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“The Role Played by Journalistic Networks in the Construction of “Public” Issues: The Brief, Happy News Life of the ‘Francisville Four,’”

Chris Anderson

Revise and Resubmit at Political Communication

“Common Knowledge” About the Blogger-Journalist Relationship

The last eight years have seen the analysis of the relationship between “blogging” and “journalism” emerge as an academic growth industry. Each year, dozens of scholarly papers dissect citizen media’s challenge to journalistic professionalism (C. Anderson and Schudson 2008; Singer 2005; M. Deuze 2003; Matheson 2004; Mark Deuze 2005) and conduct comparative framing analyses examining the different ways journalists and bloggers cover the news (Wall 2005; Bicket and Wall 2007; A. Anderson and Marhadour 2007). In addition to this formal institutional scholarship, tens of thousands of bloggers have pondered their own epistemological status and their relationship to their more professional peers.

Despite this on- and offline growth, and despite the relative ferment within the field of citizens journalism studies (Reich 2008), at least one fact has passed into conventional wisdom for both academics and bloggers alike: blogs are a “parasitic medium,” (Niles 2007), and blogging is a practice that consists largely of commentary on “the facts” reported by more traditional, professional journalists. Bloggers themselves seem to occasionally accept this definition of their work. Accord to an oft-cited Pew survey, only 5 percent of bloggers see the primary purpose of their website as providing information on news and current events (Lenhart and Fox 2006), and an even smaller percentage of these political bloggers engage in original reporting. Legal scholar Neil Nantel notes that “[news] and opinion blogs are largely (but certainly not entirely) parasitic on the institutional press. They copy, quote from, discuss, and criticize stories reported in the press far more than engaging in original reporting or linking to other blogs.” (Netanel 2008) Murley and Roberts (Murley and Roberts 2005) argue that blogs primarily engage in “second level agenda setting ... playing off the stories proffered by traditional media outlets” (17). In their 2005 article, drawn from a systematic content analysis of the 20 most popular blogs at the time, the authors reported that bloggers engaged in original reporting in only 6 percent of the time, and this number fell to five percent when only “political bloggers” were included in the sample. Bloggers linked to the mainstream media in over half their links, and to newspapers most of all (41 percent of all links). In short, blogs generally followed the agenda already set by the most elite and traditional media outlets—the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the L.A. Times. “Despite their [criticism of the mainstream media],” the Murley and Roberts conclude, “most of the blogs in this study would have little to say if it

were not for topics they choose that originate with mainstream media.” (18)

And yet: nearly all of the scholarship reinforcing this opinion has been of two methodological kinds, either surveys of journalists and bloggers (The Project For Excellence in Journalism 2008; Lowrey and W. Anderson 2005), or, most frequently, content analysis (Murley and Roberts 2005; Wall 2005; Reese et al. 2007; The Project For Excellence in Journalism 2006, 2008). A more nuanced take on the journalism-blogging relationship, Graves’ (Graves 2007) detailed overview of the diffusion of several important news stories between 2002 and 2005, remains entirely based on analysis of online texts. Even the justifiably well-regarded Harvard case study of the “Trent Lott affair” is somewhat reactive insofar as it attempts to reconstruct the diffusion of news after it occurred and remained entirely focused on the national press (Scott 2004). Perhaps the best example of the kind of analysis I propose is historical rather than contemporary: Robert Darnton’s description of news diffusion in 18th century Paris, a study that untangles “a dense communication network made up of media genres that have largely been forgotten” (Darnton 2000)¹ Little research has engaged with the question of the journalism-blogging relationship, and the impact of that relationship on the diffusion of news events, from a qualitative, newsroom based perspective.

The reasons for this lack of scholarship are two-fold. First, we must acknowledge what Eric Kleinenberg has called the “paradox of contemporary sociology ... that the discipline has largely abandoned the empirical study of journalistic organizations and news institutions at the moment when the media has gained visibility in political, economic, and cultural spheres.” (Klinenberg 2005) In particular, Kleinenberg points to the decline in ethnographic analysis of news production (Klinenberg, forthcoming). The reasons for this decline lie beyond the scope of this paper, but, in general, one can point to the idiosyncratic relationship between sociology and communications scholarship (Zelizer 2004), difficulties in gaining access to increasingly corporatized news institutions, the investment of time required to conduct comprehensive fieldwork, and, finally, developments in the communications research field in general. If scholars rarely find themselves in newsrooms, it is unlikely that they will be on site during one of the relatively rare moments when a development in the news cycle incorporates professional and amateur

¹ Interestingly, Darnton cites sociologists like Robert Merton, Elihu Katz, and Gabriel Tarde as his models in the Paris case study rather than public sphere theorists such as Jurgen Habermas. While he largely avoids elaborating on the theoretical implications of this choice, I hope to address some of them in the course of my own research.

blogs, alternative newspapers, activist websites, and traditional print media.

A second reason for the lack of qualitative scholarship on news diffusion, paradoxically, lies in the very textual transparency of the internet itself. The world wide web is, as Marres puts it, a profoundly traceable medium (Marres 2005): from the perch of the researchers desk, one can watch news stories emerge and disappear in real time; with public tools like Technorati, one can instantly trace the number of links a particular news story receives, and from whom; using even more advanced network mapping software (Kelly and Etling 2005) we can develop richly empirical accounts of issue clustering and weblog affinities. All of these techniques are invaluable, and indeed, I have used several of them myself over the course of my research. Nevertheless, relying solely on content and social network analysis in order to explain how issues become public issues (and how the relationship between old and new media producers affects that process of “becoming public”) (Latour 2005) misses a great deal. It runs the risk of seeing the journalist, or even the blogger, as merely a shadow-image of the researcher herself—constantly checking Technorati links and rss feeds, scouring the web for tips, leads, and stories. Such an image is deeply misleading. Whatever journalists may become in the future, at present, they are creatures of reality rather than creatures of the web

Methods

In the following pages I offer what I believe to be the first newsroom-based account of the process by which a news story “diffuses” across a variety of digital media spheres. The research is part of a larger project that analyzes, in depth, the process of “networked news production” in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Over the course of this larger project I undertook a 60-month process of iterative fieldwork, both on-and offline, with the most intense period of observation occurring between May and August 2008. I also conducted more than 60 semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, activists, bloggers, and media executives to gain insight into news forms of journalistic work. Over the two week period around which this paper revolves, I watched how a simple story about the arrest and detention of four Philadelphia homeowners moved from activist websites, to the alternative press, to the inner pages of the Philadelphia Daily News, the city’s daily tabloid newspaper, to major national blogs. My methods during

this time period can be placed into three general categories—primitive “network analysis” (i.e., using the online search engine Technorati and newspapers’ own web statistics to document how stories about the arrests linked to other stories); second, qualitative content analysis of the ways these different stories were framed; and finally, observation of the meetings and decision-making processes of journalists and bloggers themselves, often in real time.

[Figure 1 Here]

This chapter is deeply descriptive and fairly linear in its development, so I want to highlight some of my findings at the outset. The diffusion of the “Francisville Four” story demonstrates that, while the causal arrow between news / reporting and blogger / commentary is generally accurate, the actual process is far more complex than usually acknowledged. Discussions between journalists and activists occurred about the actual content of journalistic work, and what amount of reporting was enough for that work to “count” as journalism. Classic boundary-markers between journalists and bloggers were problematized— it appears that boundary construction between journalists and bloggers may becoming less important than these lines within different reporting, blogging, and activist communities. New evidence is presented regarding to the relationship between reporting, framing, and how a story moves from the local to the global blogosphere. Finally, a key finding of much recent media sociology-- importance of the non-media actors in the “construction” of news-- is reconfirmed. What helped make the Francisville Four story into a public issue? In large part, the actions of the police and the Philadelphia activist community.

I am not claiming that the work that follows either “proves” or “disproves” the accepted wisdom about the journalism-blogging relationship. It is entirely possible that the situation I observed was unusual and unlikely to be repeated. Like my overall research product, however, I am comfortable sacrificing some degree of generalizability for greater qualitative depth. We desperately need to extricate ourselves from the blogger-journalism dichotomy still prevalent in most academic research. In a sense, the very complexities and idiosyncrasies apparent in the story of the “Francisville Four” might be useful for generating interesting conundrums and counter-intuitive claims, claims which can themselves be subjected to a more comparative, systemic analysis in the future.

Emergence of the Story in the Online Political Press

On Friday, June 13 at 5:19 pm, activists with the Philadelphia-based radio activist group Prometheus Radio Project sent out an email announcing that four Philadelphia residents, initially identified only as “critics of the police,” were arrested in a police raid earlier in the day. Most importantly, according to the release, there appeared to be no good reason behind the arrests other than law enforcement harassment. “Philadelphia Police descended upon the home of homeowners who have been questioning police tactics in Mayor Nutter’s new ‘stop and frisk,’ program,” the email read. “4 residents were arrested in their home at 17th street and Ridge Avenue, and the police are in the process of sealing the building. The homeowners are being held at the police station, no charges have yet been filed.” The email concluded by linking the homeowners’ arrest to larger city issues of police misconduct. “Few imagined that simple criticism of a city policy could result in the seizure of one’s home and subject residents to arrest.” (Tridish 2008)

Although Prometheus Radio’s political work is primarily national in character and centers around the rather esoteric issues of low power radio and online spectrum access, its key members are long-time members of the local radical community, with many living in a large collective house in West Philadelphia. (Dunbar-Hester 2008) Word of the arrests thus spread quickly across what is known locally as the “West Philly activist scene.” About an hour later that Friday, having already heard about the raid from friends, Philadelphia reporter Henry Baker² received the Prometheus email and forwarded it to the editorial group of the Philadelphia Independent Media Center (IMC), a website used for activist news reporting and commentary (<http://www.phillyimc.org>). Using the open publishing feature of the IMC website, Baker also turned the story into a website “news brief” on his own initiative. Baker’s email proposed that

² In this paper my attribution policy is as follows: all individuals are either identified by pseudonyms or are treated anonymously, unless I am discussing their authorship of stories (news reports, blogposts, etc) in which they are identified and that are in the public domain. For example: the author of a private email would be anonymous. An editor discussing general news policy would be anonymous. A journalist discussing work published under his own byline would be identified by name.

Philly IMC turn the news brief into a full feature—meaning that it should be placed at the top spot on the website. Since a previous feature – about Philadelphia Wi-Fi—had already been proposed but not posted, and since the Philly IMC can only handle one large feature in the top slot at a time, Baker’s proposal attempted to find a way to balance the timing of the different feature promotions: “Hi folks, I just got this from Prometheus Radio, and looks real bad ... I already heard about this now from friends who know the residents, and it sounds like a really legit story, esp coming from Prometheus. What do folks think about putting it up either right now (before [the] upcoming feature [about Municipal wireless]), or we could put [the Municipal Wireless feature] up now and put this other one up 24 hours later?” (Bennett 2008)

The proponent of the municipal wireless feature quickly blessed the notion of a delay in his own proposal, and by 6:54 pm on July 13 (about 90 minutes after the distribution of the original Prometheus email) a feature about the arrests had been posted to the Philly IMC website. Headlined “Police critics arrested, home seized in police raid!” the story was primarily a repost of the original Prometheus press release. (Tridish 2008)

While the featuring process was being quickly and easily negotiated at Philly IMC, a more fraught conversation was taking place over at a second activist-journalist hub, Young Philly Politics (<http://youngphillypolitics.com>). Much as he did with Indymedia, Henry Baker posted the Prometheus press release on the “blog” section of the YPP site at 6:21pm. (journalists4mumia 2008b) Unlike with Indymedia, however, the post was quickly critiqued by a second YPP user, “MrLuigi.” Particularly problematic for MrLuigi was the press release’s assertion that Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter had declined to attend community meetings discussing recent examples of police misconduct. Nutter was a marked improvement over previous Philadelphia mayors in this regard, MrLuigi asserted. “I’m very interested to hear more concrete details about this recent arrest, but to be absolutely clear the blank assertion that this mayor and this police commissioner are less than a noticeable step forward from the past in terms of community relations seems pretty dubious to me.” (MrLuigi 2008) Baker responded by acknowledging that the state of community-police relations under Nutter might mark an improvement over past Mayors, but also shifted the conversation to the topic of the story’s inherent newsworthiness. “I, too, am waiting for

more information... But, I really want to help get the word out, so that the chances are better of these folks getting fair treatment and having the facts get out. I've personally known the folks at Prometheus Radio for many years, and called both the folks listed at the bottom to confirm the email, so this does seem like a very serious story.” (journalists4mumia 2008a) In this exchange, Baker defends his journalistic credentials—by emphasizing, first, the public importance of the story; second, the political goals it might serve (increased “fair treatment” for those arrested); third, the reliability of his sources (“I've personally known the folks at Prometheus Radio for many years”); and finally, his journalistic spadework (“[I] called both the folks listed at the bottom to confirm the email.”)

It was on the subject of journalistic credibility that the site’s founder and lead moderator, Dan Urevick-Ackelsberg, took issue with the story, about twelve hours after the original posting. Under the headline “YPP standards,” Urevick-Ackelsberg noted that “a vague email forward does not cut it here, especially if you are accusing people of fairly serious stuff. If you have more than that, post it. If not, please wait till you get something a little more concrete, like any sort of actual source.” (Dan U-A 2008b) This email prompted an important exchange regarding the status of Baker’s story and the general journalistic role of Young Philly Politics. After Baker largely repeated his original justifications for posting the story, stating that he “stood behind it,” (journalists4mumia 2008c) Urevick-Ackelsberg noted that “sure, you can stand behind it. But, this isn't a democracy, and I am telling you that it doesn't meet standards here. When I say a source: how about a witness, how about a name, how about a first person account, how about a police report, how about anything at all? ... I am not trashing Prometheus radio or Philly IMC, and what they decide to forward, report on or feature. But different places have different standards, and if you are going to post here, that isn't a debatable point.” (Dan U-A 2008a)

After Baker expressed his disappointment with Urevick-Ackelsberg and repeated his assertions that the Prometheus Radio press release, combined with the public identification of press contacts, constituted reliable sources for him, a second site leader also weighed in on the question:

“Also, re: 'website policy' or whatever, I'd like to say one thing, generally: a site like this exists in a weird space between journalism and, like, standing around the corner gossiping and talking politics. I think there's a great tool here to expand awareness of important stuff. People really do listen. It's also a tool to expand mutual understanding: I don't know everything, and I learn things by talking to people here all the time. So I'd like to think that the policies should not be so much about Dan or Ray or me drawing lines or playing some pseudo-dictatorial role, but rather as encouraging everyone to just recognize the power and responsibility of having a platform like this, which even though it's virtual, creates a written record and has the power to affect the real world, for better and worse.” (Jennifer 2008)

Although discussions about the reliability of Baker's information would continue on Young Philly Politics, the conversation would be largely preempted by new developments in both the case and the coverage of it over the course of the weekend.

Several general items are worthy of note at this point, less than 48 hours into the existence of the Philadelphia arrest story. First, contrary to much of the existing literature on online journalism, a non-professional, entirely volunteer media organization did in fact “break” the story of the arrests. However, even amongst more amateur media outlets, there were serious doubts expressed as to whether the story as it stood on Philadelphia Indymedia contained enough “reporting” to be featured in contexts that transcended the local community activist community. While the original volunteer reporter expressed confidence in the work he had done—reading the press release, contacting the authors of it to confirm the story—other journalists were looking for more-- “a witness, a name, a first person account, a police report, anything at all.” (Dan U-A 2008a) Reasons behind this apparent failure to gather more information—to do more work-- will be discussed in the conclusion of this chapter.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that many of these discussions also revolved around questions of organizational identity, self-perception and perceptions of “the audience.” I have already noted [in a previous chapter] that Young Philly Politics editors are acutely aware of the homologies between themselves and the “Indymedia crowd,” and have thus erected institutional markers (“our website is a Mumia-free zone”) (interview, 7/9/2008) around themselves to create a strong counter-identity from the Philadelphia IMC. This need for boundary work probably explains the unusually hostile remarks about YPP “standards” expressed by Urevick-Ackelsberg in his email exchange with Henry Baker.

Finally, we should note that in all cases these amateur reporters echoed traditional journalistic concerns and thought processes in their assessment of the news. Baker defended his story by invoking notions of source reliability, public relevance, and journalistic routines (“[I] called both the folks listed at the bottom to confirm the email.”) Urevick-Ackelsberg responded by asking for additional reporting. Finally, a second YPP editor alluded to the “public responsibility” inherent in maintaining a community website. All these comments were expressed by email in the heat of the reportorial moment, a time when personal and institutional mindsets might be most apt to reveal that claims to journalistic identity were little more than a self-interested mask. Instead, the opposite process was on display.

By the end of the weekend of June 14th, however, the story of the arrests remained the tree in the proverbial forest: it had fallen, but (almost) no one had heard it, so was it really news? Simultaneously, however, additional journalistic work was occurring at more mainstream news organizations, work that would soon turn the story of the “Francisville Four” into a major local story.

From Alt. Weekly to Tabloid to Broadsheet

On the afternoon of June 13th, the editorial offices of the Philadelphia City Paper (one of the city’s two alternative-weekly newspapers, along with the Philadelphia Weekly) took a telephone call from “a friend of a friend” (interview, 6/17/2008) of one of the people arrested at the house on 17th St. and Ridge Ave. Isaiah Thompson, the reporter dispatched to the scene, noted that he was new to the Philadelphia area and the caller was not a regular source of his. “I think somebody in the house knew somebody at the paper,” he surmised. “In any case,” he added, “I pretty much ran down there.” (interview, 6/17/2008) Thompson’s article, which appeared on the City Paper’s daily blog, “The Clog,” (<http://www.citypaper.net/blogs/clog>) on June 14th, contained the first extensive information about the arrests as well as a number of unusually candid quotes from members of the Philadelphia Police Department. A photo of the scene of the “investigation” taken by Thompson (the skeptical quote mark are original to the Clog’s online photo caption) as well as an interview with the building’s co-owner Robert

Gilbert “on the scene yesterday afternoon,” marked Thompson’s presence as a direct observer of the scene at some point on June 13th. The second and third paragraphs of the story established the chain of events leading to the arrests: “Moffat watched from the squad car as the officers entered the building and detained three other residents who were inside. Then a funny thing happened: Homeland Security showed up. And more detectives. And then the Crime Scene unit. And then more detectives. And the Fire Marshall. And Licensing and Inspection. And then more detectives. All day long and into Friday evening, the building was crawling with officials from one agency or another.” (Thompson 2008)

The article also contained the first interview with one of the arrestees, Daniel Moffat, who repeated the original contention of the press release that the police were targeting members of the house because of their neighborhood activism. Finally, the article provided the first justification for the police department’s action, interviewing 9th District Captain Denis Wilson, who spoke to the City paper “gravely from the building’s doorway,” as well as two other on-scene arresting officers. The officers claimed that the building contains “literature about killing cops” and “propaganda against the government,” and then made a statement that will be cited numerous times throughout the additional reporting on the story: “They’re a hate group,” said Capt. Wilson, “We’re trying to drum up charges against them, but, unfortunately, we’ll probably have to let them go.” (Thompson 2008)

The story largely complete by Saturday, Thompson and his editor engaged in a now familiar debate: “did we want to sit on the story” and save it for the print edition, Thompson remembered, “or did we want to just put it online?” (interview, 6/17/2008) The argument was a short one—the story was posted on The Clog at 4:23pm on Saturday, June 14th. When the City Paper hits the streets on Wednesday, a small box on the cover touted the “online only coverage” of the Francisville arrest story. (fieldnotes, 6/18/2008)

By the start of the workday Monday, it was quickly apparent that a media plan has been put in place to further publicize what local activists were now calling the “illegal arrests.” The first sign of the media blitz came in the form of a new, much more detailed press release that quickly, in the words of one Philadelphia Daily News editor, “went viral.” (fieldnotes, 6/17/2008) A copy of release appeared on Young Philly Politics at 8:30 am, complete with a prefatory note acknowledging that its authors had “seen lots of debate about whether or not the information that my colleagues and friends released Friday about the

police action at 17th and Ridge was enough for folks,” and adding that “there’s been much conversation and support bubbling up from the city for the folks who were evicted Friday. Over the weekend they developed this press release, and decided to organize a press conference [at 1pm Tuesday] to answer questions.” (hannahjs 2008) One of the Daily News city editors received “at least five” emails containing the press release, from both reporters and sources, and a veteran reporter “got one, maybe more” (interviews, 6/17/2008) The release did not originate at Young Philly Politics; rather “friends of the people arrested sent out the press release to everyone and their mother,” according to the reporter (interview, 6/17/2008).

“The story was just intriguing enough to catch my interest,” said a Daily News city editor, noting that four-fifths of activist-type press releases amount to nothing at all. “I think we’re always skeptical of this type of thing,” he said, but noted the fact that the release “went viral” was enough to briefly grab the paper’s collective attention. (interview, 6/19/2008) The level of online conversation generated by the story on Young Philly Politics also played a role in reinforcing the potential importance of the story, adding to a sense in the newsroom that the topic was “hot.” “When people are excited, we notice it,” concluded the city editor interview, (interview, 6/19/2008). Dave Davies, who was assigned to report the story for the Tuesday edition of the Daily News, first encountered the City Paper story after he has already started his reporting—“it was the press releases that caught our attention,” said Davies, “and we saw the City Paper article once we’d already begun the reporting.” (interview, 6/17/2008) As Daily News editors debated the next day’s newspaper at the afternoon editorial meeting, staffers described a mix of excitement and skepticism surrounding the arrests. “The consensus in the room was that it was a good story,” said a city editor, “but there was skepticism about the motives of the people behind it.” (interview, 6/17/2008)

One floor up in the newsroom of the Philadelphia Inquirer, metro columnist and blogger Dan Rubin remembers seeing the IMC story over the weekend and bookmarking it. “Then on Monday i got a note from Brian Howard of City Paper, touting his reporter’s version of it.” Two minutes later, Rubin recalled, he received the same widely distributed email announcing the Tuesday news conference. “I didn’t have a Wednesday column lined up, Rubin said, “so i jumped on it.” (Rubin 2008a) Rubin remembers that the IMC story was not enough, in itself, to prompt him to write about the story “because it wasn’t really anything more than a press release, and I don’t like linking to press releases.” (fieldnotes, 6/24/2008) By

the end of the day, Rubin “wasn't sure if [the arrest] was a column or a story because there was so much unknowable, and to columnize, I'd have wanted a better sense of what to make of it all. So i prepared to do a totally different column for Wednesday, which i did. But,” he added, “I had all this material, and we hadn't done anything for the paper yet. so [on Tuesday morning] ... I start[ed] writing. For the blog. Because i could.” (Rubin 2008a)

Tuesday June 17th thus marks the first reporting by Philadelphia's major news organizations on the Francisville arrest story. The Dave Davies Daily News article, “The Cops Came, Searched and Left a Mess for Puzzled Homeowner,” is touted on the cover, featured on page 7, and is the first appearance of the story in printed form. (fieldnotes, 6/17/2008) The Blinq blog post, “Who Wrote 'Kill The Pigs' at 17th & Ridge?” is posted at 8:52 in the morning. Both stories would eventually move to the top slot of Philly.com. The online version of the Davies story contains no links, although it prominently quotes the City Paper article (Davies 2008); the Blinq blog post links to both the City Paper and to Davies' story in the Daily News (Rubin 2008b) Both pieces were extensively reported and contained a wealth of new information: the police department claimed that their original visit to the property was prompted by the defacement of a neighborhood security camera; that someone wrote “kill the pigs” on the wall of the raided home; that the residents of the building refused to identify the owner of the house; and that there was a “bunker” on the roof of the building (prompting comparisons to the infamous MOVE cult). Moffat, who served as the lead interviewee in both stories, denied that anyone in the home wrote “kill the pigs on the wall,” (“If anyone did that, Moffat says, it was the police, themselves.”); said that the police never claimed they were investigating a defaced security camera when they arrived; noted that the so-called bunker was really a greenhouse; produced a property receipt indicating “his laptop computer is now in the possession of the State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation, Intelligence Division,” and admitted that he “panicked” when the police arrived and denied he was the owner of the building. (Davies 2008; Rubin 2008b)

[Figure 2 Here]

Despite their manifold similarities, however, the two stories also contained a wealth of subtle differences, owing to both the nature of the medium in which they appeared and the character of the institutions that produced them. The Daily News article was an entirely “straight” news piece, which, although containing a wealth of potentially damning information about police misconduct, explicitly allowed both “sides” in the arrest dispute to address the claims of the other. The bulk of the Blinq post did the same thing, and yet, was framed in a subtly different fashion. Compared to the Daily News lede (“four young residents of a North Philadelphia house who circulated petitions questioning police-surveillance cameras were roused from their home Friday and detained 12 hours without charges while police searched their house,”) Rubin’s introduction and conclusion demonstrated a slightly more skeptical attitude towards the activists. “Now that he’s had time to think -- and 10 hours in police detention gives you time for introspection -- Dan Moffat concedes things might have gone better if he’d cooperated,” Rubin begins. And the authors conclusion was even more strongly put: “All I know [says Rubin of himself] is that if a bunch of cops came to my door and woke me up -- at 3 a.m. even -- my instinct would be to cooperate to the point of blurting out anything I’d ever done, including not telling on my friend Gary when he stole a comb from Mr. Vincent’s barbershop 40 years ago. But that’s just conservative old me.” (Davies 2008; Rubin 2008b) Nevertheless, the bulk of the actual reported material is quite similar to the material gathered by the Daily News—and, to repeat, contained a great deal of damning information about police conduct. Part of the difference, as already noted, stemmed from differences in the story form. While it is a well-known truism that reported journalism should be “objective,” I observed an equally prevalent notion during my time in Philadelphia—the notion that “blog material,” even if it was mostly straight reporting, should contain, if not an explicit opinion, at the very least a strong authorial voice (fieldnotes, May-August 2008).

An additional explanation for differences in the two articles—and indeed, differences in the arc of the story coverage in general-- stems from differences in professional self-awareness and brand identity at the two newspapers. “This isn’t an Inquirer story,” one Daily News editor told me early in the week, “it’s more of gritty, Daily News type piece.” (interview, 6/17/2008) Indeed, no story about the arrests appeared in the print version of the Inquirer until the day after the Tuesday press conference—using the press

conference as a news hook, but largely driven by the fact that the Daily News had reported the story the previous day (Gregory 2008). Even more telling were the differences in follow-up planned by the two papers: while the Daily News, as we will see below, mounted “mini-crusade” around the issue of the police raid, the Inquirer quickly moved to expand the meaning of the arrests in a far more general and skeptical direction. “I got the L&I report and this house had a million violations against it,” noted the Inquirer reporter (not Dan Rubin) who covered the activist press conference on Tuesday. Possibly alluding to the Daily News, though not by name, she continued: “I think we make characters out of the news sometimes.” Speaking more than a month after the arrests, the reporter said that she thought the deeper issues brought to light by the story included the redevelopment of the North Philadelphia neighborhood where the arrests took place and the relationship between the arrestees and long-time community members. “This whole thing about people coming into the neighborhood, and are their tensions between them and the community,” that’s the story I and my editor care about, the reporter stated. Alluding to a post on a local blog, the reporter recounted another incident in which “anarchists” and members of a different neighborhood clashed over gentrification. “Some of the underlying stuff [that is important to this story] is how do these two groups work together?” (interview, 7/14/2008)

Despite these differences in tone – though not in the actual substance of reported material—the fact remained that the Francisville arrest story had become “news.” It had gained certification by both of the major newspapers in Philadelphia, and had produced a well-attended press conference. The story would now expand into the local and national blogosphere; indeed, it is at this moment in the development in the story that much of the academic literature on the “journalism-blogger” relationship begins.

The Local and Global Blogosphere

Within hours of the appearance of the Daily News story on Tuesday, the local Philadelphia blogosphere began devoting considerable attention to the travails of Daniel Moffat and his Francisville housemates. In particular, four local blogs—Philebrity (<http://www.philebrity.com>), Philadelphia Will Do (<http://willdo.philadelphiaweekly.com/>), Attytood (<http://www.attytood.com>) and Phawker

(<http://www.phawker.com>)—assured that the story would assume a life that went beyond the confines of the regular Daily News and Inquirer readership. In addition, the work of what I have termed “local bridge bloggers” (bloggers that occasionally bridge the gap between local news and a national audience, see pg. X-x) helped briefly the move into national prominence.

It is important to note, at this point, that several websites jumped on the Moffat story before Tuesday, linking to the early City Paper and the Philadelphia Independent Media Center reports. Nevertheless, it is clear that the major Philadelphia blogs were spurred into action by some combination of the Dave Davies story and the Rubin’s post, along with the prominence given to both these stories on Philly.com. In its 12:24pm story, “It Would Be Hilarious If It Weren’t True: Philly Cops Mistake Hipsters For M.O.V.E.-esque Hate Group” (It Would Be Hilarious If It Weren’t True: Philly Cops Mistake Hipsters For M.O.V.E.-esque Hate Group 2008) Philebrity links to the City Paper, the Daily News, and Blinq ; Philadelphia Will Do (“Cops Raid Dreamboat Terrorist’s House”) links to the Daily News, the City Paper, and Indymedia (D-Mac 2008); and Phawker links to the Daily News and the City Paper (Deeney 2008). All in all, the Davies story is the key one—websites linking to it over the coming days include, in addition to the three already mentioned, Attytood, the Stormfront (a white supremacist group) discussion board, and Mithras (<http://mithras.blogs.com/>). At this point we see a fairly clear validation of the conventional wisdom about the journalism-blogging relationship: key local bloggers jumped on the story once it appeared in print; most coverage in the blogosphere linked back to the newspaper story (to such a degree that they even largely ignored the online only story produced by a newspaper columnist); and most of the blog coverage contained little “original reporting” in the traditional journalistic sense of the word.

That said, a more qualitative appraisal shows that this “classic” story of news diffusion is more complex than it initially appears. Local blogs reframed the story and broadened the conversation. Some bloggers did, indeed, do original reporting. The thoughts of one journalist-blogger demonstrated that the conventional wisdom surrounding news diffusion is more complicated than it might first appear. Finally, the way the arrest story emerged move from the local to the national blogosphere provided additional insights.

While they may not have provided much additional reporting, local blogs reframed the story in ways that both reflected and shaped the direction of the community conversation. Both Philebrity and

Philadelphia Will Do blogged about the story early on Tuesday afternoon, and both blogs immediately added “snark” to the original story, writing about it in ways that typified their trademark brand of sarcastic humor. Philadelphia Will Do blogger Daniel McQuade, in addition to recapping the arrest events, noted that arrestee Moffatt had dreamy eyes; eyes that were, in fact, “too dreamy for Philadelphia.” (D-Mac 2008)

At the same time, however, local bloggers seemed genuinely outraged by the police raid. “Frankly, we don’t know where to even begin with this,” wrote Philebrity. “But let’s start here: This is one of those Culture Wars arrests that cops are always going to lose by virtue of both sheer stupidity (illegal search and seizure, giving the press ridiculous quotes) and cultural ignorance (the inability to discern a hipster from, say, Ramona Africa, cue Domelights thread, blah blah blah).” (It Would Be Hilarious If It Weren’t True: Philly Cops Mistake Hipsters For M.O.V.E.-esque Hate Group 2008) Philebrity took the additional step-- important from a journalistic point of view— adding background and context to the story and framing it, through a series of links back to previous blog coverage, as part of a pattern of recent Philadelphia police misconduct. Attytood blogger Will Bunch also added context to the story (minus the much of the sarcasm), linking back to posts he had written on civil liberties and the record of new Philadelphia Police Chief Charles Ramsey during his tenure in Washington DC. (Bunch 2008a) “I was interested [in the story] because a) civil liberties is one of the main issues that I blog about and b) I’d specifically written last year about the lousy record of the DC cops on civil liberties under Charles Ramsey,” Bunch wrote. “So I waited for Dave’s story to come out, and added some commentary about Ramsey and how such an apparent abuse of power is harmful to fighting crime.” (Bunch 2008b) In contrast to either Rubin’s or Davies’ highly reported stories, then, the three most prominent local bloggers made it a point to deeply contextualize their posts, usually linking back to previous coverage of the topic. All three key local blogs would revisit the story several times over the next few days.

A second factor complicating the usual pattern of diffusion lay in the fact that the local blog Phawker, alone amongst all other media outlets, did indeed do some important original reporting the day after the Daily News story broke. “While everyone else was at City Hall for the press conference concerning the police raid of a Francisville building last Friday,” wrote Phawker blogger Jeff Deeney, “I was on Ridge Avenue hoping to find my old friend Ms. Edna Williams, of the Mary Jane Enrichment

Center.” (Deeney 2008) Deeney’s connection with Williams went back to his days as a writer for the City Paper—“ I wrote about Edna in a City Paper article about grassroots homeless services not long ago ... She’s a strong voice among local community activists, and she’s respected by social service providers as a tireless advocate for the downtrodden.” It was Williams that Deeney would turn to in trying to answer the most pressing journalistic question at this point in the development of the story, namely, what was the character of those arrested? Were they little more than hipster gentrifiers, or were they actually members of this North Philadelphia neighborhood. “If anyone would have a good read on the situation, it would be Edna at the Mary Jane ... When I asked her about the building up the street, she became gravely serious and told me to get the word out that Daniel Moffat and the friends that lived with him were good people.”

Deeney thus draws on what we might venture to call journalistic expertise—a high comfort level with basic reporting, a stable of relevant contacts, an ability to identify “the story,” and an ability to collect, represent, and collate basic news facts—in order to advance the story of the arrests. Deeney be called now a “blogger,” but perhaps it might be better to call him a “freelancer,” and he is certainly “a journalist.” However, his journalistic identity is deeply deinstitutionalized: once a reporter for an alternative weekly (already several steps “down” the professional food chain), his Phawker bio lists him as a freelance writer “and a caseworker with a nonprofit housing program that serves homeless families.” (Deeney 2008) I will discuss the implications of both Deeney’s expertise and his deinstitutionalization in the conclusion of this chapter.

A third complication in the traditional blogging-journalism narrative: Will Bunch’s description of how he decided to blog the Francisville story for his Attytood blog, while not contradicting the general pattern of news diffusion, adds nuance to the conventional wisdom. Because it offers such a window into the blogger-reporter mindset, I quote from one of Bunch’s emails at length:

I actually first heard about the arrests the day before I wrote about it. Brian Howard of the City Paper and their blog the Clog sent me an email and said something about Homeland Security being on the site. Ironically, I was really tied up with non-work stuff on Monday and didn’t have time to pursue it, but then Dave Davies made a point of telling me about the story he was working on when I came in to the office Monday night ... For me, the key was the fact that Dave thought the police actions were pretty egregious – he’s a solid reporter and someone who takes an open minded approach to every story. He’s what bloggers mean when we talk about “a trusted source” of information. *Had the story been reported by a different news outlet, or a blogger, I’d be less likely to pick it up.* (Bunch 2008b)

There are two items of importance in this lengthy quote. First, we see the role of the print reporter fleshed out to an unusual degree. It was not simply that a “real journalist” wrote about the Francisville story, but that a particular real journalist wrote about it: a “solid reporter and someone who takes an open minded approach to every story.” While it is unclear whether bloggers who were not Davies’ colleagues (as Bunch is; their desks sit opposite one another in the Daily News newsroom) would have been influenced by Davies’ high reputation, it is a fact that a considerable number of reporters I spoke to in Philadelphia—bloggers, radio reporters, Indymedia journalists—spoke highly of Davies and often singled him out for special praise. Second, we again see that the City Paper story, marketed aggressively by its editor, played a key role in reinforcing the importance of the Francisville story in the minds of many journalists, even if that story by itself would be unlikely to advance the story within the more institutional journalistic community. While the direction of the news diffusion arrow (from newspaper to blog) holds in this instance, we see that the arrow itself is more complicated than it might first appear.

Fourth and finally, the manner in which this story briefly made a splash in the national blogosphere highlights the fact that a combination of structural positioning (the existence of powerful Philadelphia bridge bloggers) and story reframing turned this local story into national “news,” rather than the addition of new information per se. I have already alluded to the existence of these “bridge bloggers” in my overview of types of journalistic work; in the diffusion of the Francisville story across the blogosphere we can see evidence of bridge bloggers at work.

[Figure 3 here]

By 10:46 pm on Tuesday the 17th, news about the Francisville arrests had reached the pages of Boing Boing, a major weblog “of cultural curiosities and interesting technologies.” (Doctorow 2008) The key moment in the path from local story to global news (at least in the blogosphere) began when Will Bunch emailed Duncan Black, aka Atrios, a Philadelphia area blogger who writes primarily, though not exclusively, about national politics. “I emailed [the post] to Atrios, who’s also interested in civil liberties and picks up local issues from time to time – he did link to it,” Bunch told me (Bunch 2008b). Eschaton is one the aforementioned bridge blogs, and one of the most popular liberal blogs in the United States.

Black's brief post, "Hate Group: I do not think that phrase means what 9th District Police Capt. Dennis Wilson thinks it means" (Atrios 2008) linked back not to the Davies story, but to Bunch's blog post, and was then picked up by the science-oriented national blog Futurismic, which reframed it as a story about the dangers of urban surveillance cameras (Marcinko 2008). It was the Futurismic story, now reported in terms relevant to the tech-minded Boing Boing audience, that helped the story make the final leap into the blogging stratosphere. "Privacy activists in North Philadelphia who circulated a petition opposing the spy-cameras that were going up in their neighborhood were busted by cops on a warrantless raid," Boing Boing blogger Corey Doctorow noted. (Doctorow 2008) The quote from Captain Dennis Wilson – "the police captain later gave a press interview where he called them a "hate group" and said he hoped to " drum up charges against them"—first reported by a rookie reporter for a small alternative weekly in the sixth largest city in the United States, had now reached the pages of "the most popular blog in the world." (Boing Boing on Technorati 2007) The online emergence of the Francisville arrest story was complete.

The Aftermath

A few days after the appearance of the Francisville report in the global blogosphere, the story of Daniel Moffatt would disappear from the public consciousness. Two more Daily News opinion columns would be written on June 19th. Philadelphia Indymedia, retaining its strong links with the activist community and largely insulated from the normal cycle of "meaningful" news, would publish a fairly extensive piece of "first person" reporting from two of the arrestees on June 22 (Rousset and Rock 2008). This article would mark Indymedia's first bit of original reporting since posting the Prometheus press release more than a week earlier. The Daily News followed up with a brief item in its "Philly Clout" page on June 27th, noting that Moffat had been placed on a City Hall "watch list" despite the absence of any additional evidence against him (Philly Clout 2007). Other than those brief items, the story appeared forgotten by the end of the summer. According to at least one reporter covering the story, the disappearance of this particular piece of news had as much to do with the actions of the police department and the activists as it did with formal editorial decisions. The arrestees appeared more interested in using their brief moment of notoriety to push their larger political goals through the media, this reporter argued, and the threat of an ACLU lawsuit against the City seemed to have placed the police

department in an official “no comment” posture. “[The activists] still haven’t fled a complaint ... I contacted one of the people from the press release, just to see hey, what’s going on, and they said, well, they don’t really want to talk about this per se, they want to talk about the larger issues of gentrification and police brutality, and I’m thinking, that’s what this whole thing is about. To get their agenda out ... They [the activists] won’t even follow up on their own story, so it makes you, think, well, how serious, how aggrieved could you feel if you won’t file a complaint? ... so honestly, I don’t know what this is about.” (Interview, 7/14/2008).

It would also appear that the speed of the news cycle had as much to do with the disappearance of the story as did any specific decisions made on the part of the actors. I have noted throughout this dissertation that a primary impact of the Internet on journalistic work is its fostering of a dramatically sped-up sense of the news cycle. In this example alone, we have seen that news of the arrests reached the internet only a few hours after they occurred, that a reporter with a nominally weekly newspaper posted his story several days before his paper officially went to press; and that it took only a few hours for the Dave Davies story to reach the pages of the most popular blog in the world. And then? Nothing. The story had vanished. “News is what’s new,” goes the old journalistic saw; in the case of the Francisville Four, what’s new is no longer new— and therefore no longer news— for long.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper we have seen how media institutions, individual reporters, weblogs, activists, and the Philadelphia police department helped create a public issue (and therefore a public) out of the arrests of four residents of 17th St and Ride Avenue in Philadelphia. Immediately, we are struck by the importance of non-media actors in the emergence of this story. What eventually pushed traditional journalists to certify this story as news was not the interaction between reporters, bloggers, and the alternative press. It was a savvy media campaign mounted by these activists and their friends, a campaign that included such old media techniques as sending out press releases and calling a press conference. “The blogs didn’t turn this into a story,” a Daily News editor involved in the decision making process told me. “But I do think the blogs helped mobilize a community, which gave this story the viral

nature it needed to make an impression on us.” (interview, 6/17/2008) In understanding the construction of public issues, then, further research would want to spend as much time with non-media actors (activists, lobbyists, formal state institutions) as it did with the media itself.

Secondly, I hope this analysis drives home the need to expand our analytical view of the local media universe to tabloids and alternative newspapers, among other sources. The role of the Daily News – both in its practices and in its news culture in general—played the key role in the development of this story. An analysis of the Philadelphia Inquirer alone, by far the more dominant and “respectable” newspaper in Philadelphia, would have entirely missed the important moments in the diffusion of this news story.

Third: we have seen that, while the general narrative “journalists report, bloggers comment” hold true, an in-depth analysis actually paints a far more complex picture. For starters, it is clear that alternative, online media outlets broke the story. That said, their original reporting on the issue was limited to regurgitating of a press release, a fact which caused even other activist-minded reporters to question the level of journalistic work they had done. What, then does “breaking” the story mean in an era of omnipresence media? What is a legitimate level of “reportorial work” (in both normative and empirical senses)? We have seen throughout this dissertation that the Philadelphia IMC has been primarily hampered by its lack of journalistic resources (money, time, and volunteers) rather than an aversion to journalistic work in general. The Philadelphia IMC may have wished, in the words of Dan Urevick-Ackelsberg, to find “a witness, a name, a first person account, a police report” but it lacked the means to do so. We have also seen that local blogs, while largely following an agenda driven by the traditional press, added context and reframing to the Francisville story. Further research would expand this analysis, and could include a more formal examination of the way that bloggers add context to news, in particular, the way that they add this context by linking back to themselves. How does that emphasis on context affect future reporting, in both the blogosphere and in traditional media?

Finally, I want to briefly point out how the complex occupational status of Phawker’s Jeff Deeney – is he a blogger? An alternative weekly reporter? A social worker? A pro-am reporter?-- highlights a need to seriously reexamine the definitional categories that have been adopted in much of the writing about journalism and the Internet. Freelancer writers and cultural workers, after all, have long predated the

emergence of the world wide web. Perhaps we need to abandon job titles like “blogger” “journalist” and “columnist” and instead ask questions like:

- What kind of work does this cultural worker do Does she report? Add context? Give opinion? Reframe the story? Facilitate community conversation?
- Where does he or she publish that work? Online? In print? With a formal media institution, or with a diffuse collection of networked journalists?
- Finally, what is the formal contractual relationship between the cultural worker and their publishing entity? Do they work for free? Engage in piecework? Freelance? Or have they managed to obtained the kind of salaried work that was once more common in the world of journalism?

Asking these questions might finally move us toward a productive engagement with the actually existing world of on- and offline cultural production.

Fig 1
 “Francisville Four News Diffusion”

This diffusion chart is deliberately meant to evoke Darnton’s chart in “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris.”

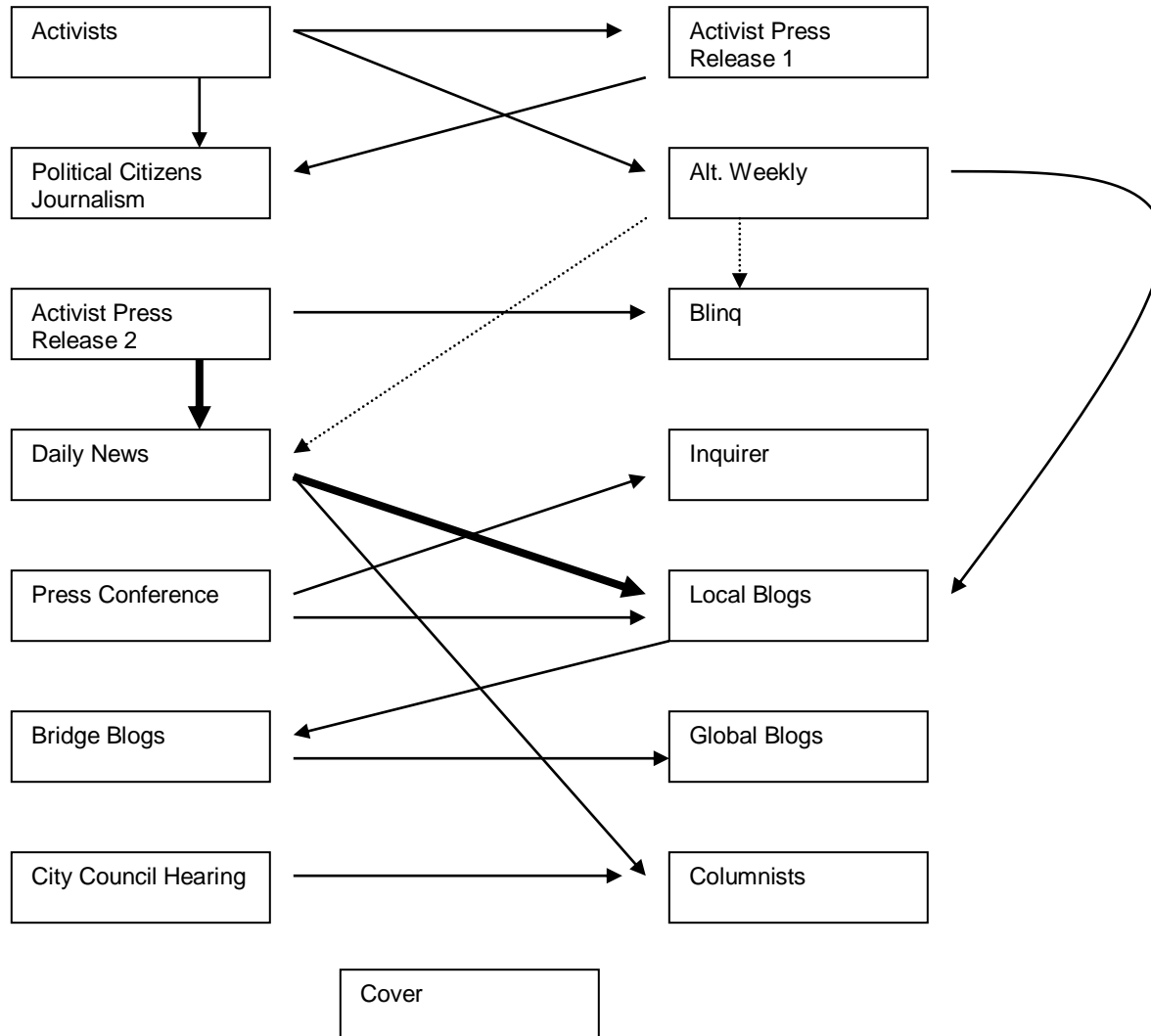
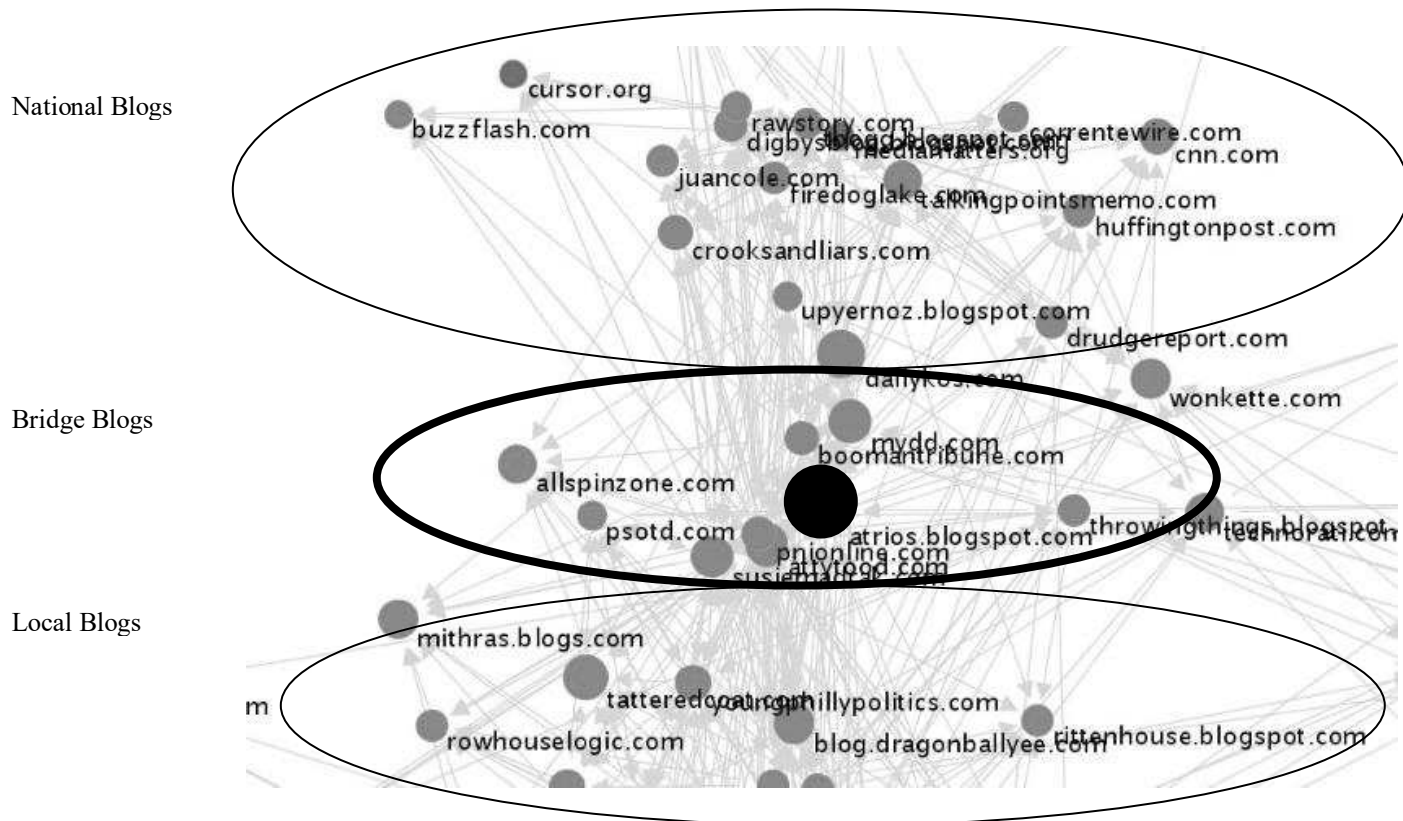


Figure 2
The emergence of the Francisville story on Philly.com



Figure 3
Bridge Blogs



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