a renewed set of institutions and channels for a reinvigorated civic life."[59] He continues this by stating "In the end, institutional reform will not work… unless you and I, along with our fellow citizens resolve to be reconnected with our friends and neighbors."[60] Putnam believes that government, religious and civic officials cannot force individuals to connect with neighbors and take up leadership roles in their communities. Americans have the right to opt out of participating in these groups and making participation mandatory would only cause a backlash. If Americans do want live in more connected neighborhoods, they will have to step up and foster those changes themselves.

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[56] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 74.
[57] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 87.
[58] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 115.
[59] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 401.
[60] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 114.

Although it is difficult to challenge Putnam's extensive research, his argument, now ten years old, may be dated. He suggests at the end of the book that there is a "need to create groups that appeal to 21st century Americans."[61] Neighborhood blogs, as well as social networking websites, did not exist at the time of *Bowling Alone*'s publication and thus may be the solution Putnam was looking for. These websites have dramatically changed the way the world connects and re-connects with each other. Although many of these interactions take place over the Internet, they also encourage people to meet up with friends in person, attend events in their communities and become more informed on local and global politics. In his book, Putnam cites election poll data, which found that voter turn out for American elections had been steadily dropping from the 1960s to the 1990s. It also found that "voting in the 1996 and 1998 elections was substantially lower than any other presidential or off-year election in nearly two centuries.[62] However, in 2000, 51.3% of the voting-age population in the United States voted in the presidential election, up 1.2% from 1996. In 2004 and 2008, that percentage continued to increase with 55.3% and 56.8% of the population turning out to the polls, respectively.[63] There are many reasons why this percentage has been continuing to go up, but the increase demonstrates how Americans, on a whole, have become more actively involved citizens since the 1990s.

The Internet, now available in almost any location, has become omnipresent in the lives of most Americans in the last decade. It has also become a tool to drive change in a particular location and reinforce personal connections. A study done by Caroline Haythornthwaite and Lori Kendall on the Internet and Community found that "emergent and evolving uses of information and communication technologies have helped to regenerate geographically based community

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2000. 33.
[63] http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html (11 December 2010)

identities" by creating more opportunities to "stimulate collective action" and "aid local or social economic conditions."[64] Haythornwaite and Kendall cite examples where the Internet has been used as a means to facilitate action and foster community, such as Israeli communities "maintaining an identity" after being forced to relocate and Chinese migrants who have used the Internet as a way to "re-create national identity" when away from their home country.[65] While a physical location is still the foundation for these relationships, they are able to connect and share their personal experiences through the use of the Internet. The researchers in this study believe that information and communication technologies are able to act as a leveler between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. They found that "the Internet affords social cohesion and collective action in neighborhoods that might otherwise be considered unlikely sources of collective identity."[66]

Similarly, researchers Gustavo S. Mesch and Ilan Talmud did a study trying to find a correlation between connectivity through the Internet and active participation in local communities. To go about their research, they surveyed two suburban neighborhoods in Israel (one which actively used the Internet as a way to organize the community and one that did not). The results of the study found that "a local community network serves as a public virtual arena" and "those seeking information and assistance in everyday community life find it easier to exchange information and experience in chats and virtual forums."[67] They also found that those who responded to the survey stating they were active participants in the electronic community bulletin board reported "a higher membership in local organizations than respondents who were

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[64] Haythornthwaite, Caroline, Kendall, Lori. "Internet and Community." *American Behavioral Scientist*. 19 February 2010. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010. 1083.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Mesch, Gustavo S., Talmud, Ilan. "Internet Connectivity, Community Participation, and Place Attachment: A Longitudinal Study." *American Behavioral Scientist*. 18 February 2010. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010. 1099.

residents but did not make use of the Internet."[68] The research demonstrates that the online bulletin board helped people feel more attached and reinforced bonds with others that were created offline.

A survey done by the Seattle Planning Commission found that the top five neighborhoods that displayed the most involvement in city planning meetings also have the "strongest blog presence" in the Seattle area. The correlation between the two is attributed to the fact that "each of the local blogs made posts encouraging neighbors to partake in city planning… which has greatly increased the interaction between community members and city planning officials."[69] A study done by Michael J. Stern and Don A. Dillman also found a connection between community participation and use of the Internet for strengthening community ties. The study surveyed 1,500 residents of the western United States and found that "community groups and the amount of actions for community change were positively affected by increased Internet usage" in organizing. It also helped to "activate the active" or strengthen the bonds and commitments of those who already had a history of above average participation in community affairs.

Although the second half of the 20th century saw a rapid decline in community participation in the United States, the rise of the Internet, specifically through the use of localized websites, has worked to begin to turn those statistics around. Local blogging has helped neighbors learn more about their areas and become engaged in their surroundings. By encouraging neighbors to log on and have discussions, the websites are giving people places to connect and in some cases, make substantial differences in their neighborhoods.

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[68] Mesch, Gustavo S., Talmud, Ilan. "Internet Connectivity, Community Participation, and Place Attachment: A Longitudinal Study." *American Behavioral Scientist*. 18 February 2010. Lexisnexis. 8 October 2010. 1104.
[69] Griswold, Jamie. "Neighborhood Blogs Drive Participation in City Planning." www.mynorthwest.com. 11 August 2009. (4 November 2010).