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Separate Spaces:
Discourse about the 2007 Scottish elections
on a national newspaper website

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Abstract: In May 2007, Scots voted into office a party and a political leader publicly committed to holding a referendum on independence from Great Britain within four years. This study analyzes nearly 4,800 comments appended to stories on the scotsman.com website, offering one of the first detailed looks at user-generated content on a newspaper-affiliated website in the context of a national election. It explores the evolving nature of online political community and the ways in which newspapers are accommodating a networked environment in their political coverage, addressing issues of citizen and journalistic engagement within a communal space.

In May 2007, Scottish citizens elected members of their own national parliament for only the third time in modern history. Despite glitches caused by a confusing ballot, along with a few special twists – the fog that grounded a helicopter sent to fetch votes from an island constituency, the irate Edinburgh voter who bashed in his ballot box with a golf club – the results were historic. By the margin of single parliamentary seat, Scots voted into power a party and a

political leader publicly committed to holding a referendum on independence from Great Britain within four years.

For weeks before and after the election, Scots and thousands of others around the world flocked to discussion spaces provided by Scottish newspapers to talk about the election and its implications. This study focuses on comments posted on the joint website of three of those newspapers, scotsman.com. It offers a uniquely detailed picture of the ways in which media content is serving as a platform for users to discuss politics in the context of a national election, posing challenges and opportunities for news organizations. The study is guided by research questions that consider the nature of the online political community formed within the website's discursive environment; the intersections of journalists and users in that communal space; and the implications for national political debate in a "virtual" public sphere.

Scottish Politics

Relations between inhabitants of the nations that became Scotland and England were contentious at best and often outright bloody over a long period that stretched from Roman times until the early 18th century. 2007 marked the 300th anniversary of Scotland's formal union with England and Wales, since expanded into a United Kingdom that today includes Northern Ireland and several nearby islands. Despite periodic adjustments in the way Scottish concerns were handled at Westminster,[1] Scotland as a nation had virtually no self-governance for 290 of those years. But in 1997 the Scots – roughly two-thirds of whom said they considered themselves either Scottish or "more Scottish than British" (McCrone 1998) -- voted for "devolution," and in 1999, the 129-member Scottish Parliament was formed.

That parliament, led by a First Minister, has legislative and administrative control over domestic issues including health, education, economic development, and the environment.[2] The Labour Party captured the most seats in the Scottish parliamentary elections in 1999 and 2003, and the First Minister – like the British prime minister, Tony Blair, during the same period – was a Labour member.

Issues of a national identity distinct from that of a Britain seen as weakening in its cohesion (Nairn 2003) have been at the forefront of Scottish politics in recent years. A sense of Scottish identity appears to have strengthened, and a "Scottish agenda" has grown in perceived importance, with those identifying themselves as Scottish increasingly likely to say they expect independence from England to become a reality in the near term (Paterson et al. 2001). Indeed, some passionate Scots and members of the Scottish diaspora have construed devolution as an interim step toward full independence from the rest of Britain.

In the 2007 election, public and media attention were drawn to a promise by the Scottish National Party (SNP) that if it gained power, it would call a referendum on independence within four years, before the subsequent election. SNP leader Alex Salmond announced that such a referendum would be a non-negotiable part of any coalition arrangements, pledging that Scots would be asked if they agreed that the Scottish Parliament "should negotiate a new settlement with the British Government so that Scotland becomes a sovereign and independent state."[3]

Scottish Press

Since at least the 1970s, the Scottish media have emphasized the Scottish dimension of policy issues and thus helped strengthen Scottish political identity. During this period, UK newspapers based in London have been widely available in Scotland but have never attracted a

significant readership among a populace much more likely to make "a more or less conscious cultural-political statement of preference for home-grown over English produce" (Meech and Kilborn 1992:255). Described as an institutional part of "the substratum of Scottish distinctiveness within the UK" (Schlesinger 1998:61), Scottish newspapers have, since devolution, "helped set the Scottish political agenda and shape public perceptions of the new institutions and their performance" (Keating 2005:87). The two leading national papers are *The Scotsman* and the Glasgow-based *Herald*, which together "provide the principal forum for serious debate of Scottish public affairs" (Meech and Kilborn 1992:256).

This study focuses on three newspapers in the capital city of Edinburgh. *The Scotsman*, *Scotland on Sunday*, and the *Edinburgh Evening News* all were purchased in late 2005 by Johnston Press, which publishes papers throughout the UK and Ireland. Their newsrooms share a building but operated at the time of this study as independent competitors. *The Scotsman*, which publishes Monday through Saturday and has a circulation of roughly 48,000, and *Scotland on Sunday* (58,000) are distributed throughout Scotland but are dominant in the eastern and central regions (Schlesinger 1998); the Monday-to-Saturday *Evening News*, also with a circulation around 48,000, primarily serves the city and suburbs. Their reach is far greater online, with 3 million unique users in August 2007, within a few months of this study.[4] Most website users are from outside Scotland.

The Scotsman was the first Scottish paper in modern times to take up the issue of devolution, which it supported for decades. However, a conservative editor loudly opposed to independence was appointed the year of the historic 1997 vote; under him, the paper adopted a skeptical tone on home rule (Keating 2005; Schlesinger 1998) and other "outdated Scottish shibboleths" (Neil 1997:xvii). Although Johnston Press appointed a new editor after it took over

The Scotsman and its sister publications, many nationalist supporters have neither forgotten nor forgiven its earlier stance – especially as that new editor was English. Indeed, observers reacted with considerable surprise when both *The Scotsman* and *Scotland on Sunday* (though not the *Edinburgh Evening News*) came out in favor of the SNP just before the 2007 election, albeit in a lukewarm way and with care taken to clarify that while they supported change, they were not backing calls for independence itself.[5]

The papers share space on the scotsman.com website; although users can choose to visit sections containing content from just one paper, most sections – including "Holyrood Elections," the focus of this study – offer material from all three. Online staff members also can contribute content that they originate. At the time of the study, these online staffers uploaded stories each day, which remained accessible chronologically by paging through a series of menus, with the most recent items on top. Menu pages offered a series of headlines, each accompanied by a few lines of text and a thumbnail graphic if available.

The following pages summarize several key strands of relevant research, followed by an overview of concepts of nationhood and national identity, particularly in the Scottish context, and their connection to considerations of an online public sphere.

Online Political Community

Citizens' use of the internet for political purposes has been studied since at least the 1980s, when Garramone and her colleagues explored the motivations of political bulletin board users. They determined that online interaction was especially valuable in satisfying personal identity needs; by helping individuals understand their "location in society," use of the boards decreased alienation and increased feelings of political efficacy (Garramone et al. 1986:337).

More recently, Kaye and Johnson (2002) found that people who used the internet for political purposes as early as 1996 were high in feelings of self-efficacy; they posited that like talk radio and call-in television shows, the internet boosted self-efficacy by allowing users the opportunity to hear people like themselves articulate political views. Reliance on the Web was the strongest predictor of political attitudes among all media used (Johnson and Kaye 2003).

Nisbet and Scheufele (2004) found that although the Internet's role in promoting active, informed citizenship was modest at the time of their study in 2000, gains in civic engagement were apparent among online users who talked frequently about politics. They proposed that the "interaction between discussion and Internet use promotes political knowledge and magnifies the effects on campaign participation" (p. 890). However, they cautioned that it was the discussion, not the internet use, that appeared to be key, adding that the influence of the technology was "unlikely to translate into political empowerment for citizens unless it is supplemented by traditional mass media channels and, as importantly, by interpersonal discussion" (p. 891). Indeed, use of traditional mass media to obtain hard news was a far stronger predictor of political participation than use of the internet for non-news purposes (Scheufele and Nisbet 2002).

Papacharissi (2004) examined the level of civility in nearly 300 discussion threads in political newsgroups. She found that while many of the messages posted on these discussion boards were impolite, few were uncivil; that is, while personally offensive, the messages did not threaten the democratic tenor of the conversation. Moreover, she suggested that the internet offered the potential to revive the public sphere by promoting an atmosphere of disagreement and anarchy. Discussants in her study indicated they valued free and diverse speech, acknowledging and respecting others' right to disagree with them but expressing disappointment when a fellow discussant did not structure an effective argument.

In work of particular relevance to the current study, Norris drew on Putnam's (2000) explorations of social capital to explore the ways in which online communities fulfill both bridging roles (bringing together different sorts of people) and bonding roles (bringing similar people together and strengthening ties among them). That is, online connections both widen and deepen experiences of community. Although online communities served dual roles, bonding functions were stronger, including for groups formed around political interests (Norris 2002).

Much of the research involving online political discourse has examined Usenet groups and other discussion forums that are not associated with mainstream media outlets. However, a few scholars have focused on media-affiliated discourse. For example, Goss (2007) looked at comments posted to discussion boards offered by *The Nation*, a progressive U.S. publication. Although he documented heated exchanges reproducing the country's left/right political divide, he also suggested evidence that "the American Way of Life" was affirmed by users across the political spectrum. In examining coverage of presidential campaigns by leading U.S. newspapers in 2000 and 2004, Singer (2006) found that journalists were moving away from a traditional gatekeeping role, which gave them nearly exclusive control over content, and toward provision of information-based tools such as ballot builders that users could manipulate to suit personal needs. By 2004, online editors saw "interactivity" as involving more than discussion areas segregated from the rest of the paper's website, instead emphasizing blogs, candidate Q&As, and other features that enabled users to actively construct information.

Journalistic Engagement with Audiences

Research suggests mainstream media have been slow to seize opportunities for audience interaction afforded by the internet. As early as 2000, Schultz highlighted advantages of forums

associated with a mass medium: Participants share basic knowledge and background, bringing content-related coherence to the conversation; the discussion is less likely to be overwhelmed by specialists; and participants see the forums as arenas for discourse rather than simply as places to post information. However, his examination of *New York Times* forums in 1997 revealed that most online debates were "highly political and energetic," at risk of attracting "dogmatists and extremists" (Schultz 2000:215). Media involvement consisted almost exclusively of monitoring for abuse; the forums thus were reactive rather than truly interactive – places for reader-to-reader communication that did not include the journalists. Schultz called for greater participation by journalists in forum discussions, as well as for reflection of that discourse in their print products.

Much has changed in the intervening years – and much has not. In their 2007 overview of "participatory news" approaches by media organizations in four Western democracies, Deuze and his colleagues note that participatory ideals "do not mesh well with set notions of professional distance in journalism" (p. 335); in addition, some organizations regard "hard news" areas such as politics as too controversial to open to user contributions. Nonetheless, their case studies identify successful alternatives to traditional separations among journalists, their sources, and the public (Deuze et al. 2007). Other scholars also are giving the topic serious attention. In examining online debate about immigration in the Netherlands, Witschge (2008) found that newspapers offered more diverse voices, with women and people of immigrant descent serving as sources and authors; however, online debates offered a greater diversity of views, a finding that highlights "the difference between mere inclusion and proper interaction" (p. 87).

Several recent students have focused on journalists' reaction to user-generated content, material originating outside the newsroom and published on media websites. At a few news organizations, particularly in the United States, journalists are experimenting with ways to recruit

and nurture users to contribute to feature areas and hard-news coverage.[6] But the most common type of user input takes the form of comments on journalists' stories, columns, and blogs (Domingo et al. 2008). Comments are popular with some users, although journalists do not believe a majority are interested in contributing; material from those who do contribute can be abrasive in tone and potentially libelous in content (Singer and Ashman 2009). As a result, news organizations are incorporating moderation processes into their work routines (Hermida and Thurman 2008). That moderation may be done in-house, outsourced, or left largely to users to oversee, but managing the process typically involves journalists in some way.

More broadly, Robinson (2007) suggests that for an institution that helps create political and social reality through a constructed product, sharing control over that product with audiences necessarily dilutes authority. User-generated content also puts pressure on long-standing journalistic norms and social roles, raising concerns about news values and standards (Thurman 2008). A case study of the UK's *Guardian* found that although journalists support the idea of an open platform for free exchange of ideas, the reality challenges their authority and autonomy. The ethical transition from professional discourse to a far more personal one is proving difficult, as journalists move from a gate-keeping role to one that entails engagement with an enormously diverse range of unseen but definitely not unheard people (Singer and Ashman 2009).

Nationalism, National Identity, and the Public Sphere

The role of newspapers and other media in forming community and national identity has long been recognized. In his conception of a nation as a "deep, horizontal comradeship," Anderson (1983:7) highlights them as integral to the anticipation, formation, and continuation of nationalism. Readers connected through printed language form, "in their secular, particular,

visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (p.44); newspapers are especially noteworthy for their provinciality and ability to refract "even `world events' into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers" (p.63). Similarly, in exploring the subtle ideological habits that constitute "banal nationalism," Billig highlights routine textual and visual practices of the mass media, in which "the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged" so that citizens continually are "unmindfully reminded of their national identity" (1995:154).

Numerous scholars have built on those ideas, and many have found them applicable in a Scottish context. For example, Law (2001) suggests that in Scotland, unlike in the UK overall, a newspaper rhetoric of nationhood exists, incorporating considerations of national identity and nationalist politics. In a study connecting Scottish nationalism and newspapers, Higgins (2004; 2006) focused on three days of coverage around the 1999 election, which produced the modern Scottish Parliament, in three Scottish and three English papers. The Scottish ones, including *The Scotsman*, offered more, and more prominently displayed, coverage and were more likely to stress the national character of the political process. He suggested the newspapers contributed to "'homeland making' by joining an inclusive and explicit rhetoric of nationhood with an assumption of local political competence" (2004:645). They also provided a greater proportion of items intended to inform voter deliberation, leading him to conclude that they formed part of a deliberative public sphere on this topic at the national and sub-national levels (Higgins 2006). Media consumers in England, however, who also have a powerful interest in the rise of Scottish nationalism, have been served by "perfunctory at best" coverage (McNair 2000:81).

Indeed, the recent surge of nationalist sentiment in Scotland has been fertile ground for scholars interested in linking the notion of a public sphere – a discursive domain of social life in which public opinion can form (Habermas 1989) -- to debates about nationhood and nationalism.

Schlesinger says devolution formalized a need to consider the United Kingdom as having "a range of partially overlapping public spheres" (2000:318), exemplified by media structures in which part of the communicative space is shared with the rest of Britain while part is almost wholly exclusive to Scotland. Hearn (2001) cites the contributions of political columnists for *The Scotsman* and *Scotland on Sunday* to discourse surrounding the nationalist movement and, more broadly, a cultural revival in the idea of Scottishness that has helped reinforce "the construction of political conflict along a Scottish versus English/British axis" (p.90).

Relatively few of these studies have considered newer media forms such as the internet in this Scottish context. However, the internet's role in a more broadly defined democratic civil society -- particularly the tantalizing question of whether a public sphere exists, or might potentially exist, online -- has generated extensive academic debate. If, as Habermas suggested, a space could be created for free and rational public debate on matters of political importance, could that space not be a virtual one? Among the early scholars to take up this question, Dahlberg (2001) analyzed normative conditions for such a public sphere, concluding that the Internet met or supported some but not all of them. For instance, the medium provided space for vibrant exchange and rational critique of positions, yet "increasing colonization of cyberspace by state and corporate interests" limited expansion of a true virtual sphere.

In a 2002 essay, Papacharissi also considered whether the Internet was fulfilling its potential to revive the public sphere. She said that although the volume of online information enhanced political discourse, inequalities of access and literacy compromised representativeness of a "virtual sphere." Discussion could be geographically wide-ranging but also fragmented and easily dominated by a vocal few; moreover, patterns of global capitalism posed barriers to emerging political cultures. Nonetheless,

"people who would never be able to come together to discuss political matters offline are now able to do so online, and that is no small matter. The fact that people from different cultural backgrounds, states or countries involve themselves in virtual political discussions in a matter of minutes, often expanding each other's horizons with culturally diverse viewpoints, captures the essence of this technology" (Papacharissi 2002:23).

Connecting ideas of nationalism with those of a public sphere in a way relevant to the present study, Cammaerts and van Audenhove (2005) used a case study to consider the extent to which technological, economic, and political transformations can engender alternative notions of citizenship that go beyond the classic understanding of its relationship to nation-states and rights. Their exploration of online discussion in the context of a potential "transnational public sphere" suggested several constraints; they found relatively weak degrees of interactivity, with only a limited number of male participants really engaged in discussing issues. While the Internet is well-suited to the fluid nature of contemporary political engagement, they said, citizens still exist within boundaries that the medium cannot erase.

Dahlgren (2005) aptly summarizes the themes of interest; he includes issues of pluralization and destabilization, considering how the medium both extends and restricts deliberative processes. Drawing on his earlier work related to civic cultures, he concludes:

"the Internet is at the forefront of the evolving public sphere, and if the dispersion of public spheres generally is contributing to the already destabilized political communication system, specific counter public spheres on the internet are also allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics" (p.160).

This study incorporates these ideas in examining the following research questions:

RQ1: What was the nature of the online political community formed within the discursive environment provided by scotsman.com around the 2007 Scottish national elections?

RQ2: In what ways did journalists engage with users within that community?

RQ3: What implications do this political and media discourse have for the potential development of a "virtual" public sphere?

Methodology

This paper draws on a content analysis of user comments attached to two months' worth of stories within the Holyrood Elections section of scotsman.com. From April 1 to June 1, 2007, inclusive, 455 items were posted to this section by journalists at *The Scotsman*, *Scotland on Sunday*, and the *Edinburgh Evening News*, as well as by online staffers. Of these, 27 from *The Scotsman* were accessible only to users paying £29.95 for an annual subscription; as comments on those stories could not be universally accessed, they were excluded from the study, leaving 428 stories available for analysis.[7]

Two coders conducted a content analysis of 39,300 comments posted to these stories, using individual comments as the unit of analysis. A systematic sampling procedure was used to code 4,796 (12.2%) of those: every first and second comment, followed by every 10th comment, plus the final comment if not already captured. Systematic sampling is appropriate when data stem from sequences of interpersonal interaction, as here, but do not coincide with any naturally recurring patterns (Krippendorff 1980). Appendix A provides the information recorded.

Data related to both stories and comments were initially logged in Word; comment data were subsequently converted into Excel files to facilitate the simple statistical procedures used here for analysis. A separate file also was created containing the user name of each comment contributor in the sample; his or her locale, if indicated; the item or items on which the user commented; and the number of comments included in the sample per user, per item.

The approach taken here diverges from the recommended procedure of creating exclusive categories for content analysis (Wimmer and Dominick 2006). Because the research interests involved the nature of the online discourse, value was seen in capturing the richness of a

conversation that typically ranged across multiple topic categories. However, the lack of exclusivity created difficulties in statistical analysis and intercoder reliability testing.

The findings reported below rely primarily on descriptive statistics. Intercoder reliability tests were performed using Holsti's formula on external links, indication of locale, and use of Gaelic or other Scottish vernacular for all sampled comments on April 6, a total of 50 items. Results yielded reliability of 1.0 on the links, .94 on the locale, and .82 on the user of Gaelic.

The dangers of online content analysis have been well-documented, notably by McMillan (2000), who highlighted problems with sampling, data collection, and coding created by the rapidly changing nature of online content. This study was able to substantially avoid those problems because all stories and comments were archived – and online staff "closed" users' ability to comment after some time had passed. The commenting period for all stories included in this study had closed, so the sample represents a complete and finite data set. After the study was completed, scotsman.com underwent a redesign; most archived stories remain accessible but are no longer organized into a single "Holyrood Elections" location within the website, and some comments have been lost in the transition.

Findings: Online Political Community

The 4,796 sampled comments were provided by 1,211 unique users – or more accurately, posted under 1,211 unique screen names, as registration using multiple pseudonyms was possible. Of those, 651 (53.8%) posted only one comment captured in the sample. The rest are represented more than once, led by a Glasgow man who contributed 202 sampled comments.

A closer look at the most active contributors – the top 10% by number of posts – is incorporated as appropriate in the findings that follow, highlighting the nature of the online

political community constituted by those who chose to return to it repeatedly. A total of 123 users are included in this consideration, all of whom contributed nine or more comments to the sample. Altogether, these users contributed 2,638 posts, or 55% of all sampled comments.

The findings support, unite, and extend earlier strands of research that have highlighted the use of online communities to fulfill bridging and bonding functions (Norris 2002) and the role of the traditional media in relation to those communities; the media role in articulating and strengthening national identity (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995), particularly in the Scottish context (Meech and Kilborn 1992; Schlesinger 1998; Law 2001; Higgins 2004), also is central here.

Online communities, including those organized around political interests, serve a bridging function by bringing together different sorts of people (Norris 2002). In the current study, users who chose to indicate their physical location – about two-thirds of the sample -- identified themselves as being from every continent except Antarctica. Fewer than half the users in the overall sample (547 contributors, or 45.3% of the total) indicated they lived in Scotland (although around 70% of those who did volunteer a location claimed to be on Scottish soil). The inclusion of voices from all over the world underscores the medium's capability, noted by other researchers, to bring diverse cultural perspectives to the political discourse (Papacharissi 2002).

Most of the sampled comments – a total of 2,853, or 59.5% -- were directly related to politics and civic issues raised by the 2007 Scottish elections, and although sentiment leaned decidedly toward the nationalist view, a wide range of opinions were represented. Discussants pulled no punches, and those with minority opinions needed thick skins. But users freely and ardently disagreed about candidate positions, government policy, the viability of independence and more. They interacted in very personal ways despite physical distances of thousands of miles

among some contributors; 2,527 of the comments (52.7% of the total) explicitly referenced remarks from another user,

But a bridging function that accommodated variations along the political spectrum failed to extend to those seen as undermining the debate itself, in line with Papacharissi's (2004) finding that online political postings might be impolite and even personally offensive but rarely uncivil in the sense of threatening the democratic nature of the discourse. In the current study, users who ventured into what others perceived as incivility came in for scathing criticism that essentially shut down such contributions, at least temporarily: "You've spoiled this thread in one of the most consistently pathetic and offensive series of posts I've seen on this forum," one exasperated user wrote to another toward the end of a 796-item thread in late April. "Some of us are trying to debate the future of our country."

The bonding function was also prominent within this community, in line with Norris' (2002) finding of its strength among members of online political groups. For example, a majority of the most active posters – 65 of 123, or 52.8% -- identified themselves with a Scottish locality; only 23 said they lived outside Scotland. (The rest did not indicate a locale.) Moreover, the sample captured attempts among these Scots – who seemed to know one another only through their online interactions -- to extend their virtual bonds into the offline world. As Election Day approached, users began to talk of a pub gathering, explicitly including those who disagreed most vehemently online. "Would you care to go for a drink on the 3rd of may for a chin wag after polling," an SNP supporter wrote to a user who did not share his political views. "Some of the punters on here would love to meet you and AM2," the prolific Glasgow poster who stalwartly defended his unpopular opinion that the SNP was not the best choice for the country.

Social bonding was particularly evident in relation to the thread of nationalism running through the conversation. In a medium that does not currently enable conversational partners to hear a regional accent, linguistic demonstrations of "Scottishness" instead took the form of textual markers, notably the use of Gaelic or distinctly Scottish idioms. In all, 358 comments (7.5% of the sample) used some such signal in their text, from dropping in a "wee" or a "tae" ("to") to posting an entire poem in Scottish vernacular. Eighty-six users (7.1%) incorporated a Scottish element in their screen name ("AJ fae Fife," "a proud doonhamer"), such as appropriating characters from Scottish history or working in the Gaelic word for "Scotland" ("AlbaWolf"). Eight of the most active posters (6.5% of that group) used Gaelic names to signal their sympathy to a nationalist cause supported by large numbers of online community members.

As constituency results trickled in for another 20 hours after the polls closed, users turned their online community into an informal global news service, a form of bonding among people with a common interest that to date has received little scholarly attention. They provided running updates of constituency results not yet posted on the scotsman.com website but available from sources such as the BBC or personal contacts -- "not to get too excited here but I have a heard a STRONG rumour from an insider that the SNP have won 5 seats in the West of Scotland regional list" – as well as rapidly changing calculations of the number of seats captured and the number still needed for a parliamentary majority. The instant a final tally was officially declared, that announcement was passed on to community members through the conversation thread. "The work starts now," one user wrote. "But first of all, a wee malt!"

Findings: Newspaper Participation

Users thus created their own grapevine news service to disseminate results and, among the majority who were SNP supporters, share a victory celebration. For the rest of the study period, aside from users' occasional pointers to news items, the role of political information provider fell mainly to the media organization hosting the online conversation space. The second research question considers the extent to which its journalists also engaged with users and contributed to the online community's interactions.

The findings indicate that direct engagement was virtually nonexistent. Only two self-identifying newspaper journalists turned up in the sample, one time each, joining the conversation for periods publicized in advance. (Both actually participated more extensively, but the sample did not capture all their comments.) One was the *Scotland on Sunday* political editor; the other was an editor and columnist for the same paper. Both entered discussions related to their articles. In other words, of nearly 4,800 sampled comments, a grand total of two were from journalists – a finding very much in line with the minimal newsroom participation in online political communities that other researchers have been documenting for nearly a decade (Schultz 2000; Deuze et al. 2007).

This was the case despite the fact that users commented routinely on the media in general and on *Scotsman* publications in particular. A total of 435 sampled comments (9.1%) referenced the media, and another 297 (6.2%) referred specifically to the *Scotsman* papers. Some of those media-related comments concerned politicians' public appearances – "Tony's on telly looking a bit shell shocked" – or were second-hand reports about polls, endorsements, or other political news. Users also provided a total of 129 external links to online newspaper or other media content, roughly a third of the total of 388 external links incorporated in their comments.

But many comments were media critiques. Local outlets came in for especially harsh words. "This paper has no shame publishing this crap and seeking to pervert the course of democracy," one user wrote. "You *Scotsman* journalists are selling out your own country," wrote another. And more. There also was a sprinkling of praise for stories -- "nice human insightful feature" – and at least one writer, that same political editor. "Take no notice" of the criticism, one user wrote encouragingly. "You keep trying mate. This was a convincing article." High praise indeed came from another: "You're actually not too bad compared to some."

Again, most newspaper employees neither acknowledged nor addressed the criticism or the praise within this discourse space. In general, journalists simply did not engage with online community members, not even when comments were directly aimed at them or their stories.

Journalists did participate in another way, however: by removing comments deemed abusive. Every comment carried an option to "Report as unsuitable." Users and journalists thus cooperated in moderating the discussion: Users could flag comments, which would then be inspected by scotsman.com staff. Only 71 comments (1.5% of the sample) were deleted.

Primarily, then, journalists "participated" in the political conversation in the traditional way: They provided stories to which users could react – or, more typically, ignore in pursuing their own line of discourse. While most discussion threads started out with comments connected with the story, the conversation often veered away quickly. Among 822 comments posted first or second (not all items attracted two or more comments), 648 (78.8%) related to the story. In comparison, 1,184 comments *after* the first two – fewer than 30% -- referenced the story.

Pursuit of this traditional role of information provider resulted in 428 freely accessible items added to the section during the study period. Of these, 292 (68.2%) were published before Election Day; between April 3 and 18, an average of seven to eight stories were added daily, and

during the two weeks immediately preceding the election, the daily average rose to 11. Another

53 stories (12.4% of the sample), most providing constituency results as they became available,

were added the day after the election. This emphasis on posting returns coincides with U.S.

online editors' views that a key advantage of the internet in a political context is the ability to

provide breaking news (Singer 2006).

The traditional role was reinforced in another way, as well: The items journalists

provided for the website were essentially identical to those provided for the print newspapers.

Aside from a periodic poll attached to the page template, the sole online-only content that

journalists produced for this section related to Election Day and its immediate aftermath. In

addition to the updated returns, this material included two Election Day photo galleries and an

Election Night blog, plus a single post-election podcast. All other content was repurposed from

items published in the newspapers, consisting of text and, for 92 (21.5%) of the items, photos or

graphics. Print stories generally were not edited for online display.

As a platform for user discourse, journalists' stories enjoyed variable success. On a

typical day, one story might attract hundreds, even thousands, of comments while other items

attracted far fewer. The mean number of comments per story was just over 97, but the median

was 21. The story attracting the most comments, an Election Day preview, received 1,827

comments from 93 individuals.

In addressing the first two research questions, then, these findings suggest that journalists

stuck to traditional interpretations of their traditional role – and that users were generally more

interested in engaging with other online political community members than in engaging with that

traditional content; most of their comments were unrelated to the story to which they were

attached. Would-be conversationalists also congregated in discussion threads that had attained

critical mass – the places where other people were talking – and all but ignored the rest of the day's stories. Whether they would have welcomed the engagement of journalists -- the people behind the content – within "their" community can only be a matter for speculation, as the journalists did not attempt to join. By choosing to remain outsiders, they determined that the political community, once enabled by the opening of news items to user comment, would occupy a separate space within a shared media environment.

Discussion and Conclusions

The third research question draws on these findings to consider the implications of political and media discourse surrounding the 2007 Scottish elections for potential development of a "virtual" public sphere. The study suggests the presence of some elements of a public sphere as originally proposed by Habermas (1989) and explored by others in the online context over the past decade; however, it also indicates that achievement of an ideal "virtual sphere" remains elusive. The political conversation was robust and geographically wide-ranging. Its evident value to the many participants who returned to it repeatedly over the study period suggested the kind of civic culture envisioned by Dahlgren (2005), who proposed that through identities developed by participation, "people are exploring new ways of being citizens and doing politics" (p. 159). The small number of deleted comments suggests a relatively – though not completely -- unfettered discourse environment; newspaper staffers retained the ability to moderate the conversation but seldom actually intervened. That said, closing some items off to all but paying subscribers is problematic if the goal is open discourse free from commercial constraints.

More troubling is that the conversation was characterized by intense interaction only among a vocal few, with minimal participation by most of those who ventured into the discourse,

as other scholars such as Papacharissi (2002) and Cammaerts and van Audenhove (2005) also have found in examining online political communities. Nor did the online population mirror the offline one in its political sentiments, which the one-seat SNP margin of election victory indicates were more closely balanced than the online conversation suggested. Many Scottish citizens chose to speak through the traditional ballot box rather than a collective virtual soapbox.

Such findings clearly are in line with earlier explorations of online political community. This study ventures into newer ground, however, in connecting these ideas with explorations of nationalism within a media space that now encompasses -- and juxtaposes -- the discourse of both journalists and members of the public. It does so by considering the uses that both journalists and users made of that shared space as well as how those uses intersected, the subjects of the first two research questions.

Earlier work has highlighted the importance of traditional media in the construction and maintenance of nationalism (Anderson 1993; Billig 1995), and various scholars have applied the concepts to the recent build-up of nationalist sentiment in Scotland (Meech and Kilborn 1992; Schlesinger 1998; Law 2001; Higgins 2004). This study offers support for Higgins' (2006) findings that a robust environment for political discourse was provided by the Scottish newspapers, considered here through their online rather than their printed presence. Over a study period of 62 days surrounding the elections, 428 stories were freely available in the single section of scotsman.com examined here, nearly all of them open to user comment.

User response was substantial – 39,300 comments during the study period from people all over the world, hundreds of whom returned repeatedly to the conversation -- and substantive, with a clear majority tied to national politics and civic issues. Users informed and engaged with one another directly throughout the discourse, with extensive references to previous comments

both within a thread and over time, offering evidence in support of the bridging and bonding functions of online political communities outlined by Norris (2002) and described above. Users also expressed a desire to extend their community into the "real world," for instance by getting together in a pub.

Although nationalist proponents were clearly over-represented among discourse participants, countering positions were freely offered and extensively debated. Impoliteness was tolerated, but incivility was not; when users felt someone was threatening the democratic tenor of the conversation, they called that person to task in no uncertain terms. The study thus underscores the argument that democratic discourse is supported rather than undermined by the sort of free-wheeling conversation, including ardent disagreement, that the online medium facilitates (Papacharissi 2004).

But the two uses of this discursive space – by journalists and by users – operated almost exclusively on parallel tracks. Journalists provided stories; users provided comments. Users occasionally took on the role of information provider, notably in reporting late-arriving election results, but journalists almost never stepped outside their own traditional function. The fact that the sample included only two comments from journalists – of a total of 4,796 – indicates few saw any value in engaging with readers in this format. The comment function was viewed as enabling users to "talk amongst themselves" – and not with anyone else – much as has been the case for a decade and more (Schultz 2000), even within an inherently interactive online environment.

It should be noted that the scotsman.com staff was in transition in spring 2007, and changes have occurred since. Conversations with journalists outside this study suggested various reasons why journalists stayed away, including time and resource constraints; uncertainty among editors about how to manage interaction; and a level of discomfort about engaging in political

discourse, especially one that some journalists saw as driven by a pack of rabid nationalists. Yet the political persuasions of users seem shaky grounds for declining to interact with them at all, especially given the extent to which the Scottish press has been actively engaged in nationalist debates for at least a generation (Schlesinger 1998; Hearn 2001; Law 2001; Higgins 2006).

Whatever the rationale, itself a subject for additional research, this study highlights a wholly one-sided relationship. Users were deeply engaged with the newspaper and its content, using it as a springboard to continue a conversation about nationalism and national issues that, again, the papers themselves have long sustained. The media institution declined to reciprocate within this online environment. It chose instead to maintain the traditional boundary between journalists and readers. Yet the internet is intolerant of boundaries. It is a space in which all communication and all communicators are interconnected – and, like it or not, that includes the journalists. How they adjust remains a crucial topic for ongoing study.

For media scholars, this intersection of journalistic and popular civic discourse is of significant theoretical interest; for practitioners, it is of equally great practical importance. Innumerable industry experiments with user contributions to media websites are currently under way, as briefly outlined above -- but there is little or no consensus, among either researchers or practitioners, as to what the role of the journalist should be this open and participatory online discourse. The issue is of particular significance when the topic involves political information and citizen choice in a democratic society.

The user-instigated conversation is rougher and more personal than the usual journalistic presentation of either news or opinion. That conversation intersects and engages with journalistic content, as shown here; at least in this particular case, however, it did not intersect or engage with journalists themselves. Those journalists continue to enter the public sphere not as

individuals but solely through their work, aggregated into the product of a formal institution, the newspaper and its website. In other words, the nature of their presence in the "virtual" public sphere of an open networked environment is nearly identical to the nature of their presence in the traditional media environment – the presence of a detached observer. A significant question for both practitioners and scholars is whether that role has ongoing value or whether change is appropriate, and if the latter, how it might best be achieved and enacted.

The current study has many limitations. It examines just one shared newspaper website in the context of a single political event, making generalizations difficult. The lack of exclusive comment topic categories poses analytical problems, and although it preserves the richness and breadth of the discourse, it does so at the expense of other potential insights. That said, this study offers one of the most intensive examinations to date of an online political community affiliated with a media website, and it is among the first to explicitly consider the ways in which the discursive activities of the two sets of actors – journalists and users – intersected within this shared civic space. As scholars turn with increasing interest to the phenomenon of user-generated content and its implications for traditional media -- particularly in the context of democratic politics, processes, and the perpetually evolving "virtual sphere" -- it is hoped that these findings will provide a valuable foundation on which to build.

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7.   Of these 428 scotsman.com items, 24 did not allow user comments -- deliberately,

because of technical problems, or because an online staffer neglected to enable the

comment function when uploading.

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APPENDIX A: Information recorded about the user comments

Information recorded	Explanation
Story date and headline	For reference purposes.
Comment number	For example, 1 of 276, 2 of 276, 10 of 276 … 276 of 276.
Date the comment was posted	As indicated by automatically generated time-and-date stamp.
Number and source of links included within a comment	Internal and external links were noted, as was the site to which the link pointed.
User's stated locale	Users had to register with scotsman.com to post a comment, and a location was requested but not required. Some users chose to provide a real geographical locale (Glasgow; New Zealand); others offered a mock one ("elsewhere"; "in exile") or none at all. Only the real ones were recorded.
Presence within the text of any linguistic devices that served as a marker of "Scottishness"	Incorporation of Gaelic words or phrases, or other bits of Scottish vernacular, was of interest here in the context of Scottish nationalism.
Comment subject(s)	All relevant subjects were recorded; no attempt was made to parse comments to decide which was dominant, as the goal was to capture the breadth of the online discourse. Categories were:

P	POLITICS, politicians, and social or civic issues of relevance in the 2007 election context (the economy, health care, etc).
U	Another USER and/or user comments.
S	The newspaper STORY or item to which the comment was attached.
M	Other references to the MEDIA, general ("the Labour-loving press") or specific ("the BBC is reporting …").
N	Any of the three NEWSPAPERS whose content was included in the Holyrood Elections section (*The Scotsman*, *Scotland on Sunday*, the *Edinburgh Evening News),* individually or collectively.
O	OTHER unrelated subjects, such as sports.

The coding sheet also provided room to record any information the coder deemed of potential interest, such as the wording of a particularly vitriolic attack on *The Scotsman* or the fact that the user had posted an original poem or song – of which there were quite a few.