

**Sarah Palin Likes This:
Discussion of the 'Death Panel' Note in Social Media**

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Presented at the annual conference of the
Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research

November 20, 2010 • Chicago, IL

Abstract

Scholars and pundits have long been fascinated by the potential of new media to open communication pathways that route around existing gatekeeping structures. In particular, the notion that the traditional press model can be evaded by organizations and individuals publishing via the Internet is a central concern of much research on blogs (e.g., Singer, 2005) and other types of online content, including social networking sites (Livingstone, 2008).

Prominent figures in these new contexts communicate with their audiences in ways that are functionally similar to the communication between traditional news sources and their audiences, suggesting that they can be understood using existing communication theories. Because political actors, new news sources and the traditional press are both interdependent and competitive, one such theory that may be particularly helpful in understanding their relationships is agenda-setting. Scholars traditionally imagine agendas passing from the press to the public, but the ability of new actors to enter the conversation suggests a more complicated model. Specifically, it raises questions about the ability of political actors to set agendas, and about how agenda-setting might occur differently between traditional and non-traditional news sources.

To begin exploring these relationships, this study focuses on blog discussion of Sarah Palin’s Facebook note introducing the term “death panel” to the then-ongoing health insurance reform debate (Palin, 2009). Linkages are examined within the blogosphere, and between blogs and the Facebook note. Additionally, content is examined to determine to what extent the “death panel” concept is connected to Palin herself and how they eventually become conceptually separated. Among the findings is a

pattern of hub interconnectivity in the blogosphere. Contrary to research showing little connection between liberal and conservative blogs, these hubs suggest that many liberal blogs engage with Palin’s claims, but uniquely do so by featuring links to frames provided by liberal hub blogs.

In the development of the new media ecosystem, change has been a constant, both in terms of technology and practice. The arc of technological development that made blogging possible in the late 1990s subsequently drew a path toward the content management systems now used by most large-scale web publishers. Likewise, the social development of blogging practice has grown from amateur-driven journaling (Blood, 2002) to become a professional-led, routinized part of the mass media. Though hundreds of millions of blogs exist, a small minority get the bulk of the traffic and attention (Blood, 2002), as traditional news organizations incorporate bloggers into their cadre of sources and contributors.

The increasingly large role of blogs in political communication is part of a broader growth trend in opinion and analysis content across media. Analyzing the blogosphere from this perspective, scholars have frequently found that political blogs and the networks they create tend to be ideologically insular (Adamic & Glance, 2005), with heavy in-ideology linking (i.e., liberal-to-liberal or conservative-to-conservative) but little cross-ideology linking (i.e., liberal-to-conservative or vice versa). While there is some evidence to suggest that ideological reinforcement in blogs promotes political participation among readers (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010; Veenstra, Sayre, & Thorson, 2008), this lack of cross-cutting linking in the blogosphere is often taken as evidence that the two sides do not talk to or engage with each other. If there is discussion in the blogosphere, it is suggested, it occurs within two disconnected echo chambers that use links as a reputational currency. However, if it is unclear that the simple linking metric is enough to make this determination, particularly as new media have been adopted by such traditional communicators as print and broadcast news organizations and

political figures. A cursory reading of blogs across the ideological spectrum suggests a significant overlap in the agendas of liberal blogs, conservative blogs, traditional media and political elites, and an awareness of the views and concerns held by a variety of discussants. As such, this paper seeks to explore ways that information and opinion may move between ideologically divergent points in the new media information network, particularly related to the agenda-building and agenda-setting concerns of political elites.

THE “DEATH PANEL” NOTE

To do this, we conducted a case study of blog discussion of the note entitled “Statement on the Current Health Care Debate” that Sarah Palin posted on Facebook on August 7, 2009, which infamously suggested that the then-pending health care reform bill would create a “death panel” that would decide the fate of elderly or infirm patients (Palin, 2009). Palin’s note followed at least three July 2009 attempts by Republican politicians to suggest that the bill had a provision that would require senior citizens be told “how to end their lives sooner” or would create “a more permissive environment for euthanasia” (“The Evolution Of The Death Panel Meme,” 2009). The claim made in Palin’s note, focusing specifically on her Downs syndrome-afflicted son, was the first of these claims to attract significant public attention, and was supported or affirmed by numerous Republican politicians in subsequent weeks and months.

This note and the reaction to it provide a case that is attractive for both methodological and theoretical reasons. First, in using the unique phrase, “death panel,” Palin kicked off a discussion that is very easy to track. In both the Lexis-Nexis archive of news content and the BlogPulse blog search engine, the phrase does not appear at any time before Palin’s note, suggesting that all content that includes the phrase relates to the

note or the ideas presented in it. Second, by succeeding where previous opponents of health care reform had failed to focus attention on the euthanasia charge, Palin’s note potentially provides insight into how social media can be used by political elites to build agendas, and what role new media sources, such as blogs, can play in setting agendas both for their peers and for traditional news outlets. We begin our study of this episode by examining existing theory regarding agendas and the nature of information-flow in the blogosphere.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda-building and agenda-setting. While early research on agenda-setting focused on the power of the press to make particular issues salient in the minds of the audience, some aspects of the process are not illuminated by simply examining the news and public agendas. Broadly, the process of agenda-building has been identified as the way in which agendas are created, prior to being transmitted to and potentially picked up by the public. At its most basic, this process involves the introduction of issues into the news agenda (Lang & Lang, 1981). New issues (or new approaches to existing issues) may arise from a number of sources, including real world events and news sources, such as politicians. Traditionally, political and governmental figures have introduced issues to the news agenda through an information-subsidizing process (Gandy, 1982). That is, by releasing statements to the press, or by making themselves available for expert analysis, these figures make the process of newsgathering on a particular issue simpler and more attractive. In the process, they may also present journalists with their preferred frame for the issue. In the context of a political campaign, this information subsidy may also come in the form of campaign communication with the public, as in Ronald Reagan’s 1980

campaign to “get the government off our backs” (ibid). Because campaign information is highly salient for the press, the themes and issues present in it are easily transmitted into the news agenda.

Journalists may also pick up new issues from other media, including those that rest outside the traditional boundaries of “news.” The concept of intermedia agenda-setting is the extension of classical agenda-setting theory, which was initially introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Over the past four decades, beyond the original hypothesis that media agenda may influence public agenda, scholars shifted their focus to understand what shapes the media’s agenda. Intermedia agenda-setting, which Breen (1997) defined as the concept of “how the media set their own agenda for news” (p. 354), has been the site of academic enquiry since the late 1980s (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

The influence of newspapers on other newspapers was established by Breed (1955), who found that larger newspapers have impact on the smaller newspapers and take the role of “opinion leaders” (p. 279). He additionally pointed to the possible influence of wire services in the news selection, which was described by Gieber (1956) as “being caught in a straight jacket of mechanical details” (p. 432). Tuchman (1978) and Fishman (1980) both stressed that competing reporters do not only read each other’s work, but also work together and socialize at news events. In addition, Whitney and Becker (1982) verified that the correlation between wire and newspaper-television agendas is not based on a shared set of news values among wire and newspaper-television editors, but on the uncritical acceptance of routinely transmitted news categories.

Media agenda also flow among different media channels. Shaw and his colleagues (1997) report that newspapers have a major agenda-setting role on political issues while TV playing a lesser role. Newspapers tend to influence the broadcast agenda more than the reverse, and television frequently repeats newspaper stories. Therefore, elite newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* work as the most influential agenda-setters, not only to local newspaper or local television (Protest & McCombs, 1991), but also over international news agenda (Golan, 2006).

One driver of intermedia agenda setting is that other media provide a cue to the real world that is impossible to observe directly: "News people operate in a special kind of environment, without much contact with their audience members. So they take their clues about an issue's priority from other media" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Second, other media's decision to cover a news event and consider it to be newsworthy indirectly validates the first medium's initial decision. Thus, intermedia agenda setting provides a double-check mechanism that reinforces a common definition of what is news and what is not. A third reason for intermedia agenda setting is the competitive setting of most media markets. Media observe competitors' behavior and emulate them as soon as it is clear that to do so is a competitive advantage.

More recently, media scholars expanded their investigation of the intermedia agenda setting process on the Internet. Scholars have linked Internet usage (Wanta & Cho, 2004) as well as the nature of the online medium itself (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002) as factors that may shape or influence the agenda-setting process. Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo (2002) investigated the transfer of salience from online media coverage to electronic bulletin board discussion. They found that online news media content has set

the discussion topics on the electronic bulletin boards. Participants used information learned from the media to elaborate on the topics discussed in the online political forums. And the time lag of the agendas ranges from 1 to 7 days. Wanta and Cho (2004) found that Internet use can both inhibit and enhance agenda-setting effects. Those who go online for longer periods may be self-selecting exposure to issues, therefore inhibiting the salience of the media agenda. Conversely, those who go online motivated by information seeking are likely going to websites that are reinforce the media agenda, thus enhancing the agenda-setting effect. Ku, Kaid, and Pfau (2003) measured the transfer of issue salience from candidate websites during the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign and the voters’ issue agenda saliency, and found that candidate websites have great potential for an agenda setting effect on potential voters.

Blogs have played an active role in political communication, especially in covering presidential campaign and election. The power of blogs as agenda setters, works best when they influence news events as a collective by creating a buzz: “Even if many individual blogs have just a few hundred regular readers, collectively the blogosphere can generate a louder ‘buzz.’ [...] Though individual link choices, this collective bestows upon a select few the ‘power of authority.’” (Tremayne, 2007, p. xvi)

However, few blogs have agenda-setting power on the traditional media, and these blogs are called “filter blogs” (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). These sites serve as “focal points” that bring attention to interesting posts of less renowned blogs. Bucy and his colleagues (2007) pointed out that filter blogs “often amplify, illuminate, or interconnect the news rather than create it” (p. 150). Drezner and Farrell (2004) also found that traditional news media journalists tend to concentrate on the same filter blogs. Through

these filter blogs, it becomes easier and less time consuming for journalists to survey the blogosphere on a daily basis. Haas (2005) argued that these filter blogs take on an opinion leader and agenda-setting role within the blogosphere similar to the one that *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the television networks play within the traditional news media.

Recently, media scholars have paid more attention to the transfer of the issue salience between blogs and traditional media. A report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project traced the buzz on filter blogs during the 2004 presidential campaign and compared it with the buzz in the traditional news media, campaign statements, and Internet forums (Cornfield, Carson, Kalis, & Simon, 2005). The researchers found that blogs had difficulties influencing other media when there was no advancement of the stories, such as the results of an investigation. Zeller (2005) stressed that blogs are most likely to influence the traditional media, if they can present a “smoking gun” or advance the content of a news story. The spread of Sarah Palin’s “death panel” from social media and blogs to the traditional news agenda could make a productive comparison with the results of previous research.

Political blog networks. Networking primarily through linking is a unique feature of blogs as compared to traditional media (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Lin, Halavais, & Zhang, 2007; McKenna, 2007; Schmidt, 2007). Two link forms operate in the networked blogosphere structure. First, most blogs include logrolls in the sidebar that link to the URLs of some online sources. Second, posts in the blogs also involve links to outside information sources, which are more likely to be initial posts instead of URLs (Drezner & Farrell, 2008). Networking drives blog traffic (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Hargittai, Gallo,

& Kane, 2008; McKenna, 2007), and creates a common agenda on which conversations and debates within the network concentrate (McKenna, 2007).

Linking model among political blogs demonstrates a homogeneous interaction between like-minded bloggers. While linking provides bloggers more chances to connect to cross-ideology blogs (Wallsten, 2008), liberal bloggers instead are more likely to connect to liberals and conservatives to conservative blogs (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hargittai, et al., 2008; Kenix, 2009). Actually, political bloggers are reluctant to link to unfavorable information inconsistent with their original positions or attitudes (Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010). They point to other ideology-matching blogs as validating-information providers to buttress their own claims or interpretations (Wall, 2005). Clustered together, liberal and conservative bloggers allocate most spaces across their blogs to communicate with members within their own ideological networks. This is unsurprising considering that political bloggers are political-agenda pursuers (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005). They view blogging as an efficient outlet for making unique statements toward critical issues (Ekdale, et al., 2010; McKenna, 2007), or a battleground for championing their own rather than their opponents’ causes (Wallsten, 2008). With the blog’s popularity rank increasing, its likelihood of hyperlinking to an opposite-minded blog reversely decreases (Kenix, 2009). That said, political blogs, especially heavy-traffic ones, bond the like-minded bloggers and construct such networks facilitating sharing and forming uniform opinions, instead of bridging the interaction between the opposite hemispheres. The skewed interaction distribution between like-minded bloggers creates concerns that political blogs further fragment the current media landscapes by nursing

political blogs echo chambers (Gilbert, Bergstrom, & Karahalios, 2009; Johnson, Bichard, & Zhang, 2009).

Furthermore, political blogs are more likely to interact with few highly ranked blogs within the hemisphere, while the majority of medium-to-low ranked blogs are only scarcely connected (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Hargittai, et al., 2008). This results in some initially disproportionately heavy-traffic blogs getting even richer in traffic overtime. Cluster analysis also reveals that the largest blog clusters connect most other blogs and are positioned in the center of the network, with their nodes being more likely to be linked by both subset blogs and opponents’ blogs (Hargittai, et al., 2008; Lin, et al., 2007). This skewed distribution of within-sphere linking demonstrates that political blogs mainly communicate with some “A-list” blogs within the same hemisphere. These heavily linked blogs are the “hubs” of other blogs and serve as an information aggregator for the whole blogosphere (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Perlmutter, 2008). Their central position in the blogging network makes other blogs cross less steps to access them and thus provides those political blogs greater chances to influence other blogs’ practices (Schmidt, 2007).

The within-hemisphere link model, nevertheless, does not predict that there is no cross-ideological communication between liberal and conservative blogs. As a matter of fact, linking out to opponents’ blogs is also a routine operation in the blogosphere. A content analysis of 40 top political blogs, for instance, reveals that 16% outbound links from liberal bridge conservative bloggers while 12% of outbound links of conservative point to liberal blogs (Hargittai, et al., 2008). The content of the cross-ideological links in the political blogosphere include four categories: straw-man argument, disagreement on

substance, neutral non-political, redirect, and agreement on substance. Among the cross-linking, strawman arguments, which link other side’s blogs for revealing the opponent’s “obvious” deficiency without elaborating the standpoint, account for half. Redirection post serves as source of another blog the reader can transfer to from the current blogger’s post (Hargittai, et al., 2008). This suggests that in most cases, cross-linking to opponent’s blogs provide information for attack or to verify the merits of the current blog’s standpoints. These political blogs mingle critiquing opponents with letting off steam (Ekdale, et al., 2010).

Although the political blogosphere is fractured into two loose conservative and liberal hemispheres, both hemispheres address the same issues. Apart from some blogs exclusively concentrating on some single policies (McKenna, 2007), most political blogs sustain the mission of informing the public of a wide-ranging assortment of political or social issues (Bichard, 2006; Ekdale, et al., 2010; McKenna, 2007; Wallsten, 2008). Issues covered by them often mutually parallel or mirror the agenda of mainstream media (Kenix, 2009; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; McKenna, 2007). These media serve as the blogs’ stable link sources (McKenna & Pole, 2008) and expose the blogs with diverse goals to the same agenda. That conservative and liberal blogs frequently link to each other (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hargittai, et al., 2008) also demonstrates that both ideological hemispheres battle for legitimacy on the same issues. On the other hand, political blogs also attempt to explore different perspectives of and alternative solutions to these issues (Ekdale, et al., 2010; Kenix, 2009). Liberal websites favor information harmful to Republicans or helpful to Democrats, while conservative websites feature information that is contrary to Democrats in the same way (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Political blogs

also choose to frame the same issue reflecting their own party’s preferences (Bichard, 2006). For example, pro-war bloggers during the second Gulf War addressed the war’s anti-terrorism theme and were more likely to link to sources supporting the invasion, while anti-blogs did not employ these frames (Wall, 2005). It is obvious that both hemispheres discuss the same topics, but they also explore the same issue from different perspectives, selectively link to different sources, and frame the arguments consistent with initial political ideologies and dispositions.

In short, political blogs cluster together and build inter-communication networks through linking to each other. During the communication, conservative blogs are more likely to connect to other conservative ones, liberal blogs opting to contact liberal ones. In the case of cross-ideological discussion, the linked content mostly serves as an agenda for further discussion or debate. Skewed distribution of links among the networks also finds within the same hemisphere that some “elite” blogs not only dominate in the network growth with more incoming and outgoing links but also illustrate the principle of the “rich” getting “richer.”

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was prompted by two main, related observations. First, the Internet – and social networking tools, in particular – seems to have changed the rules regarding the development and nurturing of news agendas. Individuals who were previously subject to the gatekeeping decisions of the press, such as politicians, now have ready and direct access to the public, as well as significant partisan allies in the new media. This may help to create a different kind of pressure on the press agenda than was previously felt, and may create coverage in which the individual proponent also becomes part of the agenda.

Second, the political blogosphere in general appears to have more cross-discussion and a more broadly shared agenda than most existing literature on networking behavior would suggest. That is, the liberal and conservative blogospheres seem as if they must have more extensive relationships than is manifest in many linking studies – potentially indirect relationships that are only revealed in more extensive examinations of blog link networks.

To examine these two phenomena, we undertake an exploratory study of the blog response to Sarah Palin’s “death panel” Facebook note. Our exploration consists of three broad research questions:

RQ1. How and when does discussion of the “death panel” concept detach from discussion of Palin herself?

RQ2. How do supporters and opponents link to and discuss the content of the note? Do they link directly or use hub blogs?

RQ3. Do supporters and opponents link to the note differently? Do they establish different conceptual connections to “death panels”?

METHODS

This study uses data from content analysis of an archive of blog posts gathered via BlogPulse’s Conversation Tracker, which includes all blog posts from August 7, 2009 (the date of Palin’s initial post) to November 17, 2009 (the day before the release of Palin’s book, *Going Rogue*) that mention the term “death panel,” as well as two subsequent levels of posts linking up to those originals. The November 17 cut-off date was chosen because the book’s release was the next major appearance of Palin as a focus of the mass media and seemed likely to alter the way she was discussed in blogs and

traditional news. In the fall of 2010, two coders analyzed a total of 820 posts for several variables: whether the post was a first-level “death panel” discussion point or a second- or third-level follow-on; whether the blogger clearly supported, opposed or was neutral toward Palin’s claim; whether the post linked directly to Palin’s Facebook note; whether the post linked to another site as a source for the original “death panel” claim, and what that linked site was; and whether the post used the term “death panel” but didn’t link to any explanatory source. Within this post archive, 118 posts were deleted or otherwise inaccessible, yielding a usable sample of 702 posts.

Additionally, post titles and text were archived for further computer-aided content analysis using VBPro (Miller, 1993). This analysis was conducted to identify the presence or absence of a number of concepts within each post: death panel, Sarah Palin, Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi, health care reform, the tea party movement, lying, Palin’s book and Obama’s address to Congress on September 9. (See Appendix 1 for a full list of search terms for each concept.) The resulting data were merged with the human coding data to allow for between-group analysis across different kinds of blog posts.

RESULTS

This study is largely exploratory, conducted in the service of better understanding how political ideas flow from node to node within an information network and from one point in time to another through the agendas of various political media. We’re additionally interested in how discussion about the controversy changes during that process. As such, our data analysis begins with a simple examination of how strongly related the “death panel” concept is to the “Sarah Palin” concept. First, we count the total number of posts mentioning the two concepts throughout the period of our sample. The

two post counts can be seen in Figure 1. The graph of the two post counts suggests an important mid-point in the sampled period, occurring on September 9 (day 33 of our sample). This was the date on which President Obama gave a televised address to Congress on the subject of health care. To more specifically analyze the relationship between the concepts, bivariate correlations were calculated to two eras within our time sample – before and after President Obama’s address. In these tests, the unit of analysis is the day for which we count posts.

In the first era ($N = 33$), the two concepts¹ are strongly related, being correlated at $r = .79$ ($p < .001$). In the second era ($N = 80$), they remain related, but at a much weaker level, $r = .38$ ($p < .05$). To provide some context for these findings, we also test correlations between the death panel concept and several others: Barack Obama ($r_1 = .83$, $p < .001$; $r_2 = .90$, $p < .001$), Nancy Pelosi ($r_1 = .62$, $p < .001$; $r_2 = .17$, n.s.), health care reform ($r_1 = .94$, $p < .001$; $r_2 = .86$, $p < .001$), lying ($r_1 = .80$, $p < .001$; $r_2 = .67$, $p < .001$), and the tea party movement ($r_1 = .02$, n.s.; $r_2 = -.10$, n.s.). The weakening of the death panel-Palin relationship from the first era to the second is statistically significant ($z = 3.12$, $p < .05$), suggesting that use of the term evolved during the period of our sample, and that the initial controversy (in which Palin may have been the central figure) gave way to discussion specifically about the health care reform bill (in which Obama may have become the central figure). It should be noted that these findings do not mean that discussion of Palin in general trailed off during the post-speech period; rather, because our sample specifically begins with posts that discuss the death panel concept, we can only say that the overlap between the concept and Palin as a concept dissipates over time.

¹ Death panel: $M_1 = 7.86$, $SD_1 = 5.65$, $M_2 = 1.71$, $SD_2 = 1.64$
 Palin: $M_1 = 4.21$, $SD_1 = 4.44$, $M_2 = 0.52$, $SD_2 = 0.67$

There is likely continued discussion of Palin in other blog posts that don’t touch on the death panel concept.

Next, we examined differences in how Palin supporters and opponents handled the death panel concept, specifically the way they linked to sources to explain the concept. Because many of the second- and third-level posts in our sample did not mention the “death panel” concept specifically, we only the sub-sample of posts that were at the top level (i.e., those that specifically mention the concept). This sub-sample included 342 posts (217 opposing Palin, 84 supporting, 41 neutral). Additionally, we looked only at posts from the first era, since posts in the second era almost without exception did not link to any source that explained the origin of the concept (linking difference between eras: $t = -6.78$, $p < .001$).

We tested the differences between supporters and opponents by running two t-tests. The first showed no difference in the tendency to link directly to Palin’s Facebook note ($t = -1.46$, n.s.). However, the second showed a significant difference in the tendency to link to an intermediary site that explained or contextualized Palin’s note – Palin’s opponents were significantly more likely to do so ($t = 3.07$, $p < .01$). We additionally tested differences in resultant discussion size – that is, how many posts linked to the top-level posts in our sub-sample – and found no significant difference ($t = 0.21$, n.s.). Taken together, these findings suggest that, contrary to some of the existing literature, both supporters and opponents link to and discuss Palin’s claims in similar ways. However, her opponents are disproportionately interested in presenting those claims to their readers through the filter provided by a hub blog – the most common intermediary link targets

are Talking Points Memo, Think Progress and The Huffington Post, all hubs in the liberal blogosphere (Karpf, 2009).

DISCUSSION

Our findings provide evidence for two important possibilities in the way ideas flow in the new media information network. Perhaps blunting some concern about a tendency toward “echo chamber” behavior in the political blogosphere, we find that Sarah Palin’s “death panel” claim was discussed by both her supporters and her opponents, and that the extent of those discussions was not influenced by support or opposition. Though we find that discussion of Palin’s claim was not cloistered in the way we might have expected, we do find that specific citations of the original source do vary somewhat based on support. Surprisingly, the tendency to link to the original Facebook itself – that is, Palin’s unexcerpted claim, and something that is part of her online “space” – is statistically equivalent between supporters and opponents. This runs counter to expectations that opponents might choose not to link directly to her note, not wanting to grant her any benefit in the link- and reputation-based economy of the blogosphere. Opponents might have also been expected to want to avoid sending their readers to an unfiltered version of the claim. This seems particularly so in light of the finding that opponents were significantly more likely to include a link to a hub blog’s analysis of the original note, which generally presents readers with selected excerpts of the note in the hub blogger’s oppositional take on it. This might be seen as a way to make the Facebook link more palatable to a Palin-hostile audience – some like-minded sugar to coat the medicine of cross-cutting opinion exposure. Whatever the motivation for the bloggers in question, these linking and discussion behaviors should be seen as good first-level

outcomes by those concerned about the selective exposure potential of the Internet.

Considering the amount of cross-cutting exposure most Americans have in their day-to-day lives (that is, almost none (Mutz, 2006)), that pathways exist to distribute ideas to ideologically varied outlets is beneficial to creating political dialogue.

The other important finding of this case study involves the potential of social media as platforms from which political actors can work around the traditional structures of political information flow. In this case, Sarah Palin was able to focus the attention of the blogosphere on a controversial and rhetorically charged claim, which quickly became an issue of its own, quite apart from discussants’ thoughts about Palin herself. Her ability to turn discussion of the health care reform bill toward phantom bureaucrats with the power to euthanize was powerful enough to lead the claim into President Obama’s health care address, by which point the arc of the “death panel” discussion became more about Obama than about Palin. That she did this with a direct audience of roughly 700,000 (TechPresident.com, 2010) makes it all the more impressive – consider that influential agenda-setters such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* both have circulations over 1,000,000 as well as long-established reputations as trustworthy and important sources of information. Palin leveraged a much different kind of reputation – that of a partisan leader – to get her word out.

To go further into the implications of Palin’s successful use of Facebook as a large-scale platform would require similar coding of traditional news content, the lack of which is one of this study’s significant limitations. Similarly, our extant coding of blog content should not be seen as an exhaustive take on the concepts that were brought to bear in the “death panel” discussion. The exploratory nature of this study led us to a set of

first-pass concepts that allowed us to create a basic understanding of the contours of the discussion. Further analysis will allow us to more deeply examine both the nature of the discussion and the way information flows from source to source.

Another significant limitation of our methodology is that we still capture only a limited part of the blogosphere’s linking network. We go far enough beyond direct linking studies to establish the use of hub blogs as a way of mediating oppositional information, but we can’t say beyond that second level how information might continue to flow through the network to third- or fourth-level nodes, or beyond. The hyperlinked nature of the web and the explicitly networked nature of sites such as Facebook allow for continued passage of original information, as well as multiple generations of threaded response. Reconstructing this entire network might be impossible, but additional levels could provide further clues as to how both supporters and opponents become exposed to Palin’s claim, then discuss and analyze it.

Finally, this research operates under all the burdens faced by any case study. Primarily, it is a singular snapshot of a phenomenon, with characteristics that may not be found in other similar cases. Fully understanding the findings made here requires analysis of these similar cases, and this might be seen as a sort of pilot phenomenon for many that occurred during the highly charged 2010 election season. Many controversies launched and driven by partisan media have arisen in recent months – the so-called “Ground Zero mosque,” the firing of USDA official Shirley Sherrod and the leaked Climate Research Unit e-mail controversy are just a few cases that might be expected to follow a similar pattern to that seen in the “death panel” case. A systematic look into the genesis and growth of these stories could provide scholars and journalists with a stronger

understanding of how new media can be used by political figures to shape the news agenda in ways never before possible.

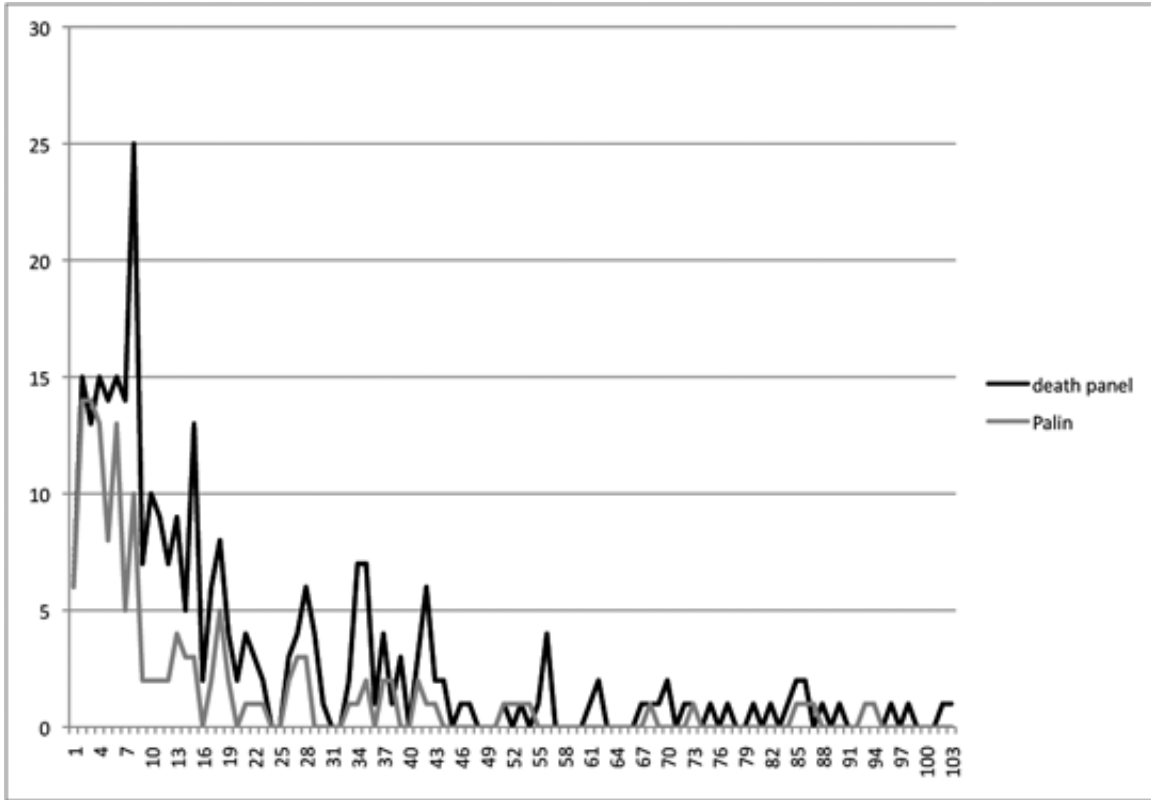
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Figure 1



Appendix 1

Sarah Palin:

Sarah Palin
Governor Palin
Gov. Palin
Sarah
Palin

Death panel:

death panel*

Barack Obama

Barack
Obama
the president

Nancy Pelosi

Pelosi
the speaker

Health care

health care
healthcare
health reform
HCR

Tea party

tea party
teabag
teaparty
tea-party

Lying

lying
liar
lie