



**FollowMe.IntDev.Com:
International Development in
the Blogosphere**

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ABSTRACT: This article explores online blogs as a new forum for discussing ideas and practices in international development. Based on a qualitative study of conversations that take place across multiple blogs, I conclude that the blogosphere combines features of a public sphere, in which people convene to discuss issues of public interest, and an invisible college, in which experts create, verify, and legitimise knowledge and expertise. Blogs have the potential to be inclusive and participatory, but they also exclude many groups and privilege certain forms of expertise, and are dominated by a sophisticated and wired global elite.

'Blogs cover many of the same issues as both newspapers and journals, but with an eye toward what they mean for practitioners and policy makers. You'll get stories from the field, scathing critiques of the latest development fads, and heated debates on everything from microfinance to conflict minerals. The blogosphere is the one place where geography is no barrier to the conversation. Academics, journalists, donors, Washington think tank-ers, UN or NGO staff — they all bounce ideas around here.'

Dave Algosos, from his blog *Find What Works* (Algosos, 2010)

'It's a brilliant intellectual community, this little slice of the world that is our visible college... But I am greedy. I want more. I would like a larger college, an invisible college, of more people to talk to, pointing me to more interesting things. People whose views and opinions I can react to, and who will react to my reasoned and well-thought-out opinions, and to my unreasoned and off-the-cuff ones as well... With the arrival of Web logging, I have been able to add such people to those I bump into — in a virtual sense — every week.'

J. Bradford DeLong, 'The Invisible College,'
The Chronicle of Higher Education (DeLong, 2006: 8)

Recent years have seen an explosion of Internet-based communication and publishing forums, ranging from Facebook and Twitter to more traditional websites.¹ These have dramatically lowered the barriers to producing and distributing content, and people can now easily share information, experiences, perspectives, artistic creations — and almost anything else — with their fellow Internet users around the world. Some decry this proliferation of online publishing as chaotic, overwhelming, rife with minutiae, and lacking in standards. Others claim it heralds the emergence of a more democratic, inclusive world of free speech, public debate, open exchange of knowledge, and global collaboration.

This paper will consider these divergent claims with regard to one popular form of online publishing, the blog or weblog, and specifically those blogs concerned with issues of global poverty and international development.² Today's students and practitioners of development, and members of the public, can choose from a vast array of development-related blogs, ranging from travelogues and personal accounts by field workers to in-depth analysis by development experts. But who are these bloggers, and who reads their blogs? What topics do they discuss? What are the norms and culture of the development blogosphere, and how are these established and enforced? Does the blogosphere

contribute to more open sharing of knowledge and help democratize development discourse, or simply provide a new platform for already dominant perspectives, or some combination of both?

In analysing the international development blogosphere, I will draw from two theoretical frameworks in order to conceptualise the blogosphere first as a public sphere for debating issues of public interest (Habermas, 1989, 1991; Eliasoph, 1998; Fraser, 2007; Barlow, 2008); and second, as a community of experts ('invisible college') for creating and verifying knowledge and expertise (Knorr-Cetina 1999, 2007; DeLong 2006; Wagner, 2008; Fourcade, 2009). After briefly outlining these theoretical frameworks and reviewing the research methodology, I will provide an overview of the blogosphere and some preliminary ideas of what makes blogs different from other forms of publication and discussion. I will then present a case study of one debate that exploded across many development blogs in April-May 2010. I analyse this conversation to better understand who is included and excluded from the blogosphere; what forms of expertise are valued; what status differentials are evident; and what norms and practices are at work. The goal is to shed light on the blogosphere as an alternative forum for discussion and debate; to contribute to theory on public spheres and knowledge communities; and to help the development community to better understand what the emergence of a vibrant blogosphere means for them.

Theoretical Framework

The blogosphere can be conceptualised as both a public sphere and an invisible college.³ As a public sphere, it is where people gather to discuss and debate issues of public interest (Habermas, 1989, 1991). A public sphere may be physical or virtual (Barlow 2008; Calhoun, 2004) or it may be enacted through social interaction, therefore 'exist[ing] *only between* people, and com[ing] into being when people speak public-spiritedly,' (Eliasoph, 1998: 16). According to Habermas's influential original conception, a public sphere must be inclusive, must disregard status, and must 'problematiz[e]... areas that until then had not been questioned' (1991: 36). Critics have challenged both the legitimacy and

efficacy of real-world public spheres, arguing that numerous obstacles prevent people from participating fully and on equal footing, or limit the influence of public opinion on political action (Fraser 2007).

Some argue that the public sphere has become, in our modern era, ‘transnational’ or ‘global,’ which further complicates its legitimacy and efficacy (Fraser 2007). When issues are global, who must take part for a conversation to be considered inclusive? What does it mean for inclusiveness and parity of participation when skills and resources for engaging in an online public sphere vary dramatically (DiMaggio, et al, 2004)? Does the digital nature of an Internet-based public sphere, including the blogosphere, serve to meaningfully expand participation, or does it merely reflect and reinforce various status differences and, as some have claimed, ‘empower transnational elites, who possess the material and symbolic prerequisites for global networking’ (Fraser 2007: 56)?

The blogosphere can also be conceived of as an invisible college (DeLong 2006; Wagner 2008): a community of people who have, or seek, knowledge. It reflects and embodies a particular type of culture – what Knorr-Cetina calls an ‘epistemic culture’ – for creating knowledge, and for observing, verifying, or validating the knowledge that others create (Knorr-Cetina 1999, 2005).⁴ It is also a network of ties among people with various types of expertise, reflecting relationships of collaboration and exchange (Wagner 2008), and it may shape what experts define as important or legitimate, or what we believe qualifies someone as an expert (Fourcade 2009).

Methods

This paper draws on data from two phases of qualitative research: first, an inductive, exploratory study of the international development blogosphere and relevant literature, from which I derived research questions for the second phase, a case study of one unusually vibrant conversation involving numerous blogs.

Overview Study

I began following development blogs in September 2010, and did so more systematically from February-May 2011 (Appendix A). To identify a sample, I asked development professionals which blogs they read, if any.⁵ I visited the blogs they suggested, and others that those blogs linked to in posts or on blogrolls.⁶ I used blog rankings and search engines, such as Technorati and Wikio, to search for additional development-related blogs. I focused on influential and widely-read blogs: those frequently cited or linked to by other bloggers, or mentioned by development professionals.⁷ I also selected blogs that would reflect the diversity of the international development blogosphere in terms of content and authorship,⁸ and I specifically sought blogs written by Africans. I limited the sample to English language blogs and to those which discuss, often among other topics, African countries or issues. This excluded many vibrant blog communities around the world, but helped provide a more manageable scope of analysis with clear relevance to development practice.

I then identified and analysed blog-mediated conversations (Efimova and deMoor, 2005) involving blogs in this sample, selecting conversations that were particularly contentious, or that discussed blogging or involved negotiation over blog norms and etiquette. Sampled conversations included a debate over publishing first-hand accounts of violent conflict; discussions of professional motivation in international development and of the practice and influence of blogging; and controversies over gift-in-kind aid programs. For conversations involving a large number of blogs, I used search engines to find additional blogs that took part but were not otherwise identified through links. I stopped collecting data on a particular conversation when I had exhausted all relevant links, including trackbacks, or I had reached theoretical saturation (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 263).

In total, I read hundreds of blog posts from 48 blogs (see Appendix A) and used QSR NVivo qualitative analysis software to code a sample of 87 separate posts, along with their associated comments (sometimes dozens per post), on 28 of these blogs. I also pulled basic information about the

blog and bloggers from all 28 sampled blogs, and coded in detail the more permanent elements (such as the 'About Me' sections and blogrolls) of a subset of eight diverse and influential blogs.⁹

Case Study

After exploratory analysis of all 28 blogs, I iterated between literature and data in developing the following analytic questions.

- How inclusive is the international development blogosphere as a public sphere (Habermas, 1991; Fraser, 2007)? Who contributes to blogs, who follows blogs, and who does not?
- Does the blogosphere 'disregard status' (Habermas, 1991: 36)? If not, what status differentials are evident, and how do those affect the interactions that take place?
- If the blogosphere is an invisible college in which experts create, observe and verify knowledge (Knorr-Cetina, 2007), what kind of expertise is valued and how do people signal or evaluate expertise?
- What are the norms and practices of discourse on the blogosphere – what Eliasoph called 'civil practices,' 'political manners,' and 'etiquette' in public discourse (1998: 10, 21)? How are these established and enforced?

I address these questions with a case study based on 17 posts from 11 separate blogs, and supplementary sources, in which blogosphere participants debate a controversial gift-in-kind initiative. This case study represents a uniquely vibrant, wide-ranging, and influential conversation among the many that I sampled.¹⁰ It was chosen as an extreme case (Gerring, 2007: 101-105) in order to explore the mechanisms and characteristics of blog-mediated conversations, and because it offers insights on many of the theoretical questions of interest.

Findings from Overview Study: An Introduction to the International Development Blogosphere

The blogosphere is in many ways a microcosm of the Internet as a whole: vast, eclectic, and in constant motion. This diversity and dynamism make it difficult to generalize about blogs, but the

following sections provide an overview of common (though not universal) characteristics that distinguish blogs from other publication and discussion forums, as well as some observations on who participates in the blogosphere.

What is a Blog?

One common feature of blogs is the presence of the author. Bloggers typically place themselves at the centre of what they create, leading some to call blogs ‘narcissistic’ (Papacharissi 2010: 146). One study of a random sample of blogs (Papacharissi, 2007) found that the majority more closely resemble online diaries (Hookway, 2008) than citizen journalism. Even blogs that are predominantly focused on news, research, or other public-interest topics also frequently incorporate personal elements, including photos, humour, emotion, and biographical details, as in the examples in Table I.

INSERT TABLE I APPROXIMATELY HERE

Another distinguishing characteristic is blogs’ dynamism (Barlow, 2008; Nayar, 2010). Because recent posts are listed first and most prominently, blogs look different from one visit to another. Active bloggers may post more than once each day (for instance, bloggers Blattman, Okafur, and the AidWatch bloggers averaged 46, 32, and 39 posts per month respectively in 2010) and the most dynamic blogs also tend to be the most popular (Barlow 2008: 75). As one scholar of cyber culture explains, ‘If there is a logic and “spirit” for blogs, it would be that of *perpetual change*’ (Nayar 2010: 90).

This frequent updating and near-instantaneous publication means that blogs sometimes have the most up-to-the-minute information about an emerging situation, and often discuss news stories, research findings, and other topics much sooner than print publications or even other online sources. One study frames this as a ‘first-mover advantage’ (Farrell and Drezner, 2008: 17). Table II includes

comments on the value of blog dynamism as well as vivid real-time accounts posted by bloggers covering the April 2011 crisis in Ivory Coast.

INSERT TABLE II APPROXIMATELY HERE

Blogs are also known for their interactivity and interconnectedness, as seen in conversations and co-production that take place among bloggers and their readers and across blogs and other websites (Herring, et al, 2005; Barlow, 2008; Farrell and Drezner, 2008; Walker, 2006). Empirical studies have shown that interconnected blogs are only a small subset of the blogosphere (Herring, et al, 2005), but others have demonstrated that readership is heavily skewed towards well-connected, influential ‘A-list’ blogs (Farrell and Drezner, 2008). Because readers are likely to discover a blog through links or search engines, these interconnected blogs are more typical of the experience of blog *readers*, even though they may not be representative of the total population of *blogs*. That said, it is also possible that the networks of development blogs resemble those of US political blogs, which Adamic and Glance (2005) found were clustered into internally dense but distinct networks separated by ideology.

The interconnectedness of blogs is created primarily through hyperlinks, embedded in posts or listed on blog sidebars. Links enrich the experience of readers by leading them to new sources of information or to interest-based communities online. Links are also an important tool for bloggers to collectively create, elaborate upon, and evaluate ideas and information, and are the connections that facilitate cross-blog conversations. Linking to another blogger can signify respect or give credit for content, and it also helps circulate traffic. Some bloggers go beyond cross-linking and engage in guest-blogging or collaborate on a group blog, as shown in Table III.

INSERT TABLE III APPROXIMATELY HERE

Co-production also takes place through the interactions among bloggers and their readers in blogs' comments sections (Walker, 2006). As shown in Table III, readers provide feedback, pose questions, and express opinions. Bloggers read and respond to these comments, and may pose questions to readers, invite input, or incorporate reader-generated content into future posts. Bloggers also read and comment on other blogs, and lively discussions among bloggers and readers sometimes emerge over the norms of blogging or the content or tone of particular posts, as show in Table IV. Interactivity and co-production on the blogosphere can be seen as characteristic of both a public sphere and invisible college: of interaction around issues of public interest, and efforts to create, observe, verify, or validate knowledge.

INSERT TABLE IV APPROXIMATELY HERE

Who Blogs and For Whom?

Blogs, like other Internet forums, are widely believed to open participation to a larger, more diverse group of people, but this claim is highly contested. In any case, there is little question that blogging has exploded in popularity and scope. By one count, there are now more than 160 million blogs on the Internet, with tens of thousands more each day.¹¹ This does not include newer micro-blogging services, such as Twitter. There are blogs on nearly every imaginable topic, from motherhood to celebrity gossip to obscure intellectual pursuits. The most popular categories of blogs deal with politics, technology, culture, and daily life (*Technorati*, 2011).

International development bloggers range from well-known experts (for instance, William Easterly) to unknown amateurs and those who blog anonymously (such as J. at Tales from the Hood). Some blog in an official capacity while others include disclaimers that their blogs are unconnected to

their employers. Bloggers represent nearly all countries, regions, and demographic groups, and they blog in dozens of languages (Kumar, et al, 2004; China Internet Network Information Center, 2007). Of the 28 blogs sampled for this paper, eight are affiliated with an organization and six involve two or more bloggers. Among those who provide demographic information about themselves, four are Africans and 17 are from Western countries; and 14 are men and nine women.¹² Blogs also differ in status and influence (Marlow 2004; Song, et al, 2007; Murphy, 2010d; McKenzie and Ozler, 2011), and a blog's level of influence can also be affected by the offline status of its readers (Farrell and Drezner 2008).

Many bloggers embed tracking software that collects basic information about who visits their blogs, but may not publicise this data. Of the 28 blogs analysed for this paper, only four include links to readership numbers.¹³ These four averaged between 2,252 (ClustrMaps, 2011a) and 21,453 (ClustrMaps, 2011b) visits per month in the last year.¹⁴ Visits came from dozens if not hundreds of countries around the world, but US-based IP addresses were the most common on all four blogs (between 38% and 49% of visits) followed by the UK (ClustrMaps, 2011a, c). Even Dibussi Tande of *Scribbles from the Den*, an African blogger, received 41% of his visits from US-based IP addresses (ClustrMaps, 2011d).

To assess the inclusiveness of the blogosphere, we also need to consider possible obstacles to participation. In principle, free blog-hosting software and user-friendly templates allow anyone with basic Internet literacy and connectivity to begin blogging in moments, but in reality there remain significant barriers. These often (though not always) correlate with socioeconomic status, and they include the cost or difficulty of connecting to the Internet, differing levels of Internet literacy, and comfort with the norms and practices of the blogosphere (Calhoun 2004; DiMaggio, et al 2004; Barlow 2008; Hargittai and Hinnanti 2008; Raftree, 2010b). Even people with high-quality Internet access and who are reasonably Internet-savvy may find the blogosphere bewildering (Barlow 2008).

Findings from Case Study: The One Million Shirts Controversy

From time to time, the blogosphere explodes with passion, outrage, or heated debate around a single issue. In April 2010, a young American entrepreneur launched a new philanthropic endeavour: to collect one million donated t-shirts and send them to Africa (Anfeld, 2010). On April 27, the initiative was reported on Mashable, an extremely popular technology blog (Elliott, 2010). A hashtag, #1millionshirts, was created on Twitter,¹⁵ and hundreds if not thousands of people weighed in.¹⁶ Although the majority responded positively (Sadler, 2010c) there was resounding and often scathing criticism from the international development and African diaspora communities.¹⁷ One prominent development blogger dubbed it ‘one of the worst advocacy ideas of the year’ (J., as quoted in Easterly, 2010) and an African blogger called it the ‘1 millionth stupid idea by wannabe do gooders’ (Ruge, 2010a).

As the debate caught fire, dozens if not hundreds of development professionals, Africans, and others commented online or via Twitter. The initiative’s founder responded in tweets, online videos, and comments on his and other blogs. On April 30, just three days after the project first caught widespread public attention, the founder and several others participated in an open roundtable discussion via Skype and teleconference, in order to discuss how the project might be improved (Murphy, 2010a). On May 12, TIME reported on the debate (Wadham, 2010). Over the next three months, in response to critics, One Million Shirts revised its project, invited a few of blogger-critics to serve as advisors, and eventually closed down entirely (Sadler, 2010d, e).

During the most frenetic days of the debate, several participants called it revolutionary and a new paradigm for transparency and participation in development. As one blogger – initially one of the loudest critics and later one of those invited to help advise the initiative – wrote on May 2:

‘For the first time... social media, philanthropy, development, accountability, logistics, common sense, top-down solutions, and recipient voices all collided in spectacular fashion. Right out in the open. A project was launched, summarily bashed, killed and redirected in the span of 70 hours... The conversation that started with a single tweet,

turned into an avalanche of blogs ripe with disdain from the aid corner for yet another ill-conceived top-down, western-driven project. The conversation migrated from 140 characters of quibbles into full analytical blog posts, rants, and well-reasoned open letters' (Ruge, 2010a).

An expert on technology for development at UNICEF blogged that 'this is how realtime information will inform the future of development work' (Fabian, 2010).

Revolutionary or not, this was certainly a uniquely influential moment for the international development blogosphere, when a discussion online not only caught the attention of professionals and lay people around the world, but directly affected practice. What does this case study suggest about the blogosphere as an alternative representation of international development? Does it resemble a public sphere, a knowledge community, neither, or both? Who was included and excluded from the debate? How did participants signal their own expertise or evaluate the expertise of others, and how did that expertise and other factors affect participants' status within the debate? What norms and practices of the development blogosphere were visible in this process?

'Who Speaks for Whom'¹⁸: Inclusion, Exclusion, and the Missing Million Recipients

Though it is hard to determine exact numbers, the debate over One Million Shirts almost certainly involved a larger and more diverse group of people than a typical project consultation. Bloggers posted at least 62 separate posts, and One Million Shirts posted at least four in response (Schimmelpfennig, 2010a). Individual posts often drew dozens of comments, though these included repeat contributions by the same commenters, and even more people participated via Twitter. The debate involved many development professionals, though perhaps an atypical subset (Barder, 2010; Thorpe, 2010b). It also involved a number of Africans, on the continent and in the diaspora, and others living in or with some connection to African countries (African T-Shirt Company, 2010; Loomnie, 2010; Ruge, 2010a, b; Murphy, 2010a; Beye, 2011). One African blogger wrote that, 'For the first time, the voices of individual Africans were heard' (Ruge, 2010a).

On the other hand, participation by a few people of African descent does not necessarily make the debate inclusive (Raftree, 2010b; Loomnie, 2010). The Africans who participated were an elite group: they read and wrote in English, had access to the Internet or Twitter, and were sufficiently savvy and connected to hear about the debate, understand its parameters, and feel confident to engage. Many were members of the African diaspora living in the US or Europe. As mentioned earlier, significant barriers to online participation still exist, even more so in poor communities in the developing world (Calhoun 2004; DiMaggio, et al 2004; Barlow 2008; Hargittai and Hinnanti 2008; Raftree, 2010b). Technical jargon and programmatic complexity can also make it difficult for non-professionals to participate in debates over development. (Indeed, it is possible that the One Million Shirts debate caught fire in part because it was relatively straightforward to understand).

Notably absent from this debate were any of the people meant to benefit from the initiative. One blogger called this absence the 'elephant in the room' (Raftree, 2010b) and she and others asked what might have been different had the project's beneficiaries been involved in the conversation, pointing out that many individuals and communities in poor countries would have gladly accepted the donated shirts (Loomnie, 2010; Beye, 2011). This highlights the paradox that while development professionals may aspire to give beneficiaries a say in the design and implementation of development projects, they must also acknowledge that beneficiaries' preferences may contradict proven 'best practices' (Raftree, 2010b; Thorpe, 2010c). As the popular anonymous blogger J. asked, 'How and on what bases do we decide when to privilege the voice of aid recipients over the experience of aid providers, and vice versa?' (J, 2010d).

Thus, the One Million Shirts controversy sparked a broader discussion about whether blogs and social media might fundamentally change the nature of transparency, accountability, and participation in international development – in other words, how they might create a more inclusive public sphere – and whether opening development projects to public scrutiny online may require those who currently

hold power in the industry to relinquish some control (Morealtitude, 2010; @booksquirm, 2010). Ultimately, the legitimacy of a public sphere depends on both its inclusiveness and the parity of communication and influence among participants (Fraser, 2007).

Who Listens to Whom: Expertise and Status in a Virtual Debate

The online conversation about One Million Shirts reveals that certain forms of expertise were valued by bloggers and blog commenters, and that participants who were perceived as experts enjoyed higher status in the debate. In fact, the relative openness of the blogosphere – the very characteristics that make it more inclusive of a variety of voices – may heighten the importance of signalling expertise. Because anyone may take part, participants must devise ways to distinguish among the multitude of perspectives and choose which viewpoints to weigh more strongly.

Specifically, two types of expertise were valued most in the One Million Shirts debate, as shown in the examples in Table V: expertise gleaned through experience in the field of development, and expertise based on African identity or close familiarity.¹⁹ Participants took pains to signal one or both of these types of expertise and explicitly referenced the expertise of others as evidence of the validity of their arguments. The One Million Shirts founder, in contrast, was portrayed as naïve and ignorant because he lacked any experience in development or in Africa (Wadham, 2010).

Some participants argued that the views of Africans and development experts should outweigh the views of people who lack this expertise. Noting that the majority of people responded positively to his project and only a minority criticized it, the One Million Shirts founder asked, ‘Does the 80/20 rule apply here? Would you just say that all of the people saying good things don’t know what they’re talking about? And because someone has a blog and has been somewhere or done something in Africa at one time, they are right?’ (Sadler, 2010c). Several people responded similarly to this commenter:

‘With all due respect, Jason, the answer is Yes. Those 20 people and 60 comments probably DO mean a whole lot more than those 600 people commending you... That’s because those 20 people aren’t just people with blogs who’ve “done something in Africa at one time.” They’re people who have dedicated their lives to aid work, to learning what

works and what doesn't in international development, and they're people who ARE African, and can tell you firsthand what is needed in their individual communities' (Becky, 2010).

From this view, the international development blogosphere looks much less like a Habermasian public sphere that 'disregard[s] status' (1991: 36) and more like a knowledge community in which debates occur among experts.

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Sarcasm, Outrage, and Constructive Criticism: Norms and Practices on Display and Under Debate

The One Million Shirts debate not only reveals some of the norms and practices of the international development blogosphere, but also how these are established, negotiated, and enforced. In particular, two sets of norms are explicitly discussed: a widely-shared norm privileging transparent and open public discussion, and contested norms that define the appropriate tone or style for blogging. Together, these examples demonstrate how participants in the blogosphere work to 'create and enforce manners for political conversation' (Eliasoph 1998: 10).

When criticism of his initiative first emerged, the One Million Shirts founder responded by asking people to take the discussion offline (Sadler, 2010b; Shaikh, 2010). This challenged one of the core norms of the blogging community: that discussions of public interest should take place in public, visible to anyone who might want to observe or take part. Bloggers rejected the founder's request that they email or call him directly, insisting the debate continue online. Their reasoning is explicitly normative. 'I am not calling. I am writing this blog post, because I think public discussion is important' (Shaikh, 2010). 'The conversations and debates about what is 'good aid' and what isn't need to happen out in the open: not via personal email or direct phone call' (J, 2010b; also see Easterly, 2010). The bloggers successfully enforced this norm, and the conversation took place in full public view.

The One Million Shirts debate also revealed a degree of contestation among blogosphere participants over the appropriate tone and style of discourse. As discussed earlier, some bloggers assumed a moderate, respectful approach (Anstis, 2010) while others were sarcastic and downright snarky in their criticism (for instance, J, 2010b; Easterly, 2010; and Ruge, 2010a, b; among others).²⁰ Several bloggers and commenters, including the One Million Shirts founder, objected to the harsh commentary (Sadler, 2010c, d) and the bloggers responsible wrote posts defending their snarky tone (Seay, 2010; J, 2010c; Schimmelpfennig, 2010b). Table VI includes examples from both sides of the argument.

INSERT TABLE VI APPROXIMATELY HERE

To some extent, sarcasm, biting criticism, and irreverent humour are common stylistic features of blog-based communication, not only in the debate over One Million Shirts but more broadly (Murphy 2010c) and this tone is part of what distinguishes blogs from other representations of development. However, there is no consensus in the blogging community on whether and when a snarky tone is appropriate or effective, and instead bloggers and their readers debate the norms of style and etiquette – as they debate most issues – out loud and in the open.

Discussion

During the One Million Shirts debate, the international development blogosphere behaved like both a public sphere and an invisible college. On the one hand, the blogosphere provided space for people to come together to ‘deal with matters of general interest’ (Habermas 1989a: 231) and to ‘speak public-spiritedly’ (Eliasoph, 1998: 10). As Fraser predicted, however, the transnational nature of this public sphere complicated its legitimacy and efficacy (2007). The blog-based debate over One Million Shirts included a large number and variety of voices, but it also unintentionally excluded any of the

actual beneficiaries. In principle the debate was open and transparent, and bloggers firmly defended this norm, but in reality most participants were members of a sophisticated global elite. Despite claims that it heralded a new paradigm (Fabian, 2010; Ruge, 2010a), the debate seemed instead to privilege existing status markers, particularly professional credentials and experience. The inclusion of African identity as a source of expertise could prove more revolutionary, but the relative paucity of African voices in this case – and the absence of the project’s intended beneficiaries – meant that potential was not tested. In the end, the debate proved effective in changing the practices of one organisation, but many others continue to engage in similar gift-in-kind schemes.²¹

On the other hand, the participants in One Million Shirts acted in some ways as members of an invisible college. One blogger and expert in both development and information technology, for instance, described the One Million Shirts conversation not only as public debate, but also an exercise in creating and synthesizing knowledge:

‘... A development concept has been aired. It has been discussed. Literature has been created around it. Sources cited. Histories referenced. A community built. Real-time input, from “the field” has just become an actor in “aid/charity/development.” Voices from places which otherwise would never be represented spoke. People in “the place” (“Africa”) where the “aid” was going got to weigh in. Experts who had not met each other were able to share experience, synthesize and create new literature on giving, aid, and development theory.’ (Fabian, 2010).

Ultimately, the slice of the blogosphere sampled here may be best understood as an elite, knowledge-based public sphere:²² inclusive of a wide array of voices, but with many populations excluded; addressing issues of public interest, but in a way that privileges certain forms of expertise; inviting input from anyone who wishes to engage, but also acting to verify and reject those ideas that the high-status participants deem substandard. The norms that emerge also reflect this hybrid between a public sphere and invisible college; for instance, discussions are interactive and happen openly, as in a public sphere, but viewpoints are given differing weights according to the perceived expertise of their proponents.

The role of online forums in the creation and evaluation of knowledge for development will continue to evolve, and further research to better understand these forums and their influence on development practice is worthwhile and sorely needed. A recent study of economics blogs provides an important contribution to this topic (McKenzie and Ozler, 2011), but there are many possible directions for future work. For instance, network analysis could be used to map the blogosphere's structure and pathways of influence and collaboration. Studies of how information and ideas move between the blogosphere and offline communities – such as local media outlets or classrooms, conferences, and meetings – would help us better understand blogs' influence. Scholars of social movements will also find rich material on the blogosphere, as some have found among other Internet communication technologies (Luo, et al 2011; Schussman and Earl 2004; and Yang and Calhoun 2007). Finally, further research on the norms and practices of the blogosphere – and on how such norms are negotiated and enforced – could yield greater insight into the nature of public discourse in an increasingly digital and global age.

Conclusion

The blogosphere has emerged as a vibrant new forum for creating and disseminating knowledge and for debating the practice of development. It differs in important ways from other arenas in which development is discussed: it has the potential, in at least some circumstances, to involve a larger and more diverse array of voices; it is more interactive and dynamic; and it is more flexible in content, tone, and style. It also has important limitations regarding its inclusiveness, the parity of participation, and its effectiveness in influencing policy and practice. Proponents of Internet-based forums, including blogs, have high hopes that they will be great levellers, allowing more people to participate in public discourse and on a more equal footing, and facilitating collaboration and exchange of knowledge across national, cultural, and even linguistic boundaries. Others have suggested that the blogosphere merely provides a new venue for elite dominance. This study shows that both are right. For now, the blogosphere is open

to broad participation but privileges certain forms of expertise, and it remains dominated by a sophisticated and wired global elite.

APPENDIX A: Blogroll

This table lists the blogs I followed while preparing this paper and all blogs sampled for the analysis. Most are concerned with international development, but a few cover other topics. This list should not be considered comprehensive or representative, nor should it be seen as an endorsement.

Blog Name	URL
...My heart's in Accra	http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/
A View from the Cave	http://www.aviewfromthecave.com/
Admitting Failure	http://www.admittingfailure.com/
Aid Thoughts	http://aidthoughts.org/
Aid Watch	http://aidwatchers.com/
AidBlogs	http://aidblogs.org/
Black Looks	http://www.blacklooks.org/
Blood and Milk	http://bloodandmilk.org/
Can? We? Save? Africa?	https://savingafrica.wordpress.com/
Chris Blattman	http://chrisblattman.com/
Crooked Timber	http://crookedtimber.org/
Dani Rodrik's weblog	http://rodrik.typepad.com/dani_rodriks_weblog/
Find What Works	https://findwhatworks.wordpress.com/
From Poverty to Power	http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/
Global Voices in English » Development	http://globalvoicesonline.org/-/topics/development/
Good Intentions Are Not Enough	http://goodintentions.org/
Hauser Center, Humanitarian & Development NGOs	http://hausercenter.org/iha/
How Matters	http://www.how-matters.org/
Huffington Post	http://www.huffingtonpost.com/
Jimmy Kainja	http://jimmykainja.co.uk/
Koranteng's Toli	http://koranteng.blogspot.com/
la vidaid loca	https://lavidaidloca.wordpress.com/
Mashable	http://mashable.com/
MobileActive	http://www.mobileactive.org/
Nicholas D. Kristof	http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/
On Motherhood and Sanity	http://onmotherhoodandsanity.blogspot.com/
One Million Shirts	http://1millionshirts.org/blog/
Orgtheory.net	https://orgtheory.wordpress.com/
Owen abroad	http://www.owen.org/
Pambazuka News: Blogging Africa	http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/blog/
Pop!Tech	http://poptech.org/blog/
Project Diaspora	http://projectdiaspora.org/blog/
Scarlett Lion	http://www.scarlettlion.com/
Scatterplot	https://scatter.wordpress.com/

Scribbles from the Den	http://www.dibussi.com/
Siena Anstis	http://siena-anstis.com/
Stratosphere International Community Education	http://stratosphereinternational.ca/#blog
Tales from the Hood	http://talesfromethehood.com/
Texas in Africa	http://texasin africa.blogspot.com/
The Rising Continent	http://therisingcontinent.wordpress.com/
Three Avocadoes	http://www.nonprofitcoffee.com/
Timbuktu Chronicles	http://timbuktuchronicles.blogspot.com/
Wait... What?	http://lindaraftree.wordpress.com/
Wanderlust	http://morealtitude.wordpress.com/
We (Heart) Failure	http://weheartfailure.com/
Whydev.org	http://www.whydev.org/
World Society, Institutional Theory, and Globalization	https://worldpolity.wordpress.com/
Wronging Rights	http://wrongingrights.blogspot.com/

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TABLES

Table I: Presence of Blogger		
Blog Characteristic	Illustration	
Presence of Author		
<i>About Me</i>	"I have worked in the field of international aid, relief and development since the early 1990s ... At different times I have been stranded, mugged, shot at, deathly ill, upgraded, dissed, pampered, promoted, in the vicinity of bomb blasts, detained, reprimanded, micro-managed, empowered, and ignored."	J, n.d.(a)
	"The best jobs I ever held were (a) rock-climbing instructor, and (b) music store salesman. (I have become considerably less cool since that time)... My work ethic and habits derive from two years cooking chicken at a vaguely militant KFC outlet. After a manager resembling Hulk Hogan forces you to clean grease traps, you can handle pretty much anything."	Blattman, n.d. (a)
<i>Personal Accounts</i>	"Grief and loss are an intrinsic part of this expat life... Everyone suffers, even those that stay behind, the ones that surround you and watch you turn your back and walk away mid sentence, while you walk through the little foot path you've put together over that abyss ... holding one child on each arm, praying to god that you'll be strong enough to get everyone safe to the other side."	Angelica, 2011
	"Big news. A beautiful, healthy, perfect baby girl strode into our lives Sunday afternoon... At right are Mom, Dad and Amara on plenty of adrenaline after an unexpected (but otherwise uneventful) C-section, a whopping two weeks after the due date." (Posted with photographs of the family shortly after birth.)	Blattman, 2011d
	"So The Wife and I were blessed with a baby girl yesterday. A bundle of joy, 6 and a half pounds of loveliness, we couldn't be more elated. We'll have the outdoor (naming ceremony) in due course. Like all new parents, it's all about change, lots of change to our life, and an abundance of love."	Ofosu-Amaah, 2011
<i>Raw Emotion</i>	"I suffer in my flesh to see mutilated bodies on the pavement... I suffer in my flesh to realize that a life is worth nothing but a bullet... I scream, I scream my pain, and hear my body twitch as it is jolted by the sight of this waste, of this enormous human misery... I can no longer hold back the tears at the thought that the history of violence on the continent still has a long way to go, worse, it is now commonplace and natural..."	Njamkepo, 2011
	"As all our readers know, Kate and I ordinarily rely on humor to help us face the unthinkable horrors with which our professions bring us into casual contact. However, there are times when laughter deserts me... I am so thankful, every day, that I was lucky enough to have been born in a place where I can take the safety and survival of myself and my loved ones for granted."	Taub, 2011

Table II: Dynamism of Blogs		
Blog Characteristic	Illustration	
Dynamism		
<i>Frequent Posting</i>	"Web2.0 lore has it that frequency drives traffic, especially cross-linking, and eclectic helps. My favourite bloggers post very regularly but don't feel the need to do more than add a link and a comment to a good quote or source, or post a picture."	Cranston, 2009
	"Duncan Green currently blogs five times per week. The majority of the FP2P readers (81%) think that this amount is 'about right'"	Zdravkovic, 2010
<i>Early Source of News</i>	"I'm not really all that smart, I just read a lot of blogs and discuss them a lot on Twitter... I'll still come out looking like a genius for knowing what's going to hit the New York Times 2-3 days ahead of when you read it and forward it to me asking me if I've seen it!"	Raftree, 2010c
	"Thanks for the great blogs and feeds guys. I get a fairly large portion of my news through the two of you? I know, scary isn't it!"	Bengtsson, 2011
<i>Real-Time Accounts</i>	"We have heard sustained gunfire since 5am yesterday... Our water has been cut, and our power is intermittent... I hope that this insanity ends soon." A few hours later: "Things are escalating rapidly... It is nearly 10:30pm right now, and we are under curfew... I just want to get information out there that things are getting real bad."	Seay, 2011a
	"I'm hearing that it's the wild west in at least two neighborhoods. Killings in a factory outside Abidjan, wide spread looting, some of which can be found on youtube, and many deaths. On the ground reports are hard to come by, and are not making it into main stream news reports."	Urbanregor, 2011

Table III: Interactivity and Interconnectedness of Blogs

Blog Characteristic	Illustration	
Co-Production		
<i>Guest Bloggers</i>	William Easterly's <i>Aid Watch</i> blog, for instance, involved 8 guest bloggers from 4 April - 19 May 2011, including representatives of academic and research institutions and a few practitioner-bloggers.	Easterly, et al, 2011
	Blogger J. at <i>Tales from the Hood</i> , for instance, has guest-blogged on <i>Hand Relief International</i> , <i>On Motherhood & Sanity</i> , <i>Shotgun Shack</i> , and <i>Good Intentions Are Not Enough</i> .	J, n.d.(b)
<i>Group Blogs</i>	One of the most famous and influential blogs on the blogosphere, <i>The Huffington Post</i> , has more than 9,000 bloggers.	Wikipedia, 2011a
	International blog <i>Global Voices</i> is "a community of more than 300 bloggers and translators around the world who work together to bring you reports from blogs and citizen media everywhere."	Anonymous, 2010b
<i>Posts Based on Reader-Generated Content</i>	"I got a great comment from Gareth on my last post...: 'Do you know of any good blogs from local aid workers? I enjoy reading all these blogs from western - educated aid workers like myself, but... it'd be great to read something from a different perspective. Any suggestions?' He's right of course." She continues with a full post on the topic, followed by 31 comments with links to "local" blogs.	Raftree, 2010d
Comments and Conversation		
<i>Praise for Blog</i>	"I'm one of those silent subscribers on the end of your RSS feed. From NZ. Your post motivated me to drop you a note as a small gesture of support for the value I get from your blog."	Quinn, 2009
	"This is Sam Grant from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.... I really enjoy your blog and consider it great form of ongoing education."	Grant, 2009
<i>Request for More</i>	"I found your comment about aid workers as "translators" intriguing. Can you elaborate on this idea?"	Dotter, 2011
	"I agree with Rachel. I'd be interested to hear and think more about this concept."	Cothran, 2011
	"@Rachael & @Tanya I've been thinking about this concept since watching founder of Global Voices, Ethan Zuckerman's TED talk..."	Lentfer, 2011b
<i>Reader Opinions</i>	"[Quoting and responding to original post:] 'In Africa, we have lost the meaning of life, the desire to live is gone.' (Certainly not true, these are phases that we must go through. Look at Europe today an[d] imagine how bloody european history was. From Britain, France, Germany and so on. Don't think there is a quick fix for Africa)."	Cadmun, 2011
	"Changing the puppets in the French puppet show in Africa for their own interest has been an old unwritten French policy. The problem with many of us Africans, who cry foul to neocolonialism, is that we are just like the proverbial slave whose yoke of slavery was removed, but went back to his master to say he did not feel secured without the yoke."	Sam, 2011

Table IV: Interactivity and Interconnectedness of Blogs (cont.)		
Blog Characteristic	Illustration	
Comments-Based Conversations		
<i>Critique of Tone</i>	"I wonder whether you are being too harsh on the student commentator."	JB, 2011
	"I agree with JB. I think you were hard on the kid. It's like this. If you see an infant crawling on the ground, can you really chastise that infant for not knowing how to walk?"	Cook, 2011
	"@JB... I agree with you: while that students' comment was supremely unenlightened, perhaps I should have been harsh on her/his teacher instead?"	J, 2011b
	"As the student commenter in question, I think perhaps my comment was poorly worded and misunderstood."	ert, 2011
Debate over Posting Real-Time Accounts		
	"Escalating fears and violence thrive in low information environments. Explosive rumor is the greatest ally. The killing becomes self-fulfilling. I'm only suggesting that bloggers and commenters don't become part of the problem." (Discussing Seay, 2011a, quoted in Table III.)	Blattman, 2011c
	"Absolutely agree, but there's a difference between rumor and an on-the-ground report from a reliable and knowledgeable source, no? I didn't post those emails lightly; the decision to do so involved a lot of discussion with the source and a lot of thought on my part. Of course it's only one story... but shouldn't that information be out there, especially when it's consistent with reports from reputable organizations[?]..."	Seay, 2011b
	"Laura, I do agree with you that you had a responsibility to post what you heard. And I also agree that what you posted is not rumor... My only point was to make sure that other voices were heard as well."	Canavera, 2011
	"I'm not suggesting one shouldn't report what's happening on the ground, especially first hand accounts. I would draw a distinction between the first hand accounts and... posts that begin 'I don't know about if this will be technically a genocide?' My question would be whether these are... speculative and inflammatory."	Blattman, 2011c
	"I agree with Laura in that the information should be out there, but also that it should be taken at face value (meaning one report, most likely biased, and highly localized)."	Bengtsson, 2011

Table V: Signals and References to Expertise

Type of Expertise	Illustration	
Signalling Expertise: Development Experience	“For someone that has worked in international development assistance for a good part of my life (US AID, Peace Corps, PVO and PVO umbrella groups)...”	Weeks, 2010
	“I’m not an expert on T-shirt distribution in Africa but I do have 16 years experience working in international development, and my current work involves identifying and sharing good and bad practices in aid”	Thorpe, 2010a
	“I spent four years in Thailand working on the tsunami recovery and for over two of those I ran an organization that tracked all the aid coming into the country. I speak Thai fluently and regularly spoke with the entire gamut of society...”	Schimmelpfennig , 2011
	“It’s worth noting... that the tirade of criticism that the [One Million Shirts] idea has generated has come from a core group of aid and development practitioners who between them probably have more than two centuries of professional aid experience. In other words, people who know what they’re talking about.”	Morealtitude, 2010
	“The people who are criticizing you all have some serious credentials... These are some of the most knowledgeable people around on this topic”	Raftree, 2010a
Signalling Expertise: African Identity or Familiarity	“The following is based on personal experience and study, which, in the grand scheme of things, is nothing compared to the experts out there – most importantly, the Africans who receive aid and then the professionals and academics who keep the industry on its toes.”	Anstis, 2010a
	“As an African who grew up in Africa and lived in the context, I can attest to that.”	Beye, 2011
	“As an African, I beg the 1 Mil Shirts campaign dies a slow death”	Ruge, 2010a
	“Just a shout -out from one of the MANY t-shirt businesses in Africa saying we'd love an invite to the call” organized by Mobile Active	African T-Shirt Company, 2010
	“I was working with the Anglican Church in Lubumbashi, DRC... in the mid-1990s, when World Vision distributed boxes of clothing to churches in the town”	Scott, 2010

Table VI: Debating Style and Tone		
Criticising Snark		
	"Judging by the response Sadler got from a group of foreign aid bloggers, you'd think he wanted to toss squirrels into wood chippers or steal lunch boxes from fourth-graders."	Wadham, 2010
	"Why does everyone have to beat someone down? Why does everyone have to laugh and be sarcastic when someone, who is new to this world, is trying to help?"	Sadler, 2010d
	"I feel as though the dissenting points are right, but why knock someone down a peg when you can make the choice to lift them up?"	Dave, 2010
	"You are mean. You are shrill. Your tone is too aggressive. Don't be so snarky. You're not talking in a way that helps people listen. You should be nice to people who want to help and criticism isn't nice!"	Shaikh, paraphrasing critics; as quoted by Seay, 2010
	"I'd like to believe that humility and respect... should be a central tenet for engagement in development. The appropriate reaction then would be... constructive criticism... Coming out of the gate and calling someone a moron is only going to make them defensive and less likely to listen"	Stefanotti, 2010
In Defense of Snark		
	"You need a thick skin to work in international aid. If you can't handle some snark, you probably can't handle all the misery your project will put you through as it gets going."	Shaikh, as quoted by Seay, 2010
	"Sometimes using humor is the only way to draw serious attention to a problem. Sometimes you have to laugh to keep from crying at how bad an aid idea is, how poorly thought-out a government decision was, or how horrible a situation innocent people have to endure can become."	Seay, 2010
	"Sometimes the hard things have to be said. Sometimes – often, actually – those to whom the hard things need to be said simply do not want to hear them... Very often just saying the unpopular thing, no matter how nice you are about it, makes you 'snarky.'"	J, 2010c
	"Despite all my time and effort spent calmly and reasonably educating donors and impromptu aid workers about in-kind donations, none of this has had the impact that a few snarky tweets and a blog post from Tales from the Hood has had on the public dialog. What I failed to do in 13 months of calm and reasonable dialog, J. managed to do in one day."	Schimmelpfennig, 2010b
	"I'm sorry for the 1 Million Shirts dude... [But] I also think his hurt feelings are a necessary casualty in the battle to educate Joe & Jane Public on the fact that aid work is NUANCED and COMPLEX and I think that snarky, cutting, funny blog posts get read and disseminated and drive points home quicker, sharper, than hand holding and head patting would."	Rachel, 2010

¹ Facebook and Twitter are web-based social networking services in which users create and share content.

² A 'blog' (or 'weblog') is usually defined as an online diary with regular posts 'arranged in reverse chronological order and archived' (Papacharissi, 2010: 145). 'Bloggers' create and contribute to blogs, and the 'blogosphere' is the population of blogs.

³ Some scholars disagree and describe the Internet (including blogs) as a private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010).

⁴ Some of the development bloggers have themselves referred to the blogosphere as an epistemic community. See, for example, Algoso 2011.

⁵ This included former colleagues and personal and professional contacts, as well as people I interviewed for a separate study on the motivation of international development professionals.

⁶ A blogroll is a list of other blogs that are read by, or recommended by, a blogger.

⁷ I could not sample on readership statistics because very few blogs publicize readership statistics, and there is no agreed "A-List" for international development blogs.

⁸ Specifically, I included blogs that are more technical and others that are more personal; blogs written by unknown figures and others written by well-known experts; and blogs with critical or alternative voices, as well as those with more mainstream perspectives.

⁹ These include three of the most well-known development blogs (two of which won Aid Blog Awards in 2010); two popular African bloggers (one a winner of the 2008 Black Weblog Awards), and three other active development practitioner-bloggers. Of the nine bloggers on these eight blogs, three are women, four are men, two of the men are Africans, and one is anonymous. The blogs are *...My Heart's in Accra*, *AidWatch*, *Blood and Milk*, *Chris Blattman*, *Good Intentions Are Not Enough*, *Scribbles from the Den*, *Tales from the Hood*, and *Timbuktu Chronicles*.

¹⁰ I discovered later that this same conversation was selected by aid bloggers and readers as “Best Debate” in the 2010 Aid Blog Awards (Murphy, 2010b, d).

¹¹ These statistics come from *BlogPulse*, an “automated trend discovery system for blogs” run by the Nielson company. On April 18, 2011 at 10 a.m., *BlogPulse* identified 160,103,053 blogs, with 80,306 new blogs and more than 1 million posts indexed in the last 24 hours (*BlogPulse*, 2011).

¹² Information about bloggers came from their “About Me” or similar sections, or from other publicly-available online profiles. In cases where blogs had two bloggers, I included demographic information for both (if available). For larger group blogs, I included information only about the bloggers whose posts were included in the sample.

¹³ As of 15 June 2011, these were *Tales from the Hood*, *Wait... What?*, *Scribbles from the Den*, and *...My Heart's in Accra*. All use ClustrMaps, which provides statistics and maps the location of visitors on a world map (ClustrMaps 2011a, b, c, d). A few other bloggers provided statistics but with little background on the data (Green, 2009; Blattman, n.d. (b)).

¹⁴ These counts are of visits, not unique visitors.

¹⁵ Hashtags are words or phrases prefaced by a hash symbol. They are used to track mentions of a particular topic (Messina, 2010).

¹⁶ According to one blogger, there were more than 1,500 tweets on the topic by the afternoon of April 28, plus posts by many widely-read development bloggers (Fabian, 2010).

¹⁷ Critics called the initiative wasteful and potentially harmful, and objected to aspects of its messaging. They cited the negative impact of free shirts on local tailors and vendors; the cost of shipping; the portrayal of Africa and Africans as desperate and undifferentiated; and the use of photos of unnamed shirtless Africans, including many children. Many argued that clothing was rarely (if ever) a priority for impoverished communities.

¹⁸ Loomnie, 2010.

¹⁹ A few cited academic expertise, but this was less common (Joe, 2010; Loomnie, 2010).

²⁰ The term ‘snarky’ is frequently used on the blogosphere to mean snide, sarcastic, and sharply critical.

²¹ For instance, bloggers spoke out against several gift-in-kind initiatives in the year following the One Million Shirts debate, most prominently World Vision’s distribution of Superbowl T-shirts (Freschi, 2011). Some critics refer to these initiatives as #SWEDOW (‘Stuff We Don’t Want’), a term coined by a blogger (J, 2010a).

²² Thank you to Kathleen McGinn for the idea of an elite public sphere.