

New Media and the 'Anchor Baby' Boom

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The term 'anchor baby' refers to children born in the U.S. to undocumented migrant parents who are thought to have been conceived in order to improve their parents' chances of attaining citizenship. Though the term is considered racist and dehumanizing by many, it has recently entered into common usage. This study investigates the process by which this has occurred. We test hypotheses derived from theories of mass and new media using multiple data sources and methods of analysis, and find that the main sources of the anchor baby boom are partisan news websites. The findings suggest that new media may be influencing mass media by creating unique and unprecedented opportunities for medium-sized partisan news organizations.

Key words: anchor babies, immigration, new media, blogs, segmented news media, critical theory, media convergence.

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The term "anchor baby" is thought to originate in the related term "anchor child," which was used in reference to Vietnamese boat people in the early 1980s (Arax, 1987) and again in the early 1990s (Kelly, 1991). While "anchor child" refers to a very young immigrant who will later sponsor immigration for family members who are still abroad, anchor baby refers to children born in the United States to undocumented migrant parents who are thought to have been conceived in order to improve their parents' chances of attaining American citizenship. The term is considered by many to be racist and dehumanizing, as it implies that undocumented migrants are having children in the United States as a means to attaining U.S. citizenship, rather than as an end in itself (e.g. Lowery Contreras, 2007; Navarrette Jr., 2007).

Although the term "anchor baby" is offensive to many, there has been an anchor baby boom in cyberspace in recent years (Figure 1). An unconsolidated Google search of "anchor babies" yields only 10 results for the year 2000, about 30,000 for 2005, and about 436,000 for 2010, while a Yahoo! search over all years yields over 29 million results and a Bing search yields over 28 million.¹ The news database Access World News finds one U.S. newspaper article using the term in 2000, 99 in 2005, and 502 in 2010. In the early 2000s, the term was used almost exclusively on extreme right-wing and anti-immigrant sites such as vdare.com, but by late in the decade it had appeared in almost all mainstream news outlets. The term appeared on 441 blogs in 2005, and about 16,000 in 2010. In 2010 Twitter users were posting dozens of anchor baby-related tweets per day. Several anchor baby-related Facebook pages have been set up, in August 2010 the popular television show *The Daily Show* featured an 8-minute segment on anchor babies, the independent film *Anchor Baby* was released in 2010, and *Time Magazine* listed "Anchor Babies" as one of 2010's "Top Buzzwords" (Silver, 2010).

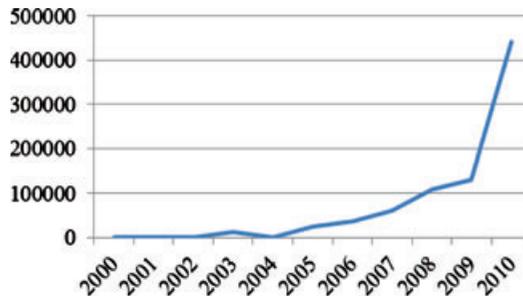


Figure 1 ‘Anchor babies’ on the Internet, 2003-10

Source: google.com, Jan. 4, 2011

In this article we ask how all of the above occurred. How did a term that was once used mainly by a small number of right-wing anti-immigration activists, and that was generally considered both racist and dehumanizing, quickly gain popularity? And what role has new media played in the term’s popularization? We begin with a selective review of epidemiological models for information diffusion, followed by a review of theories of media influence focused on theories of media hegemony, new media, media convergence, and segmented news media. We derive hypotheses from each of these four theoretical frameworks, and test these hypotheses using data from the Internet and news sources. We employ three main analytic techniques: 1) temporal tracking, 2) link tracking (Adar and Adamic, 2005) and web memetics (Shifman and Thelwall, 2009), and 3) page ranking (Adar et al., 2004). Using these techniques, we chart some of the main branches of the “conversation tree” (McGlohon et al., 2007) from which the anchor baby meme diffused across the “social topology of cyberspace” (Erbach, 2004) beginning in the mid-2000s. We argue that the main source of the anchor baby boom of, approximately, 2007-10 is the segmented news site *newsmax.com*. In tandem with *foxnews.com*, in the mid-2000s *Newsmax* dramatically increased the audience sizes of three previously obscure anti-immigration writers: Madeleine Cosman, Frosty Wooldridge,² and Michelle Malkin.³ Our findings thus suggest that new media may be influencing mass media by creating opportunities for medium-sized news organizations that provide a conduit for ideas to diffuse from fringe websites to mainstream news. Such medium-sized news organizations have thus far received little attention in research on new media (cf. Messner, 2009).

Modeling information diffusion

The epidemiological model

To investigate the role played by new media in the 2007-10 anchor baby boom (Figures 1 and 2), we borrow several concepts from the classical SIRS epidemiological model (see Gruhl et al., 2005).⁴ Applying this model to information diffusion, our first step is to treat the term “anchor babies”⁵ as a virus. And it appears to be a highly virulent virus at that: Being a vivid and affective term, it is more likely than abstract or scientific terms to be remembered and to influence behavior (Sinaceur, Heath, and Cole, 2005).

In the SIRS epidemiological model, a virus cycles through its host in four stages. First, hosts are susceptible (S), then infected (I) and infectious, then recovered (R) or removed, and then either inoculated or susceptible (S) again. The last two stages of the model have little relevance here, however, as information generally cannot be modeled as either terminating or inoculating its host.⁶

Infection threshold. Another important concept in epidemiological models is that of the *infection threshold* of a host (Leskovec et al., 2007). In the case of the anchor baby boom, we generally cannot

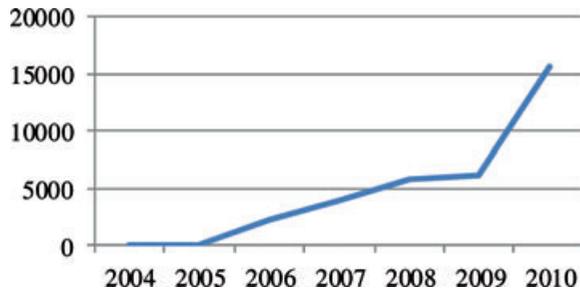


Figure 2 'Anchor babies' in blogs

Source: blogsearch.google.com, Jan. 4 2011

know firsthand when or from where a journalist or blogger first learned the term (i.e. became infected). Nevertheless, as we will see, it is possible to conceptualize the infection threshold qualitatively, in terms of a site's audience size and demographic and ideological profile, the site's age, and other factors.

Cascades and conversation trees

To model the diffusion of an idea across a large social network, in addition to epidemiological concepts we make use of several concepts from computer science and information theory. First, phenomena in which actions or ideas becomes widely adopted due to the influence of others in a network can be referred to as *information cascades* (Leskovec et al., 2007). Cascades have two main shapes. The first, *stars*, produce a wide, shallow conversation tree. That is, a star pattern is produced when an idea sparks conversation across several sites, but only briefly. The second, *chains*, are deep trees with little breadth. They spark fewer conversations, but they continue to be discussed over a relatively long period. Most cascades are somewhere in between these two extreme points (Leskovec et al., 2007). Finally, a *cascade initiator* is the site to which other sites subsequently link, but that does not link back to other sites. In terms of Internet influence, cascade initiators can also be referred to as "hub pages," "authority pages" (Erbach, 2004), or "A-list blogs" for blogs (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). One of our goals in this study is to identify the cascade initiators for the 2007-10 anchor baby boom and to adumbrate the conversation trees that grew from these initiators.

Drawing from contemporary media theory and research, we develop four main hypotheses regarding what types of media genres and outlets were susceptible to infection, what genres and outlets were cascade initiators, and why. We find it useful to think of these media genres in terms of a two-dimensional space, with the dimensions being infection threshold and audience size. Mainstream news sites have high thresholds and large audiences; amateur blogs have low thresholds and small audiences; and, as we will see, a number of new news genres can be conceptualized as filling the space between these two extremes.

Media theory

1. Critical theory

A major school of thought within Western social theory since the 1930s, the critical theory of Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, and Antonio Gramsci (How, 2003; Rasmussen and Swindal, 2004) focuses on the role of mass media in society and culture. Critical theorists argue that media monopolies (in totalitarian states) or oligopolies (in advanced capitalist countries) are able to achieve

hegemony—total control over what the public sees, reads, hears, and ultimately, thinks. Critical theorists argue that because of elite control of a “culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002[1944]) within each nation, cultural innovations come from the top down and are generally shallow: New cultural forms, such as new films and television shows, do not challenge the public’s widely held beliefs, nor do they encourage viewers to think critically about their society. Though critical theory may appear antiquated in light of the new media revolution and free-wheeling blogosphere (see Pensky, 2005; Landow, 2006), it is still the case that most online news originates with a small number of oligopolistic corporate media outlets, such as CNN.com and the *New York Times* web site (Norris, 1999; Pew Research Center, 2009). And blogs and social media typically trail, by several hours at least, mainstream newspaper and television coverage of major issues over the course of the 24-hour news cycle (Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg, 2009). In light of these findings, it is not surprising that to Habermas (2006) and other critical theorists, new media appears to play mainly a “parasitical role” with regard to traditional mass media, functioning mainly as an “echo chamber” (Baum and Groeling, 2008; Gilbert and Karahalios, 2009) rather than as a source of new information. Critical theory suggests that despite the new media revolution, large, oligopolistic media outlets are likely to be the main source of trends in public discourse.

H_{crit1}: Mainstream newspapers were infected prior to the 2007-10 epidemic.

H_{crit2}: Mainstream newspapers were initiators of the 2007-10 epidemic.

2. *Theories of new media*

At the time of the 2007-10 anchor baby epidemic the blogosphere was doubling in size approximately every 6 months (Agarwal et al., 2008). According to a Google blog search, by 2010 the term “anchor babies” appeared in approximately 20,000 blog posts, and as a consequence, bloggers and journalists have attributed the surge in popularity of the term to a bottom-up process of infection across networks of bloggers and their readers, and from there to the general public. Blogs have, in effect, a lower infection threshold than do traditional media outlets because bloggers do not face the sorts of content restrictions faced by professional journalists. Because the blogosphere is more conducive to the free exchange of ideas than is traditional mass media (Carpenter, 2010), it is possible that within the blogosphere at some point a critical mass or “tipping point” (Gladwell, 2000) was reached, and anchor babies went mainstream. There is evidence to support such a bottom-up view of Internet innovation. Gruhl et al. (2005) found that spikes in sales ranks of books can be predicted based on online chatter in blogs, bulletin boards, web pages, wikis, and other user-generated new media forms (also Bollen, Mao, and Zeng, 2010; Gilbert and Karahalios, 2010). However, there are caveats to consider with bottom-up accounts of new media influence. While blogs may have been an initiator of the anchor baby epidemic, because only a relatively small fraction of blogs are widely read (Herring et al., 2005; Leskovec et al., 2007; Agarwal et al., 2008), blog influence is not accurately depicted as a grass-roots democratic process.

H_{blogs1}: The blogosphere was infected prior to the 2007-10 epidemic.

H_{blogs2}: Blogs were initiators of the 2007-10 epidemic.

3. *Theories of media convergence*

A third argument regarding possible sources of the anchor baby epidemic combines elements of critical and new media theories, and posits that rather than being a result of either old *or* new media, the

anchor baby epidemic may be a product of the convergence of the two. Despite claims that new media posed an existential threat to old media (Ellis, 2002; Lehman-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor, 2004; Meyer, 2004; Lowrey and Mackay, 2008; Pena, 2009), new media has not replaced old media. Instead, both newspapers and television have adapted to the Internet, and there has been a great deal of convergence rather than mainly competition between different media forms (Bruns, 2008; Farhi, 2005; Allan, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Lasica, 2003; Lowrey, 2006; Reese et al., 2007; Neuberger and Nuernbergk, 2010). An example of old-new media convergence is the increase in blogs, reader forums, and social media tie-ins within mainstream news media (Thurman, 2008; Hermida and Thurman, 2008). These new forums for reader opinion have lower infection thresholds than traditional media: They provide opportunities for relatively uninhibited and unrestricted discourse—and they do so within widely read, influential media outlets. This combination—a low infection threshold with high visibility—might have enabled these new and expanded forums for reader opinion to play a critical role in spreading the anchor baby virus. Theories of media convergence thus suggest the following hypotheses with regard to the anchor baby boom.

H_{conv}1: Mainstream newspaper web sites' reader opinion sections were infected prior to the 2007-10 epidemic.

H_{conv}2: Mainstream newspaper web sites' reader opinion sections were initiators of the 2007-10 epidemic.

4. *Segmented news media*

A fourth argument regarding the main sources of the anchor baby boom does not combine critical and new media theories, as in convergence theories, so much as splits the difference between the two. Examined closely, both critical and new media theories appear somewhat implausible on their own. Because the use of the term anchor baby is offensive to many media consumers, it is unlikely that a large, oligopolistic, legacy media outlet would initiate the use of the term. Their infection threshold is too high: Using the term would damage the outlet's reputation and drive away readers and viewers. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the blogosphere alone was a main source of the 2007-10 epidemic, because the vast majority of blogs have minuscule readerships and few links to other blogs, and generally take their cue from mainstream media (Baum and Groeling, 2008; Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg, 2009).

To be able to initiate a major trend like the anchor baby epidemic, a web site would ideally have a blog-like low infection threshold, but with a much larger audience than most blogs. In the 2000s a number of such sites were created, including popular news blogs and "segmented," partisan news sites (Tewksbury, 2005; Baum and Groeling, 2008). Research on these new news outlets has often asked whether their 'partisan filtering' (Baum and Groeling, 2008: 346) of news contributes to audience fragmentation and political polarization (Katz, 1996; Sunstein, 2001). While these are valid concerns, we suggest that by focusing mainly on their capacity for polarization, research on segmented news media has been insufficiently attentive to these outlets' capacity for innovation. Because these sites' audiences are smaller and more homogeneous than are those of oligopolistic media outlets, their infection thresholds are lower and their appetite for risk is at least potentially greater (for a general sociological argument on this point, see DiMaggio, 1977). And these sites have certainly become influential: 12% of survey respondents in a 2009 Pew study claimed to have visited the website of an "alternative news organization." Sixteen percent of men had done so, and eight percent of women.

Because the term "anchor baby" is used primarily by American political conservatives opposed to illegal immigration, here we focus mainly on major right-wing news blogs and news sites. In a study of traditional news media and political filter blogs' coverage of the 2006 United States Congressional Midterm Elections, Messner (2009) found that conservative blogs "cited elite traditional news media

less than did liberal blogs” and “relied more on conservative media outlets in their election coverage” (p. 5). This finding lends support to the following hypotheses.

H_{segmed1}: Segmented news sites were infected prior to the 2007-10 epidemic.

H_{segmed2}: Segmented news sites were initiators of the 2007-10 epidemic.

Data and Methods

Our analysis of the etiology of the anchor baby boom is based on several web-based sources of data: the Internet as a whole, blogs, and news sites. We use Google, Google Insight, Yahoo!, and Bing for general Internet searches, several specialized search engines for blogs, and Google News and Access World News for news. Because we cannot determine first-hand the path information takes across cyberspace, we rely on indirect evidence of influence, and employ multiple forensic methods of “infectious inference” (Adar and Adamic, 2005), including temporal tracking, link tracking and ‘web memetics’ (Shifman and Thelwall, 2009), and page ranking. We also make use of historical and biographical research at several points in our analysis.

1. Temporal tracking

Temporal tracking is the longitudinal tracking of spikes and chatter in discussions of a particular topic in cyberspace (Grahl et al., 2004). Because information cannot be linked forward in time, recording the timing of information spikes (in this case, spikes in the use of the term ‘anchor babies’ on the WWW and in news sources) allows us to infer influence and also to eliminate explanations that do not match observed temporal patterns.

2. Link tracking and web memetics

Two types of Internet searches allow us to infer that one site has infected another. The first is link tracking, in which we search for sites that link back to a hub site. Links are relatively simple to detect and track because “variants are infrequent” as “there are many ways to describe a web page, but there are far fewer ways to point at it” (Adar and Adamic, 2005, p.1).

The second type of search is based on “web memetics,” which is a method of extracting useful information about the flow and evolution of “memes” (Dawkins, 1976) across the Internet. Web memetics involves using “[g]eneral, specialist, and date-specific search engine queries,” which “give an unprecedented opportunity to retrospectively track in detail the transmission and evolution of memes” (Shifman and Thelwall, 2009).

3. Page ranking

To determine a site’s relative influence, we use each site’s Google PageRank. PageRanks, which range from 1-10, are a “method for rating Web pages objectively and mechanically” that effectively measures the “human interest and attention devoted to them” (Page, Brin, Motwani, and Winograd, 1998). The PageRank algorithm is a core component of Google’s Internet search engine (Langville and Meyer, 2006). Page ranking allows us to filter results obtained from temporal tracking, link tracking, and web memetics in order to distinguish conversation trees’ main branches from their smaller branches. Unfortunately, using the site prchecker.info we only have access to 2010 PageRanks. By necessity we rely on these as a rough indicator of a page’s influence in prior years.

Results

1. Critical theory

H_{crit1} and H_{crit2} hypothesize that mainstream large-circulation newspapers were infected prior to the 2007-10 epidemic, and that mainstream newspapers were also initiators of the epidemic. To test these hypotheses, we meme- and link-tracked infected articles in mainstream US newspapers from the two years (2005-6) immediately preceding the epidemic. Before 2005 there were never more than six uses of “anchor babies” per year in all major U.S. newspapers combined, and in 2004 the term was only used twice. In 2005 the figure spiked to 27, and then to 32 in 2006. These are still very small numbers of infections compared to the widespread use of the term in subsequent years. But it is possible that because of national newspapers’ large audiences, these newspapers’ use of the term in 2005-6 initiated the broader use of the term later. However, most of the newspapers that published the term in 2005-6 were small- or medium-circulation regional papers, with the exception of *USA Today* and Los Angeles, Chicago, Newark, and Atlanta newspapers (Table 1). Where these smaller papers were infected, in almost all cases the infections were isolated single occurrences. Meme-tracking and link-tracking the 2005-6 articles, based on their titles, authors, and newspaper titles, revealed almost no influence on either the blogosphere or the Internet as a whole.

If critical theory is useful as an account of the origins of the anchor baby boom, then we would expect the term to begin to diffuse after appearing in a newspaper such as *USA Today*, which is the largest-circulation paper to have published the term in 2005-6, the number two newspaper in the US in total daily print circulation after the *Wall Street Journal* (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2010), and the only paper in this group with a major national readership. In April 2006 *USA Today* published a 966-word article by Wendy Koch that used the term (Koch, 2006). In the article, “Mixed status’ tears apart families—When illegal immigrants’ kids are legal, choices painful,” Koch discusses a bill sponsored by Republican Representative Nathan Deal of Georgia and 83 Republican cosponsors that would have restricted automatic citizenship at birth to children of U.S. citizens and legal residents. Koch refers in the article to ‘illegal immigrants who use so-called ‘anchor babies’” to establish a foothold in

Table 1 U.S. newspapers printing ‘anchor babies,’ 2005-6

Newspaper	Weekday Circulation	Newspaper	Weekday Circulation
USA Today	2,278,022	Columbus Dispatch	218,940
Los Angeles Times	815,723	Fort Worth Star-Telegram	210,990
Chicago Tribune	566,827	Boston Herald	201,513
Newark Star-Ledger	372,629	Austin American-Statesman	173,579
Atlanta Journal-Constitution	357,399	Fresno Bee	157,546
Sacramento Bee	279,032	Memphis Commercial Appeal	146,252
Kansas City Star	260,724	Tulsa World	120,583
Seattle Times	219,722	San Angelo Standard-Times, Wichita Eagle, Waco Tribune-Herald, Wilkes Barre Times Leader, San Bernardino Sun, Times Argus, Ventura County Star	Under 100,000

Source: *Burrelles Luce Top Newspapers 2007*

the US. After publishing the 2006 article, *USA Today* did not use the term again for more than 4 years until the the summer of 2010 when the paper used the term in six articles on Arizona’s controversial proposed immigration law S.B. 1070. Meme-tracking and link-tracking Koch’s 2006 article uncovers no evidence of its having any impact on the Internet. It is not mentioned in any high-ranking websites or in any immigration-related blogs.

Another example of the early use of ‘anchor babies’ in a large-circulation news outlet is an August 2006 article by *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn (Zorn, 2006). Zorn used the term in reference to Saul Arellano, the young son of an undocumented immigrant who had been given sanctuary at a Chicago church. Zorn advocated the mother’s arrest and deportation on immigration-related charges. In response to two readers’ complaints, the next day Zorn wrote in his defense that the term had appeared in newspaper stories since 1997, ‘usually softened by quotations as in my column.’ He stated that he regretted having used the term, and foreswore using it again.

Meme-tracking and link-tracking Zorn’s article reveals that it generated almost no discussion in high-ranking websites or immigration-related blogs, and was not part of a main branch of any conversation tree. References to the article and its aftermath do not appear online until well into the anchor baby boom, and even then there is not much. Thus it appears that the two hypotheses derived from critical theory are not supported: Large-circulation newspapers were only mildly infected prior to the 2007-10 anchor baby epidemic, and we uncovered no evidence that they were initiators of the epidemic.

2. Theories of new media

$H_{\text{blogs}1}$ and $H_{\text{blogs}2}$ hypothesize that the blogosphere was infected prior to the 2007-10 epidemic, and that blogs were initiators of the epidemic. Figure 2 presents the results per year of a Google Blogs search of ‘anchor babies’ in all blogs from 2004-10. The temporal pattern in Figure 2 is similar to the one for results from the Internet as a whole (Figure 1): Use of “anchor babies” increases slowly beginning in late 2005, and then spikes from 2007-10.

A fine-grained analysis of the data presented in Figure 3 reveals that many blogs were infected prior to 2007. A Google blog search reveals that 103 blogs were infected in 2006 (followed by about 1400 in 2007 and 2300 in 2008). In most cases, these were blogs with small audiences and low PageRanks, and in most cases “anchor babies” was used in an offhand way in comments. It was rarely used in an original post, and was rarely the main subject of a post. Nonetheless, $H_{\text{blogs}1}$ is supported: the blogosphere was infected before the 2007-10 epidemic.

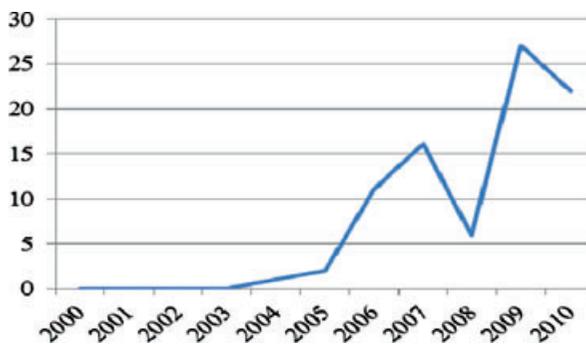


Figure 3 ‘Anchor babies’ in letters to the editor

Source: Access World News, Jan. 4, 2011

To explore whether blogs were initiators of the epidemic ($H_{\text{blogs}2}$), we analyzed the small numbers of infected blogs from 2004 ($N = 4$) and 2005 ($N = 30$). It is possible that blog-to-blog conversation trees developed from these early-infected blogs, and that these conversation trees initiated the epidemic.

The first influential blog to use the term in 2004-5 was mangans.blogspot.com, an anti-immigration blog. In a September 24, 2004 post, the blogger Dennis Mangan discussed an article on illegal immigration by conservative historian Victor David Hanson. Mangan used ‘anchor babies’ in quotation marks. Hanson did not use the term himself until 2008, and then only in quoting another author. Although the 2010 PageRank for Mangan’s blog is a respectable 5, meme- and link-tracking his infected blog uncovered no evidence that his 2004 post initiated a conversation tree.

The next influential blog to be infected in 2005 was vdare.com, a far-right-wing anti-immigration blog (PageRank = 6) that had published an infected “treatise” in 2001, “Weigh Anchors! Enforce the Citizenship Clause.” [Vdare.com](http://vdare.com)’s infected 2005 post is by Joe Guzzardi, and is mainly a discussion of “Illegal Aliens and American Medicine,” an article by Dr. Madeleine Cosman published in 2005 in the *Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons*. Meme- and link-tracking Guzzardi’s post reveals a star-shaped cascade: It was picked up by five medium-sized right-wing sites, all in 2005. The day after the original post, it appeared on americanpatrol.com (PageRank = 6). Then on June 12 it appeared on three more sites: michnews.com (PageRank = 5), unitedpatriotsofamerica.com (PageRank = 3), and the tiny blog inlibertyandfreedom.net (PageRank = 1). Its last-ever appearance was on stopthenorthamericanunion.com (PageRank = 4) on September 16, 2005.

Liberal blogger David Neiwert posted “Anchor babies away” on his popular blog ‘[Orcinus](http://Orcinus.com)’ (PageRank = 7 on March 29, 2005). Link- and meme-tracking this post reveals that while Neiwert’s blog is linked to and discussed by many left- and right-wing blogs, there is no evidence that the 2005 ‘Anchor babies away’ post initiated an information cascade.

By the end of 2006 over 100 blogs were infected. But we were unable to identify any one of these blogs as a cascade initiator. $H_{\text{blogs}2}$ thus receives at most moderate support. While blogs were infected early in the course of the epidemic, we found no evidence indicating that amateur blogs were initiators of the epidemic. Instead, in this case they appeared to function as an echo chamber (Baum and Groeling, 2008: 346; Gilbert and Karahalios, 2009; Messner, 2009; Benkler and Shaw, 2010), reproducing a sound originating elsewhere.

3. Media convergence

$H_{\text{conv}1}$ and $H_{\text{conv}2}$ hypothesize that mainstream newspapers’ reader opinion sections were infected prior to the 2007-10 epidemic, and that these newspaper sections were initiators of the epidemic.

Figure 3 shows infections in letters sections in all U.S. newspapers from 2000-2010 (we examined published letters only, and excluded blog posts and letters published in online-only sections). There are several spikes in letters sections before and early in the course of the epidemic: one in 2003 and one in 2006-7. While these infections are in newspapers with large audiences, these spikes represent minuscule numbers of infections. Meme-tracking the 2003 and 2006-7 spikes reveals that these were isolated infections; we found no evidence that any of the other 2005-6 infections spread at all. Thus while $H_{\text{conv}1}$ is partially supported because there was some ‘anchor baby’ chatter in newspaper opinion sections before the epidemic, $H_{\text{conv}2}$ is not supported. There is no evidence that these sections were initiators of the epidemic.

4. Segmented news

$H_{\text{segmed}1}$ and $H_{\text{segmed}2}$ hypothesize that segmented news sites were infected prior to, and were initiators of, the epidemic. General Internet searches of the years prior to the epidemic reveal that

the highest-ranking infected sites were neither mainstream news outlets nor amateur blogs, but were instead segmented news sites. Among these the site with the highest 2010 PageRank is foxnews.com (PageRank = 8), a large site that could arguably be considered a mainstream news outlet. But Fox News is still an example of segmented media, as its target audience is socially and politically conservative (see Collins, 2004). And though they are generally unfamiliar to audiences outside their target audience of political conservatives, other alternative news sites such as Newsmax (PageRank = 7) have become popular and influential (Smith, 2008; Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2010). Two recent studies highlight the asymmetry between the left and right blogospheres, and the reliance of the latter on segmented news sites. First, in their study of the “two blogospheres” in the US, Benkler and Shaw (2010) found that liberal and conservative blogs differed in terms patterns of participation, authorship, narrative length, and other dimensions. And second, Messner (2009) found that while both liberal and conservative political blogs relied heavily on traditional news media, liberal blogs cited elite traditional news media more often than did conservative blogs, which relied more heavily on conservative news outlets.

Foxnews.com. Although “anchor babies” was used once in an on-air interview with commentator Michelle Malkin in 2003, searching the foxnews.com archives reveals that the site was first infected on November 27, 2005 in an article on the bill proposed by Representative Nathan Deal that would have eliminated “birthright citizenship.” Then anchor babies was mentioned for the next two months in an “Up or Down” reader opinion section. In 2006-7 the site was only infected twice, and was not infected again until 2010, when Fox News began to use the term frequently.⁷

With a large audience and a significant Latino readership (foxnews.com spun off the website Fox News Latino⁸ in 2010), Fox’s infection threshold is higher than that of smaller segmented news sites. Because of its size and visibility, the use of inflammatory and controversial terms is more likely to be resisted by viewers and readers, as well as by influential critics. For instance, Fox News’s use of ‘anchor babies’ was brought up in congressional hearings in questions to the company’s founder and CEO Rupert Murdoch in 2010 (Parkinson, 2010).

Newsmax.com Newsmax.com, founded in 1998, may have been the most critical single site in the course of the anchor baby epidemic. The site “is now a news powerhouse and a must-read on the conservative media circuit” (Smillie, 2009; also Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2010). Newsmax’s audience is medium-sized among Internet news outlets (about 4 million unique viewers per month, 2.5 million subscribers to its daily e-mail alerts, and 1 million viewers for its online video channel: Santaniello, 2010; also Meyers, 2010). The Newsmax audience is also wealthy and relatively homogeneous, comprising mainly “very high-end, affluent, well-educated Republicans” (Lantigua, 2008). Newsmax’s success is based partly on a unique business model in which the company takes fees from financial services and health-related companies to send email offers to its affluent readers (Smillie, 2009).

With a medium-sized, conservative, socially homogeneous audience, Newsmax fills a gap in the newsmedia landscape between small-audience, low-infection-threshold right-wing news blogs, and large-audience, high-infection-threshold news sites such as foxnews.com. Compared with Fox News, Newsmax is not only smaller, but is considered “more of a cerebral operation” that publishes longer opinion pieces and attracts “people who want to go deeper than what they get in ordinary news and commentary” (Santaniello, 2010). By reaching a “highly affluent and informed audience. . . it creates a ripple effect by hitting ‘influencers’—opinion leaders in communities, business, and media, especially talk radio and television news” (Santaniello, 2010).

Foxnews.com and Newsmax do not appear to compete directly against one another (Smith, 2008). Instead, their relationship is mostly symbiotic: Newsmax leverages Fox’s stories (‘Fox News’ appears in Newsmax archives thousands of times), and Fox News regularly draws from columns and articles published in Newsmax. Newsmax has also paid Fox News personalities Bill O’Reilly, Sarah Palin, and

Dick Morris to endorse Newsmax products. Newsmax readers “are ardent fans of Fox News: [i]ts Web site ranks No. 3 among those who have watched Fox in the past week” (Meyers, 2010).

Based on a search of the newsmax.com archive, the first infected Newsmax article ran July 31, 2004. Then in 2005 infected articles ran April 2, July 12, and December 26 and 27. In 2006 they ran January 27, February 10, March 10, May 9, May 23, September 7, October 6, and November 10. In 2007 infected articles ran March 2, March 29, May 11, and May 15. And unlike mainstream newspapers, blogs, and even Fox News, Newsmax did not often use ‘anchor babies’ in passing or in quotes. Instead, in Newsmax articles and columns the term often appeared in articles’ titles and subtitles, and was the main subject of several in-depth pieces (e.g. Putnam, 2004).

From 2008-10 the term was used less frequently in Newsmax than it was from 2004-7. As Newsmax has grown, the site has overall “become less right-wing and ‘more moderate,’ according to its public relations representatives” (Lantigua, 2008). This may be partly due to Newsmax CEO and editor Christopher Ruddy’s exhibiting “a stronger commitment to the bottom line than to presenting himself as an ideologue” (Friedman, 2009).

Townhall.com and humanevents.com The conservative news sites townhall.com (PageRank = 4) and humanevents.com (PageRank = 6) are both smaller than Newsmax. Both of these sites use “anchor babies” very frequently, but searches of their archives reveal that they were infected later than Newsmax, Fox News, blogs, or newspapers’ reader forums.

Townhall.com was first infected in a June 13, 2006 article by Pat Buchanan, “The stealth amnesty of Mike Pence” (this article was published the same day in humanevents.com). Pence is a “conservative congressman from Indiana who heads the House Republican Conference and was the 2005 Man of the Year to the conservative Human Events weekly” (Buchanan, 2006). Faced with Pence’s plan for comprehensive immigration reform, Buchanan argued that what is needed is to “Cease granting automatic citizenship to ‘anchor babies’ of illegals who sneak across the border to have them. Take care of mother and child, then put them on a bus back home.” Meme-tracking Buchanan’s article reveals that it was reprinted on a number of conservative news sites and blogs. However, none of these sites focus on anchor babies per se, but rather on Pence’s 2006 immigration plan. After the publication of Buchanan’s article, no townhall.com pages were infected until June 29, 2007, and the vast majority of infected townhall.com pages are from 2010.

Humanevents.com published the infected article “What Makes an American?” by Michelle Malkin on July 9, 2003. Near the end of the article she argues that “the custom of granting automatic citizenship at birth to children of tourists and temporary workers such as Hamdi, tourists, and to countless ‘anchor babies’ delivered by illegal aliens on American soil, undermines the integrity of citizenship—not to mention national security.” We found no evidence that conversation trees grew from this article. Anchor babies are also mentioned in passing two-thirds of the way through conservative columnist Phyllis Schlafly’s January 6, 2004 humanevents.com article “Will Americans Support Another Amnesty?” This article was later mentioned or linked to on freerepublic.com in 2004, and federalobserver.com and theamericanresistance.com, although no dates were available for these two sites.

In a March 28, 2006 article in Human Events, “Stop the Insanity: Secure Borders Now,” by Representative Dan Burton, “anchor babies” are mentioned in passing near the end of the article, and in quotations: “so-called ‘anchor babies.’” Burton’s article was later mentioned on usmessageboard.com, renewamerica.com in 2009, worldobserver.org, headline.blogspot.com, and freerepublic.com. In a March 7, 2006 article, “Myths, Realities of the 14th Amendment” by talk show host Lynn Woolley, ‘anchor babies’ are mentioned about halfway through the article: ‘the 14th Amendment. . .provides many illegals with citizen children often called “anchor babies.”’ This article was linked back to by cairco.org, and reproduced in its entirety on f**kfrance.com. A July 26, 2006 article “The Crisis in Social Services: Taxing the Middle Class” was an excerpt from the book *Minutemen: the Battle to Secure*

America's Borders, by Jim Gilchrist and Jerome R. Corsi. Near the end of the excerpt, the authors wrote: “. . .the development of a Hispanic immigrant underclass is being perpetuated into the second generation, including anchor babies born to immigrants in the United States.” This excerpt was linked back to by a number of educational sites, and reproduced on citizensforaconstitutionalrepublic.com (PR = 4). Finally, in “The Other Race in California’s 50th District,” published June 4, 2006, *Human Events* columnist John Gizzi mentioned in passing a proposal “to deny citizenship to the children of illegal aliens [‘anchor babies’].” There was no evidence that this column produced a conversation tree.

It appears that while some of the infected 2006 articles from townhall.com and humanevents.com did contribute to the anchor baby epidemic, overall these sites were infected later than Newsmax. The majority of the infections of townhall.com and humanevents.com occurred in 2010, a pattern that suggests that in this case these sites functioned more like blogs than like Newsmax. They were more like an echo chamber (see Messner, 2009; Benkler and Shaw, 2010) than a cascade initiator.

Summary. We find evidence that supports $H_{\text{segmed}1}$ and $H_{\text{segmed}2}$. Segmented news sites were infected beginning in 2003, well prior to the 2007-10 epidemic. And there is ample evidence that these sites, especially Newsmax and Fox News, were initiators—if not necessarily the only initiators—of the epidemic.⁹

Discussion and conclusions

This study makes use of several recently developed, powerful search-based research methods that allow researchers to infer the paths information has taken across the Internet. However, as used in this study, these methods have their limitations. Because web sites are frequently destroyed, link- and meme-tracking can only find traces of past influence, so with these methods we do not know whether in the mid-2000s there were influential infected pages that were later destroyed. Our results are therefore biased in that they are based mainly on sites that survived until 2010, and that archive their pages. Another limitation of this particular study is that many of our searches are not especially precise. For our purposes it is sufficient to show that there is evidence that some sites and pages were cascade initiators and others were not. But more sophisticated methods could be used to analyze and compare information cascades similar to those identified in this study. Yet despite these significant limitations, our findings do suggest that new media may be influencing mass media in ways that have not received much attention from researchers.

Asymmetry and heterogeneity

Our analysis suggests that it may not necessarily be productive for new media scholars to think in terms of categories of “new” versus “old” media, as in the 2000s all sorts of combinations and permutations of new and old media emerged. Old media genres such as newspapers rapidly adopted new media technologies, and the organizational field between amateur bloggers and oligopolistic media firms became saturated with new medium-sized media companies such as Newsmax. The field of news media organizations that has emerged in the US is thus both heterogeneous and asymmetrical. There are all sorts of different types of news media organizations and news sites, and there are major differences between the fields of conservative versus liberal news organizations, news sites, and news consumers (Messner, 2009; Benkler and Shaw, 2010).

Social realism and interdisciplinarity

Finally, as computer science techniques for blog and link analysis become increasingly sophisticated, we hope to have demonstrated that qualitative methods of historical, comparative analysis of websites,

organizations, and authors can contribute a great deal to our understanding of the “social topology of cyberspace” (Erbach, 2004). As Benkler and Shaw (2010) have recently emphasized, the blogosphere is not made up of homogeneous units of analysis. Instead, different types of sites and authors are tied together through complex webs of affiliation and interdependence. In our view, link-tracking and related techniques are, alone, insufficient to reveal the social, organizational, economic, and ideological connections between sites, authors, and media organizations. Instead, to generate fresh insights and a deeper understanding of the interplay of new media and social reality, what is needed are creative mixtures of theoretical concepts and analytic methods from communications, political science, psychology, sociology and other disciplines.

Notes

- 1 Because the Bing search algorithm is not publicly available (Yahoo! searches are now based on this algorithm as well), it is not possible to know with any certainty why Bing and Yahoo! searches yield such large numbers of results as compared to Google searches.
- 2 <http://frostywooldridge.com/>
- 3 <http://michellemalkin.com/>
- 4 The epidemiological models of diffusion used in this project share many features with models developed in meme theory (e.g. Lynch, 1996: 9), although we find classical epidemiological concepts to be more precise and useful than memetics for this particular project (though we do make use of Shifman and Thelwall’s [2009] research on ‘web memetics’).
- 5 In all searches for this project we search for the plural ‘anchor babies’ rather than the singular ‘anchor baby.’ In some search engines results of searches for the former include the latter, but the reverse is not necessarily the case. Overall, we found the plural to be used more frequently than the singular.
- 6 Although we are not primarily concerned with information immunization here, it can be argued that early exposure to the anchor baby virus led to a kind of immunization of major newspapers such as the Chicago Tribune, which in 2006 published an op-ed piece that used the term (Zorn, 2006). Several readers reacted negatively, the author apologized for his use of the term, and the newspaper did not publish the term again until 2010.
- 7 <http://mediamatters.org/research/201002170038>
- 8 <http://latino.foxnews.com/index.html>
- 9 It may be worth noting that three writer/activists figure especially prominently in Newsmax and Fox News’s coverage of ‘anchor babies.’ The first, Dr. Madeleine Cosman, was a medical lawyer and author of numerous publications on medieval Europe, as well as on immigration and public health. She passed away in 2006 (see Cosman, 1976, 2005; Fox, 2006). The second, Frosty Wooldridge, is a journalist, environmentalist, and Internet radio talk show host who regularly participates in long-distance bicycle tours to advocate for immigration restrictions. He is the author of children’s books, travel and adventure books, and books on immigration policy, almost all of which were self-published (see Wooldridge, 2004, 2009; Wooldridge and Gabbard, 2004; Putnam, 2004). The third, Michelle Malkin, is a syndicated national newspaper columnist whose articles are published on townhall.com, nationalreview.com, and many other conservative news websites. She is also a Fox News television personality (see Malkin, 2002, 2004). Wooldridge and Malkin mention each other’s and Cosman’s work fairly regularly, and though their backgrounds and interests diverge, all three view immigration in essentially the same terms: as a threat to Americans’ safety and well-being.

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