Parallel Public Spheres: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor

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ABSTRACT

Although American politics lacks a forum approximating the ideal public sphere, elites and citizens alike consistently act as if participation in a common public sphere were the pinnacle of democratic practice. This paper examines letters to the editor as one of the ways citizens seek to enact a public sphere using available means of technological mediation. Using a sample of all letters received by a metropolitan newspaper during a three-month period (N = 1,113), the paper demonstrates that the tone and argumentative styles of letters differ systematically with the scope of the issues the letters address. Local issues evoke more reasoned, conciliatory tones, while issues beyond the local context evoke more emotional, confrontational tones. The finding holds up even after controlling for individual writers’ characteristics and their self-reported anger as a motivation to write. This implies that parallel public spheres are fostered by the same technological mediator. Each public sphere fosters its own standards for engagement; the local public sphere more closely approximates the idealized, deliberative public sphere, while larger publics tend toward more polarized dialogue that emphasizes conflict, recognition, and emotion.

Subject headings: public sphere, deliberation, democracy, letters to the editor
The image of the deliberative public sphere, although empirically and theoretically contested, is a central figure of democratic thought and practice. Perhaps more striking, citizens’ everyday ideas of how democracy should operate usually include a prominent place for public, inclusive debate and discussion. In other words, even though American politics does not have—and never had—a forum approximating the ideal public sphere, elites and citizens alike consistently act as if participation in a common public sphere were the staple of democratic practice. This paper examines one of the ways citizens seek to enact a public sphere using available means of technological mediation. We demonstrate that, at least in this case, a public sphere does not simply reflect a public but actually helps produce it (Mansbridge 1993). We continue by showing that citizens segment this anonymous public sphere, patterning their argumentative strategies to match the topics they address. The public sphere, we suggest here, is not only constituted by a specific location, technology, or forum. It is also in part a set of cultural norms and ideals, part “styles, skills, and habits” (Swidler 2001), part normative expectations of democratic practice (Perrin 2006). We show that, within a single technologically-constituted forum, participants adopt modes of discussion that match others’ similarly situated contributions within that forum.¹

Recent research suggests that citizens’ access to face-to-face deliberation is declining. Citizens now have less connection to communities and to civic organizations than they had in previous generations (Putnam 2000), and they perceive issues of public importance as being “distant” (Boltanski 1999; Moeller 1999; Eliasoph 1997) and beyond their reach. The ordinary activities of citizenship—from voting to contacting representatives, running for office, and participating in demonstrations—are a decreasing part of citizens’ lives (Robinson and Godbey 1999), even as recent events in American electoral politics suggest an increase in social movement activity among some segments of the population. Previous

¹We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this synopsis of our argument.
research (Perrin 2006) shows that an important reason for this decline is the absence of fora for political discourse. Citizens think more about politics, and participate more, when they have access to vibrant, deliberative public spaces. One important element of such public spaces is access to disagreement: the possibility that a citizen will encounter, and consider, opposing viewpoints (Sunstein 2000; Mutz 2006; Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Huckfeldt 2007).

One way of substituting for the absent public sphere is to use communications technologies to simulate public discourse. This article examines one such forum in which citizens attempt to enact public communication: the letters-to-the-editor column found in virtually all newspapers. Using a unique data set consisting of three months’ worth of letters received by the Greensboro, N.C., News & Record and surveys answered by their authors, we present the discursive contours of two parallel publics “imagined” (Anderson 1991; Warner 2002) through the letters column. One of these publics—constituted by letters addressing local issues—more closely approximates the civil, deliberative public sphere championed by Habermas, while the other—constituted by letters addressing issues more distant—tends toward more emotional, even inflammatory, language.

1. The Rise and Decline of the Public Sphere

From the early days of the public sphere (Habermas 1968a,b) and New England town meetings (Mansbridge 1980) to more recent concerns with mass media and citizen nonparticipation (Schudson 1995b; Page 1996; Hanson 1993), theories of democracy place a high value on political discussion. This includes traditions such as democratic deliberation (Habermas 1962 [1989]; Calhoun 1992) as well as less-constrained notions of

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2 Habermas goes a step further, arguing that technological mediation need not compromise the deliberative character of public discussion (Habermas 2006).
communication such as “free spaces” (Polletta 1999) and citizens’ access to disagreeing perspectives (Huckfeldt et al. 2004, 2005; Mutz and Mondak 2006). While an important strain of thought appropriately challenges the overly rationalist bias of deliberation theory (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1989, 1997c; Schudson 1992a, 1997), the theoretical traditions are nearly unanimous on the importance of citizens’ ability to express their own concerns and listen seriously to the concerns of others.

In the American context, writers have emphasized the New England town meeting (Mansbridge 1980; Bryan 2004) as the epitome of “real democracy.” Here, as illustrated by Norman Rockwell’s painting Town Meeting (Herbst 2004; Adorno 1964 [2005]), citizens transcend everyday divisions and assemble to discuss and debate the issues facing the town. The public is concrete and immediate: indeed, it is made up of the individual citizens assembled in the meeting hall. The public’s interests are, by definition, the interests of those assembled—or, at least, of a voting majority of them. At the town meeting, the population of a geographically-bounded community assembles, discusses, listens, and decides.

This is an attractive image, but it is a poor representation at best of the actual practice of American politics both then and now. Eighteenth- and 19th-century politics was characterized by systematic exclusion of large numbers of citizens, as well as by widespread patronage and corruption. The early American public sphere thus allowed deliberation only to a select few (Schudson 1992a). The 19th century’s raucous politics and party machines engaged many more citizens, but in activities that were anything but deliberative (Valelly 1990; Schudson 1998; Bensel 2004). By the time the Progressive movement reformed and professionalized politics in the beginning of the 20th century, popular distaste for politics (Eliasoph 1998) and the technical expertise the Progressives favored diminished the degree and fervor of popular involvement in politics.

Danielle S. Allen argues that the popularity of the deliberative ideal in America rests on
a prior false hope: the ideal of “wholeness.” American political culture, she claims, places undue value on viewing the public as a unified whole and, therefore, on erasing substantive differences among citizens and groups (Allen 2004). Political speech that reinforces this sense of communal continuity falls more into what James Carey calls “ritualistic” communication (as opposed to the more utilitarian “transmission” form; see Carey (1989)).

Recent entries in the debate over deliberation have, similarly, emphasized disagreement. Cass Sunstein’s provocative discussion of group polarization (Sunstein 2000), for example, argues that successful deliberative institutions should support a mix of like-minded and disagreeing groups. And Andrew Perrin shows that different “political microcultures” yield different modes of political discussion, even after controlling for the kinds of individuals in the groups (Perrin 2005, 2006).

There is ample justification, therefore, for the contention that American politics does not have a forum approximating the public sphere, and furthermore that no such forum has ever actually existed. Nevertheless, elites and citizens “think with” (Schudson 1992b) the public sphere as a democratic ideal. Citizens valorize “moderate” positions as compromises among social extremes. They advocate democratic decision-making through active debate and discussion, not through the clash of opposing interests, nor through the benign leadership of elites (Perrin 2006, 2005). Indeed, “special interests” is an epithet in American politics, used to label opponents as beholden to something other than the collective polity. The democracy Americans imagine looks strikingly like the normative theory of the public sphere.

That vision, though, is strikingly at odds with the polarized political landscape in which Americans find themselves. Individual political identification and emotional

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⁢Vanessa Beasley’s excellent study of presidential rhetoric (Beasley 2004) shows, in detail, how presidents have sought to reinforce this value.
commitments encourage citizens to refrain from discussing political matters with others who disagree (Eliasoph 1999; Mutz 2006). Meanwhile, the openly partisan, even pugilistic, character of much elite media discourse conveys the message that citizens who disagree are morally tainted and, by extension, that real Americans are those who hold a specific political view (McCarty et al. 2006; Prior 2005; Posner 2005). These concerns harken back to discussions of the politics of mass society (e.g., Kornhauser 1959). Kornhauser famously worried that declining social integration into organized groups would lead to “mass politics”: extraconstitutional political organization by social movements that would threaten democratic order (see, e.g., p. 227). Thus, while Americans idealize the deliberative public sphere of Habermas, important parts of the public sphere they experience are much more fragmented and emotion-laden: in a word, mass-political. Letters to the editor are one of the methods they may use to build something like the more integrated public sphere they value.

As Benedict Anderson has famously argued (Anderson 1991), the modern polity is itself the historical product of communications technologies that enabled citizens to imagine a unified public in the face of practical limits on physical interaction: a collectivity of citizens physically removed from one another. Letters to the editor are but one of numerous technological interventions that allow citizens to imagine publics they cannot directly observe (Anderson 1991; Warner 2002; Allen 2004). Such mediated public spheres\(^4\) have an interesting additional quality in that they may allow people who otherwise might have met one another face-to-face to avoid meeting (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher 2003). Thus these technologies simultaneously expand imagined communities while potentially reducing

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\(^4\)We use this term to refer to forums that are constituted through technological mediators such as newspapers, the Internet, television, or radio. See Clayman (2004) for a slightly different, but related, use of the term.
Following research suggesting that local politics tends to be less polarized than national (Macedo 2005, ch. 3) and that citizens feel more efficacious in local politics (Eliasoph 1997), we expect there to be a marked difference in rhetorical style between citizens’ speech when addressing local issues and that addressing nonlocal issues. Following the innovative work of Michael Warner (Warner 1992, 2002), we conceptualize publics as groups constituted by the fact of their being addressed through common media and with some degree of common interest or concern. We theorize that the distinct modes of addressing local and nonlocal issues may actually constitute parallel public spheres: analytically distinct arenas in which rhetorical style and topic of discussion covary in patterned ways based upon the scope of the topics of concern.

In this article, we test this possibility by characterizing the public spaces constituted by a particular, technologically-mediated forum: the letters to the editor column. We begin with a discussion of the history and theoretical import of letters to the editor as a form of public sphere. We then use a large sample of coded letters to the editor to investigate the relationships between the scope of the topics letters address and the rhetorical styles they use to address them. These data allow us to show the patterns of connection between the rhetorical styles and substantive topics taken up in this mediated public sphere.

2. Letters to the Editor

American newspapers have long carried letters to the editor columns as part of their editorial pages. Michael Schudson reports that 19th-century newspapers contained reader-to-reader communications on everyday issues, although generally offering advice more than opinion on the issues of the day (Schudson 1995a, 50). The general practice of
publishing information in the form of letters was a staple of colonial papers (Bleyer 1927, 74, 79).

We draw our data from the Greensboro News & Record, the largest-circulation newspaper in Greensboro, North Carolina (population 430,800), and the surrounding Piedmont Triad region (1.27 million). The News & Record’s daily circulation at the time of the study was 63,612 households, or 36.8%, in Guilford County (where Greensboro is located) and 75,607 households, or 14.8% in the Piedmont Triad region. It reached 37% of Triad households receiving any newspaper—the largest market shares in the county and the region (Standard Rate and Data Service 2003). It was the product of a merger between two older newspapers, each of which represented a party perspective in town. The younger of these papers, the Republican-leaning Daily News, carried letters from readers addressed to the entire readership within its first year of publication in 1909. The Democratic paper, the Daily Record, founded in 1890, carried advertisements in the form of letters to the general public from early on, but only began publishing letters on matters of public concern in 1927. The News & Record was bought in 1965 by Landmark Communications, a diversified media company owning a few other newspapers along with broadcast and internet companies.

From the perspective of newspaper editors, the letters serve a dual purpose: they offer readers an opportunity to respond to the newspaper itself, and they offer a “public forum” for discussion of issues of the day. These dual roles—and the dual audiences they imply—sometimes come into conflict with one another. In a formal sense, the letters column is supposed to be about the newspaper it appears in: comments about articles, editorials, and other material. The guidelines of the Greensboro News & Record require

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5Letters were introduced in the Daily Record with no fanfare or introduction, suggesting that the editors expected readers to have experienced the form before.
that letters “respond... to columns, editorials, other letter writers, or stories in other parts of the [paper]” (Editorial Page Staff 2002), although this rule is honored more in the breach—indeed, of the letters in this study that were printed, fully 71% did not refer to any identifiable prior item in the paper. Thus while editors often say they seek letters that are directly relevant to the newspaper, in practice readers and editors alike understand the column as a forum for more general commentary on the public the paper both serves and constitutes.

But newspapers are well aware of their central role in forming the publics they serve (Anderson 1991; Warner 2002), and editors are often quick to acknowledge that they see the letters column as offering a space for public debate, not just discussion of items in the newspaper. Thomas Feyer, letters editor of the New York Times, is explicit in welcoming “the thousands who write about what gets them worked up, or what moves them. And no subject is off-limits, within the bounds of good taste” (Feyer 2003). Echoing the sentiments of other editors, Feyer continues: “…my core belief as letters editor is that healthy, informed debate is the lifeblood of a strong democracy” (Feyer 2004).

Letters to the editor have rarely been used on a large scale as social scientific data. There have been some small-scale studies of local letter-writers’ opinions on specific issues (Hill 1981; Kinloch 1997) and cultural patterns (Halkias 1998), but no study has sought to consider the general tone or content of the Letters column. This is particularly surprising since letters to the editor are a perfect nonreactive measure (Webb et al. 1981): they are a documentary byproduct of everyday civic life and a forum in which citizens choose to participate in a public sphere—albeit one that is constrained and mediated (Hart 2001b; Page 1996).

Rosenau’s (1974) classic investigation of nonelectoral political participation refers to letters to the editor only in passing, and combined with the discursively quite distinct
practice of writing letters to representatives. Early studies (e.g., Buell 1975; Volgy et al. 1977) refuted the commonly-held notion that letter-writers were simply cranks and eccentrics, arguing instead that the forum provided a space for serious political talk. Hart (2001b) found that letter writers were significantly older and more politically engaged than nonwriters in their communities, but did not consider the relationship between letters’ content and the public they addressed.

Other work has concentrated on the biases involved in selection of letters to the editor. Small-town newspapers like those studied in Hart (2001b) tend to publish over 90% of the letters they receive, making the gatekeeper function nearly irrelevant. Most medium- and large-size dailies, such as the one studied here, are more selective. Renfro (1979) found that the gatekeeping filter introduced little actual bias in a sample of letters received and published at one important newspaper. Sigelman and Walkosz (1992) found that published letters to the editor reflected the general dimensions of public opinion surrounding the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday debate in Arizona. Grey and Brown (1970), by contrast, found that the gatekeeping function of editors significantly biased the contents of the letters published.

A review of trade publications and ethnographic experiences by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002b) established four rules characterizing the selection of letters for publication: relevance, brevity, entertainment, and authority. Civility, in particular, was not a criterion, as editors explained that excluding uncivil voices would violate their image of public deliberation (Wahl-Jorgensen 2004), even though Wahl-Jorgensen (2002a) also noted that the San Francisco-area editorial staff she observed often wrote letter writers off as “insane.” A recent study of editorial page contents in general (including, but not limited to, letters to the editor) found that the scope of opinions expressed in letters was similar to that in the op-ed columns (Hoffman and Slater 2007).
3. Data

To map the contours of the mediated public sphere created by the letters-to-the-editor column, the first author gathered a unique dataset. Working in collaboration with the staff of the News & Record, he gathered, catalogued, and analyzed all the letters received by the newspaper during a three-month period in 2002, regardless of whether they were eventually published. Using a modified version of Dillman’s “total design method” (Dillman 2000), he also conducted a survey of the authors of those letters. The letters and survey responses constitute the data for this article.

The study began on September 1, 2002, and continued through November 30, 2002. During that time, two important events happened, which provided the focus for many letters: the first anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and the 2002 midterm elections. North Carolina held a contentious race for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by the retirement of Jesse Helms, and there were several local races as well. In addition, there were several controversial local issues regarding city development and employment, including the construction of a shipping hub for FedEx at the local airport and a proposal for downtown revitalization centering on a new baseball stadium.

Newspaper staff provided copies of all letters. Letter writers were contacted with a request to complete the survey in exchange for entry in a drawing for a small prize. The survey contained demographic background questions, as well as questions about respondents’ political engagement and beliefs. It asked about their interest in local and national politics, as well as their sense of political self-efficacy (Verba et al. 1995) and their attention to print, internet, and broadcast media. It also asked a series of questions about

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6Details on the data collection can be found on the first author’s website, http://perrin.socsci.unc.edu/letters.
the decision to write: how long authors spent writing, why they decided to write, and other actions they may have taken regarding the issue they wrote about. In addition, many respondents provided unsolicited commentary beyond the scope of questions on the survey.7

In total, 1,113 letters were received and coded in the course of the project. These were written by 970 unique individuals. There were 106 repeat writers. For letters beyond the first, authors received an abbreviated questionnaire that asked only about the most recent letter. Analyses of letters use the letter as the unit of analysis, not the author—multiple letters written by the same author are all included. Twenty letters were written by authors determined to be ineligible for the survey because email or postcards were returned as undeliverable. We received 730 surveys back from letter writers, for an effective adjusted response rate of 66.8% (American Association for Public Opinion Research 2004). Of the 1,113 letters received, 524 were printed in the newspaper, for an acceptance rate of 47%. 8

Anonymized letter texts and survey responses were entered into a database. Research assistants added information about each letter, including whether, and when, it was published in the paper, and to what items from the newspaper (if any) it referred. Finally, using a custom web-based coding system built in part around CodeRead (Perrin 2001), the letter texts were coded for topic, scope, coherence, tone, and rhetorical strategy.

7The analysis of this commentary will be the subject of a future article.

8This rate is substantially higher than those at elite, national papers such as the New York Times as well as at papers with larger catchment populations. Since the amount of space reserved for letters varies little among papers, but papers’ target populations may differ by as much as two orders of magnitude, it follows that publication rates will be higher in papers with smaller target populations. Accordingly, the 47% rate is substantially lower than that experienced in many small-town newspapers, which print virtually all non-libelous submissions (Lauterer 2006; Hart 2001a).
To identify topics, we worked inductively. For each letter, the system presented options consisting of all topics that had been identified in previous letters; coders could also add additional topics that had not yet been identified. Later, topics that were substantively identical were collapsed into single topics, but all meaningful distinctions were maintained. All other codes were determined \textit{a priori}. Letter scope points to the largest area to which a letter refers (the newspaper, local area, state, region, nation, or world). These are mutually exclusive values.

Tones and strategies, by contrast, are a series of binary variables; each denotes the presence or absence of a particular tone or strategy. Tones of interest were “angry,” “superior,” “professional,” “respectful,” “objective,” “personal,” and “posing.” Rhetorical strategies were \textit{ad hominem} attacks (arguing based on the character of another person), invoking \textit{religion}, mentioning specific political \textit{officials} or political \textit{parties}, engaging in explicit \textit{comparison}, and using “close to home” and “for the children” as reasons for concern (Eliasoph 1998). A random sample of approximately 25% of the letters (N=299) were coded by two coders to assess inter-rater reliability (table 1).

\begin{table}
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\caption{Table 1}
\end{table}

Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa (Cohen 1960). The evaluation of tone is inherently a form of “expert coding” (Neuendorf 2002), and so inter-rater agreement can be expected to be lower than in a technical content analysis (Krippendorff 2004). Nevertheless, the agreement scores are generally high, with the exception of coherence. In part because of this low score, we do not interpret the coherence evaluation here.

Because our analysis here focuses on angry and hostile tones, we offer examples of letters identified with the relevant codes. These tones are purely form-based; they do not evaluate the content of letters.
• Angry

...The endorsement [of Black leaders for Erskine Bowles] was mailed to thousands of African American voters.... I'd like to hear one of those blacks who endorsed Bowles encourage Black children to strive for excellence. Maybe they could encourage them to become a mathematician, an attorney, a Senator or just Speaker of the House. The children see what we do and this time wasn’t pretty. The twenty-nine “nonleaders” were mistakenly identified in the ad as “African American Community Leaders;” they are in fact “Misleaders.” I would call them Uncle Toms, “however, that would be an insult to Uncle Toms.” In Vietnam, the Vietnamese shot their Uncle Toms. That allowed the Vietnamese people to move the fight for liberation forward. “How do we, African Americans, move forward when the very people who ought be leading us are going backwards?” Back on the plantation it was not unusual to see a sign, “Negroes for Sale.” You may not see the sign today, but some folks, obviously, still do. If you’re Black and still a candidate for the General Election, here is a clue: “These African-American Community Leaders From All Over North Carolina Support Erskine Bowles”

This letter’s tone is clearly angry. The letter writer accuses blacks who endorsed Bowles for senate of being “Uncle Toms,” or racial traitors, only to add vilification by mentioning violent deaths for such leaders.

Crucially, the tone is not dictated by the topic. A separate letter on the same topic (African Americans and the senate race) was “respectful” and “objective” in tone while taking essentially the same position:

...Mainstream media’s newsrooms are run primarily by white people,
and to them the U.S. [Senate] race is all about Erskine Bowles and Elizabeth Dole. Elizabeth Dole and Erskine Bowles have nothing in common with you and me. Do you really want them representing you? But Dole vs. Bowles is not the way it has to be. It’s improbable that any of the Republican candidates could beat Dole. Bowles, however, is a different story. If Bowles and N.C. Secretary of State Elaine Marshall split the white votes, and all black voters supported Dan Blue, the November election would be between Dole and Blue. I would rather have Dan Blue. Apologies to the Cynthia Brown campaign, but Blue has the credentials.

**Superior**: adopting a position of rank over the expected reader or the subject of the letter

In a previous letter to the editor someone stated that president Bush had to go to war before election time because he has not had any accomplishments to bring before the people. I guess that is true if you compare it to being a liar [sic], sleeping with multiple women even though you are married, keeping the support of millions of morons and still remaining president accomplishments. I guess to a certain party, I mean group of people, it is not what you have actually done that counts it is what you can convince people you did that counts.

Here, the writer (a 29-year-old man with a high-school education) refers to former president Clinton (without using his name), claiming he had few accomplishments. The writer positions himself as superior to the author of the letter to which he refers—because of the author’s tolerance of Clinton’s sexual and legal transgressions. It is not principally angry in tone; while the author may have chosen to write out of anger, the tone is haughty. The letter’s rhetorical strength derives from an assumption
of hierarchy, not from an emotional offensive.

- **Ad hominem claims**: any mention of an individual’s *character*, separated from extant public issues.

  Mark McDaniel wants to be a state senator – a law-maker – but... he clearly does not live by the rule of law. He has received 20 convictions for speeding violations and has had his driver’s license revoked three times. . . .

These typical letters demonstrate the range of tones available and, in particular, the validity of the coding for hostile tones we analyze. These codes proved suitably reliable ($\kappa = .834, .769, .642$, respectively); the excerpts above serve to demonstrate face validity.

### 3.1. The Discursive Environment of the Letters Column

In order to compare letters to the editor to other, better theorized, forms of public sphere interaction, we need to evaluate the characteristics of the “interactions” taking place there. Specifically, what about the “social geometry” (Simmel 1950, 21–22) of interaction in the letters column makes it similar to, and different from, interaction in a face-to-face discussion?

Two specific characteristics of the letters to the editor genre merit special consideration in discussing the form’s approximation of a democratic public sphere. These characteristics are (1) the *asynchronous* character of the communication itself; and (2) the *anonymity* of the audience being addressed.
3.1.1. Asynchronicity

Face-to-face communication is largely synchronous: that is, speakers are able to observe their audience’s reactions as they speak (Gibson 2000). Members of a speaker’s audience may provide feedback in the form of expressions, supportive utterances, interruptions (Gibson 2006), and regular responses in real time. Even presupposing the regular taking of turns within a conversation (Sacks et al. 1974; Ford and Thompson 1996), each speaker can adapt her claims to her sense of the audience, learning “on the fly” the contours of the discussion (Perrin 2006).

By contrast, mediated public spheres like letters to the editor are asynchronous. The “conversation” they constitute is interrupted by long periods of silence. Furthermore, speakers cannot be understood as taking turns as in face-to-face conversation. Rather, the asynchronicity of the letters-to-the-editor form makes engaging in this public sphere more like a series of discrete broadcasts. At a given point in time, they collect the materials, skills, analyses, and emotional impetus to produce and dispatch their messages in the form of a letter. At some later point in time, the message may or may not be received by others—some letters, of course, make it no further than the desk of the editorial page editor, and even those published will receive varying amounts of attention from readers.

Crucially, both of these potential receptions occur some significant amount of time after the message’s dispatch and without recourse to further communication with the writer to clarify, dispute, or support the message. Any given message is therefore purely unidirectional—with only minor exceptions, writers cannot expect feedback about their letters. Its reception is also delayed, so those receiving the message do so in a different temporal environment from that in which it was produced (see Perrin et al. 2006).
3.1.2. Anonymity

The News & Record’s primary public, Guilford County, was home to over 420,000 in 2000 according to the U.S. census. It is obviously impossible for any letter writer to meet, let alone talk to, more than a tiny fraction of this population. Leaving aside the fact that those to whom writers do talk are likely to be relatively similar to themselves (McPherson et al. 2001), the size of this public means readers and writers are likely to stay anonymous to one another.

Each of these formal characteristics has implications for the forum’s contours and for individuals’ behavior in it. Specifically, these characteristics lower the “bandwidth” of communication vis-à-vis face-to-face interaction. Most information from speaker to audience must be carried by the text of the letter itself, and with very few exceptions there is no information carried from audience to speaker. This form lends itself particularly well to the phenomenon known as pluralistic ignorance (Krech et al. 1962; Katz 1988): essentially, speakers routinely misjudge overall public sentiment because they draw broad inferences from the skewed sample of others with whom they interact often. These others, though, are rarely representative of the public they seek to address through letters to the editor. In the context of public opinion, extant theory suggests that “pluralistic ignorance will be more pronounced in large groups because there is less intercommunication, so that cognitive reorientation will occur more slowly there” (Breed and Ktsanes 1961). By extension, we can also expect that pluralistic ignorance will be more pronounced when feedback mechanisms are scant and asynchronous.

Pluralistic ignorance should make a letter’s argument less convincing to the reading

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However, see (Huckfeldt et al. 2004) for an important caveat for the case of political discussion networks.
public because of the mismatch between the audience the reader expects and the audience who might actually read the letter. For example:

Until recent decades both of the major political parties gave united support to basic values but there has been a dramatic change. 1. One critic accused the GOP of being turned into a church because of their solid support of Bible values and the freedom to promote them. Instead of getting any thanks for this stand it has been twisted into an issue to be used against them. 2. When Dr. Laura went on television urging people to live by the Ten Commandments some of the highest democrat leaders (including a major presidential candidate) said that her program should not be allowed. In addition democrat senators are blocking conservative judges who support Bible values with the excuse that they are too extreme. For almost forty years people have complained about the expelling of the Ten Commandments. There will probably never be a better time to say no more with our votes.

The writer, a man living outside the state, begins with the assumption that “Bible values” are “basic values,” and proceeds from there. While Christianity is an important force in North Carolina politics and culture (Luebke 1998, 90–91), the premises of the letter’s argument make it unlikely that it will appeal to readers (even Christian ones) who do not already share the conclusions.

The theory of the “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann 1993) predicts that individuals will suppress views they expect others in a discussion to disagree with for fear of ostracism or reprisal. The effect of the spiral of silence is theorized to diminish with distance from others in the group. Therefore, we would expect letters to be less constrained by group norms than face-to-face conversation would be. For example, the following letter from a local man (which was not published):
I accuse! Men like Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman would be repelled and sickened by the sorry state of the liberal-infested Democratic Party today. In the last decade, it has given us eight years of Bill Clinton’s lies, amorality, traitorous technology transfers to the Red Chinese military, and bribery-tinged pardons. His numerous transgressions are too long to list here. Now his personal spin meister wants to be our next senator; just what we need, a man sullied by the same discharge as Monica. Next we got Al Gore’s thinly disguised power grab in Florida. No sooner was our president declared the winner, than Gore had his shyster minions heading for the sunshine state. He was more than willing to parlay “pregnant chads,” nullified absentee ballots from our military, and a corrupt Florida Supreme Court into an overturned election. Al Gore didn’t care what effect this might have had on our country, as long as he got power. In the last year since 9/11, Democrats like Tom Daschle, Hillary Clinton, and “Chappaquiddick” Ted have shown their naked ambition. They have steered the party into obstructionism and appeasement, anything at all to stymie George Bush. I am convinced that they are perfectly willing for his country to fail, both militarily and economically; whatever it takes to advance their quest for power. I also have no doubt that if, God forbid, the United States was overrun by terrorists, the leftist Democrats would become the party of treason and collaboration. Modern liberalism is a plague on the body politic. It should follow Robespierre’s [sic] Terror and Stalinism into the history books.

It is difficult to imagine any but the most partisan of speakers arguing in this way to a face-to-face audience he knows contains Democratic partisans. Indeed, it is arguably precisely this kind of affect that the spiral of silence is most effective at stifling. In this case, the distance and anonymity of the public licenses more direct, angry expression than would take place in a face to face setting.
Not all letter writers are equally capable at judging the environment they seek to enter; indeed, quite a few submit letters whose style is so dramatically different from the standard, published letters that there is obviously no chance of their publication. For instance, a 54-year-old woman who accompanied a disabled friend to court, only to be confronted with a variety of hardships, write a 779-word letter about her experience:

....She has COPD, diabetes, high blood pressure, and arthritis in her knee, and a newly diagnosed heart problem. She was just out of the hospital last week. We arrived in the parking lot only to find it totally inadequate in the number of handicapped spaces available. They were all filled. We had to park a little farther away. She finally made it to the first courtroom only to find out that the judge hearing her case would be delayed. Two hours later the judge ended by being a no show....

Upon arriving back in the parking lot she found a $5.00 parking ticket on her car. Since this is the editorial section I intend to do just that. Express my opinion as a very close observer and a voter and taxpayer on the events of our trip to court....

Some of you who are familiar with the legal system may find me a bit naive but my father always said “We live in the United States of America and we have rights.” A fact my father took much pride in. It is probably a good thing he is no longer with us. He would be very disappointed. Only the rich can afford to access the legal system nowadays. The very idea of a judge not showing up to do his job. He may very well have had a good reason but if I don’t show up for my job I may not get to eat....

A similar, but somewhat more analytical, letter seeks to abstract from personal hardship to political lessons:
I feel I am being pooped on by the American machine we call “The System.” First I was fired from my job of 6 years for taking the Lord’s name in vain [sic]. I was forgiven by him, but the boss couldn’t forgive, some kind of God complex he was carrying. (So much for 1st amendment, huh) So I applied for unemployment and yes, was denied. I appealed and was denied all the way up the chain to Raleigh, where a smaller but just as powerful image of God sits.

So I go back and apply for benefits, get them, and ask for back dated to my qualification time. WHOaa, Nellie, back up. Must I be insane? I should have known being an educated Southern woman with no foreign nationality to call my own, and heaven forbid I can speak and understand English.

What is wrong with our society today when you follow all the rules and still get the short end of the straw. In the words of the immortal Ben Stein, “answers, anyone, anyone.”

Need help in GSO.

While these letters are emotionally laden and poignant, they lack the focus and pithy claims-making valued by editors, and therefore never enter the conversation.

Other letters view the forum as a public bulletin board. The following one, for example, requests public help on solving an auto theft:

We need your help in locating a teenage (18 or so) drunk driver who totaled our brand new $27,000 truck. He was driving an older model large vehicle (Jeep Cherokee, GMC Jimmy, or Ford Bronco style) dark colored (we think red or black due to the large amounts of red and black paint on our white truck). This teen was seen leaving the residence of ... at [address] near the airport and was seen getting into their car and then the accident. This vehicle should have substantial damage but appeared to be running properly when leaving the
scene. The teens who remained at the residence are protecting the identity of the driver for unknown reasons. It may be possible to establish the identity of the driver if the parents are aware of this accident and look into their child’s whereabouts, or if they drive a similar vehicle which was damaged recently, and their child is friends with the individuals at this residence. Thank you for any help you could provide.

The public imagined here is broad but entirely apolitical—this author hopes her public announcement can call upon informal surveillance to provide information about a private concern. The writer reported reading the *News & Record* daily, reading the letters column every time, and having written three prior letters to the paper, two of which were published. Nevertheless, she has clearly miscalculated the character of the letters forum.

Other letters, though, skillfully navigate the editorial standards to craft messages that speak to public issues:

Anyone who doubts our country’s involvement in the war against terrorism, including the impending action against Saddam Hussein, should rent the movie “Pearl Harbor” and should remember the terrifying events of a year ago. As with Pearl Harbor, the US Government had information and chose not to act on it until too late. What a costly lesson learned, in terms of lives and dollars. And almost exactly 60 years later, history repeated itself. Do you think Bush and Cheney would be pushing for action against Saddam if they had “no reason?” Don’t think for one moment that all information gathered is relayed to the people of these United States. I shudder to think what life would be like if we were all privy to know exactly what is going on in the Mid East. We would be looking over our shoulders every minute of every day, and would never let our loved ones out of our sight in an effort to protect them. Mass panic would be
the norm. Let not “the sleeping giant” be caught by surprise again. We have become a nation of complacency, thinking “it could never happen to us” on our own soil. It did in 1941, it did in 2001, and it will again if we don’t get our heads out of the sand.

This letter was printed in the paper, having made several distinct arguments in favor of the Iraq War. Similarly, in another published letter:

I have news for [a previous letter writer] who laments celebrating Thanksgiving in a secular nation. You missed your boat. The Mayflower. And to dissapoint you further, Christianity was not America’s mainstream religion at that first Thanksgiving. Forty-two pilgrims vs 42 million Indians is not mainstream. It’s rowing upstream without a paddle. As for the Colonies being bastions of blue blood Christian values, it would behoove you to become acquainted with the beliefs of Roger Williams, Anne Hutchison, William Penn and others who advocated the exclusion of religion from governmental rule. I do not pretend to be a scholar of either history or religion, but I can recognize a tom turkey by his diatribe.

Neither of these letters qualifies as deliberative in the strict, Habermasian sense. Nevertheless, they offer arguments worth considering in the public sphere (Perrin 2006; Benhabib 1992).

4. Data Analysis

The publics created by mediated public spheres can be understood as “nested.” For example, a news-reading public is part of a local public, which in turn is nested within
a state, national, and international public. Each of these publics may also be divided internally by status distinctions (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000) and areas of topical interest. Insofar as these different publics demand different modes of address, we expect styles of argument to vary in ways patterned after the scope of the public being addressed (Perrin 2006; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2002). Based on preliminary research, we expect calmer, more reasoned discourse in more local debates and more emotional discourse in debates more distant. We theorize that the perceived distance of an issue (that is, its non-local character; see Boltanski (1999); Eliasoph (1997)) lowers the political efficacy of those who seek to address it (Lichterman 1996) and thereby incites them to become more vehement and less civil (Manturuk and Perrin 2003). In other words, vitriolic discussion of local issues risks the local reputation of both the writer and the newspaper (Blumin 1976, 131–33) in a climate where that reputation may be helpful in the future.

Therefore, we expect that

**Hypothesis 1** *Letters that address topics relevant to more distant publics will be more emotional in tone than those that address topics relevant to local publics.*

We begin the evaluation of hypothesis 1 by carrying out an exploratory cluster analysis to evaluate the extent to which letters’ formal or rhetorical characteristics co-occur systematically with their topics. Specifically, we performed a cluster analysis of the letters using the tones and elements as the discriminating variables. We used SPSS’s two-step clustering procedure with the hierarchical clustering method. The first step calculates a

---

10Of course, among the general population, low political efficacy may lead to disengagement instead of anger (Verba et al. 1995). But since our sample includes only those who were motivated enough to write letters, those with lower efficacy must express that efficacy through their words instead of through exit (see Herbst 1995, 268).
Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) for each number of clusters within a specified range and uses it to find the initial estimate for the number of clusters. The second step refines the initial estimate by finding the greatest change in distance between the two closest clusters in each hierarchical clustering stage (SPSS, Inc. 2001; Bacher et al. 2004). The procedure found the best match to be a two-cluster solution. Normalized means for each strategy and tone on the two clusters can be found in table 2.

EDITOR: PLACE TABLE 2 HERE.

The two clusters that emerged from the algorithm were instructive. Cluster 1, which we name “civil,” included “professional,” “respectful,” “objective,” and “personal” tones, as well as with elements of “close to home” and “for the children.” Cluster 2, which we call “conflictual,” included “angry,” “superior,” and “posing” tones, as well as ad hominem argument and mentions of religion, political parties, and political officials.

We continue by using the same clustering process to evaluate the extent to which the scope a letter addresses—local vs. nonlocal—is associated with the rhetorical tone in the letter (table 3).

EDITOR: PLACE TABLE 3 HERE.

In general, the civil cluster contains more local issues, while the conflictual cluster contains more national and international ones. There are three significant exceptions. Letters discussing the military were more closely associated with the civil cluster than the conflictual one. This is likely due to the fact that the military enjoys widespread positive public sentiment, particularly in North Carolina, where there are numerous military installations and personnel. On the other side, Jim Melvin and FedEx are local topics that were associated with conflictual tones. These were “hot button” issues about local economic
development that aroused unusually strong divisions in the city.\textsuperscript{11}

We continue testing hypothesis 1 by estimating the correlation between each of the tones and elements and whether the letter’s content is local in scope.\textsuperscript{12} We use separate logistic regressions to estimate the odds that a letter regarding local issues contains each coded element, relative to letters regarding nonlocal issues. Table 4 presents the results of that analysis.

\textbf{EDITOR: PLACE TABLE 4 HERE.}

As we expected, broader content scope is significantly associated with superior tone, with comparative logic, and with mentions of religion, political officials, and political parties. By contrast, more local content scope is associated with professional, respectful, and personal tone and with “close to home” and “for the children” logics. Hypothesis 1 is further supported by this analysis.

\textsuperscript{11}We carried out two additional analyses to check for specific effects of (1) “hot” issues like the Iraq war, George W. Bush, and the Sept 11 attacks; and (2) the exceptions from our cluster analysis (the military the FedEx hub, and the stadium). Our overall results (not presented here, but available from the first author’s website, http://perrin.socsci.unc.edu/letters) are robust to these covariates, although mentioning Bush is a good predictor of hostility in its own right.

\textsuperscript{12}Just over 50% of all letters were coded “local” in scope; an additional 5% referred only to the newspaper: a sub-local scope. We therefore consider local scope a binary variable indicating whether the scope is local or beyond local We include the sub-local letters in the local category. Similar analyses carried out using ordered logistic regression (results available upon request) yielded similar results.
One possibility is that the newspaper’s letters column simply hosts different discussions for different groups of people. That is, different people may simply address different issues and also use different tones. If rhetorical style is, as we theorize, a function of the scope of the public being addressed, we expect

**Hypothesis 2** *Local scope will predict letter tone even after accounting for demographic and political characteristics of letter writers on their letters’ tone.*

We test for this possibility by considering the influence of writers’ individual characteristics and beliefs on the scope of the letters they wrote using binary logistic regression (table 5).\(^\text{13}\)

EDITOR: PLACE TABLE 5 HERE.

There are important demographic predictors of letter scope. Women are about 84% more likely than men to write about local issues. Older writers are slightly less likely to write about local issues, and those who identify as liberal or left-wing are substantially less likely (43%) to do so. However, the variation in scope explained by these characteristics is small enough (7.5%) that authors’ selection of a public sphere into which to seek entry should not be understood as a function of demographics and political views alone.

We continue testing hypothesis 2 by considering the effects of letter authors’ individual characteristics and motives, as well as local scope, on their letters’ likelihood of using a hostile tone. We characterize a letter as having a hostile tone if it was coded as “angry” or “superior,” or if it employed *ad hominem* attacks. Table 6 presents the results of a binary logistic regression used to predict hostile tone.

\(^{13}\)For all following analyses, cases with missing data have been dropped. Religious involvement, political efficacy, and education have all been \(z\)-standardized for easier comparison.
The letter’s scope shows a significant, positive effect on its likelihood of exhibiting a hostile tone. Hence, again, we confirm the hypothesis that writers who seek to address topics relevant to different publics address them using different argumentative styles. Moreover, this effect persists even after including pertinent information about the letter writer and the motives for writing. Predictably, letters written by authors who acknowledged anger as a motive for writing were significantly more likely to use a hostile tone. Those written by women and by more educated, more religious, and more politically efficacious writers were less likely to use hostile tones.

However, even after accounting for the effects of all these significant predictors, the scope of the letter continues to be a strong and significant predictor of hostility. This is strong support for both our hypotheses: the public spheres constituted by the letters column are bifurcated by their topics of concern. Citizens who aspire to enter one of these parallel public spheres adjust their argumentative style to the norms of the particular sub-public they seek to address. Even after accounting for demographic and general political characteristics of these citizens, the arena in which they seek to speak maintains a strong effect on the rhetorical strategy they bring to the discussion.

5. Limitations

To our knowledge, ours is the first study to use a complete population of letters received by a newspaper to evaluate the contours of debate in the letters column. As such, there are important strengths of the data, including the facts that (a) no entries to the debate are missing due to sampling; and (b) that we have eluded the effect of editorial gatekeeping on the discourse we analyze. Nevertheless, like any study, ours has important limitations as
well. First, the study took place entirely in Greensboro, a second-tier city in the American south. As such, the regionally-bound character of the newspaper determines what topics are of local concern. This is not a problem *per se*, but leads us to generalize based on form and tone instead of content. Second, the institutional configuration and cultural tradition of American newspapers are significantly different from papers in other countries (see, e.g., Ferree et al. 2002b; Benson and Saguy 2005). Third, the study is based on letters received between September 1 and November 30, 2002. This too structures the list of topics that are salient, most prominently the 1-year anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks and the campaign for the U.S. Senate seat.

While these elements locate our sample in space and time, we do not believe they are significant threats to valid inference about the kinds of topics that can be expected to constitute parallel public spheres and the kinds of argumentation that can be expected in these spheres. Because of these limitations, though, we cannot evaluate whether the effects we observe are generic effects of distance upon the likelihood of hostility in debate—a plausible social psychological claim—or whether they capture a style of debate that emerges from the social, institutional, geographical, and historical situation of the early-21st-century American south.

6. Conclusion

The letters forum, then, provides writers with different kinds of discursive spaces based, in part, on the kinds of issues they seek to discuss. Because we can assume writers tailor their arguments to the audience they imagine reading their letters, we can infer that writers on different topics are imagining two parallel publics: one, a distant, combative public dealing with national and global affairs; the other a more civil public dealing with concerns closer to home. We emphasize that these may both be reasonable responses
to the discursive environment. After estimating their efficacy with respect to local and beyond-local issues, citizens respond with the kinds of messages they expect best to address these issues. Anger and hostility may very well be instrumental in beyond-local publics, if for no other task than establishing a frame that might underwrite collective action.\textsuperscript{14} Our point is simply that the distinct public spheres, constituted around distinct sets of issues, evoke systematically different kinds of political expression.

This is not simply a matter of what sorts of citizens seek entry into the parallel public spheres. Indeed, the analysis in table 6 demonstrates that what a letter is about is a strong predictor of how it argues, over and above the effects of writers’ characteristics on the scope they address and the tone they use to do so. This finding demonstrates the presence of multiple, parallel public spheres within the same technological medium.

In any public sphere, would-be participants must gauge the kind of speech that will allow them best to make their point (Perrin 2006; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2002). In a mediated public sphere, which constitutes a public that cannot plausibly meet collectively face-to-face, participants must do so by substituting partial experiences for a comprehensive understanding of the public. In this sense, the mediation itself constitutes the public it represents, providing an opportunity for citizens to engage with, and imagine, an anonymous public.

Writers’ understanding of the public, though, is at once both more and less sophisticated than this. It is less sophisticated in that citizens frequently misjudge the kinds of arguments that are likely to gain them entry into the public sphere and convince others in it. It is more sophisticated, though, in that writers, whether consciously or unconsciously, may adapt their argumentative styles to the predominant tone found in other letters addressing

\textsuperscript{14}We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
Beyond demonstrating an important way in which imagined publics are bifurcated, the qualitative distinction between these two parallel public spheres is substantively important. Normative theories of the public sphere differ as to the permissibility of different types of speech, such as self-interested, emotional, and “negative” approaches (Ferree et al. 2002a; Geer 2006). Writers’ behavior suggests that they expect the local public to be more reasonable, akin to what Ferree et al. refer to as “discursive” democratic theory. By contrast, writers appear to assume that publics addressing topics beyond the local are not reasonable; rational argument takes a back seat to emotional and even inflammatory tactics, leading to a public sphere more akin to Ferree et al.’s “constructivist” model, which emphasizes emotion and recognition (Fraser 1997a). The apparent polarization of American politics (McCarty et al. 2006) implies not just opinion polarization, but polarization in group style as well—different public spheres constitute different publics and, by extension, different rules for engagement in them.

We conclude this study by returning to the insight with which we began: Americans cling to an ideal of the democratic public that more or less approximates the normative theory of the public sphere. Although no such forum actually exists (and it never has), many citizens seek forums to approximate the expressive, deliberative venue they imagine, and one important such forum is the letters to the editor column. In a recent article on mediated public spheres, Habermas charges the actually-existing public sphere with a generative task: “votes do not ‘naturally’ grow out of the soil of civil society. Before they pass the formal threshold of campaigns and general elections, they are shaped by the confused din of voices rising from both everyday talk and mediated communication” (Habermas 2006, 417). Our findings suggest that this din of voices is very much alive, but that its publics deliberate differently based on what they are concerned with and, by
extension, to whom they seek to speak.
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Hoffman, Lindsay H. and Michael D. Slater. 2007. “Evaluating Public Discourse in Newspaper Opinion Articles: Values-Framing and Integrative Complexity in


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This manuscript was prepared with the AAS L\TeX\, macros v5.2.
Table 1. Inter-rater reliability for letter coding

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<td>Content scope</td>
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<td>Coherence</td>
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$p < .000$ for all codes.

Scores calculated using the concord library in R (R Development Core Team 2003).
Table 2. Normalized means from two-step cluster analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cluster 1 (Civil)</th>
<th>Cluster 2 (Conflictual)</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tones</strong></td>
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<td>Objective</td>
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<td>.50</td>
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<td>.14</td>
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<td>For the children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comparative</td>
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Table 3. Topic clusters

<table>
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<tr>
<th>“Civil”</th>
<th>“Conflictual”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public suggestion</td>
<td>Campaigning</td>
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<td>Cheney, Dick</td>
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<td>traffic</td>
<td>Florida 2000 election</td>
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<tr>
<td>jobs</td>
<td>Dole, Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crime</td>
<td>Bowles, Erskine</td>
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<td>electoral endorsement</td>
<td>politics</td>
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<td>police</td>
<td>Clinton, Bill</td>
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<tr>
<td>safety</td>
<td>Bush, George W.</td>
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<tr>
<td>veterans</td>
<td>Edwards, John</td>
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<td>stadium construction</td>
<td>Daschle, Tom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memorial stadium</td>
<td>Gore, Albert</td>
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<td>Consumer complaints</td>
<td>Social Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Downtown revitalization</td>
<td>vote</td>
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<tr>
<td>Albright, Stuart (county DA)</td>
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<td>Public thanks</td>
<td>Melvin, Jim (downtown revitalization booster)</td>
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<td>billboards</td>
<td>patriotism</td>
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<tr>
<td>environment</td>
<td>Afghanistan war</td>
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<td>economy</td>
<td>Islam</td>
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<td>business</td>
<td>guns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action Greensboro (downtown revitalization group)</td>
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<td>sports</td>
<td>FedEx hub</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Civil”</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<td>women’s rights</td>
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<td>Thigpen, Jeff (county Register of Deeds)</td>
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<td>military</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>school</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sykes, Marti (School Board candidate)</td>
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<td>Routh, Nancy (School Board candidate)</td>
<td>September 11 attacks</td>
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<td>Allen, Pam (School Board member and candidate)</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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Table 4. Relative odds of local letters containing each coded element

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<th>Element</th>
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<td><strong>Tones</strong></td>
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<td>For the children</td>
<td>2.70***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>0.39***</td>
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</table>

***p < .001  **p < .01
Table 5. Writer characteristics’ effect on the probability of addressing local-scope topics

<table>
<thead>
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<th>OR</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>Author’s political identification</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>0.765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>0.570*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Involvement</td>
<td>1.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy</td>
<td>0.971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.984*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.840**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.302*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger as motive to write</td>
<td>0.864</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 *p < .01

Pseudo-$R^2$ = 0.075. $-2 \times \text{log} – \text{likelihood} = 689.37$

Pseudo-$R^2$ is Cragg and Uhler’s $R^2$.

$N = 524$. Cases with missing data excluded.
Table 6. Effects of letter and author characteristics on the likelihood of hostile tone  
(logistic regression)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local scope</td>
<td>0.475***</td>
<td>0.498***</td>
<td>0.498***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author's political identification</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>1.114</td>
<td>1.080</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>0.719</td>
<td>0.748</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Involvement</td>
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<td>0.819</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy</td>
<td>0.734**</td>
<td>0.771*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.556**</td>
<td>0.560**</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.769*</td>
<td>0.761*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger as motive to write</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.162***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$-2 \times \log \text{–likelihood}$</td>
<td>691.97</td>
<td>656.11</td>
<td>640.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001

$N = 524$. Cases with missing data excluded.

Pseudo-$R^2$ is Cragg and Uhler’s $R^2$. 