

Possible Uses of Blogs and
Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)
for Depolarizing Political Discourse

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Objectives

In the fields of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and political communication, there is a recurrent hope that CMC will provide new spaces and new forms of political communication that will contribute to the democratization of various societies and to more humane and conciliatory political dialogue.

A United Nations report on terrorism notes that denying violent political groups the ability to terrorize others is very important, but there is also a need for concerted efforts to dissuade disaffected groups in the world from supporting terrorism (United Nations, 2002). Such efforts can be helped with more scientific knowledge about the communication processes which generate political polarization and those which can facilitate depolarization. This necessitates research on the social dynamics of polarizing and depolarizing discourse and communication. This includes the study of new communication technologies that can aid the social processes that lower polarization in (depolarize) political discourse.

This paper examines political polarization and depolarization processes in social spaces generated in computer-mediated communication (CMC). There are three good reasons for observing polarizing and depolarizing social dynamics in CMC: 1) CMC is an increasingly common medium for social interaction, 2) some people denied other media can communicate via CMC, and 3) the discourse is in print and easily manipulated.

Communication research has shown that social interaction generates social structures, which in turn, feed back to modify forms of interaction. Polarized and depolarized political structures are likely to be shaped by patterns of discourse and social interaction (Sunstein, 1999; van Dijk, 1998). Moreover, discourse feedback loops are an essential part of the polarization process, since it is through feedback that social structures are either reinforced or attenuated (Giddens, 1984; Wiener, 1948). Social structures pattern social interaction through processes that integrate or separate members due to “reciprocity of practices” or the regularizing relations of autonomy and dependence among members (Giddens, 1979, p. 76).

Given that reinforcement through cyclical causality both establishes and characterizes emergent constraints on any dynamical system (Van Orden, Holden & Turvey, 2003), feedback loops observed in political discourse can be used to characterize the social structures that are

employed by discourse participants. The feedback loops can be observed in terms of iterative reinforcement of concepts and arguments. We argue later that this type of observation can be aided with the use of automated semantics recognition software.

Studies of political CMC have found numerous ways in which CMC facilitates productive political communication. These include innovations that provide new types of public spheres for political deliberation. One of the most direct observations about CMC is that it helps to provide “more and better information access and exchange” (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000, p. 215). Researchers (van Dijk, 1999; Hacker & Steiner, 2001; Stromer-Galley et al., 2001; Anderson, 2003) have found that Internet users are able to increase their political knowledge. Additionally, CMC participation offers new opportunities to engage in direct, point-to-point political argumentation (Kolb, 1996; Kim, 2003; Fishkin, 1995; Fox & Miller, 1995). Some argue that CMC also provides new avenues of communication between citizens and their representatives (van Dijk, 1999; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000). Bennett and Entman (2001, p. 2) argue that “access to communication is one of the key measures of power and equality in modern democracies” CMC provides citizens more control over content, more opportunities to assert their views, and more chances to exert pressure on government. Because CMC facilitates citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-official interaction, it can reduce the function the mass media as gatekeepers of information, thereby allowing citizens access to previously unavailable information. (Bentivegna, 2002). There is evidence that CMC provides visibility to groups and movements that would not be accessible to them with traditional mass media (Hacker, Mason & Morgan, 2006).

Notwithstanding the positive findings about political CMC just described, we still do not know how CMC can be used to generate large societal changes such as the formation of, or changes in, what political theorists call political will or general will in a population. We also do not know how CMC specifically affects political and democratic deliberation. Moreover, we lack knowledge about how CMC can help manage or resolve political conflicts.

Yankelovich (1991) argues that information that is provided to citizens in a downward flow constitutes a process by which they possess only that information passed onto them by the elites of their society. This kind of top-down communication (with the aid of traditional mass media) does not empower citizens; but instead, serves to position citizens as passive consumers of information distributed by elites (van Dijk, 1996; Bordewijk & van Kaam, 1986). Political communication and CMC scholars tend to believe that high CMC users have more multilateral political communication than low CMC users and the difference is likely help them develop empowering roles for themselves in the polycentric power structures that are part of CMC

networks. Van Dijk (2006, p. 106) argues that while studies have shown some CMC political discourse to be of poor quality, ‘the diversity of inputs and the (limited) reciprocity of contributors are promising.’ Van Dijk articulates that view of many political communication scholars that political CMC can have community building effects.

While some scholars claim that CMC offers little to political communication other than another channel or set of channels, others view CMC as revolutionizing politics. A third view, the structural perspective, argues that CMC contributes to an incremental process that creates social structures and does so through sustained feedback loops. In this view, political power is related to the ways in which agents (human actors) use CMC to gain more input and effectiveness in social structures that affect political systems (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990; Hacker, 2004). In the process of political structuration, CMC can be used by communicators to construct new forms of political interaction that produce or reproduce new rules and resources that are used for political communication. As the changes in rules and resources occur at micro levels of social interaction, their cumulative effects initiate larger changes in the social systems that affect and are affected by the lower levels of social interaction. Through this process of political structuration, citizens are more likely to increase their political efficacy and their roles in democratic systems. The role of blogs in structuration or political structuration is unknown at this point, but we will attempt to use the example of one blog to argue that blogs can be used in a desirable process of structuration that generates depolarization in discourse that tends to politically polarized (in a negative sense).

Accordingly, this paper describes one Iraqi citizen’s personal security perceptions and use of a political blog in order to suggest ways in which this particular blog and blogs like it may have effects on the emergence of larger communication systems. The objectives of the paper are to: (1) review the current literature on the influence of blogs on political discourse, (2) identify security discourse as a special form of political discourse of relevance to national policy makers, (3) identify ways in which this discourse may relate to other spheres of political discourse, (4) identify possible structuration processes in the discourse, and (5) offer an argument saying that CMC, effectively managed, has the potential to depolarize extreme political discourse. These objectives are accomplished by relating current CMC and blog research to a specific Iraqi blog and to three basic arguments about the political effects of blogging. These arguments are a) that CMC most likely increase political polarization, b) that CMC may either increase polarization or decrease it, and c) that CMC has good potential to decrease political polarization. Through such analysis, we propose ways in which blogs, as a computer-mediated communication (CMC), can be used to structurate connections between micro-level interpersonal communication, concerning

individual security concerns, and macro-level intercultural communication, concerning national and international means of addressing those concerns.

Badgdad Burning

<http://Riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>

Saturday, March 18, 2006

Three Years...

It has been three years since the beginning of the war that marked the end of Iraq's independence. Three years of occupation and bloodshed.

Spring should be about renewal and rebirth. For Iraqis, spring has been about reliving painful memories and preparing for future disasters. In many ways, this year is like 2003 prior to the war when we were stocking up on fuel, water, food and first aid supplies and medications. We're doing it again this year but now we don't discuss what we're stocking up for. Bombs and B-52's are so much easier to face than other possibilities.

I don't think anyone imagined three years ago that things could be quite this bad today. The last few weeks have been ridden with tension. I'm so tired of it all- we're all tired.

Three years and the electricity is worse than ever. The security situation has gone from bad to worse. The country feels like it's on the brink of chaos once more- but a pre-planned, pre-fabricated chaos being led by religious militias and zealots.

The words above are from Baghdad Burning, a blog written by Riverbend who lives in Baghdad, Iraq. The blog describes life in Iraq and presents a stream of intelligent observations about the despair experienced by many Iraqis over the continuing violence and occupation as well as the lack of public services for so many years. Riverbend is former computer programmer and is believed to be the daughter of a former high ranking Iraqi diplomat to Washington, D.C. (Coombs, 2006). She is an example people living in autocratic or violent societies who have turned to the Internet for political expression as a safer option than face-to-face (F2f) activism. Baghdad Burning is read by thousands of people. A traffic analysis by www.alexacom indicates that for the last 3 months, Riverbend's blog received on average 33.5 hits per 1 million web users (0.003% of web users). This is a very significant readership, given that prestigious Middle Eastern Media Institute (MEMRI) (www.memri.org) received only 44 hits per million users (0.004%).

Riverbend has achieved literary recognition in the United States and Europe following the publication of her blog for the period of the occupation of Baghdad in 2003/2004 (Riverbend, 2005). For this book, she won the Ulysses Prize for literary reportage in 2005 and in March 2005

it was dramatized at the West End Theatre in New York. The book was also shortlisted for the BBC Four Samuel Johnson Prize in 2006. Then, in March 2006, Riverbend's site received the Bloggie award for the best Middle East and Africa blog. This international recognition is interesting. In part, it may be due to Riverbend being a very good writer. However, Baghdad Burning may be an example of a "bridge blog," where the author writes well considered posts that attempt to bridge between cultures and to encourage high standard responses. One consequence of Riverbend's growing reputation is that she is being quoted by op-ed writers.

While the potential of one blog like the Riverbend blog, to structure may be difficult to grasp conceptually and remains unverifiable empirically, we believe that there is potential for any blog to become part of various structural processes. The potential for Riverbend to contribute to the structuration of significant political spaces concerning the traumatic impact of operations such as Iraqi Freedom on the civilian population is subject to debate and empirical confirmation. However, the fact she is drawing so much attention may indicate that she is using political discourse in a way that visitors to her site find useful. The fact that the blog is constituted for personal reasons (if that is true) does not preclude the possibility that readers of the blog are using what Riverbend says to add her discourse to other discourses that are critical of United States foreign policy.

How Blogs Can Influence Political Discourse

Communication scientists examine new forms of communication technologies to ascertain what types of enabling functions those technologies provide for their users. Blogs, short for "web logs," are one type of CMC that communication scientists are observing in terms of the roles they will play in new forms of social organization and communication. Blogs are diary-like sites on the Internet which either publicly or privately, contain updated posting that are listed chronologically. They have also become an increasingly popular CMC channel, it being estimated that there are between 30 million and 60 million blogs worldwide (e.g., www.blogherald.com/2005/05/25/world-wide-blog-count-for-may-now-over-60-million-blogs). The Daily Kos political blog receives nearly 5 million visitors per month (Perlmutter, 2006). Despite lots of activity for blogs, Perlmutter (2006, p. B-8) argues that "Any pronouncements about the power of blogs and the potential direction of political blogging would be as foolish as similar prognostications about the trajectory of television news in 1952."

More importantly for this paper, blogs provide places where marginalized social groups like women can tell their stories that might not in other media be heard (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). New forms of CMC may provide more places for them to articulate their concerns and

create audiences for their messages. CMC forms such as blogs also increase their opportunities to initiate communities of interest concerning the issues they address.

Some political communication scholars believe that blogs are an important challenge to mainstream mass media news. Some observers even call the audience of mass media the "former audience" (Chadwick, 2006, p. 303). Blog optimists believe that reports in the "blogosphere" allow citizens to produce their own streams of news while blog pessimists believe that the bloggers are chatting to themselves. One ironic aspect of news in blogs is that large mainstream organizations have joined the news non-traditionalists with their own blogs (Klotz, 2004).

It is very easy to set up blogs with the free software platforms like Userland and Blogger. With these platforms, a person with no software programming knowledge can establish their own blog (Chadwick, 2006). Moreover, the RSS software protocol in the blog platforms facilitate easy and fast diffusion of stories or opinions around various blogosphere spaces (Chadwick, 2006). Blogs offer chances for more people to become news story sources and for more to post comments about current stories (McMillan, 2006). It is possible that this results in increased interactivity in relation to some events and stories (McMillan, 2006).

The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that while 62% of Net users don't know what blog is, readership of blogs increased 58% in 2004 (Rainie, 2005). Readership of blogs is higher than authorship (7% of Net users) of blogs for those online (Rainie, 2005). By the end of 2004, approximately 32 million Americans (27% of Net users in the U.S.) were reading blogs (Rainie, 2005). About 12% of American Internet users have posted comments or material on the blogs of other users (Rainie, 2005).

A concern of this paper is whether blogs created by the innocent civilian victims of war - the "collaterally damaged" - can have a significant, albeit indirect, effect on the decisions of policy makers. Some observers argue that "swarming" in the blogosphere has led to concrete political actions such as the resignation of Senator Trent Lott who was exposed for making remarks labeled as racist, and the resignation of a New York Times editor who was connected to the Jayson Blair news fabrication scandal (Chadwick, 2006). Observers who believe that blogs have significant effects argue this is likely given examples such as the Trent Lott affair and the fact that some blogs attract as many as 200,000 hits per day (Chadwick, 2006). Of course, hits and effects are not the same thing. Chadwick (2006) also argues that an important impact of blogs may be in their influence on the framing of events by mainstream journalists. Still, we have little knowledge of precisely how blogs affect framing in news stories and what political purposes are served by blogging. Indeed, political communication research indicates that most people online

use political Web sites to reinforce their existing viewpoints and ideologies rather than for seeking new sources of viewpoints and ideologies (Bimber & Davis, 2003).

Anderson (2003), argues that the many-to-many architecture of the Internet makes it possible for individuals to easily discuss politics with many other individuals. Anderson (2003, p. 30) argues that CMC makes more interactions and relationships possible and that "the Internet facilitates communication among people who would otherwise have difficulty finding each other." This is certainly an important property that could possibly linking together dispersed individuals experiencing particular types of threat or linking threatened individuals with those who might sympathize - and be able to take remedial (political) action by changing the normal political rules on who is heard.

During the early stages of the Iraq war of 2003 (Operation Iraqi Freedom), Internet communication expanded from news and information functions of the Bosnian war to increased activism and the emergence of blogs (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). While the war in Iraq escalated physically, it also escalated in Internet argumentation and conflict (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). Those who supported the war or those who opposed it found new tools to strengthen the intensity of their differences (polarization) and to extend the reach of their arguments (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). One facet of this polarization was the use of new genres of CMC, like blogs, to directly attack the proponents of the opposing war views (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). One man started an online diary to inform people about events in the war. This was Ken O'Keefe, a Marine who had fought in the 1991 Gulf War and opposed the 2003 war (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). His stated goal was to act as a physical human shield in Iraq and to inform people that Iraqis are just people (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004).

The 2003 war blogs emerged in a context of other forms of CMC actively being used for political polarization of war views. These genres, like chat rooms, web sites, and discussion forums, challenged the news being released by traditional news outlets as well as governments. Viewpoints were diametrically opposed to each other, as one might say that Iraq was liberated while another responded that a new system of repression replaced the old one (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). It appears to some scholars that people were using CMC during the 2003 war to seek out political discussions with others and to initiate new relationship (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). Polarization of political views is described by Egyptian scholars Hamdy and Mobarak (2004, p.247) as something "like burning down the house." Some chat room participants raved about being able to get those with opposing views forced out of the chat space (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004).

Blogs grew in usage and popularity during the 2003 Iraq War as they were used for posting opinions about the war and also as alternative sources of information in contrast to traditional news sources (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). Seeking information, debating the war, and finding alternative sources of information appear to be some of the basic uses or functions of the war blogs (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). One of the few studies done on blog user motivations indicates that war blog users seek more information about the war from blogs, seek information from sources other than traditional news outlets and trust blogs more than the traditional news media (Kaye & Johnson, 2004). Blog users in this study appear to trust blogs but not other forms of CMC such as chat rooms and discussion lists. Apparently, they view blogs as more credible than other CMC genres and see blogs are more credible than traditional news media. In the latter group of sources, they trust broadcast TV news the least (Kaye & Johnson, 2004). Consistent with a vast CMC literature testing replacement and displacement hypotheses for CMC vs. other channels of communication, this study found that blogs supplement trusted traditional media (like cable news) and supplementation is more likely than replacement (Kaye & Johnson, 2004). Other interesting findings are that blogs may be stimulating interpersonal discussions about politics and that blogs tend to aggregate similar-minded individuals (Kaye & Johnson, 2004).

Personal blogs, such as the one published by the Iraqi architect "Salam Pax," provided daily accounts about the war from an Iraq citizen living in Iraq. The blog was so popular it led to a book in 2003 (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004). Riverbend's blog follows a similar pattern. The 29 year old Salam Pax offered on-the-ground observations of the bombing of Baghdad and attracted about 100,000 visitors per day (Kaye & Johnson, 2004). Other types of blogs included journalist blogs, news source blogs, soldier blogs, and military family blogs (Hamdy & Mobarak, 2004).

Blogs can be used as diaries in order to provide self-expression and connections with others online. However, they are also used as alternative sources of news. There is evidence that some blogs are read by journalists and therefore may provide some agenda setting effect for news organizations. However, there is obviously more information flow from news media to the blogosphere than the other way around.

A single blog has less impact than a network of blogs. Blog linking is made easy by the technology made available to authors and networks of blogs may encourage or facilitate the formation of certain types of online communities (Kim, 2005). Blogs can be interlinked with other blogs and also with various Web sites. While blogs may appear to be diaries simply in online format, there is the importance difference of private (offline diaries) and public online diaries (Kim, 2005). Whether offline or online, this type of self-presentation constructs the self-

identity on a daily and chronological basis (Kim, 2005). Many bloggers believe that they have a rhetorical force that effectively challenges the power of the traditional mass media (Kim, 2005).

Hartelius (2005) distinguishes topic blogs (group blog) and individual blogs (personal blogs). She then relates these two types of blogs to online community formation. Communities are formed when there are shared experiences, in-group identification, and social cohesion. Political group blogs are linked to organizations while political personal blogs (like Riverbend) are not. The personal blog, unlike the group blog with its main voices, has one voice (Hartelius, 2005). Marla Ruzicka was a humanitarian activist who had a blog called Marla's Journal. Those who followed her efforts could be assumed to share her interests in peace action. Hartelius (2005, p. 85) argues that "In her implicit audience, the reader indicates an existence of an 'imagined community, those left 'at home.'" With this type of personal blog, it is possible for the author can provide discourse that is an extension of an offline identity or political cause (Hartelius, 2005).

Similarly Schaefer and Dervin (2005) note that online user groups use strategies to either engage in agreeing/disagreeing behaviors or they post introspective self-oriented opinion. The authors note

Counter to many of the received theories about the need to privilege user-to-user interaction within online discussion groups, these findings suggest that both modes—dialogic and contemplative—appear to be important for robust dialogue within online public spheres, even though the latter does not necessarily accompany consensus/dissensus activity, the assumed telos of such a sphere. Choosing not to engage fellow participants in agreeing-disagreeing tactics appeared to open up structural spaces for participants to voice their own beliefs and sentiments outside of a judgment-oriented, consensus-dissensus context, albeit with an always-present, but sometimes silent audience (Schaefer & Dervin, 2005, p. 23)

While this study focused on posts in an online group, the findings may be generalized to some political blogs.

Riverbend, and the constellation of bloggers she associates with via links, combines a situated reporting of events with political evaluation. Riverbend, as a blogger who can relate her own experience about the Iraq war, engages multiple roles in her discourse—she is at once publicly and privately oriented—but projects a primarily contemplative discourse. This duality appears to add emotional depth to her postings that political bloggers who wrestle with abstract issues cannot duplicate. Riverbend engages readers dialogically and contemplatively, thereby opening structural space that appears less contestable. It is possible that she has a significant effect if her stories are appropriated as a discursive resource into discourse about Iraq that opposes current U.S. policy. It is, therefore, important to examine these stories more precisely in order to determine what discursive resources they offer.

Security Discourse

Security discourse is typically construed at, or beyond, the level of the nation state. Moreover, the designation “security” is typically used to justify the suspension of normal social rules in favor of “emergency measures” directed at removing a threat (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde, 1998). These measures may include anything from a declaration of war on a threatening state or organization, to suspension of normal rights to privacy, Habeas Corpus, freedom of movement, and freedom of speech. All of these were witnessed in the U.S. following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In addition to the implicit linking of Saddam Hussein with al-Qaeda to justify the invasion of Iraq, the country has argued for the use of “torture lite” at Guantanamo Bay, has bypassed the FISA Court in the wiretapping of U.S. citizens, and pressured the press to self-censor war imagery from the Middle East.

In ‘Security: A New Framework for Analysis,’ Buzan, Wæver and Wilde (1998) broaden the concept of security discourse to address the increasing role of non-state actors in international politics, along with newly perceived threats to an emerging global economy – principally matters of a rapidly deteriorating environment, over population, and regional ethnic conflicts. Key components of the new framework emphasize the subjective, perceptual aspects of threat as a social construction over rational reactions of a nation to a direct physical threat and diversify areas that states seek to securitize beyond the political and military sectors to include environmental, economic, and societal sectors. Some scholars believe that, given the increasing role of non-state actors in international affairs, security studies should include observations of the psycho-emotional mindsets¹ of individuals experiencing threat in nations undergoing intense violence and political conflict such as Iraq (Coombs, Hacker & Weaver, 2006).

The 1990s saw extensive growth of knowledge into the neurobiology of emotion and its impact on both judgment and behavior (Adolphs & Damasio, 2001 for a brief review). This work supports the “embodied cognition” thesis in psychology which claims that the mind cannot be understood without considering its underpinnings in the body. Indeed, there is a fast growing literature on the complex interrelationships between the triad of biological, psychological and social domains as individuals construct identities and “life spaces” through discourse (Harré & Gillett, 1994; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). Thus, one may propose a framework for analyzing security mindsets based on discourse data but also related to bio-psychological states people generate as they adopt social positions, and impose social positions on others (Coombs, 2006).

The Australian traumatologist, Paul Valent (Valent, 1998), has proposed an ontology of eight survival strategies commonly invoked by individuals under stress. Each of the eight strategies is directed at mastering, or submitting to, one component in the threat situation, and so may be readily recognized in the declared or observed priorities of subjects. Moreover, as elements in a palette of survival behaviors, they can be combined dynamically into more complex behaviors. Work done by Coombs (2006) seeks to determine whether Valent's (1998) survival strategies are descriptive of the mindsets manifest by Riverbend when reacting to publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs in the polarizing political environment of post-Saddam Iraq.

Traumatologists are faced with making sense of very complex reactions to traumatic events. Complexities include everything from variable responses to a given stressor, multiple contradictory reactions by an individual, variation in reaction with time, and variations in the onset of maladaptive symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Valent (1998) seeks to make sense of this variability by organizing phenomena as points located within three axes. The components of the primary axis concern the progression of bio-psycho-social processes as an individual reacts to an extreme stressor. Coombs, Hacker & Weaver (2006) applies these survival strategies to analyze Riverbend's security mindsets.

Living in post-occupation Iraq is unquestionably harsh. Jonathan Finer and Omar Fekeiki (Finer & Fekeiki, 2006), in a Washington Post article on March 06, 2006, report the grim picture of the population's mental health. Iraq is clearly a traumatized country. In an Iraqi Ministry of Health survey carried out in Sadr City, a Shiite slum in Baghdad, 90% of people surveyed suffered from stress-related psychological disorders. These included depression, insomnia and PTSD. People living in such conditions might be expected to simplify their mindsets to the activation of some small set of Valent's survival categories. Furthermore, given the long term traumatization of the Iraqi population, polarized and extremist political behavior might be expected to be prevalent.

Upon Riverbend's return to her country, Iraq was already a traumatized country at this time, having suffered the violence of the Iran/Iraq war, Ba'athist purges, and sectarian unrest. Then, following the invasion by the United States led Coalition in March 2003, the trauma of the crippling economic sanctions following the Gulf War, were replaced by more economic deprivations and an increasingly bloody insurgency. Riverbend writes about daily life in this environment, where the principal political forces include (1) the United States military occupying Iraq, with the cause of bringing democracy and freedom, and personified by President George W. Bush, (2) a resurgent Iraqi political establishment, personified by returned Shia émigrés with Iranian sympathies and violent pasts, such as Iyad Allawi, (3) innumerable Shia and Sunni

insurgency militias, (3) the Shia Mahdi Army and its leader Moqtada al-Sadr, and (4) the Sunni foreign fighters led by Abu Mos'ab al-Zarqawi responsible for kidnappings and videotaped beheadings.

Friday, April 30, 2004

Those Pictures ...

The pictures are horrific. I felt a multitude of things as I saw them... the most prominent feeling was rage, of course. I had this incredible desire to break something...

There was a time when people here felt sorry for the troops. No matter what one's attitude was towards the occupation, there were moments of pity towards the troops, regardless of their nationality. That time has passed. People look at troops now and see the pictures of Abu Ghraib... and we burn with shame and anger and frustration at not being able to do something. Now that the world knows that the torture has been going on since the very beginning, do people finally understand what happened in Falloojeh?

Positioning theory seeks to explain how individuals construct themselves and others dynamically through discursive action. (Harré & Van Langenhove, Eds., 1999) Riverbend's post may be considered to be a discursive action in which she positions herself and other military/political players in social relationships through its storyline. These acts of positioning involve the systems of local rights and duties expected to be followed by the actors, the moral order asserted as the context for public and private actions, and the actions themselves

A descriptive analysis of Riverbend's discourse suggests that she is extremely energetic in her protests against the failure of the United States in its duty to protect innocent Iraqi citizens. Riverbend's focus is on what she considers to be the direct threat – the United States military and politicians – rather than on resources, the innocents themselves, or her goals. This leaves fighting as the survival strategy, with its objective of fighting off the threat.

In contrast to the military and political forces in Iraq, Riverbend does not have an explicit political constituency or agenda. As the title of her post – Just Go (see Appendix A) --suggests, what she really wants is to return to a life that was at least as liberated as what she lived under the secular government of Saddam Hussein. Having been brought up in the nation of the forces who came to bring “freedom and democracy”, she might have been expected to have believed that the freedoms she enjoyed in Baghdad, and had previously enjoyed in Washington DC, would have been extended to all Iraq. Instead, the country was descending into violence and the freedoms on innocent civilians were being violated as a daily event. Furthermore, none of the political authorities seem to have been interested, or able, to defend the innocent civilians from the violence. Instead, as Riverbend complains in later posts, they are pursuing personal agendas that appear contrary to the development of a liberated society. In particular, Riverbend is dismayed

by the partisan Shia influence in the various governing structures (post of Sunday, May 25, 2005) and a resurgence of clerical influence that is opposed to women's rights (post of Friday, September 23, 2005).

Riverbend's emotionally controlled discourse on the violation of innocent civilians as a response to the Abu Ghraib photographs stands in contrast to the response of the authorities. One may conclude that she is centered on the security of individuals rather than Iraq as a nation. She is essentially taking a human security perspective on the responsibility of state authorities. Human security focuses on the security of the individual and was elaborated in the Commission on Human Security: Human Security Now which was sponsored by the United Nations and reported in May 2003 (CHS, 2003). Seen as complementing state security, the concept includes not just protecting people but also empowering them to fend for themselves. In the "New Iraq", Riverbend sees herself as being disempowered rather than empowered. The irony is that she was empowered as a secular professional woman under Saddam Hussein.

The utility of the discourse descriptions above may become apparent with the realization that individual blogs can become parts of blog networks and personal securitization strategies can therefore enter into structuration processes that produce structures of political discourse that involve many people. Also, the notion of controlled discourse, particularly in a traumatized social climate, may suggest at least one way of depolarizing discourse about very polarized topics.

Riverbend's political dilemma is one she shares with many other bloggers in the Middle East. Researchers may want to investigate whether blogging has provided an important medium of political expression for individuals who are living in repressive or violent regimes but are essentially transnationals. These are individuals who have either studied, or otherwise lived, in the West, possibly children of families who emigrated as refugees, and are deeply infused with Western culture to the point where they are not sufficiently rooted in either culture to be politically credible in either place.

Having reviewed the literature on political communication and CMC, the literature on political uses of blogs, and introduced the Riverbend blog as one possible source of discourse for appropriation into other political discourses, we are ready to explore three arguments about CMC and polarization more closely.

Political Polarization or Depolarization

Political discourse polarization should be viewed as part of a continuum running from extreme polarization to extreme depolarization.

Polarization ----- depolarization

The importance of treating polarization as a continuum is that discourse may move back and forth between high and low (depolarization) polarization. It is not simply a binary phenomenon but rather one that is dynamic and changes through time.

Political polarization is a process in which a community becomes divided by one or more of the fault-lines of the human condition (e.g., race, nation, class, exclusion). Conflicts originate as incompatible goals, and divide disputants into camps of “Us” and “Them.” Social structures within camps are reinforced through discourse that propagates positive beliefs about “Us” (righteous, legitimate, victims, superior, etc.) and negative beliefs about “Them” (evil, illegitimate, aggressors, inferior, etc.). These beliefs manifest in polarized dialogue through discourse features such as: 1) dehumanization of “Them” by naming with negatively valenced collective nouns (e.g., Zionist), 2) attribution of blame to “Them” for hurting “Us”, 3) reference to a fixed set of highly affectively charged historical incidents in which “They” hurt “Us” (e.g., the Holocaust), or reinforcing expressions of approval at statements that enhance group cohesion and punishing disapproval at statements that question the basis for cohesion. Some terrorism experts believe that the reason people become terrorists is rooted in this “Us” versus “Them” way of thinking which includes the belief that violence must be used to communicate with the out-group (Turk, 2004).

Polarization moves people into intensifying levels of conflict and violence like war and terrorism is most likely to occur with low levels of what we can consider depolarizing discourse and communication (conciliation, negotiation, etc.). As we will restate later in an argument for measuring depolarization in CMC, we strongly believe that polarization is a dynamical process and one that involves change and the potential for moving in the opposite direction, i.e. depolarization. Depolarization is movement toward multiple perspectives or at least the understanding of a competing perspective. It is not simply a middle position between alternative points of view in a conflict. Polarization discourse is likely to support coercive or forceful political behavior while depolarizing discourse is likely to encourage cooperative political behavior.

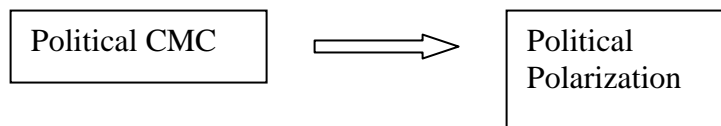
With this brief introduction to our conceptualization of polarization and depolarization of political discourse, we are ready to examine three competing arguments about discourse and polarization in CMC.

The First Argument: CMC Generally Increases Polarization

Tedesco (2004) observes that CMC differs from other forms of communication in part because of a lack of information control features that are found in mass communication. More importantly, he notes that research indicates that while traditional forms of participation such as voting appear to be unmoved by increasing CMC, there is “initial evidence that the Internet is facilitating politically charged political debate.” (Tedesco, 2004, p. 520). Some scholars of political communication include polarization of political views in their lists of important topics for new political communication.

The case against CMC being a viable mechanism for depolarizing political discourse is derived from observations about small group communication offline and from observations of unmoderated online social interaction. Later, we will see that there are numerous problems with the argument that CMC is more suited for polarization than depolarization. For example, current studies in psychology and persuasion indicate that people do not selectively perceive as much as once thought.

As shown in the Model One below, the first argument says that political CMC naturally, or most likely, increases the polarization of discourse. This is the expected effect.



Model One: CMC Polarizes Political Communication

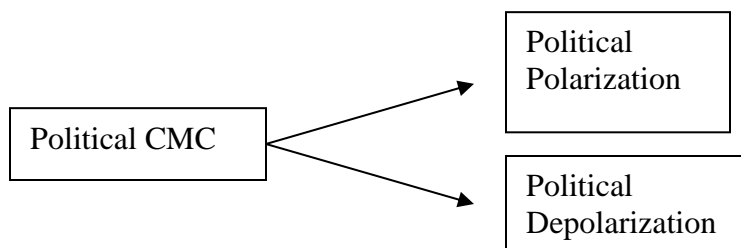
Lim (2004) argues that CMC can be a threat to democracy if it helps to fortify ethnic and religious identities that fuel political conflicts. Through a process of "identity filtering" it is possible for CMC participants to avoid cognitive dissonance by pulling together information that

supports their preferred identity and filtering out that which is unfavorable to that identity (Lim, 2004). When truth is linked to identity, viewpoints of others that contradict the fusion of truth and identity are rejected and categorized as lies (Lim, 2004). CMC can facilitate both identity formation and identity filtering (Lim, 2004). A common finding in early psychology research concerning perception of information contradicting held beliefs concerned the process of selective perception. Some communication scientists believe that people expose themselves to political messages selectively and form networks that filter out dissonant messages (Lim, 2004). There is empirical data indicating that most people selectively perceive political information on the Internet (Bimber & Davis, 2003). The CMC technologies allow people to combine high amounts of information with high amounts of filtering (Lim, 2004).

Whether good or bad, CMC extends social networks and thus makes political information easier to disseminate and deliberate with greater rates of speech than ever before. Additionally, CMC deliberative spaces can become public spaces that generate political resistance and this has occurred frequently in recent history (Lim, 2004). In Indonesia, CMC helped to disseminate information against the dictator Suharto and when his regime collapsed, groups that had worked against him now work against each other and unify their animosity by networking via CMC with similar groups in other nations (Lim, 2004). Thus, while Wellman and others are correct about "glocalization," i.e., the expansion of both local and international social networks with CMC, global movements partially constructed with CMC can polarize political discourse within specific nations (Lim, 2004). Lim (2004) argues that political messages in CMC diffuse through interpersonal channels of communication such as mosques, universities, and schools. In her view, CMC polarizes political discourse by generating identity filtering, applying global sources of information to local contexts, and shifting the salience of various types of identities (Lim, 2004).

The Second Argument: CMC Can Polarize or Depolarize

The second argument assumes the expected effects of CMC for political discourse are not easily predictable and that what occurs can be either more or less polarized discourse. As shown in Model Two below, dual-valence effects are expected.



Model Two: Dual Valence Effects of Political CMC on Discourse

The mixed case does not privilege CMC as facilitating either polarizing or depolarizing political discourse.

Despite the fact that governments in China, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and other authoritarian systems work overtime to censor CMC in their nations, citizens are able to communicate with each other by email and to get email messages past certain filters for incoming and outgoing mail (Barnes, 2003). An email system was set up in Sarajevo with aid by the Soros Foundation to increase a free flow of information by email (Barnes, 2003). This allowed the citizens of Sarajevo to communicate with outside of Bosnia. Another Soros project linked students in Romania to students in California by CMC (Barnes, 2003). The hope of these kinds of projects is that CMC can enable members of diverse cultures to interact productively.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that people from diverse cultures using CMC become more polarized in their attitudes (Barnes, 2003). This argument says that people self-select themselves into groups that share their attitudes and values (Barnes, 2003). It is also argued that people online seek to promote their own interests and to reinforce their own points of view (Barnes, 2003). In general, CMC research shows that the effects of CMC depend on the social contexts which mediate the usage of CMC (Barnes, 2003).

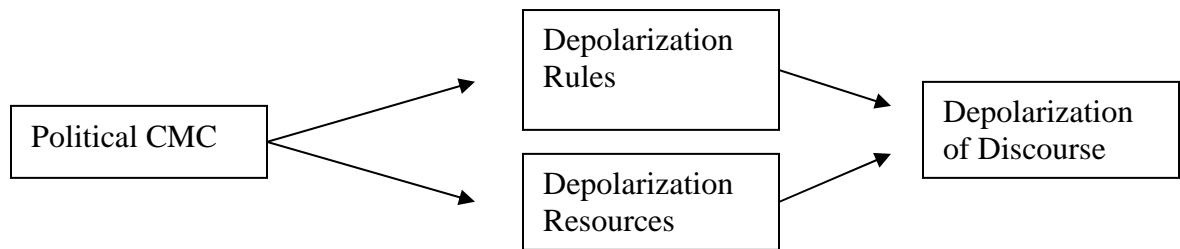
Research done in Israel which seeks to make the communication between Israelis and Palestinians more conciliatory argues that dialogue about religion is helping the process of building understanding (Mollov, Schwartz, Steinberg & Lavie, 2001). CMC has apparently been useful, when carefully managed in some of those efforts.

There are no automatic effects to political uses of CMC, but the directions of political discourse enabled by CMC are most likely significant in the total media environment of political communication. If political CMC is like other contextual applications of CMC like organizational communication and interpersonal communication, the effects of usage are most likely capable of moving in either positive or negative directions due to various moderating variables.

The Third Argument: CMC Can Depolarize Political Discourse

Some scholars argue that democratic communication or pro-peace kinds of political communication might be constructed bottom up through Web-mediated patterns of social interaction. Some supporting evidence for such CMC-based structuration is given by McCaughey and Ayers (2003) in studies of progressive social change. Similarly, Gurak & Logie (2003) argue that the Internet, like pre-Internet protest movements, has always involved networks of people. They observe how cyber-activists used many forms of communication, including CMC, to fight back the Lotus MarketPlace product. Here, they observe that the voices of computer professionals provided a challenge to the authoritative claims made by Lotus and to using traditional hierarchies for sending messages. (Gurak & Logie, 2003).

As shown in Model Three below, the third argument says that the expected effects of CMC are directly related to the structural efforts put into the CMC social dynamics. Thus, depolarization of discourse can be expected if there is good management of the social structures and feedback loops in political CMC.



Model Three: CMC Potential for Depolarization

The 21st Century has seen the escalation of many conflicts in both U.S. (e.g., the abortion debate) and international (e.g., Islamic factions) arenas. It is in the interest of the United States to depolarize communication that exacerbates terrorism as a means of political communication. CMC allows interactants from diverse locations to pursue individual goals while also creating and recreating group identity and relationships (Barnes, 2003; Cecez-Kecmanovic, Treleaven, & Modie, 2000; Hacker, 2004; Hacker & Van Dijk, 2000). Despite fears about flaming and other disruptive online behaviors, virtual communities online have been found to create social norms that regulate member and visitor behaviors (Baym, 2006; Tanis & Postmes, 2003). CMC and the Internet make it possible for people to create new social structures which supplement their offline social interaction.

It is important to recognize that CMC is part of the network of networks we call the Internet. This means there are many technologies that are interoperable and many modes of operation that are difficult to locate (Luke, 2006). While too easily argued perhaps, some observers believe that blogs are a form of CMC that encourages or serves “populist politics.” (Luke, 2006, p. 164). Certainly, people who go online with political discourse bring their offline ideologies with them. Luke (2006, p. 164) argues that CMC provides social forces with alternative modes of action and types of artifacts to organize their cultural interactions...” Traditional means of national governance do not apply easily to CMC using the Internet. This assures more freedom of speech, in practice, than can be found in most nation-states. The territorial sovereignty of states has less power of CMC than offline communication (Luke, 2006). However a skeptical view of digital democracy argues that political communication on the Internet is subsumed by the main driving forces of CMC which are economic development (Luke, 2006).

Rucinski (1991) argues that an expanded view of political participation which includes acts of communication brings a rejection of elitist theories of democracy which view politics as something done only by representatives of the people. The other view of expanded participation views politics as more related to everyday conversations among anyone who deliberates political issues. While some communication scholars believe that conciliatory discourse (described earlier) can only occur in face-to-face interaction, others argue that CMC can facilitate conciliatory discourse and collective decision making (Rucinski, 1991). One reason for this faith is that CMC has technical factors of interactivity in systems design as opposed to the unidirectionality of mass media (Rucinski, 1991).

The case for CMC being a viable means of political depolarization is derived from studies of conflict management in various contexts of communication, various communication theories, and from observations of CMC being used for rational political and productive political deliberation.

From the literature on psychological coping, CMC deindividuation, and conflict management related to discourse dynamics, we are able to derive several theoretical generalizations and research hypotheses with which we argue that it is indeed possible for CMC to be used to depolarize political discourse.

From interactionism in communication studies, for example, we know that conflict between individuals or any other tier of communication system can be perpetuated by communication that punctuates one's own behavior as the result of the behavior by the other party. Thus, one nation may say that it is arming itself out of a need to protect itself from the aggression

of the other while the corresponding nation says exactly the same thing. Interactionism says that this a typical cycle of dysfunctional communication and can only be broken when both parties acknowledge that they are co-creators of the conflict. In order to break free of such cycles, both parties have to reframe their positions and their conflict with the other. It is interesting that observers use the metaphor of "walking out of a nightmare" for communicative reframing that ends punctuation (slicing a cycle into one cause-effect sequence when the other is the cause).

Another interesting area of conflict management knowledge comes from the early Contact Hypothesis which said that conflicting parties will learn to like each other if only they are in contact with each other more. This was the failure of busing in the United States to achieve harmony of children of varying ethnic groups. Close contact was not enough to end voluntary segregation (Berreby, 2005; Cialdini, 2003). What did work in this situation, however, was the jigsaw approach to youths from groups that seemed to automatically segregate themselves (Berreby, 2005). The jigsaw approach brought youths of varying ethnic groups together in teams at school where they needed each other to solve problems.

From CMC literature, we have the SIDE model and structuration views to draw upon for means of depolarizing discourse. The SIDE model says that anonymity and strong social identity in CMC spaces will encourage polarization through deindividuation processes while individuating dynamics will lessen the effect of social norms. There are two ways to use this principle to depolarize discourse. First, social norms of conciliatory discourse can be highlighted with anonymity and deliberate efforts to deindividuate in a positive discursive environment. Second, in a negative discursive environment, individuals can be encouraged to individuate by self-disclosure processes which will lessen the effects of collective and polarizing norms on them. From structural views, we can draw upon the principles of duality of structure whereby social interaction produces social structures comprised of rules and resources and those social structures in turn shape future interaction. Additionally, we can bring in key aspects of the modalities of structuration and also the principle that social structures exist in relation to other social structures (Giddens, 1979).

A recent study of online political deliberation found that civic and political engagement is positively related to online discussion but that political efficacy is not (Price & Capella, 2002). The study also found that people higher in interpersonal trust are more likely to participate in online discussions about politics (Price & Capella, 2002). Perhaps more importantly, the study found that people can learn from online discussions and that they can increase their argument repertoires from such discussions (Price & Capella, 2002).

Perhaps we should acknowledge that what is essential about political discussion is the kind of political work that is accomplished. The Price and Capella study offers some hope in that regard. They found that discussions over time can affect political opinions and can also increase knowledge about issues. More importantly, they found that discussion participation affects involvement in elections and engagement in community activities. (Price & Capella, 2002). From a revolutionary view, these may appear trivial but from a structural view, they appear promising, albeit insufficient for large-scale democratization. Studies show that online communicators have social networks with contacts that are more spatially dispersed and larger than those of nonusers (Castells, 2001).

It may be possible to develop collective securitization discourse from the structural processes stimulated from one individual who then networks his or her discourse with that of others. It is natural to wonder why the psychology of individuals would be a topic in an analysis of CMC. Much time was spent earlier discussing trauma of individuals. Current research in neuroscience justifies our linkage of psychological analysis to CMC.

Neuroscientists Quartz & Sejnowski (2002) note that how the human brain develops depends on its interactions with culture. These scientists, while experts in studying human brain operations, do not believe that the human brain or mind operate with stand-alone wiring or functions, but rather in tandem with social environments and social interaction. Citing evolutionary psychology as ‘creative storytelling,’ they argue that humans are who they are and act as they do because of a lifetime of brain evolution (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002, p. 16). Contrary to speculations of evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, and artificial intelligence, the brain neither functions as a computer nor follows computational sequences or algorithms in sorting out behavioral choices (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). Instead, the brain develops along with the lifetime development of self (sense of self) and various abilities to adapt to various social situations (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). The prefrontal cortex part of the brain is the last part of the brain to fully mature and does not become fully functional until some time after puberty (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002).

The brain acts as a complex self-organizing system (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). This means that the development and organization of the human is dynamic and results from a “constructive learning” that occurs as the brain and environment interact and the brain builds circuits based on the interactions (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002, p50). The constructive learning process builds a hierarchical organization of the brain as layers of experience correspond to layers of complex structures such as language, abstract thinking, and social skills (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). The connection here to CMC emerges if one realizes that neuroscientists are describing a

duality of structure involving brain and social interaction, that is, culture and social interaction act to shape development of the brain and the brain regulates social interaction (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). CMC is another facet of social interaction and serves to extend the quantities and qualities of face-to-face interaction. Indeed, the expansion of social networks and social capital through CMC may provide more diversity to how people think about political topics as long as they are not simply finding sources to confirm their biases. New forms of social organization are made possible when people enter into long-term, reciprocal relationships with nonkin others (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002).

Neuroscientists believe that wars, terrorism, and political polarization are not determined by genetics or neuromodulators but rather by “worlds of meaning” created in cultures that interact with the brain (Quartz & Sejnowski, 200, 121). It has been argued, for example, that ideologies, like drug abuse, are not good for fitness but can be addicting (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). What is known as “obsessive ideation” links ideas and beliefs to negative and violent brain processes (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002. p.121). Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory, along with the CMC theories like the SIDE model, indicate that strong in-group membership pressures lead to norms of bias against out-groups. This obviously can encourage polarization of views about both groups. Indeed, systematic killing such as genocide, is found to be more related to social identity than to brain structures or processes or genetics (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). The case of Reserve Battalion 101 in Nazi Germany is an example of this. The battalion consisted of 500 middle-aged family men who had no prior military service and had not grown up with the Nazi ideology (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). In 1942, they were ordered to begin killing thousands of Jews. Leaders allowed anyone to quit the battalion who did not wish to follow orders. Only 12 of the men quit. In less than one year, they had murdered about 38,000 Jews (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). Experts who analyzed this case concluded that the butcherous behavior of these mild-mannered good citizens resulted from the factors of group pressure, conformity, and dehumanization of the Jews (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). Some neuroscientists believe that such violence connects a reorganization of many brain structures such as the orbitofrontal cortex and processes (such as hyperarousal) to obsessive ideation and ideological communication (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002).

Obsessive ideation, group dehumanization, desensitization to violence, extreme ideology, and discursive polarization appear to work together to encourage political conflict and violence. Some argue that this is a case where culture feeds biology which in turn reshapes behavior (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). Group killing thus results from the same brain circuits that

drive socialization (Quartz & Sejnowski, 2002). This should provide a striking rationale for finding more ways to depolarize heated political discourse.

Some views of digital democracy or pro-democracy political communication assume that alternative forms of political discourse are more likely to be found online than offline (Luke, 2006). Web sites like Global Internet Liberty Campaign (www.gilc.org) promote the argument that CMC allows or enables multinational communication which promotes freedom of speech and human rights (Luke, 2006). Some argue that the open source architecture of the Internet make it impossible for large corporate, government, or political interests to effectively block populist movements online (Luke, 2006). It is possible since CMC tends to be less bound to territorial (geographical) regulation than other forms of communication that transnational political communication is much easier to build online than offline. Still, as Luke (2006) notes, it is naïve to believe that high networking and connectivity assure any kind of cooperative multinational spheres. Luke (2006, p. 178) argues “On the Net, one finds points of coincidence, cooperation and configuration condensing into new modes of transnational cohabitation – separate and apart from existing maps of familiar behaviors.” Researchers will have to determine if online identities and communities formed around political topics will stabilize into communication spaces that allow the reinforcement of transnational political behavior.

The hopes that blogs like Riverbend may indicate micro-level processes of structuration toward more peaceful approaches to hot conflicts and more depolarization of discourse that needs more conciliation, may be very idealistic. One might even invoke the comment by systems theorist Gerald Weinberg discussing a First Law of Change that says “Cucumbers get pickled more than the brine gets cucumbered.” (Heterick, 1994, p. 16). The argument is that a subsystem may be more likely to get changed by the larger system than the other way around. However, the certainty of this is debatable and history as well as communication research provides evidence that micro-level social changes can generate larger and larger levels of change. Keane (2000) argues that micro-level processes of communication affect meso and macro levels.

Possible Structuration in the Riverbend Blog

Riverbend contrasts her ideal Iraq with the Iraq that actually exists. She expresses personal exasperation and links it to collective exhaustion of fellow Iraqis. She notes how powerful people do not understand the culture there and how the occupation contributed to what is called sectarian violence. Her writing provides a story that is told every few days and which allows people outside of Iraq to share her perceptions.

All collectives have a locale for operations that differs from the locales of other collectives (Giddens, 1979). CMC spaces such as blogs are more about what Giddens (1979, p.207) calls "social geography" than about physical geography and locales. With either type of geography, spatial dimensions are affecting the sustaining and reproducing processes of communication (Giddens, 1979). Within social geography, "regions" can be identified (Giddens, 1979). These can reinforce physical geography or they can challenge it. Regions are bounded areas where the process of creating boundaries sorts out various social behaviors. An example is a glass wall in a recording studio which blocks audio contact while allowing visual contact.

The ability to control spaces and regions is a form of political power (Giddens, 1979). One can exercise such control by manipulating what Goffman referred to as front and back regions (Giddens, 1979). The current controversy over what news about Iraq, good vs. bad, is legitimate news for Americans to pay attention to, is an example of political struggle over regions. Riverbend appears to open a window into Iraqi culture and the psychology of Iraqis as they respond to the chaos, uncertainties, violence, and stress in their everyday lives.

Since every instance of social reproduction also has the potential of influencing social change (Giddens, 1979), the very personal discourse of Riverbend has far more communication potential than simply self-expression or "bridging" one culture to another. Group identification, obviously important to political identity (van Dijk, 1998), is a process that is structural (Giddens, 1979). Social structures are related to other social structures and to larger social systems and institutions (Giddens, 1979). This suggests the storytelling of this one woman in Iraq, linked to thousands of visitors who read her story and most likely tell others about it, can generate certain structural processes that over time can link to larger social and collective communication. Riverbend may be appropriated as a discursive resource into discourse about Iraq that opposes current U.S. policy or she may be appropriated into an international system of discourse that rejects binary framing of the conflicts and war in Iraq.

The duality of structure between a blog and a social system can involve social structures in the blog that are physically distant from the social system but still affect and are affected by that social system. As a person who utters English in a casual conversation contributes to the reproduction of the English language, small daily behaviors can contribute to the reproduction of large social systems (Giddens, 1979).

Social reproduction involves the binding of time and space regarding high presence and availability of communicators (Giddens, 1979). With face-to-face communication, binding is clearly related to physical presence while this is less true with mediated communication such as writing (Giddens, 1979). Social analysis requires studying human phenomena over time. Social

change and time go together and even social stability requires the observation of continuity through time (Giddens, 1979). The linear nature of writing, which is obviously a feature in the discourse of blogs, allows a developing consciousness of social change and of moving from one point in history to another (Giddens, 1979). It is an interesting contribution of structuration theory that time and space are not treated as contextual factors but rather as central attributes of social behavior (Giddens, 1979). Giddens (1979) argues that writing extended social systems and social interaction out into time and space. We can see that CMC and blogs continue this extension as communication can become more distanced. Riverbend may be extending the discourse of Iraqi (some) citizens from the confines of physical geography into the discursive spaces created by CMC including her blog, blogs that cite her, her book, and the network of blogs and web sites that appropriate her discourse.

Political Structuration and Collective Securitization

As noted earlier, there are reasons to suspect that securitization can occur at multiple levels of discourse and communication and that one type of political discourse can be appropriated into another.

A structuralist view (from which a variety of structuralist theories are derived such as Adaptive Structuration Theory), rejects the view that social phenomena are always fluid or in process of change as assumed by symbolic interactionism and social constructivism and the view that stable actors are processing information in order to act as assumed by some psychological views. Instead, structurationists assume that human action results from some elements of stable personal nature and some elements of transformation and emergence (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985).

If there is a connection between the polarization or depolarization processes in political discourse, it should be observable in the structuration of such discourse. Norms are not static or simply present in CMC, but rather emerge just do rules and resources (social structures) through social practices (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). This suggests that whether or not CMC discourse is polarizing or depolarizing depends on the creativity and motivations of the participants in a particular CMC space. In CMC as in any communication space, participants can create new social arrangements, new terms, and new rules for how they interact. Once a pattern of production is begun, the direction will result from the reproduction or challenge of emerging rules and resources (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985).

Examples of reproduction of structures can be found in how words are used and in cases of where people detect social norms by observing the behaviors of others (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). From a structuralist view, social behavior results from structured practices

(Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). As opposed to structuralism, structurational views assume that guides to human action are time-bound rather than timeless (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). Thus, the meaning of any single behavior depends on its relationship to other behaviors. Because structuration unfolds with processes like repetition, reinforcement, and reproduction, there is hope in surmising that CMC can produce depolarized discourse if such discourse is repeatedly used, is reinforced by interactants, and reproduced over time. Reflexive monitoring is also important to this potential because goals, meanings, and plans change according to attempts to act within changing circumstances (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). Each individual is engaged in self-reflexive monitoring but also in rationalization or the attempt to make our actions appear rational in the contexts in which they occur (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). Giving an account for one's behaviors in this sense is not just giving reasons but rather is changing behavior while explaining it (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). This implies that continual deliberation in political CMC can encourage depolarization because each participant will be expected to account for their communication actions.

A structurational view of CMC assumes that a CMC group or community does not form and then start communicating. Instead, the assumption is that people begin communicating and their social interaction produces the group. It is also assumed that group norms are not objective entities but rather always the product of patterned social practices (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). As members of a group take positions on issues, they form roles for themselves as advocates of those views (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). Commitments emerge toward particular positions and those commitments begin to condition the process of structuration (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). Positions may be bolstered and degrees of freedom diminished (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). Various comments are mediated by communicators; the comments rarely stand alone without change by the discourse of others (Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985). Rather than this being seen as an overbearing process in CMC, it should be seen as an open system that becomes increasingly stable over time but which is always susceptible to challenge and change.

When considering depolarization effects of CMC we note that considering polarization and depolarization presumes a binary-construct; this indicates a primary focus on content. It may be helpful to separate form from content and look at each individually. While the content of a blog may influence reader's ideological opinions, a brief discussion about the medium of blogging may shed light upon combined effects. On the surface, blogs appear to be simply an electronic extension of the technology of writing in an electronic environment. As such, the

blogger presents what appears as a monologic argument supporting his/her ideology, at least on the surface.

Sunstein (2001) argues that the Internet will fragment society since users will seek out information that aligns with what they already believe. This view assumes the audience is self-censoring material and limiting their information gathering to reinforce their beliefs. This dystopian view assumes that the content an individual may encounter in their internet search is limited, monologic, and more polarizing than offline communication and use of traditional media. In fact, the narrowing of information in print and traditional media may not be augmenting abilities to engage meaningfully as fully informed citizens (Entman, 2004; McChesney, 2004). The underlying assumption that content, not the medium, influences polarization, trends us away from any discussion of media effects and presumes that the interactive nature of the Internet has a neutral effect on social structures. The internet in this scenario is most like a tool.

Social identity appears to influence what content users seek to meet their information needs (Hogg & Reid, 2006) but perfect agreement resulting in coalescence and ideological alignment and the individual nesting within an online ideology is, at best, a temporary phenomenon. Content of news sources and blogs are, like their offline counterparts, a mix of positions and interpretations of history representing different memory dimensions at cognitive levels (Edwards & Potter, 1995). Polarized ideologies attempt to establish and assert true versions of history. Contestations, whether face-to-face or in an electronic geography, occur as a result of conflicting interpretations about the meaning of events. These are contestations and conflicts about how to interpret history.

Polarizations are not necessarily fixed in a moral context, but occur as a process of affiliation-making within a cultural context; ideological poles are conceptual positions whose boundaries are fluid and multiple rather than pure. Conceiving of polarization as an artifact of an affiliation-communication process is important. For our purposes we are inclined to treat polarization as a dynamic oscillating process of social identity-building and collective affiliations; depolarization is its structural complement. To locate polarization within a system of meaning, the process must be coupled with a moral judgment, which engages memory and interpretation of events culturally (van Gorp, 2005). Sunstein (2001) also recognizes this when he gives examples of beneficial polarizations, including the civil rights movement. Polarizations appear to be conceived as binary-constructs, and as such culturally assert interpretations for rule formation and resource distribution (Giddens, 1984).

Group affiliation is related to agreement with socially constructed role prototypes (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Prototypes appear to be group constructions of standardized roles that represent

norms, define association, help interpret contexts, histories, and possible futures, and may be internalized for individual use. Prototypes become group resources that are intermingled with emotional value for the participant and may be used to justify individual action. These prototypes, or social categorizations, differentiate specific attributes and “generate stereotypical expectations and encourages stereotype-consistent interpretation(s) of ambiguous behaviors” (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 11). Group constructed prototypes appear to be tools that are both imagined standards for affiliation, and areas for differentiation and contestation. Prototypes appear to be group constructed metaphors consistent with culturally legitimated interpretations of history. Prototypes influence in-group behaviors, and polarize members away from perceived out-group others, in prescriptive ways that represent cognitive changes that occur in identity construction.

These identity building constructs are similar to those used in international relations and include (1) contrast, (2) fluidity, (3) multiplicity, and (4) social construction processes (Goff & Dunn, 2004). An individual may identify with multiple groups and utilize multiple prototypes for normative behaviors; multiple prototypes may be engaged sequentially or synchronously. Narrowing of group affiliation may occur when the members perceive threat to their values, norms, or definition (Hogg & Reid, 2006) that may prescribe certain actions to secure the group’s existence (Buzan, et al., 1998).

One useful way to conceptualize depolarization of political discourse is with the concept of participatory democracy theory (Rucinski, 1991). In this theory, individual actions stem from social relations and macro-level social structures are believe to emerge from micro-level social interactions Rucinski, 1991). This view of democracy sees reciprocity as essential to political deliberation. Reciprocity involves knowledge that is shared by communicators Rucinski, 1991). All of this involves conciliatory discourse in which differing perspectives are discussed to the extend that some areas of agreement emerge in the deliberation (Rucinski, 1991).

Polarization may be countered through the strategies of relationship building, maintaining an image of peaceful relations (even in the middle of hostilities), day-to-day cooperation, and equal-status contacts (Amir, 1969; Lederach, 1997; McEvoy, 2000; Pettigrew, 1998). These strategies are embodied in Gergen’s notion of “transformative dialogue” (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001). Using this approach, participants share personal perspectives and seek to avoid dichotomizing abstractions. This promotes coordination of meanings in the social interaction, with less commitment to strong interpretations.

Measuring the Dynamics of Polarization or Depolarization

It is argued here that any political discourse can fluctuate along the continuum of polarization and depolarization. We recognize that sometimes polarization is a positive form of political communication as with resistance to a dictator like Adolph Hitler. On the other hand, it is assumed here that peaceful negotiations between conflicting political entities cannot move toward conciliatory discourse or conflict resolution without movements in their discourse that move toward depolarization. To the extent that conflicting parties depolarize their discourse, they are increase their ability to manage their conflict.

While the recipe for depolarization proposed by Galtung et al. (2002) can be implemented through careful moderation of dialog, the mental nature of the polarization structure renders attempts to measure directly its undoing impossible. Successful depolarization endeavors therefore rely on the instincts and timing of the moderator. Due to the emotional nature of such proceedings, impressionistic management may be too brittle to ensure a stable environment where parties that wish to depolarize can find a mutually acceptable third-alternative understanding.

There appears to be little work in the CMC literature or political communication literature on methods for depolarizing political discourse. Rucinski (1991) argues the following formula as a way of operationalizing conciliatory discourse. Assuming R=reciprocity, PK=perspectives and underlying interests known, and

PA=perspectives and underlying interests available,

$$R = PK/PA.$$

Thus, reciprocity can be operationalized as the ratio of perspectives and underlying interests known to the perspectives and underlying interests available for all of the members in a discourse space (Rucinski, 1991). A discourse group with no reciprocity has members who cannot state any perspective other than their own. Negative reciprocity is believing perspectives are held by others than actually are not and positive reciprocity is the condition in which some members can articulate accurately the perspectives and underlying interests of those perspectives underlying interests of those perspectives held by others in the discourse space (Rucinski, 1991).

Noting again the continuum nature of polarization (low at one end and high at the other), we need caution in assuming any kind of polarization/depolarization dichotomy as a static phenomenon. Instead, polarization and depolarization should be viewed as directions. If discourse is moving toward low polarization, it is depolarizing. We can think of an analogy being deceleration as being a lowering of acceleration. If discourse is moving toward high polarization,

it is polarizing. Thus, depolarization, as refer to it, is not an end state or a state but rather a process and what one might call depolarized discourse might be low in polarization at one moment, but then higher (or even lower) at another.

We seek a more quantitative and dynamic method of measuring levels of polarization in political discourse. Such methods would accomplish a) the ability to quantify at any moment in time a level of polarization in CMC discourse, b) the ability to track and changes in levels of polarization of CMC discourse across time, and c) the ability to identify changes in polarization related to specific episodes of CMC discourse such as particular message interventions by moderators.

Esteban & Ray (1994) have laid out some groundwork for specific considerations relevant to the measurement of polarization, albeit more in an economics context than a political communication context. They assume that polarization occurs in a society when one group has members with attributes that are very close to each other but groups in the society have attributes that are very different from each other (Esteban & Ray, 1994). In other words, polarization involves high intra-group homogeneity and high inter-group heterogeneity. They argue that such polarization is closely related to social tensions (Esteban & Ray, 1994). Applying this conceptualization of polarity to CMC discourse, we can see that polarization and depolarization dynamics can refer to more than groups and are observable also in social/political identities, ideologies, and political viewpoints. We are thus dealing with attributes of various discourse types.

The issue of polarization is therefore not a matter of dichotomization as much as it is extremity of us vs. them thinking and speaking. In making this argument, we assume that the "them" of polarization can be multiple groups. This can be observed in the current political situation in involving competing sects in Iraq. With three sectarian groups vying for power, each in-group tends to polarize its discourse against the other two sects. Regardless of the number of groups, increased polarization indicates greater us vs. them discourse.

Esteban & Ray (1994) argue that political conflict likelihood is increased with a two-spike distribution along the political spectrum. A more uniform distribution of political views is an indication of less polarization (Esteban & Ray, 1994). Political polarization is likely to involve increasing spiking, less uniform distribution, and increases in populations for the most spiking views along the continuum (Esteban & Ray, 1994). From the above discussion, we see the polarization has at least the following characteristics:

1. homogeneity in the in-group with simultaneous heterogeneity between the in-group and out-groups.

2. increasing degree of polarization with increased distance between in-group and out-group views.
3. increased polarization with increased membership of in-group and out-groups.
4. decreased polarization (depolarization) with increased uniformity of viewpoint distribution.
5. decreased polarization with decreased membership in the more polarized positions.

One means of testing depolarization strategies is to apply the propositions from above in empirical tests of CMC discourse. For example, a third or fourth view that attracts more and more members may help to depolarize some of the other groups or views. This could be as simple as a "middle" view among two opposing views. If a middle view becomes just another polarizing group, it may be possible to try a more dispersing strategy. Because communication and related processes like cognition are dynamic and not static, we should expect levels of polarization to change as discourse moves forward in time.

It is possible to describe methods to study depolarization interventions. As with all communication processes, the mental must imprint itself on the physical world in order to transfer messages to another party. In CMC this imprint is readily apparent through the electronic records of the communication, both textual and voice based. If one is to study a moderated discussion for evidence of depolarization, naturally, he participants must agree to have their dialog recorded. However, merely capturing the dialogic content may not be enough to determine how efforts at depolarization may be progressing.

Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) is a technique that elucidates the underlying statistical association structure in corpora of text (Landauer, Foltz, & Laham, 1998). Such corpora are typically composed of hundreds of text units of at least a paragraph's length. For convenience, such individual texts are referred to as documents even though they may in fact be smaller partitions of larger documents (Landauer et al., 1998). A vocabulary list for each of these documents is assembled. Using this list as a column indexing set, and using the documents themselves as a row indexing set, a matrix, A , of term-document co-occurrences is created. The entries of A are then transformed with an information theoretic filter that reduces the significance of purely functional terms such as articles and conjunctions. This yields another matrix which shall be called B . B is then factored using Singular Value Decomposition (SVD) and all but 300-400 of the top singular values are dropped (Landauer et al., 1998).

The usage of the factors is determined by the task for which LSA was performed. The first widely accepted use of LSA was as a document indexing algorithm. The latent associational structure of the texts being indexed allowed the term "doctor" to retrieve medical texts even

though certain examples of such texts used the word physician exclusively. (Deerwester, Dumais, Furnas, Landauer & Harshman, 1990). Thus, it became clear that in a corpus that included medical documents “doctor” and “physician” had a latent statistical association owing to their common medical contexts. That is, they could be deemed to be statistical synonyms as far as the indexing process was concerned.

The statistical synonyms can be computed without explicit reference to the document set by assigning 300-400 dimensional vector coordinates to each term. This is done simply by multiplying the matrix corresponding to the reduced singular value set with the orthonormal factor representing the column space of the matrix B (see Weaver, 2005 for a technical description). The similarity between terms can be computed as the cosine between the vectors assigned to them. Statistical synonymy is asserted when this similarity measure exceeds some threshold. 0.5 has proven to be useful as this threshold for a number of corpora. That is for a given term, all terms within 60 degrees of that term in the 349 dimensional sphere (assuming a 350 dimensional Latent Semantic Space) are counted as its synonyms in a folk sense. Nevertheless, the corpus under regard should guide the selection of this threshold.

Since these statistical synonyms are asserted based on their common context, antonyms are often found to be statistically synonymous. This is because they are necessary to define each other. For example, “good” is “not bad”, and “bad” is “not good.” The negation particle “not” only adds to their common context. Consequently, the statistical synonymy cannot be used as the antithesis of antonymy. Rather, it should be used to show that two terms have a common context and thus mutually define each other even though they may be generally recognized as antonyms.

This statistical definition of synonymy, while not precise in the linguistic sense, provides a way to illustrate the manner in which the text corpus frames certain topics. Entman (2004, p. 5) describes media framing as: “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.” Scheufele (1999) demonstrates how this concept applies to social contexts other than mass media through its roots in prospect theory. Kintsch (1998) describes how to use LSA to turn a mental concept such as a frame in the Entman sense into a network of terms that define each other mutually. For the purposes of the method we are arguing, it is sufficient to assert that the statistical synonyms of a given named topic are the pieces of evidence of the framing of that topic. While this approach can only give evidence of the mental process involved in framing, facets of a particular topic must be used frequently in a common context with that topic in order to frame it.

Moreover, if a dialog moderator wishes to see evidence of positive progress toward a desired depolarization, the moderator must find evidence of the restructuring of the group constituted by the disputing parties. Following Giddens' model (1984), the rules and roles that guide the members of disputing factions must evolve so that the in-group/out-group distinctions are attenuated. Therefore, moderators must show evidence of disputing parties reframing each other as in-group respectively. Furthermore, the ways in which the disputing factions frame each other must be shown to be trending towards more humanizing language; referents to members of the other group must turn from objects or animals to more personal appellations. (Gergen *et al.* 2001)

There are a few shortcomings for this method of measuring how social interaction is related to the dynamics of polarization and depolarization. There are as yet no published reports of using this method for the study of political communication framing and dynamics of discourse within CMC contexts. Nevertheless, this type of metrical understanding may help moderators in CMC dialogues that attempt to encourage depolarization may be better able to tune his or her efforts deflate the mutual alteritization of the disputing parties and focus the framing of each other respectively on humanizing language and arguments. He or she will still have to rely on instinct to guide the particulars of the discussion, but this technique gives him or her surer numerical way to track progress.

Discussion and Conclusions

Political polarization and violence are related to the social processes by which the "other" side becomes rhetorically associated with moral issues and thereby mobilizes social and political action (Coe, et al., 2004; McCulloh, 2006). Additionally, polarization may occur with political leaders developing a unified foe but drawing from a heterogeneous audience with multiple binary constructs that complements other prototypes they project about the same set of issues (Coe, et al. 2004). As we have tried to explain, however, the binary nature of us vs. them thinking and speaking does not translate into a polarization/depolarization dichotomy. Instead, we have argued that polarization is a continuous variable rather than a discrete one.

In this paper, we have explored the potential of political blogs to provide discourse which contributes to uses of CMC for depolarizing political discourse. We can now argue some necessary conditions for using CMC as a means of depolarizing political discourse:

1. increasing social pressure toward depolarizing the discourse.
2. creation and reproduction of new positive structures.

3. expansion of the positive social structures into networks of depolarized discourse.

We have attempted to formulate an argument here which says the CMC can effectively be used for depolarization of extreme political discourse by a commitment to certain necessary conditions. First we see that CMC genres like blogs provide spaces for securitization discourse that might not be found in traditional mass media and older CMC genres like Web sites. Second, the dynamics of social positioning that may occur in a single blog can provide discourse and positioning strategies that can act as structural resources for other blogs and other sites of political communication.

The history of CMC research has included a movement away from technological determinism and an increasing recognition of the enabling functions of CMC technologies and systems. We hope to have presented a case for using CMC for depolarization of discourse that does not rely on any deterministic assumptions about technology, social norms, culture, or social interaction. We have taken a structurationist view of CMC and therefore recognize as do other more subscribers to technological realism, that the impacts of new communication technologies are found in the social practices and uses of CMC and patterns or changes which result from CMC usage over time.

Social identity theory presents a strong explanatory framework for understanding the collective force of CMC spaces, particularly with anonymous interactors. This is clearly explained by the SIDE model. However, we know that the social norms which may work with the deindividuation process described by the SIDE model and by Social Identity Theory are not unchangeable. Moreover, social norms can be generated toward peace and cooperation as much as they can be created for uncooperative communication and behavior. Therefore, we argue that CMC can aid depolarization through the formation of depolarizing norms, the generation of cooperative feedback loops, and the structuration of pro-cooperation social structures which can affect other social structures and larger social systems.

We argue that blogs provide only one input into an increasing space of CMC tools for promoting cooperative feedback structures. For example, the virtual world environments of massively multi-player on-line games (MMO) such as Linden Laboratory's "Second Life" has already inspired initiatives to integrate gaming with real-life interaction to create the conditions for furthering positive political discourse of contentious issues (see Peacemaker, the winner of a peacemaking MMO competition run by the USC Center for Public Diplomacy, www.publicdiplomacywatch.com/2006/05/peacemaker_wins_uscs_public_di.html). Initiatives like this potentially solve the problem of propagating bottom-up a citizenry familiar with multiple perspectives on the pervasive and "wicked" political issues of territory and resources that have

traditionally led to conflict, polarized positions and war. In such CMC environments, a person might participate in the lived experience of Riverbend as she tells it on her blog. Meanwhile, a person may receive the RSS feeds of other blogging or reporting on the same events, and might even play the insurgents or authorities whose actions are causing Riverbend grief.

Armed with these emotionally instructive, and international extended experiences, we might expect latent structuration in a population through continual exposure with cross-cultural political experience. These latent structures may then be ripe for activation by events to implement coordinated grass-roots influence of existing political structures. By recruiting individuals in these structures, new system may be structured as adaptive forms of deliberation and communication that aid the human security needs of the twenty-first century.

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Appendix A: Post of Friday, May 07, 2004

Just Go...

People are seething with anger- the pictures of Abu Ghraib and the Brits in Basrah are everywhere. Every newspaper you pick up in Baghdad has pictures of some American or British atrocity or another. It's like a nightmare that has come to life. (Para. 1)

Everyone knew this was happening in Abu Ghraib and other places... seeing the pictures simply made it all more real and tangible somehow. American and British politicians have the audacity to come on television with words like, "True the people in Abu Ghraib are criminals, but..." Everyone here in Iraq knows that there are thousands of innocent people detained. Some were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, while others were detained 'under suspicion'. In the New Iraq, it's "guilty until proven innocent by some miracle of God". (Para. 2)

People are so angry. There's no way to explain the reactions- even pro-occupation Iraqis find themselves silenced by this latest horror. I can't explain how people feel- or even how I personally feel. Somehow, pictures of dead Iraqis are easier to bear than this grotesque show of American military technique. People would rather be dead than sexually abused and degraded by the animals running Abu Ghraib prison. (Para. 3)

There was a time when people here felt sorry for the troops. No matter what one's attitude was towards the occupation, there were moments of pity towards the troops, regardless of their nationality. We would see them suffering the Iraqi sun, obviously wishing they were somewhere else and somehow, that vulnerability made them seem less monstrous and more human. That time has passed. People look at troops now and see the pictures of Abu Ghraib... and we burn with shame and anger and frustration at not being able to do something. Now that the world knows that the torture has been going on since the very beginning, do people finally understand what happened in Falloojeh? (Para. 4)

I'm avoiding the internet because it feels like the pictures are somehow available on every site I visit. I'm torn between wishing they weren't there and feeling, somehow, that it's important that the whole world sees them. The thing, I guess, that bothers me most is that the children can see it all. How do you explain the face of the American soldier, leering over the faceless, naked bodies to a child? How do you explain the sick, twisted minds? How do you explain what is happening to a seven-year-old? (Para. 5)

There have been demonstrations in Baghdad and other places. There was a large demonstration outside of the Abu Ghraib prison itself. The families of some of the inmates of the prison were out there protesting the detentions and the atrocities... faces streaked with tears of rage and brows furrowed with anxiety. Each and every one of those people was wondering what their loved ones had suffered inside the walls of the hell that makes Guantanamo look like a health spa. (Para. 6)

And through all this, Bush gives his repulsive speeches. He makes an appearance on Arabic tv channels looking sheepish and attempting to look sincere, babbling on about how this 'incident' wasn't representative of the American people or even the army, regardless of the fact that it's been going on for so long. He asks Iraqis to not let these pictures reflect on their attitude towards the American people... and yet when the bodies were dragged through the streets of Falloojeh, the American troops took it upon themselves to punish the whole city. (Para. 7)

[He's claiming it's a "stain on our country's honor"... I think not.](#) The stain on your country's honor, Bush dear, was the one on the infamous blue dress that made headlines while Clinton was in the White House... this isn't a 'stain' this is a catastrophe. Your credibility was gone the moment you stepped into Iraq and couldn't find the WMD... your reputation never existed. (Para. 8)

So are the atrocities being committed in Abu Ghraib really not characteristic of the American army? What about the atrocities committed by Americans in Guantanamo? And Afghanistan? I won't bother bringing up the sordid past, let's just focus on the present. It seems that torture and humiliation are common techniques used in countries blessed with the American presence. The most pathetic excuse I heard so far was that the American troops weren't taught the fundamentals of human rights mentioned in the Geneva Convention... Right- morals, values and compassion have to be taught. (Para. 9)

All I can think about is the universal outrage when the former government showed pictures of American POWs on television, looking frightened and unsure about their fate. I remember the outcries from American citizens, claiming that Iraqis were animals for showing 'America's finest' fully clothed and unharmed. So what does this make Americans now? (Para. 10)

We heard about it all... we heard stories since the very beginning of the occupation about prisoners being made to sit for several hours on their knees... being deprived of sleep for days at a time by being splashed with cold water or kicked or slapped... about the infamous 'red rooms' where prisoners are kept for prolonged periods of time... about the rape, the degradations, the emotional and physical torture... and there were moments when I actually wanted to believe that what we heard was exaggerated. I realize now that it was only a small fragment of the truth. There is nothing that is going to make this 'better'. Nothing. (Para. 11)

Through all of this, where is the Governing Council? Under what rock are the Puppets hiding? Why is no one condemning this? What does Bremer have to say for himself and for the Americans? Why this unbearable silence? (Para. 12)

I don't understand the 'shock' Americans claim to feel at the lurid pictures. You've seen the troops break down doors and terrify women and children... curse, scream, push, pull and throw people to the ground with a boot over their head. You've seen troops shoot civilians in cold blood. You've seen them bomb cities and towns. You've seen them burn cars and humans using tanks and helicopters. Is this latest debacle so very shocking or appalling? (Para. 13)

The number of killings in the south has also risen. The Americans and British are saying that they are 'insurgents' and people who are a part of Al-Sadir's militia, but people from Najaf are claiming that innocent civilians are being killed on a daily basis. Today the troops entered Najaf and there was fighting in the streets. This is going to cause a commotion because Najaf is considered a holy city and is especially valuable to Shi'a all over the world. The current situation in the south makes one wonder who, now, is going to implement a no-fly zone over areas like Falloojeh and Najaf to 'protect' the people this time around? (Para. 14)

I sometimes get emails asking me to propose solutions or make suggestions. Fine. Today's lesson: don't rape, don't torture, don't kill and get out while you can- while it still looks like you have a choice... Chaos? Civil war? Bloodshed? We'll take our chances- just take your Puppets, your tanks, your smart weapons, your dumb politicians, your lies, your empty promises, your rapists, your sadistic torturers and go. (Para. 15)
