When the Audience is the Producer: The Art of the Collaborative Weblog
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April 2004

Introduction

Web logs, the online daily journals that link to and comment on everything from pornography to the war in Iraq, are often compared by their boosters to the printing press and upheld as the salvation of democracy in general and journalism in particular. Millions produce them, millions read them, and the mainstream media is gradually incorporating them as the reputation of "weblogs" as a source of news rises in stature.

A bilingual resident of Baghdad drew an audience to his weblog with his ruminations on everyday life before, during, and after the war in Iraq. A freelance Web correspondent raised enough money from his readers through his weblog to fund his independent coverage. Weblogs helped break the story that led Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott to resign from his post, and provided eyewitness, breaking accounts of the attacks on New York City on Sept. 11. In the few years since blogging software made it possible for almost anyone with access to a computer – regardless of technical ability – to set up a website on a shoestring budget, the medium has evolved beyond a fad.

As the influence and usage of weblogs grows in the field of journalism, it becomes increasingly important to study the structure and content of this medium. This paper will explore an relatively unorthodox variation on the blogging concept – the group weblog. Weblogs have evolved significantly since their birth in 1999, and now encompass a variety of formats – from the individual-based structures that are already considered "traditional" to the more collaborative and open group-based structures, which rely on the contributions of thousands of members. Some observers consider these group weblogs to be a shift in journalism from a centralized and top-down publication process to a more horizontal model, where the boundaries between producers and audience blur into one. I will review the practices, communities, and structures of several group weblogs in order to explore whether this particular species of weblog offers a new form of journalism that is truly democratic, participatory, and interactive.

This qualitative review of multiple case studies looks at group weblogs through the intertwined theories of the public sphere and alternative media. It will study whether group weblogs are capable of creating alternative, or counter, public spheres while simultaneously working to revive and improve the public sphere as conceptualized by Jurgen Habermas. I will compare the selected group weblogs to Habermas' public sphere ideal, and subsequent critiques of this ideal (i.e. its emphasis on elitism and rational discourse, its lack of diversity, its adherence to national boundaries in a globalized world), to evaluate whether this type of blog serves as a response to Habermas and his critics. Alternative media scholarship is also relevant here, especially the numerous calls for an alternative media that is alternative in structure rather than merely alternative in political viewpoints.

Beyond its impact on this theoretical discussion, the outcome of this study has journalistic implications, particularly regarding the issue of interaction between the media and its audience. Group weblogs are part of what seems to be an increase in interactivity and feedback in the blogging medium. The advances made by weblogs in this area, if adapted by the traditional media, offer the potential to include more perspectives and ultimately provide more information. Increased interactivity also could impact the quality of this information by increasing the power of the audience to challenge facts and catch errors. Expanding this horizontal model internationally could do the same, while also allowing for more cross-border journalistic collaboration, providing leads for international stories, and adding unfiltered versions of international events from in-country sources.

The collective group weblogs that rely on the contributions of community members have been noted as a format of journalism that is new and untapped. In the English language, the most popular and respected practitioners of this format are MetaFilter, Plastic, Kuroshin, and Slashdot. Yet little research has been done concerning fundamental questions about how these group weblogs function in practice – what their relationship is to the mainstream media, what their relationship is to their audience, what the characteristics of the most popular group weblogs are, and other questions that can flesh out a medium that often takes a backseat to the individual blogging superstars, whose approach is more easily incorporated into traditional media formats. This paper will focus on these and other questions qualitatively in an attempt to provide a foundation for further study by identifying trends among this selection of highly popular and influential group weblogs.

Literature Review

This study is based upon several recurring premises found throughout prior research into the public sphere, the alternative media, the impact of the Internet upon communication, and the application of emergence theory – where systems organize and maintain themselves without direction from a centralized authority – to new forms of online discourse. It follows this trajectory: the belief that public debate plays a vital role in democracy; that this debate occurs between the dominant public sphere created today by the mass media and the diverse and numerous amount of counter spheres attempting to influence it; that the mass media's current structure has inherent characteristics that contradict its ability to create and maintain a healthy public sphere; that an alternative media developed to pose alternative spheres to the mainstream, but the typical manifestations of these alternatives have either possessed fundamental weaknesses that rendered them impotent or sacrificed openness for influence as they "sold out"; that the Internet is often cited as a balm for these imbalances of power; that the evolution of the weblog from traditional top-down formats to more participatory and collaborative models signals the rise of an emergent journalism with the potential to revitalize both counter spheres and the dominant mass media sphere.

In 1962, Jurgen Habermas's highly influential and controversial description of the bourgeois public sphere depicted the rise and fall of a metaphorical public arena where citizens could debate the issues of the day. As Habermas tells the tale, this public sphere emerged as feudalism's demise led to the civil society of the 18th century (Sitton) and the

growing population of merchants who filled taverns, coffee houses, and the various other social institutions that developed alongside them. The discussions that took place among the bourgeoisie and the opinions they produced spread among the public by means of the printing press, and allowed the public to affect the decision-making process, even if ultimately it was left to officials to make the final decisions.

Through this increased exchange of information, a public sphere developed that was a place where well-reasoned arguments rose to the top. The public – although that term in the sense of "public" sphere was and is far from egalitarian – debated the public's issues by using rational arguments, and it was the quality of the argument that was foremost. The background and status of the arguer was unimportant (Calhoun). Reason was to be the sole arbiter of issues. Since money and power, embodied in the economy and the state, did not respond to reason, they were in conflict with the public sphere. This often led the public sphere to challenge the accepted wisdom presented by money and power (Calhoun).

This meritocracy was not always the case, but it was always the goal. The sphere was inclusive in principle, although in reality this inclusion was limited to those with property and education. But the complete participation of the public was not required for Habermas' sphere to be healthy and vital. As long as those who do participate maintain the sphere, and so long as the sphere functions as a whole, then individuals do not all need to be as well-informed as the group (Sitton).

Aside from its insistence on rational debate and relatively open participation, the public sphere was supposed to be value-free. To be self-sustaining, the sphere had only to ensure that debate was possible. It must not attempt to sway any debates. It should only establish procedures while avoiding recommendations (Sitton). The philosophy or political view that emerged from these debates was unimportant to Habermas. What was truly revolutionary was the ability for people to engage in the debates, for regardless of their position, there was emancipation in participation and the potential for mobilization.

But the successful expansion of the public sphere ultimately transformed and undermined it. After reaching its zenith at the end of the 18th century (Habermas), the public sphere declined as umbrella institutions emerged to represent large swaths of the public, the state and society grew more intertwined, and rational debate was only found in the discourse of scattered sub-publics. What was left in its stead was solely consumption and non-committal conviviality (Calhoun).

Such trivial issues found a home within the mass media (Habermas, Castells). Habermas is not alone in stating that the dominant public sphere exists there. This fate was unavoidable, for the expansion of debate to a wider audience also required the assistance of communication technology able to distribute messages regardless of distance or the size of the audience. The result, as Castells flatly stated, is that the media, be it television, radio, newspapers, or the Internet, is the only political space that matters today. While there are qualifications to this statement – the audience still plays a role in the ultimate impact of media's various messages, and there are spaces on the margins beyond the reach of the media – Castells argues that the format and structure of the mass media has fundamentally altered how debate is conducted in the public sphere.

It is the existence of discourse on the margins that has led to much of the criticism of Habermas. Some have disputed the respect he granted the bourgeois public sphere, and instead decry it as elitist and unresponsive to the voices and needs of the working class

(Negt and Kluge), women (Fraser), and other cultures (Husband, Hanchard). Of what merit, these and others have asked, is a public sphere open only to rich white men? Downing also criticized its dependence on rational and civilized discourse, citing Freire's study of the power relationships within a dialogue and Bakhtin's review of "the voices of the general public" versus "authoritative discourse," and arguing "a democratic culture cannot only subsist on rational argument" (Downing 2000, p.47).

The concept of other spheres outside the main public sphere, serving as forums for alternative discourse and in perpetual conflict with the dominant sphere, is a far more accepted revision of Habermas' original framework. In 1972 Negt and Kluge originated the now-popular ideas of multiple spheres, alternative publics, and counterspheres, by examining the exclusion of the working class from Habermas' bourgeois sphere. By 1993 Fraser would expand this critique by proposing that not only was the bourgeois sphere exclusive in nature, but it was an essential vehicle for the transition of political domination from one maintained through force and repression to one constructed from a more consenting public ruled under a system of hegemony (1989).

Yet Fraser and others found some hope in the concept of counterspheres. From this proliferation emerges a widening of discourse and participation. Alternative publics use their alternative spheres to form and strengthen oppositional voices and in some instances are able to build enough momentum to impact the discourse of the dominant sphere. But there are still challenges and obstacles that make this interplay far more rare and difficult than in this optimistic scenario. Habermas argued that in order to make democratic public discourse a reality, all of the large-scale institutions within society need to be made more democratic, piece by piece. In the case of the media, more democratic structures that increase public access would counteract the concentration of ownership and the growth of media conglomerates (Calhoun).

Reform of the mainstream media and the development of the alternative media are two persistent strategies for the democratization of large-scale institutions that Habermas speaks of. The problems with the traditional media that block participation and stifle debate are numerous: economic inequality; government secrecy; religious opposition to knowledge; racism and sexism; and reactionism (Downing 2000). All of these traits can emerge in alternative media models as well, as scholars and critics of alternative media have noted. But in regards to its oppositional role, research has argued in favor of the alternative media's relevance, such as Mathes and Pfetsch's look at how the alternative media's influence upon the construction of the media agenda, the "spill-over effect," provides it with a role in agenda setting (1991). The unrest surrounding the 1999 World Trade Organization conference, and the alternative media outlets who covered the demonstrations, inspired Deluca and Peeples to propose the birth of a venue for such information beyond the concept of the public sphere – the public screen (2002). They argued that this "public screen", enabled by technology, emerged because the public sphere ignores some technologies. For them, the expanded forum created by the public screen strengthens the alternative voices typically drowned out in the public sphere by the mainstream media. As a result, further examination of these alternatives is necessary. Downey and Fenton considered the case of Mexico's Zapatista movement, and its influence on the "transnational public sphere" through "counter-publicity," and argued that counter public spheres such as that shaped by the Zapatistas can influence the public

sphere (2003), as did Harcup in his comparison of alternative and mainstream media coverage in the United Kingdom (2003).

Not content with the occasional impact and victories resulting from the mainstream-alternative dynamic, McChesney focuses his critique on systematic reform of the traditional media's business model. He finds an inherent conflict between the dominant for-profit model, dependent on advertising and highly concentrated, and the communication needs of a democracy. For McChesney, a public sphere dependent on this system is fundamentally corrupt and broken, and he cites a 1998 interview with Habermas as further support for this claim (McChesney 1998).

Since the dominant public sphere and the mass media are one and the same, the result is a political debate with little input from an uninformed public. McChesney not only sees this in the national context of the United States, but in a global sense. He sees a link between the rise of neoliberalist policies in the 1980s, the increasing power and influence of the mass media, and the undermining of democracy. Neoliberalism as a philosophy maximizes the role of the market and minimizes the role of the state, and is based upon the belief that society will function best when government does not impede business. The global spread of neoliberalism was joined with the rise of a global media system built upon the commercial, private model found in the United States (McChesney).

Successful opposition and reform of these flawed national and international models requires what Downing calls "radical media activism" (Downing p.28). This umbrella term incorporates media literacy, the improvement of the practice of journalism, and the creation of alternative versions of print and broadcast mediums. Downing sees a potential in media in general, noting that Dewey and Lippman believed the media can provide the information and communication possibilities required for democratic discourse. But Downing then draws upon the theories of Raymond Williams, who argued that media must disconnect from private or state ownership and be open to mass participation by the public. Such a fundamental restructuring of the media requires tremendous faith in the public, a stance which Downing bases on Macpherson's developmental power theory – that the public has the capacity for this but is restrained from acting upon that capacity – as well as Freire's respect for the intelligence of students and Bakhtin's argument that the "voices of the general public" are as important as "authoritative discourse" (Downing p47).

The Internet provides the greatest chance for such dreams of structural revolution within the media, Downing and others believe. "The Internet represents a new era for alternative media," Downing (p202) claims, adding that it has the potential to become the first global public sphere as it transforms local and global politics into truly participatory forums. Downing looks to take his radical media activism online, thereby using the Internet's technological capabilities to turn the traditional media format of one-way information flows into interactive formats that allow users to speak for themselves directly.

Similar enthusiasm for the Internet is more often tempered by digital divide concerns. Castells is another believer in the use of online tools to increase participation of citizens and communication between citizens (1997). Computer-mediated communication, such as discussion boards, and their interactive and decentralized natures, are one such tool that can bypass the mainstream media and allow citizens to

communicate with each other directly. But Castells notes some potential drawbacks to this reliance on the Internet: the creation of an online "Athenian democracy" open to the educated and wealthy elites that have access to these technological tools; the exclusion of the public that is not connected to the Internet; the specialization and polarization that might occur following the niche targeting that the Internet facilitates – hampering the discussions between groups needed to reach consensus and move forward.

This ongoing dilemma, of an alternative media or medium succumbing to the same exclusionary faults that it originally tried to overcome, raises an important question – is the alternative media alternative in more than its politics? Does it provide an alternative – more empowering and more democratic – experience for the user? Although alternative media, from typed pamphlets to multimedia websites, might position themselves as a freeing counterpoint to the top-down model found in the mass media, there is cause for skepticism. It's possible that the audience for alternative media can end up as shut out from the alternative media's countersphere as the powers behind the alternative media were shut out from the public sphere.

Studies comparing the alternative press to the mainstream press have considered factors like the ease of participation in the editorial process to determine if in fact there is any structural difference between the traditional and alternative medias. Some have noted that the organization of a medium, and the relationships that this organization creates, "may be more crucial than the kinds of content produced" (Schudson 1987). Upon study of alternative media's organization, researchers now question whether alternative media is truly more democratic than traditional media.

Such similarities between mainstream and alternative media were observed by Hamilton (2000). The high levels of training and investment needed to participate in traditional media limit participation in production to a select few, leading to media that are mass in consumption but not in production. Alternative media, by using an organizational model similar to the traditional media, can become similarly exclusive (Hamilton, 2000, citing Lazere, 1987, Shore, 1985, and Ruff, 1997). The solution for truly alternative media is to focus on reducing the barriers to participation and creating organizations with low operating costs. The goal is to create a medium that eliminates the gap between producers and consumers (Hamilton, 2000). The solution for truly alternative media is to focus on low barriers to participation, organizations that are inexpensive to operate, and engagement in the outside world. The image of a montage, "widespread postings in workplaces," and "appearances on bulletin boards in supermarkets" are cited as examples of mediums that "erase the division between producers and consumers" (Hamilton 2000).

To measure this division between producers and consumers it's necessary to focus on levels of interactivity within a medium. Deuze provided a useful spectrum of interactivity in a discussion on online journalism (2003). This spectrum ranges from open websites that allow users to share and post comment "without moderating or filtering intervention" to a closed site "where users may participate, but their communicative acts are subject to strict editorial moderation and control" (Deuze 2003). Deuze also listed different types of interactivity, among them "functional" interactivity, where a user participates in the production of a website "by interacting with other users or the producers of a particular page or site." In a review of interactivity definitions, Kiousis

settled on the requirements of two-way or multiway communication, interchangability of sender and receiver, and message exchange among participants (2002).

Hamilton's alternative model called for interactivity as well as low barriers to participation. Blogging proponents would claim the latter trait is an inherent benefit of their craft and that weblogs have blurred the lines between producers and users. They've stated that blogging software has "given millions of people the equivalent of a printing press on their desks" (Blood 2003), that blogging can lead journalism to "expand from a centralized, top-down, one-way publication process to the many-hands, perpetual feedback loop of online communications" (Andrews 2003), that weblogs are an egalitarian "informal conversation" because "the readers want to be a part of the news process" (Lasica 2003) and weblogs "break down many of the existing barriers between journalists and the public" (Grabowicz 2003).

In theory, the organization of a group weblog is similar to the structure Hamilton was searching for. This form of weblog also falls into the general category of an online community, alongside more traditional community forms like bulletin boards and chat rooms. Research into these communities has focused on the underlying rules and structure that sustain them – how identity is formed and maintained, social processes, controls on deviant behavior, changes over time, and how they support collective action (Smith & Kollock, 1998).

Researchers have studied the traits of successful communities to deduce what types of communities can best encourage participation, democracy, and cooperation among users. Linus Torvalds (1993), who established the community that helped him develop the open-source operating system Linux, listed the following necessities for a successful community: a small group of dedicated users to do the majority of the work, a founder to start the work while waiting for the community to step in and take over, and an interesting project. However, a complete lack of meetings between group members, instability in the identities that members adopt, and the absence of any group memory or community record of previous interaction can undermine an online community (Kollock, 1998).

Viewpoints on the worth and effectiveness of online communities typically split between utopian dreams – these communities will rejuvenate public debate – and authoritarian nightmares – online communities will expose themselves to greater surveillance and control by the powerful. Boosters all but abandon the offline public sphere, where discourse is smothered in flashy, phony, and violent imagery by the mass media (Postman, 1985), and argue that online communities have the ability to challenge the offline hierarchy's monopoly on communications media and thus revitalize democracy (Rheingold, 2000).

Along with libertarian-centered fears of authoritarianism are concerns about equity. Research notes that social inequalities seep into the world of online communities (Feenberg, 1991, and Jones, 1995). There is a lack of the infrastructure needed to get online for the disempowered groups of the offline world (Mele, 1999) along social and economic class lines (Harasim, 1993) that eventually creates new inequalities and divisions (Mele, 1999). Whether online communities can address these offline realities, or just impress them upon a new forum, is an open question.

One recent analysis of online communities uses the collaborative blog Slashdot to explore the concept of emergent systems. These bottom-up systems rely on the work of

many simple parts to solve problems, thereby forming a far more complex and adaptive system that does not require the guidance of a single member to make it function (Johnson 2002). The laws of such self-organization are at play in anthills, the human brain, and urban development. But now, as Steven Johnson observes, systems are being designed to intentionally mimic this emergent behavior, which realize that: simplistic behavior changes when a group reaches a certain level of members; many simple elements can join together to create sophisticated behavior where complicated elements would fail; allow random interactions instead of manipulating or ordering behavior; and other rules that are inherent characteristics of some new online communities, such as the collaborative weblog Slashdot. Johnson notes that to manage the growth of Slashdot's audience while maintaining its open and participatory structure, Slashdot relied on emergent behavior, allowing decentralized control and interactions between the audience without the interference of the site's creator. The result is "the closest thing to a genuinely self-organizing community that the Web has yet produced" (Johnson p152). But even that accomplishment, which places debate fully in the hands of the public, must answer Johnson's question of how to avoid the tyranny of the majority.

Nevertheless researchers continue to place great hope in such decentralized systems as true alternatives which empower the public by providing it a voice with the least possible resistance. Castells sees in the media the same strategy employed by the environmentalist movement, global trade activists, and religious fundamentalists – a decentralized nature that does not rely on a concrete strategy or top-down leadership. At the finale of his sociological overview of the Information Age, Castells felt that such systems were so revolutionary that he stated: "It is in these back alleys of society, whether in alternative electronic networks or in grassrooted networks of communal resistance, that I have sensed the embryos of a new society." (Castells p362)

In his study of decentralized mob behavior, Rheingold pursued this line of inquiry further (2002). He also highlighted Slashdot and its 300,000 members as an example of self-organized behavior by "smart mobs" and "swarm systems," which grow to exhibit collective intelligence that is greater than the sum of their parts (Rhengold p179). Rheingold notes that the many-to-many media model found in a group weblog empowers the audience by allowing them to "create, publish, broadcast, and debate their own point of view" in ways previously unheard of in the print and broadcast mediums. Like others before him, Rheingold was not sure if this newfound ability would provide a legitimate counterforce to society's dominant forces, or just be a simulation of a counterforce that feels empowering but, in reality, is toothless. Nevertheless, he concluded that before anyone could reach such a verdict, or determine a way to alter that outcome, there is a need for more knowledge of how such technologies, and the people that use them, function today.

Methodology

This paper uses the exploratory case study method to examine four collaborative group weblogs. Despite their potential for providing an egalitarian journalism model, and their significance for researchers of alternative media, blogging, and online communities, these four weblogs – MetaFilter, Kuroshin, Plastic, and Slashdot – have so far avoided an

analysis of their members in practice. Of primary concern for this study is the public sphere and community that exists within each blog, and what its characteristics say about the potential for this type of blog to be a democratic communications medium.

To study these questions, I conducted my case studies by reviewing all posts and comments from a week's worth of content for each case (MetaFilter from October 26 to November 1, 2003; Slashdot and Kuroshin from March 7 to March 13, 2004; Plastic from March 20 to March 26, 2004). Looking at the content over the course of seven consecutive days provided a more natural picture, similar to spending consecutive days among an offline community. A random sample of days might provide answers to such questions as which members are the most frequent contributors, how often mainstream news sources are cited, and similarly quantitative questions. But what I hope to accomplish here is to provide an overall view and framework as a basis to formulate those questions, since the study of group weblogs is still in its infancy.

There are two practical reasons for the selection of the particular weeks I reviewed. When studying the content of weblogs, researchers must take note of the fact that links to material can likely break, die (by expiring within one to two weeks), or lead to material on mainstream media websites that is archived after a period of one to two weeks. Any plan to follow the links and experience the site in accordance with what a user would have experienced needs to realize this time factor. But researchers must also allow time for a weblog's contributors to submit their reactions to a post. This process can easily take several weeks to unfold. The researcher starting their research is left to go back two weeks in time from their starting point to reach the optimal time period for content availability and completeness. Although this week ends up being an arbitrary one dependent upon when the researcher commences their research, this is permissible in a qualitative study that seeks to use a moment in time to raise some broad issues and questions. In the case of Plastic, which does not have a public archive, the researcher does not have the luxury of selecting the week based on these factors, and is forced to instead monitor Plastic on a daily, real-time basis.

My decision to rely upon the content as it is on the webpage, without online or offline interviews, has precedent in several online ethnographies. Kosloff's (1992) study of an online community in the context of the media and external influences, Duffy's (2003) study of online hate groups, and Baym's (1993) research into the discourse of an online community's membership all relied upon similar methods. Lindlif and Shatzer (1998) have questioned the effectiveness of online ethnography. They cite a problem facing the analysis of computer-mediated communication: justifying claims based on small amounts of discourse pulled from a large and complex volume of online and offline communication. This situation is not unique to online analysis, and the difference in size between the discourse selected to the discourse overall is probably less severe than in an offline setting. Here I defer to Geertz' (1973) advice that "it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something" (p20).

MetaFilter

In several ways MetaFilter serves as a good bridge between the more familiar individual blog and the collaborative group weblog. Its design structure is very similar to

an individual weblog – little more than a series of sentence or paragraph-length posts presented in chronological order with the most recent at the top, and a series of comments attached to each post as a discussion board. It functions much like a standard weblog as well, allowing members to post and comment directly to the page, without any editorial control or moderation. Although criticized for its currently closed-door member policy, the unfiltered discussions of MetaFilter's existing membership provides much insight into how the members view, police, and maintain the weblog.

Just exactly what MetaFilter's identity should be currently and in the future is up for debate among the members. Its mission statement, still visible on the side of the front page, states that the blog is meant to be "a community of users that find and discuss things on the web." It's a broad mandate that would seem to include current events and minutiae, but members struggle over which realm should receive more coverage. The conflict lies between the MetaFilter purists – who link to safe and apolitical technology news and Internet oddities – and those members with higher aspirations who would steer the blog closer to a news source model. "I think this is something that deserves much wider coverage than it has been getting," is the justification for posts on items like electronic voting conspiracies, or an investigative series in the Toledo Blade newspaper about Vietnam that was unacknowledged by major media outlets and has since won a Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting (the post began with "Another My Lai") .

This conflict is evident in a front-page post which linked to detailed reports about the tampering of computer voting machines in the 2000 elections. After the first post the tone of the members gradually changed, starting out as flippant and then becoming more informative. There were links to websites with detailed information on the technology behind the Diebold company's voting machines and the ease of corrupting their results. The conversation shifted to other methods of electoral fraud, with links to voter roll purging in Florida in 2000. A member who claims they observed a Florida county recount adds to the thread of discussion with their eyewitness observations. It's not uncommon for other blogs to pick up on MetaFilter's conversations and pass the information on to their own readers, making MetaFilter have occasional moments where it seems like a news wire for bloggers, as evidenced by the Diebold story's subsequent spread throughout the blogosphere.

The participation in the Diebold story of the member who observed a Florida recount emphasizes the potential of the weblog medium – its ease of use and openness make it possible for the people that reporters interview to give their own version of these current events directly to an audience. It's supposed to be free of the spin of public relations because the information can be linked to in a more raw and unprocessed form, and lies can die quickly among a vigilant readership. The traditional editorial process of a news organization which takes the accounts of many and filters it through the eyes, ears, and judgments of one reporter and a few editors before returning it back to the public is abandoned on a group blog like MetaFilter, where members of the public can tell their stories and opinions to each other directly.

This is the ideal, but the public on MetaFilter, at least the visible public that establishes what subjects the group will discuss and what is included within each of those discussions, often seems far more exclusionary. When Wal-Mart surfaces on the front page, the community struggles with arguments for and against the company's retail dominance and its effect on both suburban sprawl and the homogenization of American

culture. Nowhere amongst the debaters is someone who actually worked a shift at the chain.

Divisions of class and education are often apparent on MetaFilter. Posters refer to jobs in computer programming industries, experiences in graduate school, and trips overseas. Front-page posts, which are intended to either provide useful information or encourage the sharing of information on a topic, frequently deal with topics that are beyond the reach of members or readers with low incomes or technical ability: favorite bars around the world, Macintosh iPods, and string theory, to name a few. The ability to consume, the ability to travel, and the ability to intelligently discuss scientific topics seem directly related to the ability to post and comment on posts. Early adopters of blogging and the group-blogging concept are obviously going to emerge from a world where these abilities are more widespread, but so far there seems to be little inclination to make the subject matter more accommodating to other segments of the public. There are no posts here from the member stavrosthewonderchicken on unemployment, public housing, and healthcare.

Just posting such topics wouldn't automatically make MetaFilter more accessible, considering the structural obstacles a person faces if they want to play along. There are an average of 30 posts on the front page per day. The comments for each post usually average a dozen, but can easily reach 100 for a popular post. They're made throughout the day, requiring regular Internet access. Posts often link to very lengthy and literate background material that requires time to read, and websites with advanced visual and audio features that require expensive high-speed Internet access to follow. To fully experience much of the information presented in this medium requires a daily schedule with a high amount of leisure time and the money it takes to afford the necessary technology for access.

There are members that apparently have these luxuries and are able to develop a presence on MetaFilter. Despite its many members, there are several names that recur so often as to develop recognizable personalities and predicable habits. Over the course of a mere week these A-list "MeFite" celebrities are obvious and so well-known that their absence in a thread is obvious and noted by other members. An aura surrounds the frequent posters and is noted by rookie posters. After the veteran MiguelCardoso responds to one rookie's post, she then comments that it feels like a visit from "one of the Beatles." A hierarchy among members develops, and although it helps the community to police itself, it also can drive MetaFilter's coverage through a vicious circle of posting popularity. Posts are steered towards the style dictated by the dominant members. There were no posts in the week I observed that varied from the typical MetaFilter post characteristics – socially liberal, technological/scientific, educated, media-savvy, and relatively wealthy. By not accepting new members, there seems little chance for a change in that pattern.

Plastic

Plastic's motto is "Recycling the Web in Real Time" , and its 40,500 plus members are faced with the daily task of creating an online newspaper by picking

through the content produced by the online outlets of the traditional media, summarizing it into digest form, and then expanding on it with user discussions. All of the familiar sections are here, and cordoned off into separate parts of the site – politics, media, music – with one "top story" pulled from those subsections and placed on centerstage for the majority of each day. Considering this format and the weblog's overall control over the users and editorial process, Plastic is the most tightly controlled of the group weblogs studied here. It is also an example of how too much control can suffocate discussion and stunt the growth of a group weblog.

Once Plastic users register, they become part of what appears to be a very orderly and methodical process. Stories are submitted by members for the approval of an unnamed group of editors, who determine what will be posted on the site. These stories are typically a more opinionated rewrite of the original story, with the addition of links to other offsite stories or archived Plastic stories to add context. Plastic then puts the story in the "submission queue," where members can suggest additional information (such as links) and other improvements – although ultimately Plastic cites one member as the "editor" of the story, and the nature of their specific role is unclear and unstated. Finally the story is published, and available for users to comment on in the discussion area at the end of the story.

The range of stories that emerge from this process mostly don't stray very far from the top stories of the week for traditional, mainstream news outlets. The main story with the most exposure on Plastic usually mirrored the main front-page news in national newspapers for the week studied – subjects like Richard Clarke's allegations and the Congressional investigation into September 11, same-sex marriages, and Israel's fatal attack on the leader of Hamas. Stories are typically drawn from sources like the Los Angeles Times, USA Today, and the Wall Street Journal. There is no original reporting in the main posts, no links to other weblogs, and no links from extreme political alternative voices. There are the occasional obscurities – a story from Space.com or a story from smaller regional papers like the New Jersey Courier-Post or the Denver Post - but overall Plastic plays it very safe. Despite its attempts to distance itself from the mainstream – note the cartoon graphic of a newspaper as a roll of toilet paper that accompanies a story on USA Today – Plastic is heavily reliant on the mainstream's product.

There are two sections where Plastic loosens the reigns slightly and things become more interesting – the short news brief stories on the sidebar of each section, and the comments for each story. The briefs, although nothing more than a link and one or two sentences worth of explanation, will cover stories that are less likely to receive widespread coverage in the traditional media – such as a link about sexual exhibitionism and swingers' clubs in the United Kingdom, a link to a Reuters story about the use of Saddam Hussein's former army officers as advisers to Iraq's new military, and a link to the Columbia Journalism Review's Campaign Desk weblog – which fact-checks election coverage by the mainstream media. The fact that the membership relegates the undercovered topics within these briefs to the sidebar, while promoting more predictable topics, is telling, and raises questions about how much diversity of discourse Plastic's editors are willing to accept.

It is in the comments section of each story that Plastic distinguishes itself as part of the weblog medium, exhibiting the interactivity and analytical benefits inherent on a

website where everyone suddenly has a voice. The comments are the one part of Plastic that is open to any reader – they simply fill out the content form and have to bear the insignia of the label "Anonymous Idiot," as all nonregistered participants are coined. The comments immediately change the voice of Plastic from the edited and slightly irreverent to more individuality and raw emotion. A story on Jack Kelley, the USA Today reporter fired for falsifying stories, leads one reader to say "this makes me fucking mad"; a story on the emerging music scene in Detroit leads another reader who claims to be a resident of the city to describe it as "a conservative, blue collar metropolitan region with a big fucking hole in the middle…It's not someplace you move to be discovered. It sure the fuck isn't an easy place to live." The comments are rated on a scale of one to five by the readers, with five as the highest, and there are additional one-word reviews of each post, such as "informative," "compelling," and "irrelevant." Readers can adjust the viewing of comments and read them from the highest-ranked to the lowest. Despite this system, it often seems that users do not rate the comments, and many bear the standard unrated "one".

Plastic's comments sections are very non-confrontational in their relationship with the mainstream media's source material, using the format as an opportunity for debate and punditry between members rather than the aggressive "us versus the media" stance found on most other weblogs, particularly individual models. Usually the reporting in the main post is taken for granted as accurate. There are few links within the comments to other sources that contradict the claims of the main post, and few rhetorical attacks on the writer's logic in reaching the conclusions presented in the original article. This attitude can lead to occasional stretches where the post is not responded to at all, or with a meager one or two comments, turning Plastic into nothing more than a distribution outlet for the mass media. The briefs in the sidebars, which post far more outrageous content, don't even allow comments. Such one-way communication with no opportunity for feedback is extremely jarring and out of place for a group weblog – for any weblog, really.

The exceptions to such behavior by Plastic's members reveal the potential benefits of such feedback, and emphasize the opportunity that exists for this format in providing a richer media experience. One post links to coverage of Howard Stern's newfound opposition to Bush, and how this could help defeat Bush by swaying Stern's typically Republican listeners. Through the comments, the audience builds upon the original story, adding evidence and contradicting some of the information within it. The member who posted the story surfaces again during the discussion to defend her claims, but those claims are ultimately proven to be misleading or factually wrong. One member undermines the entire premise of the story by noting that Stern's influence on the election would be minor, since he isn't broadcast in major markets in swing states that would most impact the election's results. By expanding on the scope and length of the article for those interested in the story, the comments have improved the article in a way that is not possible through the delayed interactivity of a letter to the editor and subsequent clarification in a newspaper several days after the publication of the article in question. During the discussion following a story on binge drinking at the University of Madison Wisconsin, Plastic members that live in Madison surface to challenge some facts, and other members link to research studies online that question the effects of anti-binge drinking efforts – all participation from the audience that enhances and improves the

original story. Members will challenge comments as well as stories. After a member claims that Wal-Mart uses its influence to impose its religious standards, for example, by not carrying the "morning after pill," the next member notes that the pill is not available in any pharmacy – with a link to the manufacturer's site. The original member who made the error then apologizes for the error and "not looking up the facts." All within less than an hour.

Possessing the time needed to look up the facts, or otherwise participate in Plastic's publishing and discussion processes, raises questions about the inherent difficulties of participating on the site. Although every member can theoretically contribute a story, the entries must require a significant amount of leisure time to research the story, locate additional sources to link to, and finally write the summaries – which usually surpass six or seven paragraphs in length, as well as the computer access and literacy level needed to contribute. Commenting requires smaller degrees of all of these elements, but as the level of debate increases it's possible that the discouragement to participate increases in a direct relationship – comments grow longer in length, arguments become more refined, and it takes a greater amount of resources to compete.

These obstacles, combined with Plastic's various methods of editorial control, seem to have stifled participation on the weblog. There is a core of members who contribute the majority of posts, comments, and sidebar briefs. Despite its tens of thousands of members, Plastic seems to be the domain of less than 100 individuals. Often the content grew stale on the site, with sections left without updates for several days. Many times a story was posted, only to remain comment-free for several hours. Although Plastic was almost completely free of nuisance posts and other forms of virtual graffiti, its lack of vitality seems to be the price it has paid to maintain order.

Kuro5hin

Computer programmer Rusty Foster founded Kuro5hin (pronounced "corrosion") in 1999, with the hopes of using the Scoop software he created to give people "from the trenches" control over a medium. Drawing inspiration from his predecessor Slashdot's experiments with participatory collaborative weblogs, Foster told an interviewer in January 2002 that the two-way nature of the Internet and the variety of sources it offers would lead audiences to question authority. Arguing that innovation comes from the edges and not central ruling powers, Foster decided to grant his users greater freedom than Slashdot and near-total editorial control over Kuro5hin's content.

Foster pushed the Slashdot model further into the world of emergent, audience and member-driven content. Submitted stories rose to the front page through the approval of the members, whose votes determined whether the story would become one of the "front-page" stories with full exposure on the Kuro5hin homepage. Anonymous comments were allowed, and it was up to the members to moderate the comments through a rating system. Viewing options would then allow readers to read only the highest-rated comments. At the most extreme end of the freedom spectrum, where a single member has absolute control over content, are Kuro5hin's "diaries." This section uses the Kuro5hin template but allows members to post entries without any filter or

editing by site administrators or members. The most recently updated diaries are linked to on the lefthand side navigation bar for Kuro5hin's homepage – the equivalent of front-page exposure.

Such openness had widespread appeal, and in mid-2002 Kuro5hin's web traffic peaked to a level of 220,000 daily visits. But by the spring of 2004 that number was down by 50 percent, as "trolls" sprung forth from the trenches, overrunning the site and turning its efforts at creating a more accessible, democratic debate into chaos. Meanwhile the weblog Daily Kos, which was once based on the individually-focused Movable Type software, switched to Scoop and now receives more than 300,000 visits per day – often seeming more like a group weblog than the work of one individual. It has far eclipsed Kuro5hin in popularity and success.

Whether this turn of events is a result of Kos' superior management or flawed execution by Rusty is a matter of debate and frustration on Kuro5hin, and signs of the resulting disarray were obvious after a few visits to the weblog during the week studied. Comments from users lament "the wasteland that Kuro5hin has become"; users with alias like Tex Bigballs, RobotSlave, and Michael Moore frequently antagonize Rusty, provoking him into online arguments called "flamewars"; existing users note that former users were frustrated by such displays, and that their subsequent evacuation has left Kuro5hin with spottier levels of production. Kuro5hin is organized around a main post drawn from one of its 13 sections – divided into topics like technology, science, and culture. But there is such a slow rate of turnover for these main posts (and within the sections as well) that the content on the site quickly grows stale. This problem becomes more obvious when Kuro5hin is compared to Slashdot, which typically has 30 new posts per day, each followed by hundreds of comments.

Despite all of Kuro5hin's problems, there are still examples of the benefits of the open collaborative model. The main "front-page" post on March 9 describes a conference of economists in Copenhagen who plan to rank the world's problems and how best to deal with them. In the media's traditional format, it would be up to the reporter to question the validity and worth of such a conference, to question the qualifications of the participants, and to challenge the assumptions of its organizers. If that job is not done, it's up to the reader to assume the responsibility for critical thinking. On Kuro5hin, although the basis article is unquestioning, the extension of the article through the 203 comments that follow is far more critical. User responses include the following statements: "I'm inclined to disagree"; "a pathetic publicity stunt"; "bollocks"; "an inconsistency in your article"; "suppressing (sic) science"; "Worldwide problem, Western solution." Although most comments are based on rhetoric rather than factual evidence, the challenging tone could inspire a reader to also question the authoritative voice of the source, or question the members of Kuro5hin, and investigate the issue further.

In some cases the comments themselves spur further user interaction. Occasionally the critical comment of a user, which attempts to undermine a suspicious claim or fact from the original article, is critiqued itself by another user. A March 13 post on the revelations of a former detainee from Britain's Camp Delta leads to 478 comments – one entitled "Suspicious aspect…" which questions how the detainee's complaints of frostbite are possible in Cuba's climate. Several comments later, another user points out that this attempt at fact-checking overlooks that the detainee was referring to another prison camp in Afghanistan.

Such examples of critical thinking by the audience, and the richer media experience it produces, exist amongst the pollution of off-topic comments, vulgar insults, and user harassment. But the conflict between allowing any member of the public to post comments, and leaving it to the users to rate comments and moderate the discussion, versus the strict control found in traditional media, is ongoing for Kuro5hin. In Kuro5hin's case, as with MetaFilter and Plastic before it, the answer is now stricter control over audience freedom. One user anticipates as much in a post comparing Daily Kos to Kuro5hin: "kind of sad…how DailyKos is doing so much better with Scoop than K5 is. Far fewer trolls (almost none), frequent and generally better stories (not that posted K5 stories are bad, but in terms of submissions…), etc. Interesting question is why K5 is failing while DailyKos is succeeding. Is it the tighter focus, the tighter reigns, or just that it hasn't been around long enough to fail?" To which another user, leery of such "tighter reigns" responds "There aren't many trolls in North Korea, either" adding that on DailyKos, "admins delete most messages that dissent from the status quo." On March 25, Rusty surfaces with announcement of a reorganization of the site – no more anonymous comments will be allowed on Kuro5hin, and potential members will have to pass several trials to join the site and participate. In the case of Kuro5hin, for now, control trumps freedom.

Slashdot

Founded in 1997, Slashdot often sits atop most of the lists of the most popular weblogs with a daily audience of two million readers, has 50,000 regularly contributing members, and has been called "the closest thing to a genuinely self-organizing community that the Web has yet produced." All of this for something that a 21-year old from Holland, Michigan with the screen name Commander Taco started in 1997 as a simple bulletin board for him and his friends to discuss the latest news in computer programming and Star Wars films.

Yet for all its success, Slashdot remains very much unknown because it targets the niche of technology-savvy, highly-educated computer users. The vocabulary in most discussions is so technical that it constitutes another language. But a review of the occasional posts which discuss current events grounded in familiar issues and terms reveals a highly functional system that achieves high levels of feedback, interaction, and freedom, but still maintains a high level of insight and information in its content.

The key to Slashdot's success are several emergent system tools, like comment filtering, which require some explanation before examining how they work in practice. Founder Rob Malda describes the growing pains of Slashdot (and by extension all "open" group weblogs that invite participation from non-members) in the site's FAQ section: what begins as a small group of people with similar attitudes and interests eventually attracts a wider audience; this audience is invited to participate, but with greater inclusion comes greater diversity and the opportunity for abuse of an open system's vulnerabilities; the founder relinquishes some authority and responsibility for the site to trusted members, who help administrate the site as problems increase, deleting irrelevant or harassing posts and comments; eventually the degree of content pollution (i.e. spams, hate speech, nonsense) is so great that the site's administrators enlist the membership in policing itself.

Slashdot uses two tools to make its community responsible for maintenance. To moderate the comment discussions, Slashdot grants members with a high degree of "karma" (amassed through a history of useful contributions) the ability to rate each comment on a scale of -1 to 5. Members with high karma gain points to use for moderation, and when they use them all a new group of community moderators emerges to replace them. With the use of a comment filtering system, all readers can adjust their settings to screen out the garbage, or when comments reach into the thousands, to read only the small percentage considered important.

For Slashdot, which produces a constant stream of at least 30 posts per day – each followed by hundreds of comments – this filtering mechanism is key for both maintaining quality discourse and manageability for its audience. Consider the story "They Can Sue, But They Can't Hide," which describes an online database used by doctors to track the litigiousness of prospective patients. Reading the summary is easy, it only lasts for two paragraphs, although there is a link to the original source story as well. But there are 1212 comments afterwards – which would be easily ignored if not for the likelihood that many comments will provide information and insight that can completely change a reader's understanding of the issue covered in the original story. If the reader set the filtering system at -1, they would read all 1212, including such comments as "this is my first comment!" or "I love you." If the filter is set at 0, those comments disappear and 1190 are left – if the filter is 1, there are 900; if 2, there are 578; if 3, there are 186; if 4, there are 106, and if 5, there are still 80 comments available to read.

Screening out the -1 comments is usually an efficient way of eliminating offtopic or hateful garbage, but beyond that the comment rating system seems an imperfect science. Fives are not reserved for comments that are strictly based on information – many of them, like the majority of Slashdot comments, consist of personal anecdotes and opinions, prefaced with qualifying statements like "I have heard of cases" but without any supporting evidence for the comment's claims. One reader's insight that "a site of 'actually these are the facts' would be great…I've stopped believing most of the stuff I'm told or read unless they list the evidence and it is accessible to me" rates only a 1. Sometimes a 0 is not content-free or off-topic, but simply a more harshly presented viewpoint.

Despite the inconsistent nature of the comment ratings, there is an overall tone to Slashdot's comments – although members do not explicitly challenge the traditional media that provides the weblog's source material, overall they provide a measure of critical thinking that eventually does challenge the authoritative voice of the media, and occasionally prove it wrong. There is an army of factcheckers on Slashdot, and there is not much that escapes its collective knowledge. The story "Need a Job? Move to India" inspires 1078 comments – including the difficulties of getting a visa, which is not mentioned in the CNN source story – and the contention that New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman is "full of crap" to argue that India's economy is booming because of technology outsourcing, when "the main reason that the Indian economy is booming is in agriculture, where harvests have been great for the past few years." Of a story called "TV Losing to Video Games" – based on a story that quotes a study conducted by Sony, a member observes that Sony, which manufactures video game systems, did the study and is therefore biased, concluding sarcastically, "what a very fair study that is." Slashdot members are more prone to make unsubstantiated claims that rely more on a logically-

presented argument to be convincing. But there are instances where they use links to support their stance. A story on the health benefits of coffee leads to a debate over the advantages of tea versus coffee, with members linking to various studies and websites to support their viewpoints.

But it is rare for Slashdot to challenge the veracity of a news source. Unlike the individual weblogs, which often define themselves as the alternative to a compromised and biased mainstream media, Slashdot bears the group weblog's more symbiotic relationship to the mainstream. There is little original reporting on Slashdot, be it in the posts or the comments, and the traditional outlets are needed to provide source content for users to process and build upon. While some claims or statements in those stories might be challenged by a member, stories are not singled out as examples of a problematic mainstream media, which members are determined to systematically prove wrong. With the level of readers and members that Slashdot boasts, and its lack of an obvious ideology, sources have their opponents and defenders. There is no unified front of "us against them" on Slashdot.

Yet there are times when Slashdot's members and readers function as one cohesive whole, and it hints at the potential power of such collaborative projects. Occasionally Slashdot will link to a website that is unprepared for the massive flow of traffic from millions of Slashdot users clicking onto the same link. The site's server crashes, leaving the site technically overwhelmed, or "Slashdotted." During the week studied, news of the Slashdot effect is publicly announced once – after Slashdot links to another weblog's interview with Cmdr Taco which sarcastically observes that "his little project" Slashdot "hasn't really taken off yet."

Conclusions

The four group weblogs studied here balance freedom and chaos to varying degrees, ultimately creating various counterspheres of differing levels of democracy and vitality. This study has uncovered some signs of the potential this medium has for presenting an alternative media far more egalitarian in structure than seen in the past, while exposing some of the persistent barriers preventing these weblogs from realizing their full potential.

Individual weblogs facilitate the growth and development of group weblogs in many ways. As they increase in popularity, gaining viewers and users, individual weblogs make writing a post or a comment and adding content to the Web a more familiar task. Through the efforts of the individual bloggers, the need for increased interactivity between the traditional media and its audience and a sense of empowerment and entitlement amongst that audience strengthens.

But as the audience for individual bloggers grows, it becomes more difficult to manage the audience and control its feedback. Individual weblogs either separate the audience and the producer – as in the case of Andrew Sullivan and the Instapundit – or they relinquish some of their authority to that audience, allowing the role of the audience and the producer to merge into one. Daily Kos' evolution into an individual/group weblog that places responsibility for a portion of its content in the hands of its audience everyday, and its continued popularity during that evolution, could signal the first steps in

this gradual change. People are drawn to weblogs because they give people a voice, whether through the creation of their own weblog or through the ability to comment instantaneously on their favorite weblog. If the most popular individual bloggers cannot accommodate such freedom, will their model survive, or be replaced by a model where the audience is the producer?

This overlap between the audience and the producer occurs to varying degrees, as witnessed from the experiences of MetaFilter, Plastic, Kuro5hin, and Slashdot. All began with the intention of allowing their readers to participate in the editorial process: submitting stories directly to the page; submitting stories for the approval of editors; submitting stories for peer review; commenting on stories; and rating comments to determine their level of exposure. These initial experiments and aspirations have been reigned in through different policies – not accepting new members and not allowing comments being chief among them. Although these group weblogs present a medium that is far more horizontal in structure than the traditional mass media, none of them have attained the completely anarchic nature of freedom that some alternative media scholars encourage.

The group weblogs, like the individual weblogs, do seem to constitute separate counterspheres to the mainstream media's public sphere. Their relationship to that dominant sphere is a complimentary one. While they cannot hope to replace it, they have the potential to impact it through the spill-over effect – boosting an issue to such a high presence that it finally arrives on the mainstream's radar – and the potential to improve it, if the mainstream is willing to incorporate some of the practices that these group weblogs are refining.

Lacking the necessary resources to conduct the reporting done by the traditional media, group weblogs rely on the traditional media for the source material that it provides them. Without the mainstream, group – and individual – weblogs would not exist. But the group weblogs do provide two services for the traditional media – they help spread its coverage to wider audiences, particularly when linking to lesser-known publications, and they provide a degree of fact-checking and editing that provides a pool of ideas for expanding and adjusting future coverage. The latter trait could also undermine some of the mass media's power. If weblogs continue to add to their present audience, the constant questioning of the mass media's authority through the exposure of flaws in its coverage could force reform of the public sphere whether the mass media wants to make itself more interactive or not.

There are some flaws within the counterspheres created by these group weblogs that could hinder this development. Despite their potential for inclusion and participation from the audience, the group weblogs are based upon a system that is exclusive in nature because of the time, money, and demographics required of users before they can participate. As with individual weblogs, members of group weblogs need frequent access to a computer, enough free time to read the extensive amount of content provided by posts and comments, and the educational and literacy levels to process the material found on the weblog and then express themselves in return. The material on the group weblogs studied often pertains to interests common to particular demographics defined by class lines. A person's personal circumstances during their past and present will determine if they will have a voice in these counterspheres. Offline realities, such as a lack of technological infrastructure, a lack of capital, and a lack of free time, would be

impediments to online participation. In effect the warnings that offline hierarchy can easily transfer to an online setting seem to have some merit. For now, such utopian ideals as the proletariat sphere and the multicultural global sphere do not exist in the world of group weblogs either.

Nevertheless, these group weblogs operating on the edges of society are experimenting with ways to create and sustain a medium that involves the audience in the medium's production in ways little seen before in the world of journalism. Even more so than their individual weblog brethren, these group weblogs are finding ways to increase freedom while controlling chaos. Further study of their successes and failures in these two endeavors are worthwhile, for academics and professionals alike, who believe in the importance of the media, realize that its current incarnation is flawed, and hope to make it better.

Appendix A: Group Weblog Examples
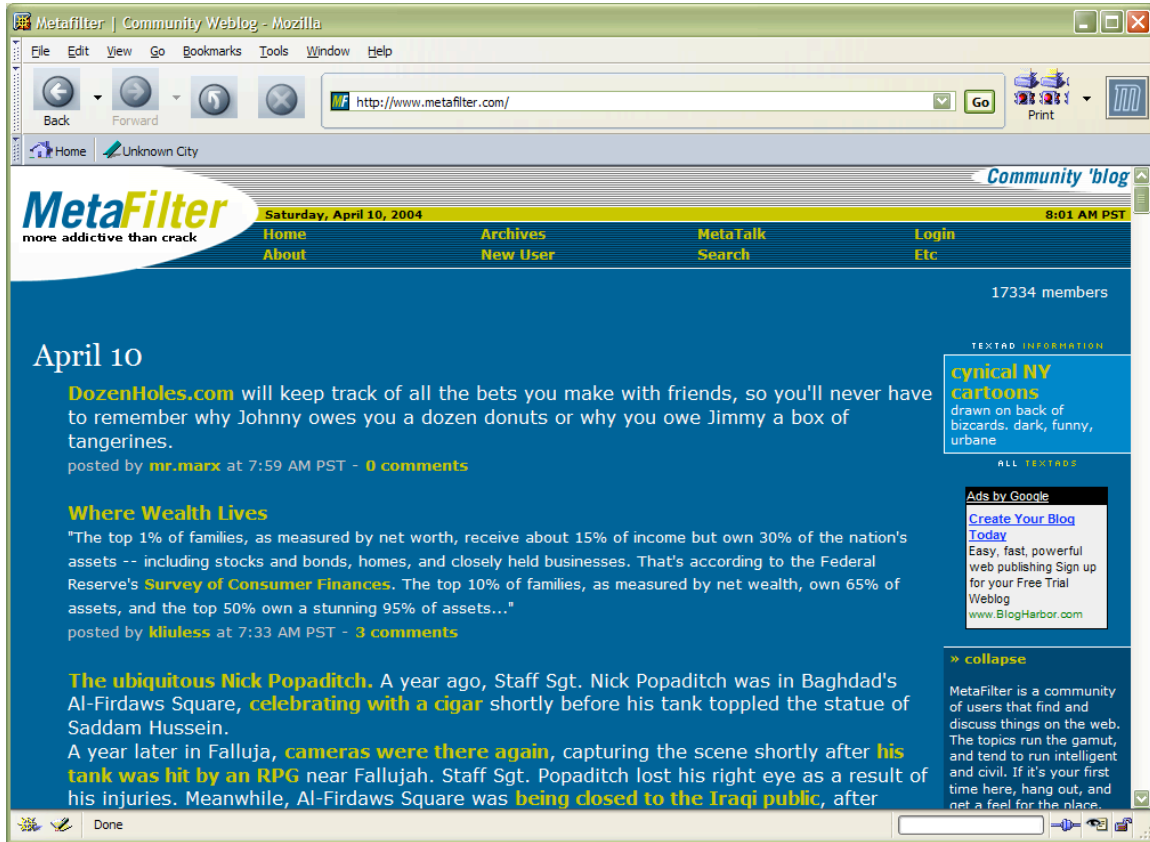
Figure 1: **MetaFilter's home page.** The separate entries are referred to as posts. Clicking upon the comments link leads readers to further discussion on the topic, and clicking on the contributor's name leads to a profile of that user – including links to their own homepage or weblog, previous posts, and previous comments. An unpredictable sequence of topics is one of MetaFilter's distinguishing characteristics, as seen here – a post on Iraq and a post on income disparity are followed by an irreverent post about a recently discovered website.
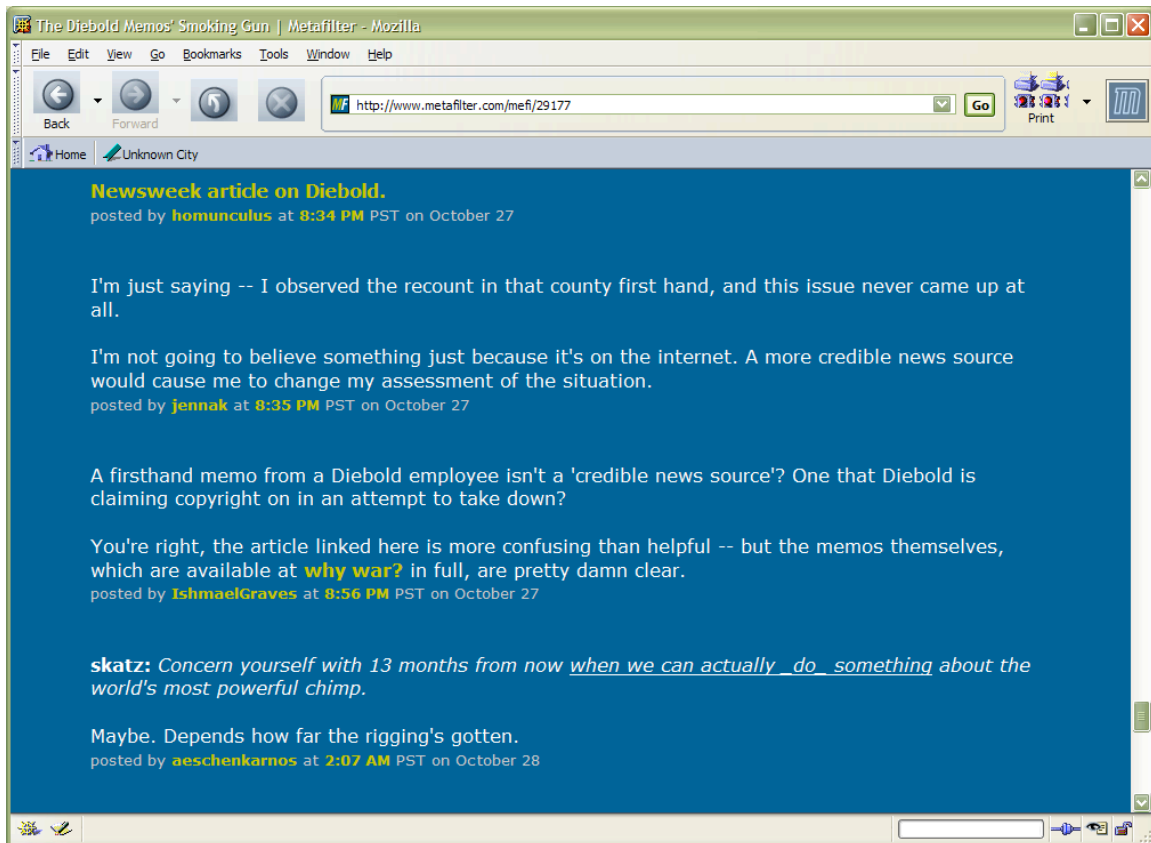
Figure 2: An example of a comment area on MetaFilter. This is taken from the
Diebold post of October 27, 2003. In this section – which shows four of the 47 comments
that followed this story – the first user posts a link to a Newsweek article with further
information on the topic, the second claims to have observed the recount in question in
person and disputes the source that the original post linked to, the third argues in favor of
the legitimacy of that original source and provides a link to additional documentation
online, and the fourth sarcastically disputes a previous commenter's suggestion to focus
on the election in 2004.
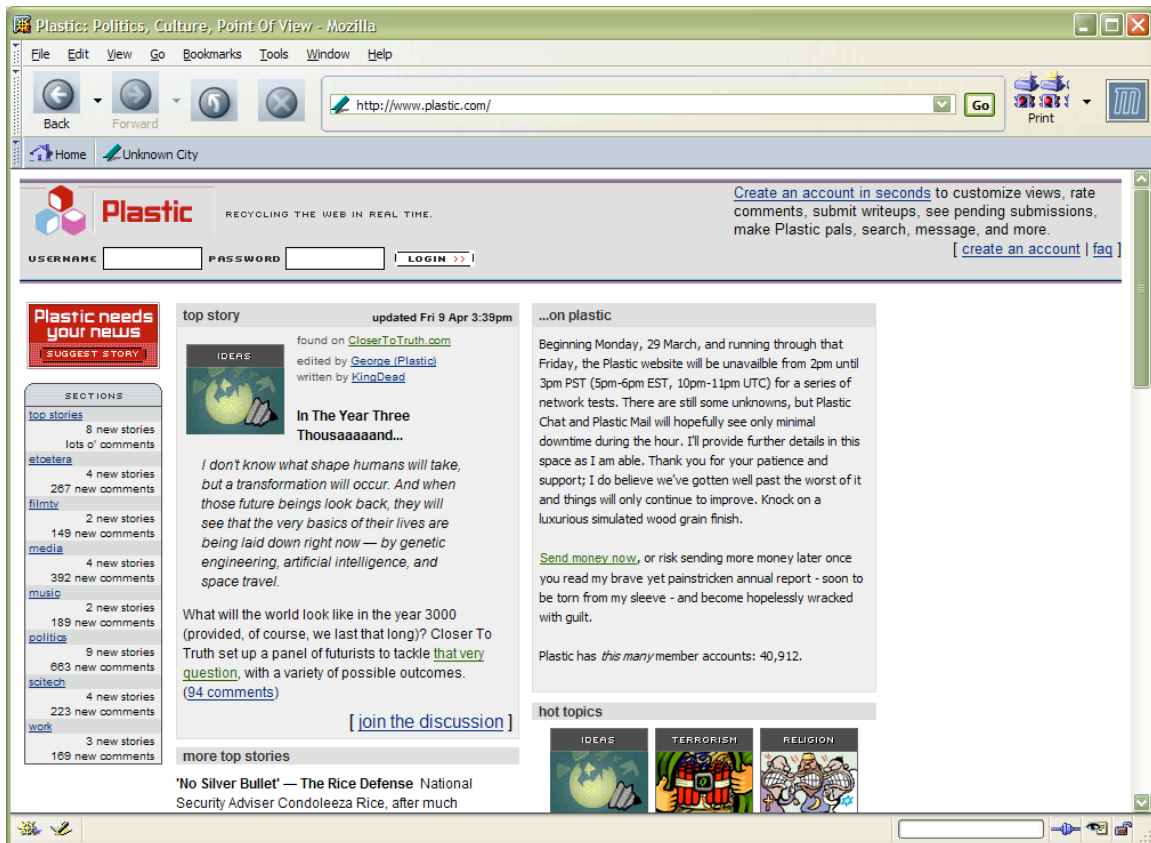
Figure 3: Plastic's homepage. In a relatively traditional layout arrangement, the main story is set in the middle of the page while subsections are listed in a left hand side navigation bar. The "top story" is edited by Plastic's administrator and owner, revealing the high level of control by Plastic over its editorial content.
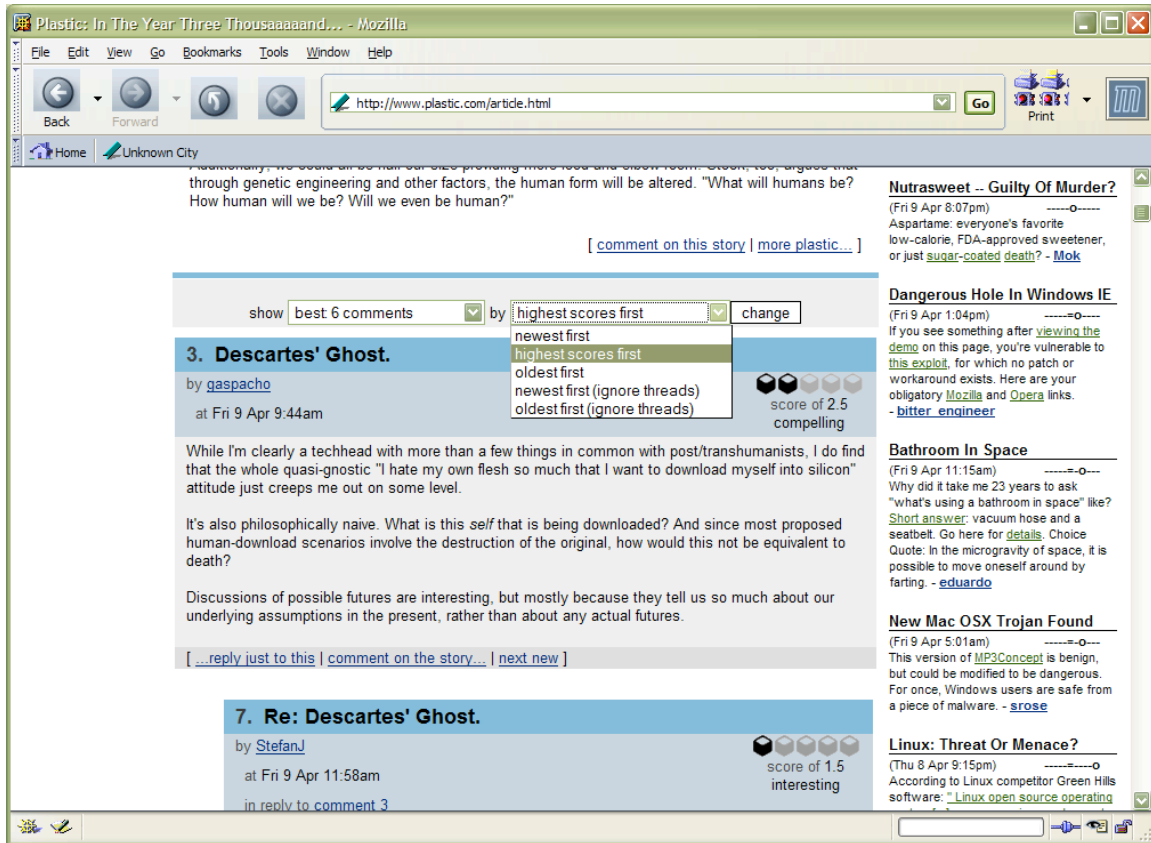
Figure 4: An example of a comment section for a Plastic story. The comments are arranged here by highest score, and this post is at the top with a 2.5 for "compelling" content. Note the use of "post/transhumanists", "quasi-gnostic", and overall high level of discourse in the comment – one of the potential barriers for entry to the discussion. The right hand side of the page contains the short briefs found in each of Plastic's sections. Although there are links to the other sources, there is no section for comments or other feedback.
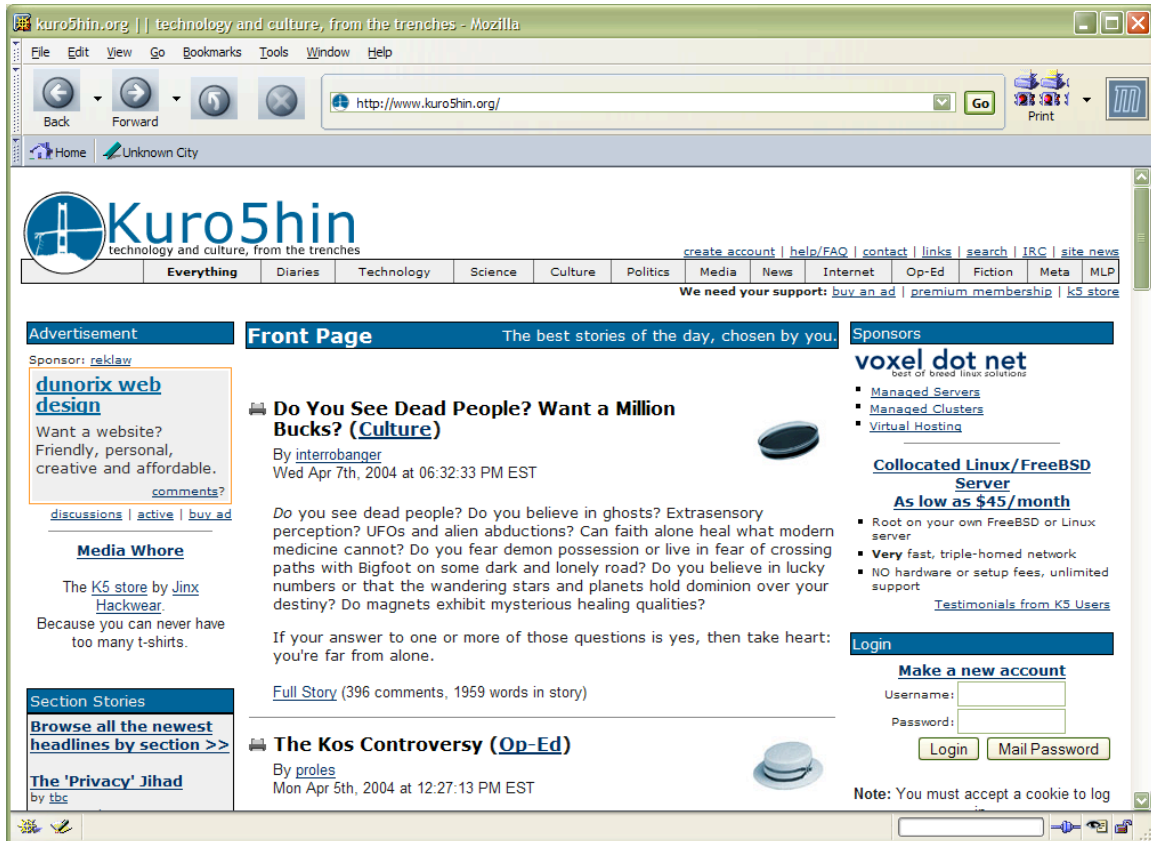
Figure 5: The Kuro5hin homepage. The main stories are placed in the middle – note that this is a story from April 7, yet the screen capture was taken on April 10, indicating the slow turnover of copy on the site. The previous main story is from April 5. Kuro5hin, like Plastic and Slashdot but unlike MetaFilter, is highly segmented and separated into sections.

by dcm266
Op-Ed::Politics

New Diaries

Good afternoon!
by Hide The Hamster

I'm Rick James, Bitch!
by SilentChris

Pointy, and Elsewhere
by CheeseburgerBrown

Going up Larch Mountain
by awqsilyari

I love you, T.S. Eliot.
by qzt

Pravda: US Homeland Security Threatened by Iraq
by Baldrson

Damn, Rusty's having a bitchslap hoedown
by James A C Joyce

Less On Iraq
by jpex

ATTENTION INFIDELS ABOUT TO ROCK

McGrew's School of Fine Art (Culture)   /etc
By mcgrew
Mon Apr 5th, 2004 at 03:27:56 AM EST
The Faculty
A bunch of people who were dumb enough to study art and smart enough
to get a Master's Degree in it, plus a few who went on to obtain their
doctorates, thus condemning themselves to teaching Art History for the
rest of their lives. For the ultimate college art teacher, rent *The Eiger
Sanction*.

Full Story (110 comments, 4579 words in story)

DaveGate (Op-Ed)
By felixrayman
Sat Apr 3rd, 2004 at 06:43:12 PM EST
It started out innocently enough. Last Monday, David Letterman, a
late-night talk show host with a penchant for sharp humor, aired a clip of
President Bush giving a speech in Orlando, Florida. Introduced under the
title "George W. Bush Invigorates America's Youth", the video clip showed
an obviously bored and exhausted young man attempting to stay awake
during a Bush speech. The young man yawns repeatedly, checks his
watch, twists his head, and ends up with his hands on his knees trying to
stay upright and conscious during the speech.

A very amusing clip. Laugh out loud funny as anyone who has seen it will
probably agree.

After that, things start to get very strange.

Full Story (136 comments, 611 words in story)

"Under God" Under Scrutiny (567 comments)

Wednesday March 24th
▪ Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the mythical memory videotape (84 comments)

Tuesday March 23rd
▪ The Outsourcing Bogeyman (208 comments)
▪ Switching from PHP to Zope/Python (132 comments)

Sunday March 21st
▪ Activist Congressmen Try a Power Grab (190 comments)

Friday March 19th
▪ Mortal Passage (150 comments)

Thursday March 18th
▪ Rumsfeld Caught Lying on "Face the Nation." (291 comments)

Wednesday March 17th
▪ Why I Like PLT Scheme (236 comments)

Tuesday March 16th
▪ (11-M) A chronicle of the four most intense days in Spain (420 comments)

Monday March 15th
▪ Sedna Puts Light On: What is a

**Figure 6: Kuro5hin's homepage, part 2**. The Kuro5hin user diaries, with their
completely unfiltered content, are linked to on the left hand side, about halfway to the
bottom of the homepage. The editorial freedom for members is apparent, considering the
diary headlines include "I'm Rick James, Bitch!" and "Damn, Rusty's having a bitchslap
hoedown", an entry highly critical of the site's administrator.
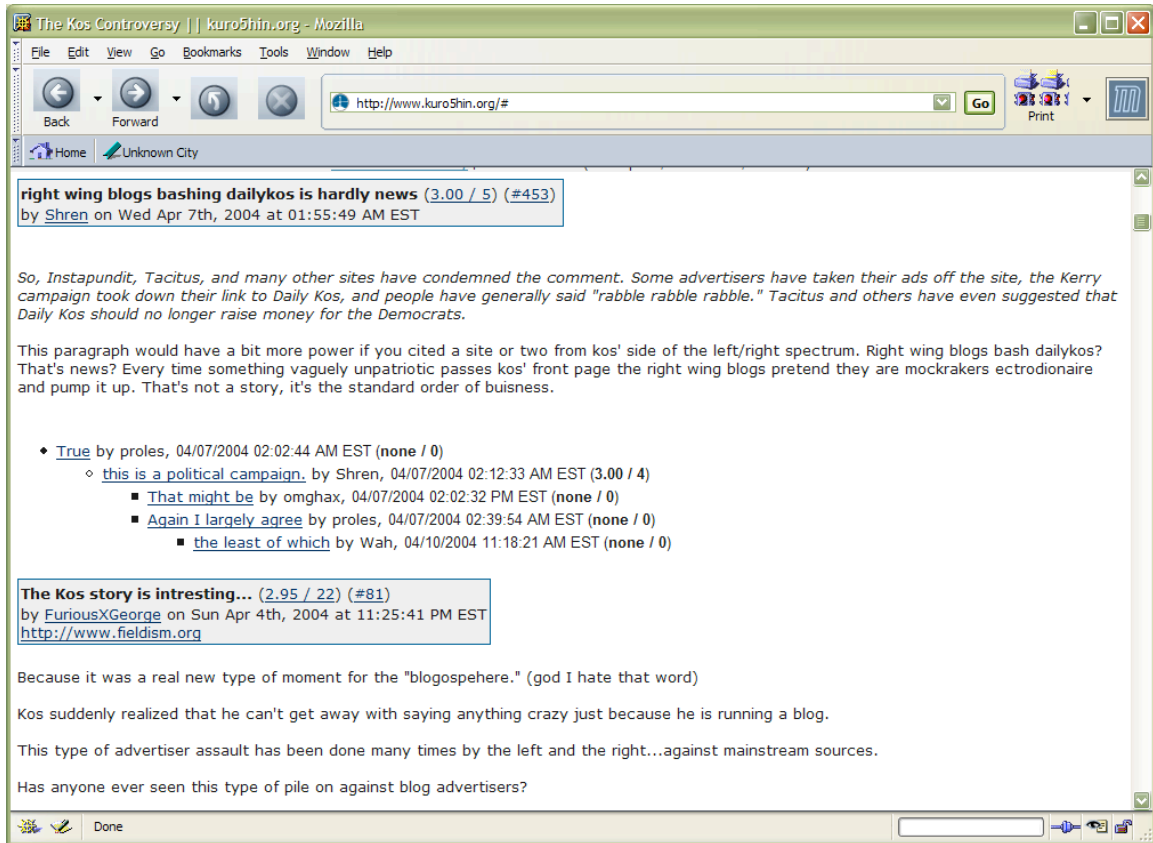
Figure 7: A Kuro5hin comment discussion. Each comment has a rating next to its title – the first number is the average points awarded to the comment, and the second number is the number of people who voted on it. Comments that react to the original comment are listed afterwards, providing tangential discussions.
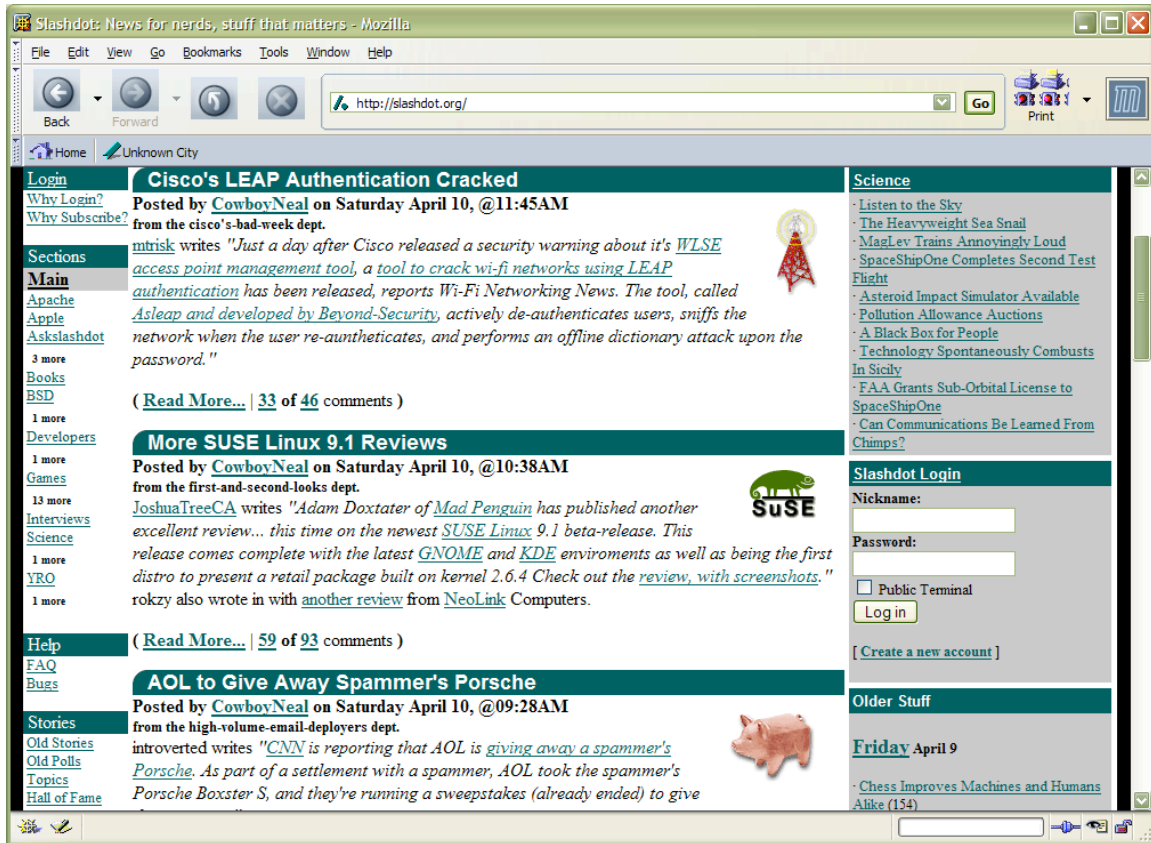
Figure 8: Slashdot's homepage. Note how the entries have all been posted by "CowboyNeal" – one of the Slashdot editors. Despite it being a Saturday, there are entries every hour, and each attracts dozens of comments within an hour of being posted – highlighting the frequent updating of content and involvement of the audience on Slashdot.

File   Edit   View   Go   Bookmarks   Tools   Window   Help

Back   Forward   http://slashdot.org/articles/04/04/09/2137231.shtml?tid=109&tid=166&tid=187&tid=99   Go   Print

Home   Unknown City

YRO
1 more

Help
FAQ
Bugs

Stories
Old Stories
Old Polls
Topics
Hall of Fame
Submit Story

About
Supporters
Code
Awards

Services
Broadband
Online Books
PriceGrabber
Product News
Tech Jobs

The Only Way Microsoft Can Die is by Suicide | Log in/Create an Account | Top | 583 comments (Spill at 50!) | Index Only | Search Discussion

Threshold: 1: 398 comments   Threaded   Oldest First   Change   Reply

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◆ so what... by rohan_leader (Score:1) Saturday April 10, @05:01AM

Re:so what... (Score:5, Insightful)
by ron_ivi (607351) <sdotNO@SPAMcheapcomplexdevices.com> on Saturday April 10, @05:30AM (#8823684)
(http://www.cheapcomplexdevices.com/)
That's true of most large established industries. I don't expect GM to stop making cars, or Wal*Mart to give up retail, or P&G to stop making consumer products either.

Just another sign that software is leaving high-tech and becoming a mature industry.

If you want high-tech for the next decade or so, think bio, nano, and robotics [rutgers.edu], not software.
[Reply to This | Parent]

　　○ Re:so what... by Anonymous Coward (Score:1) Saturday April 10, @06:04AM

Re:so what... (Score:4, Insightful)
by tickticktickfast (663451) on Saturday April 10, @07:26AM (#8823941)
The difference is that that there are significant numbers of other cars besides GM cars and there are a significant number of other viable merchants besides Wal Mart. The difference is that automobiles represent technologies and economic systems that are past mature and on their way to becoming defunct. Comparing the situation with computers to cars and stores doesn't help anyone come to grips with a serious problem that has a large and growing negative impact on their cost of living. The only thing mature about the software industry is Microsoft's death grip on the consumers grossly distorted view of what Microsoft has done and can do for them. If you use computers then Microsoft takes your money whether you want them to or not. The believe that software is mature will take a serous dive when the death toll and overall cost from trashy software begins to enter the public consciousness. Computing technology and broadband communication will play a much bigger role in every aspect of

Figure 9: A Slashdot comment discussion. The "Threshold" at the top of the page allows readers to filter comments by the score assigned to them. Just below that is a line that reads "The Fine Print: The following comments are owned by whoever posted them. We are not responsible for them in any way."

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