# Ethosblog: Trust and Evidence on the Internet

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I want to start with three observations: First, newspapers and television don't have footnotes. Even newspaper science reporting and editorials, both of which almost always rely on other reporting, do not use footnotes to direct us to that reporting. In fact, in the case of editorials and op-eds, they do not generally direct us even vaguely to a reliable source for whatever factual claims are at the basis of their arguments.

This may seem like an insane comment. Who would expect newspapers to have footnotes? Yet when we look at blogs, and in this paper I want to focus on those blogs most comparable to newspaper op-eds, public affairs blogs like the American volokh.com and kausfiles, or the Anglo-American-Australian crookedtimber.org, we see something very different[1]. These and competing political blogs are rich in hyperlinks, the internet equivalent of footnotes. One of the most read in the United States, instapundit.com, consists almost entirely of hyperlinks, with short commentaries added by the blog author, University of Tennessee law professor Glenn Reynolds. It is true that online newspapers, the Guardian in England or Ha'aretz in Israel, frequently provide links for further information. Such links are not generally source links but exit links: I cannot recall a single instance in which the link was to the

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[1]By "public affairs blogs" I mean blogs devoted to discussing public issues, persons, and events.
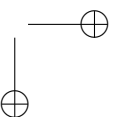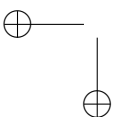
specific sources for the factual claims in the article[2]. So my second observation is that blogs, and in particular public affairs blogs, have footnotes, that is to say, they source their claims through hyperlinks.
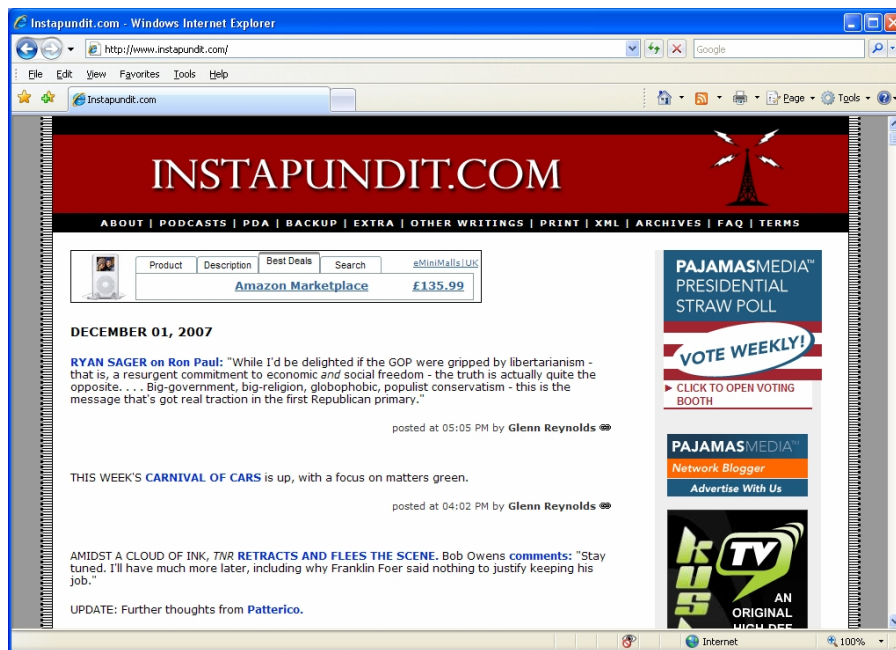


Figura 1: Instapundit.com, with hyperlinks (accessed 1 December 2007)

Third observation: public affairs blogs and online communities of other sorts have already played crucial roles in politics in the United States. Think of the repudiation of Republican Senate leader Trent Lott for the remarks praising then South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond: At Thurmond's 100th birthday party in 2002, Lott said that it was a shame that Thurmond wasn't elected when he ran for President in 1948. The problem: in 1948 Thurmond had run as a racist and

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[2]Contrast Richard Rogers, Information Politics on the Web (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 106.

segregationist candidate in the independent "Dixiecrat" ticket against the integrationist incumbent Democratic President Harry Truman. A blogstorm, a swarm of blogs drawing attention to and keeping attention on Lott's compliment, eventually produced Lott's resignation as leader of the majority Republican party in the United States Senate.

Another example, which I want to go back to at some length, is the exposure as forged of the celebrated "Killian documents" or "Ra<sup>th</sup> erate memos," on George W. Bush's military service as a young fighter pilot in the 1970's United States Air National. The CBS television program 60 Minutes Wednesday used these memos as the basis for a story, reported on screen by CBS's most important correspondent, Dan Rather. The story claimed that Bush had avoided duty and evaded his service obligations, while relying on his political connections (his father, later elected President, was at the supposed time the memos were written, the Spring and Summer of 1972, a former Houston congressman, the central figure in the Texas Republican Party, and Richard Nixon's ambassador to the United Nations). The story might have been quite damaging to George W. Bush, but bloggers exposed the documents as amateurish computer-generated forgeries rather than the 1970's type-written documents they claimed to be. The resulting scandal discredited the mainstream media for the remainder of the campaign, and forced Dan Rather into retirement. The scandal, as it fell out, gave by implication favorable attention to Bush, and thereby deprived Kerry of coverage which might otherwise have swung what was, we should remember, a close Presidential election.

In the United States public affairs blogs have, it appears, altered the course of political events. This has yet to happen in Israel, even though most Israeli households have internet access from home, and Israel is even a center for developing new internet technologies. In Israel the influence of media on public life is largely the influence of old media, television and newspapers, and even radio. The sole form of new media to which the political and media elites pays attention is comments on news stories, which in Hebrew are called "talkbacks." Perhaps I should
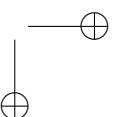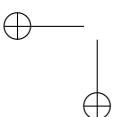
add that the influence of radio is due to morning drive-time call-in-shows, which one could argue are new media because these shows rely upon people talkbacking from their cell phones.
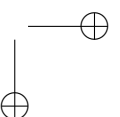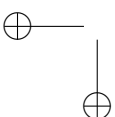
Let me go back to the observations with which I began: Newspapers and television don't have footnotes, while public affairs blogs are rich in footnotes. Public affairs blogs have already played crucial roles in events and scandals in the USA, but have not done so in Israel.

In the remainder of my paper I want to connect up these observations, or stylized facts, to two points from rhetorical theory. First, persuasion is largely a matter of assertion, not argument. Not only are assertions more persuasive than arguments: this is desirable, since we want our beliefs and actions to be reasonable and not just rational. My point may seem more acceptable if I restate it as point about politics rather than about rhetoric. As Walter Lippmann puts it – and we will be coming back to him several times "a code of right and wrong must wait upon a perception of the true and the false." [3] Insofar as political institutions see truth or correctness, they are largely engaged in sifting claims of fact rather then assessing arguments. As Lippmann writes, "useful discussion ... instead of comparing ideals, re-examines visions of the facts."[4]

Some examples: what mattered in the period immediately before the second Gulf War was whether Saddam Hussein had chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs. What matters is what are the expected net costs of global warming. What matters is whether the proposed new constitutional arrangements for the European Union will increase or decrease the responsiveness of Brussels officials to public opinion in Covilhã, Birmingham, or Leipzig.

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[3]Lippmann, The Phantom Public (1925; New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1993), 20.

[4]Lippmann, Public Opinion (1922; New York: The Free Press, 1965), 79. I discuss the greater weight of assertions in rhetoric and other areas of common life in "From Argument to Assertion," paper presented at "Perelman and Beyond: From the Rhetorical Tradition to Argumentation Studies," Tel Aviv University 7-9 January 2008; the paper is available on my website www.politicalontology.com.

Persuasion, then, is largely a matter of getting one's claims of fact seen as true and relevant. This is not, largely speaking, a matter of good arguments for these claims, because factual claims rest principally on judgments of observations and not on inference. Rather, as I have contended elsewhere, getting one's factual claims accepted as true and relevant is largely a matter of putting forward a persuasive character[5]. To quote Walter Lippmann again, "Except on a few subjects where our own knowledge is great, we cannot choose between true and false accounts. So we choose between trustworthy and untrustworthy reporters."[6] As Aristotle says in the Rhetoric, "Character provides just about the most powerful proof" (Rhetoric 1356a13).

I have made two claims of rhetorical theory, and these claims of rhetorical theory may seem to be in tension. On the one hand the speaker or writer must make compelling assertions of fact; on the other hand he or she is saying, "trust me, I know the facts."
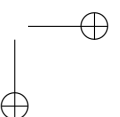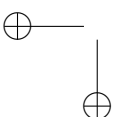
This apparent tension can be dissolved if we consider the three components of a trustworthy character, of ēthos, and here we can safely take our cue from Aristotle. The three components of ēthos are first phronēsis, or knowing what to do, having relevant practical experience and factual knowledge; second, homonoia: sharing the values of your audience; and third eunoia: sharing the interests of your audience. Just to make everything crystal clear let me give examples.

There is a failure of phronēsis if I, a political scientist and rhetorical scholar, attempt to persuade you of some proposition about the consequences of global warming – concerning which I know perhaps less than anybody else reading this. There is a failure of homonoia if someone asserts that global warming is unimportant because the future of the environment is unimportant, since we can all be presumed to agree that the future of the environment is important. There is a failure of

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[5]See Kochin, "Individual Narrative and Political Character," The Review of Metaphysics 55 (June 2002):691-709; ibid., Five Chapters on Rhetoric: Character, Action, Things, Nothing, and Art (Penn State University Press, forthcoming), chapter 1, "Character."

[6]Lippmann, Public Opinion, 143.

eunoia if a farmer from Siberia attempts to persuade his audience that
global warming is beneficial. This is because we can see why it would
be beneficial to him in ways that it would not be beneficial to us!

In terms of the rhetoric of factuality or evidence it is helpful to put
these categories in a diairesis:

1. phronēsis: knows the facts

2. Has the same attitude toward the facts

   a. homonoia: shares with us a sense of what facts are relevant

   b. eunoia: has the same interest that we do in the facts being
      whichever way they are

   (1) or can be made to be

       (a) since facts are fabricated (factum)

When do we resort to argument? Real speeches heavy on arguments
seem to aim to present the speaker as calm, serious, and knowledgea-
ble. In public life, one argues not in order to demonstrate the claim
for which one is arguing, but firstly, to show that one possesses ho-
monoia, that one shares the common prejudices or values that appear
in the presuppositions and conclusions of one's argument, or, secon-
dly, to demonstrate phronesis, to show mastery of the subject matter by
displaying relevant knowledge in coherently organized detail. Arguing
is thus a way of presenting facts and principles so as to show one's
character as worthy of trust.

To be trusted is to be trusted as a knowledgeable, unbiased source
of relevant facts. "Trust me" is a comparatively rare appeal. The only
cases I have found in ten years of work on rhetoric are cases where
the speaker has a long record of actions that demonstrate his or her
possession of the components of ēthos. In the United States and Israel,
it seems to be made only by former generals: who have demonstrated
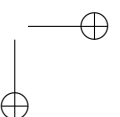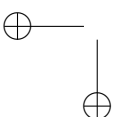
their knowledge of national security, or phronēsis; whose service shows their patriotism, or eunoia; and their courage (homonoia)[7].
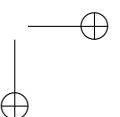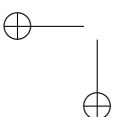
If people earn trust by presenting relevant facts, what does trust add to the facts? In my view we need the mediation of rhetors, speakers, writers, television presenters, because there are simultaneously too many facts and too few. We have within a few clicks of a mouse far more information that appears to us relevant than we can process. Yet we don't know facts we know are relevant, and we know that we don't know which facts are relevant. This is the import of the famous Donald Rumsfeld statement about "known knowns, unknown knowns, and unknown unknowns."

Thus we need guidance on the ocean of facts. This point was explored at length after the First World War by Walter Lippmann, and his set of solutions was institutionalized into the American policy Establishment. This establishment rests on three components: first, think-tanks and government research bureaus; second, objective reporting in newspapers and broadcast media; third, editorialists in that media who draw out the consequences of what is reported for their readers and instruct them which politicians or issues ought to be supported.

Let me go over these three components of the policy establishment that Lippmann envisioned and helped to create. This Establishment includes, in the first place, expert research organizations inside and outside government to produce facts, commissions studies of facts, and digest these studies for decision makers. Second, this policy Establishment includes objective, non-partisan reporters who confront decision makers with their failures in the light of the facts. The facts, of course,

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[7]See Ariel Sharon's major speeches related to the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the prerequisite expulsion of 5,000 Israeli civilians from their homes there; "Speech of Prime Minister Sharon at the Herziliya Conference," 18 December 2003; "The Separation," 25 October 2004; "Speech of the Prime Minister at the Herziliya Conference," 16 December 2004. What is remarkable about these speeches, along with all of Sharon's other statements regarding the withdrawal, is that they offer no explanation as to why the withdrawal from Gaza will serve Israel's interest but ask Sharon's listeners to trust Sharon's personal patriotism and judgment.

are supplied to the reporters largely by leaks from the experts or their political masters. "The ship of state," it has famously been said "is the only ship that leaks from the top." Thirdly, the Lippmannite policy establishment includes editorialists who draw the practical conclusions from their reportage for voters, and endorse candidates appropriately.

What we can see now about the Lippmannite establishment is that the primary mediation is institutional. Not the official who wrote or complied it, but the bureau or think tank stands behind the report. Not the reporter, but the newspaper, wire service, or television network stands behind his or her reportage.

In that respect the Lippmannite establishment is quite different from the academic and scientific establishments. In the case of "the media," it is made as difficult as possible for the viewer, reader, or consumer to get behind the institution to the sources[8]. The print reporter "protects his sources. "The television news network sequesters the raw footage from which the broadcast report is cut and edited. The wire editor for the local paper edits down the wire report without even an ellipsis mark to note what has been deleted. We, the consumer of these mediated reports, have no choice but to rely on the institutional reputation of the newspaper or television network that the factual claims in the report as presented are correct and representative. Most of what we read about China, say, in our local newspaper comes from a wire service. Yet not only do we not recall the name of the wire service reporter in Beijing or Shanghai for Reuters or AFP, their name often does not even appear in the reports: if all we had was what was printed in the paper, we would have a hard time finding out the wire service reporter's name even if we cared to.

To all this, public affairs blogs present a startling contrast. In general the web offers an alternative to institutional mediation. Blogs are

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[8]A point noted by Onora O'Neill in the fifth of her 2002 Reith Lectures on Trust, http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml (accessed December 2007). O'Neill does not discuss the ways in which it is functional for "old media" journalists to conceal their sources, and for that reason I find unpersuasive her arguments against such concealment.
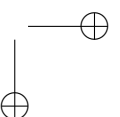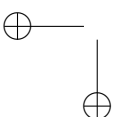
personal, never anonymous (though anonymity would easily be technically achievable if it were desired), though frequently pseudonymous[9]. The public affairs blog establishes authority by using hyperlinks or direct presentation of facts (often in multimedia format).

To take the simplest matter, selection from a previously composed story: because the reader can check the source against the quotation right away, the blogger almost always notes that his quote is partial, and may even hint at what has been omitted. Public affairs blogs that consist mainly of their own reporting do not generally protect their sources. Michael Totten (michaeltotten.com), an independent blogger/reporter to whom we will return, generally illustrates a claim with a captioned photo of the source who makes it[10]. This ought to make us wonder whether reporters protect their sources just in order to protect the sources, or also in order to protect themselves from refutation.

Like the scholarly book, the public affairs blog works by its footnotes, called hotlinks, but these footnotes, along with the site to which they refer, are capable of being continuously updated. In the case of some web resources, such as Wikipedia, are continuously updated. Footnotes are multimedia, linking to text, audio, digital or digitized photographs, and video.

Public affairs blogs have footnotes because they are descended from scientific papers. The web was invented at CERN, as is well known, in order to disseminate physics papers heavy in numerical and pictorial data. What we see in the blogs is a rhetorical scientization of political discourse: not just by bringing technoscience content into public discourse, but by putting public discourse into the form of scientific or scholarly discourse. It would be worth knowing whether this impor-

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[9]Even Wikipedia, which is impersonal (and somehow not even a corporate person), does not attempt to mediate institutionally between the facts and its readers. the Wikipedia community instead prefers editing to be done by named, almost uniformly pseudonymous, persons.

[10]See e.g. the photo of Lieutenant Colonel Chris Dowling that illustrates Michael J. Totten, "An Edgy Calm in Fallujah," www.michaeltotten.com, 27 November 2007 (accessed 1 December 2007).
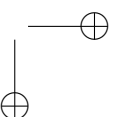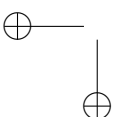
tation of scientific form makes possible a greater importation of tech-noscience content into the public affairs blog than we find in the op-ed sections of our papers.

What interests me today about these distinctions between the fo-otnoted assertions we find on public affairs blogs and the unfootnoted assertions we find in the newspaper or the television news program is their consequence for the relation between ēthos and evidence. In par-ticular, what we have seen in the last few years, is that the corporate ēthos of old media is not up to the test of the evidence. The most stri-king instance is the notorious Ra<sup>th</sup>ergate.

The time: a few days after the end of summer vacation, on 8 Sep-tember 2004, just as the American general election campaign was mo-ving to the center of public attention. CBS's star correspondent Dan Rather reports the existence of documents alleged to be memos from Bush's 1972 commander in the Air National Guard about his failure to carry out his duties. Given that Bush's opponent, Senator John Kerry, had been decorated for combat service in Vietnam, this could have de-termined the election. It turned out that these memos, supposedly ty-ped on typewriters in 1972, were in fact created on Microsoft Word for Windows. But how did it turn out this way?

CBS posted digitized photographs of what were supposedly photo-copies of the alleged memos on its website. The memos were analyzed by bloggers, most notably by two pro-Bush blogs, powerline.com and littlegreenfootballs.com, and shown to be reproducible microspacing for microspacing, kern for kern, superscript for superscript, using Mi-crosoft Word, while irreproducible on any typewriter known to man[11].

In other words, the claim by Lippmann that we ought to trust insti-tutions to process evidence is outmoded. The institutions, CBS news,

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[11]Technical issues related to the documents are well-covered in the Wikipedia article "Killian documents authenticity issues," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killian_documents_authenticity_issues (accessed 24 November 2007). The superscript <sup>th</sup> is the most obvious sign of computer generation to the layman, but other details of the document font are more compelling to experts.
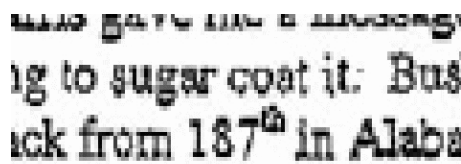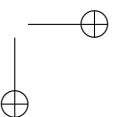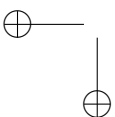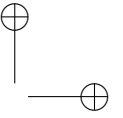
in this case, since the wartime days of Edward Murrow the most respected broadcast news outlet, went mano-a-mano with a bunch of "bloggers in pajamas" and the network lost. It is not just that the institutions are biased: the bloggers are partisan too. The point is that the old media's institutional mediation is now perceived by the public to keep us from seeing the facts through their bias. It is not just that CBS failed to get the facts right, which can happen to anybody, their institutional ēthos, with its commitment to many layers of editorial checking and judgment, kept the institution from blogging effectively: from adjusting their report to the evidence as that evidence revealed itself in real time.

Bloggers must win their reputation as individuals. In the Rathergate case the bloggers who won their spurs did so by reanalyzing evidence presented by CBS. But that dependence is gone: bloggers are no longer guys in pajamas but can be reporters in flak jackets. I find particularly striking the American reporter Michael Totten, whose blog on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war provided better reporting than that available from any other source.

Old media reporters are supported by their institutions; both in terms of their credibility, and, let us not forget, materially. Old media reporters get paid, and even if many stories are generated by stringers, it is every reporter's ambition to be salaried. Bloggers are supported by the anonymous public: Their credibility comes from their factual



Figura 2: The famous[th] ; http://truthandduty.com/documents/CBS0 01196.pdf (accessed November 2007)
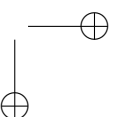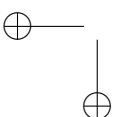
claims backed up by hyperlinks, while materially they are supported by automatically placed ads, donations, or by a university salary (generally paid by taxes) for academic bloggers.

The American Lippmannite establishment has thus lost control of the mediation process. The old media no longer have the decisive role in structuring public opinion, which means that public opinion is less structured, with more varied voices, and less common knowledge of established "truths" or shibboleths. Since the establishment is usually right, this is something of a mixed blessing.
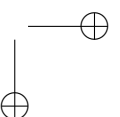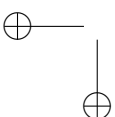
What I have been describing is an American phenomenon. Public affairs bloggers may have influence elsewhere, and I have heard that such is the case in China, where the bloggers are engaged in a perpetual game of cat and mouse with state controlled media and the state's internet censors. But public affairs bloggers have not, as I said before, had much influence on the course of events in Israel.

Conservative American bloggers like to claim that public affairs blogging has taken off due to the deficiencies of the liberal American media[12]. I would argue that the media is just as constraining in its gatekeeping function in Israel, but public affairs blogging has not been influential. There are political bloggers in Israel, but there are none of importance, in the sense that their are none who have had an impact on the course of events, so far.

In fact, Israel may be unusual in the extent to which the decisive shaping of public opinion is still done by newspapers rather than television, even if it is no longer the society with the highest number of daily newspapers per capita. (At the moment there are, I believe, six Hebrew daily papers, two which appeal only to ultra-orthodox Jews, and one free daily launched in 2007, Yisrael HaYom). The newspaper market in Israel is a mixture of the partisan and the objective: there is only one "objective," Lippmannite paper, the mass circulation Yediot Aharonot, which also is the dominant presence in Hebrew language net

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[12]See e.g. Hugh Hewitt, Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Your World (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

news, and has some English net presence also. There are two moderate-circulation partisan dailies, Ha'aretz, in which a neo-liberal wing and a socialist wing duke it out every day in the news and opinion columns. The neo-liberal wing of Ha'aretz is pro-peace process, and is part of the media establishment that centers around Yediot Aharonot, and the socialist wing, survivors of the old Labor Party daily Davar that closed around 1995, has views of the of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict equivalent to those in the Guardian or the London Review of Books, for whom several of its members also write. Competing for the middlebrow and lowbrow market with Yediot is Ma'ariv, slightly to the right of center but frequently anti-establishment. Both Ha'aretz and Yediot have a strong internet presence in Hebrew, and Ha'aretz also has a rich daily web edition in English.
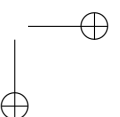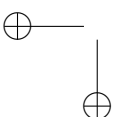
What is missing in the Israeli mass media is a conservative or nationalist voice as vigorous as the liberal and left-wing ones? Why, then, are there no significant Israeli public affairs blogs? I am going to be brief: Small countries like Israel have disproportionately large establishments, simply because of the inverse of economies of scale. After all, it takes a certain number of people to run an establishment, and those are going to be a higher proportion of the well-informed and hyperliterate in a smaller country

To present facts other people have not considered is to threaten the way things are going on. Faced with these facts the established elite has a conflict of interest: on the one hand that elite needs correct facts in order to go on, and on the other hand they cannot go on pursuing their projects if these projects are perpetually being called into question. This is an instance of what in my forthcoming book on rhetoric I call the tension between saying something that may threaten a preexisting relation), and saying nothing, to preserve a relation[13].

Lippmann speaks of people as acting on pictures of the world, as if the actions are consequent on the pictures[14]. A more philosophi-

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[13]Kochin, *Five Chapters on Rhetoric*, chapter 4, "Nothing."
[14]Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 16.

cally tenable approach, now that Heidegger and Wittgenstein have deconstructed the Cartesian mind and the concomitant "Age of the World Picture" is not that the actions are consequent on the pictures but that the pictures are consequent on the actions. New facts that threaten our picture changes the action by a kind of backwards induction, since we cannot carry out the action if we cannot hold to the picture that rationalizes them. The Establishment media of the Lippmannite era, say 1919-1999, engaged in a kind of gatekeeping of facts that allowed policy Establishments to maintain solidarity and the integrity of their projects[15].

Now conformity to established opinion is always and everywhere the price of being or remaining within the Establishment. Yet simply by the numbers small countries have less room for a counter-establishment which presents facts uncongenial to the establishment, or for any kind of informed opinion outside the establishment. In the United States so many people are excluded from the policy establishment by sheer force of numbers, that any hyperliterate person interested in public affairs can find a job as an academic, reporter, or think-tank researcher. In small countries it is more-or-less impossible to have influence on the course of affairs from outside the establishment, given the higher relative reward to anyone who might pay attention to ignore you and keep in good with "The Powers that Be." In Israel, disagreeing with the mainstream of elite opinion guarantees that one will have no influence, and unless one is fortunate to have landed an academic position, no income.

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[15]The Lippmannite establishment thus receives the benefits and pays the cost of what Cass Sunstein has called "enclave deliberation," and like any other organized group, suffers from what Russell Hardin calls a "crippled epistemology" as opposed to the unrestricted epistemology of the public sphere as a whole; Cass R. Sunstein, Republic.com 2.0 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 77; Russell Hardin, "The Crippled Epistemology of Extremism," in Political Extremism and Rationality, ed. Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, Pierre Salmon, and Ronald Wintrobe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
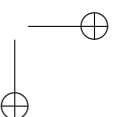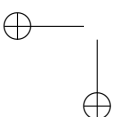
In small countries, or at least in Israel, there is less room for counter-establishment mediators, largely because there are fewer hyperliterate people to do the job. In Israel there are no influential political blogs, and there is no influential nationalist media outlet, no Israeli right-wing equivalent to Fox News or Rush Limbaugh. The Israeli media still speaks truth to power, but it speaks only those truths with which the established media is comfortable. Nobody in Israel is speaking truth to the established "old" media after the fashion of the pro-Bush bloggers in the Ra[th]ergate scandal.

Smallness, I conclude, has a perverse consequence for foreign policy. The Taoist strategy manual "The Master of Demon Valley" teaches "To be small means there is no inside; to be large means there is no outside."[16] This has two consequences: First, small countries have no inside: their affairs are more determined by what goes on outside of them than are those of big countries. Second, small countries have no inside: they don't have inside of them a counterestablishment, including public affairs blogs, that can present uncomfortable facts about the challenges coming from outside.

I am always astonished by how much better Americans understand Israel than Israelis understand America, even though Israeli national survival depends, in great part, on a successful understanding of America. Small countries, having no inside, have a greater need to be guided by accurate information about what is outside, but in fact they have less accurate information about what is outside. We need to keep in mind Cass Sunstein's observation that "blunders are significantly increased if people are rewarded not for correct decisions but for decisions that conform to the decisions made by most people"[17]. Establishments may sometimes heed mavericks, but they never reward them.

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[16] Anon., The Master of Demon Valley, in Thunder in the Sky: Secrets on the Acquisition and Exercise of Power, tr. Thomas Cleary (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1994), "Opening and Closing," sec. 12.

[17] Sunstein, Why Societies Need Dissent (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 62.