

From Local Project to National Controversy:  
The “Ground Zero Mosque” and  
the Trajectory of Public Discourse

by

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In a period of nine months, from December 2009 to August 2010, a Muslim group's intention of building an Islamic community center in the heart of New York City, roughly two blocks from the site of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, evolved from a local zoning issue into one of the most discussed news stories in America. It generated a firestorm of emotional and spectacular debate. The controversy became far more than about one group's attempt to build on its land; indeed, the story came to be understood as a referendum on national priorities: how the country should treat its religious minorities, how it should understand the relationship between Islam and September 11<sup>th</sup>, and how it should treat certain freedoms that are supposedly afforded in the Constitution to all citizens. By the end of September 2010, the noise generated by this controversy began to quiet and the public debate seemed to end just as it had started: without a definite resolution and with the planners of the Park 51 Islamic Cultural Center cautiously continuing with their plans. The period in between, however— consisting of months of heated accusations, toxic rhetoric, and prolonged debate among a wide swath of those in America's political culture— offers insight into how a seemingly innocuous issue can be manufactured and transformed into a national controversy.

This paper uses the "Ground Zero Mosque" dispute as a case study to better understand how the media and America's political culture collide, arguing that this particular case is evidence of a relatively new and specific pathway that has emerged for grassroots claims to become mainstream national issues. Drawing on a wide variety of primary news sources—newspaper articles, television episodes, blog posts, and other internet material—the paper argues that the pathway contains four

progressive steps, although these steps occasionally overlap. First, a blogger traditionally on the periphery of political culture and who commands a discrete and loyal following will write consistently on an issue ignored by more mainstream media sources. Next, partisan media organizations—which are generally considered biased and less legitimate than mainstream sources but which nonetheless hold more legitimacy than the lesser known blogs—will publicize those claims. Once the claims have been broadcast by partisan outlets, a handful of national politicians will then comment on the increasingly visible dispute, in many cases seeking to exploit it for political gain. Finally, once significant national politicians have weighed in (as if to signal the controversy's importance and legitimacy), the most well-known corporate media sources that are generally recognized as most legitimate—and which are traditionally deferential to establishment political authority—will fully adapt those claims into the larger mainstream media narrative. Thus a claim can proceed from a fringe, local issue to a major national one. This paper also contends that these grassroots-to-mainstream controversies can become particularly distorted and exploited when they involve identity groups considered by a portion of the American public to exist outside the margins of American cultural life, and when the controversies occur during an election season as groups with political interests become especially desperate to find divisive wedge issues that they can manipulate for political gain.

### **Reviewing the Literature on the Media and Blogs**

As it dragged on, the controversy surrounding the “Ground Zero Mosque” became a tangled web of interrelated institutions, all of which are significant contributors to the fabric of American society. In order to extract the greatest insight from the dispute, it is first necessary to ground this analysis in existing scholarship on the role of the American media and the function it serves for the citizenry. The mechanisms through which news is disseminated to the public have generated a substantial amount of past academic inquiry, and the discussion here will focus on the structure of the American media and its relationship to news. Perhaps because of the profound technological and structural changes to the media and journalism in the last generation, contemporary critics will often imply that there was once a “Golden Age” in media: a period during which objectivity reigned, major news accurately reflected the concerns and interests of citizens, and journalists understood how they should relate to those they covered. It is indeed tempting to romanticize the past to more effectively critique the present, but such an impulse threatens to misrepresent an important reality: there was no Golden Age in media. The dissemination of news is an inherently selective process, one complicated and influenced by various factors—some of which are directly at odds with the public-service role many would desire the media to fill.

Instead, many scholars divide the American media’s approach toward news into distinct historical periods, as Michael Schudson has chronicled in his book *The Sociology of News*. (Schudson 2011) In the nineteenth century, American newspapers, which dominated the media landscape and controlled the flow of news

dissemination, were closely tied to the two political parties and were openly partisan in their news advocacy. (Schudson 2011) Many newspapers explicitly identified their political loyalties in their names (for instance, the *Denver Republican* and the *Wisconsin Democrat*). But by the 1920's, individual journalists and newsmen became increasingly regarded as a more autonomous professional group, and many well-known media figures and journalists began adopting self-enforced standards of journalistic objectivity in order to gain more widespread legitimacy. (Schudson 2011) These standards tended to focus more on presenting “both sides” of an issue without clearly establishing the guiding facts of the narrative. (Skocpol and Williamson 2012) The escalation of these practices coincided with the growing popularity of television news as an alternative to print journalism. (Schudson 2011) Soon, the largest news organizations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—on television, network entities such as CBS News, NBC News, and ABC News; and in print, papers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—became recognized as mostly objective, even deriving their legitimacy from the widespread perception that they were substantially separated from political influence.

The practice of presenting both “sides” of the debate—in other words, the attempt to clarify the general perspectives of the two major political parties—moved large-scale news dissemination away from the explicit partisanship of the nineteenth century. But by taking cues from party positions, the mainstream media’s standards of objectivity also served to marginalize political claims made outside of the two-party window (it should be noted that the 19<sup>th</sup> century model served to pushed views outside of the political mainstream to the sidelines as well, just in different ways).

(Schudson 2011) In his 1980 book *The Whole World is Watching*, Todd Gitlin conducted a study on the New Left and found that, although the mainstream media's coverage of the social movement likely increased its popularity, the coverage adopted a generally condescending tone, emphasizing its radical nature and thus serving to marginalize the movement as a whole. (Gitlin 1980) Gitlin's study is perhaps the most revealing example of what the historian Howard Zinn famously wrote regarding the public memory of Christopher Columbus: that telling any story necessarily involves the emphasis and de-emphasis of certain facts. (Zinn 1980) Which facts are ultimately emphasized is a choice profoundly affected by the socio-political considerations of the moment. (Gans 1979) After noticing this reality, Gaye Tuchman coined the valuable phrase "symbolic annihilation" to refer to the media's systematic underrepresentation of certain issues or groups as a result of the conscious or unconscious priorities of those involved in media (this term could refer to fictional works, such as movies, as well as more traditional forms of news dissemination). (Tuchman 1978) In essence, what appears to be "objective" may be uncontroversial, but it is not without the inevitable bias of human subjectivity. In the case of the American media's move toward "objectivity", the practice was not as much about mediating factual disputes as about emphasizing the issues that both major parties deemed important. This often meant presenting both parties' positions as equally legitimate and either downplaying or scorning ideas that existed outside of the political mainstream.

Many of the most well-known corporate media organizations today continue to derive their legitimacy from maintaining self-enforcing journalistic standards of

objectivity. However, other actors have dramatically altered the media landscape. One is the ascendance of twenty-four hour cable television news networks such as CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News, which have combined breaking news with opinionated debate-style discussions. Fox News, a subsidiary of News Corporation, the media conglomerate owned by billionaire Rupert Murdoch, deserves particular focus here because of the scale of its influence and its prominent role in the “Ground Zero Mosque” debate. Fox News operates as a prominent cable news network, but it is only one of a vast array of other media entities owned by Murdoch, many of which contain the “Fox” name and others which do not, such as the newspapers *The New York Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*. (Corporate Watch 2011) Regarding Fox News specifically, Schudson describes it as maintaining an “insistently conservative cast, especially in its lineup of aggressively conservative news commentators with their own shows.” (Schudson 2011) In the last decade, several of these commentators—such as Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck—have become much more than famous and influential media stars. They have become, to many consumers of Fox News, conservative icons. But despite the network’s choice of on-air talent, it continues to promote and advertise itself as “fair and balanced”. (Fox News 2012) Likewise, O’Reilly refers to his show as existing in the “no-spin zone.” (Fox News 2012) Perhaps partially because of the network’s pose of objectivity, Fox News viewers disproportionately perceive all other major news networks as “mostly liberal,” as compared to the opinions of those identifying as viewers of other networks. (Pew Research Center 2009) Still, Fox News is consistently among the highest rated cable news channels on television, and it appears that many viewers

flock to Fox News precisely because they perceive that it is a “no-spin” alternative to other news outlets.

It would, of course, be impossible to create a “zone” free of subjective interference: scholars such as Gitlin and Herbert Gans, writing mostly in the 1970’s and 1980’s, provided overwhelming evidence that news reports are embedded with all sorts of constructed socio-political values. (Gitlin 1980; Gans 1979) Gitlin refers to the impact that these values have on news reporting as “media framing.” (Gitlin 1980) Framing bias impacts not just the content of news, but also what is *considered* news. (Gitlin 1980) For instance, how does a news outlet choose which issue is featured as its most “important” story, and how often does the outlet choose to amplify that issue? In his 1979 book *Deciding What’s News*, a deep investigation of the content of network news broadcasts, Gans found that these framing decisions seemed to be most informed by white, upper-middle-class values, such as “responsible capitalism” and “altruistic democracy”. (Gans 1979) They are also intimately affected by economic considerations: what kinds of news do readers or viewers *want* to consume, and how can the news be presented so that “lay viewers” are sucked in by the sensationalism of the story? (Gans 1979) The news coverage that an organization ultimately produces is powerfully affected by value-based considerations, which are often so deeply entrenched in the consciousness of media figures (and the general public) that those figures can genuinely portray themselves as objective observers without being critically challenged. Analyzing these types of considerations will be central to understanding how the “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy became so prominently featured by major media outlets.



More recent scholarship has generally accepted that the media plays a role in setting the news agenda. The exact degree to which the media acts as a politically influential actor, however, remains a point of debate. One particularly insightful model for understanding the economic forces that lead to the partisan framing of news, constructed by Gentzkow and Shapiro, suggests that “firms will slant their reports toward prior beliefs of their consumers in order to build a reputation for quality”. (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006) Partisan framing will be less severe when “there is more competition between independent news outlets” and when consumers are able to (or seek to) independently confirm excessively partisan reporting. (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006) It will be more severe when consumer demand rises for skewed reporting and when that reporting prevails in an uncompetitive market. (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006). When cable news outlets respond to the partisan demands of their audiences, therefore, they do so in order to create an economic niche sought by partisan consumers of news. Given that consumers of news media tend to gravitate towards the news outlets that are more reflective of their previously-held views, it should not be surprising that this type of partisan news model has been increasingly successful. (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006).

Other scholars have tried to provide quantitative evidence that the media—and perhaps especially partisan cable news organizations such as Fox News— can substantially affect what consumers consider important issues, nudging consumers towards adopting certain political views. DellaVigna and Kaplan find that the introduction of Fox News into certain local media markets is correlated with an increase in votes for Republican political candidates. (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007)

They conclude that the introduction of certain “new political information” into a location had an impact on voters, estimating that “4 to 8 percent of the audience was persuaded to vote Republican because of Fox News.” (DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007) This finding does not specifically account for who tends to watch Fox News in the first place, so the implications of their conclusion are somewhat limited. But the study nonetheless offers considerable evidence that partisan framing does not merely impact what issues voters regard as important; the framing can also impact how citizens vote. Given that the “Ground Zero Mosque” debate exploded during election season, it will be essential to consider the political impact of news framing at each step of the controversy.

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Any discussion of modern American media would be incomplete without consideration for the rise of new media in the last decade and its impact on news dissemination. The internet has introduced new avenues for news distribution, ones not reliant on the traditional news media or large organizations, and American political discourse has been noticeably diversified as a result. Users of new media do not have to seek acceptance from the traditional gatekeepers of media to build an audience, nor do they have to rely on establishment legitimacy or formal credentials in order to gain influence. In particular, the phenomenon of internet blogs, written forums through which individuals can provide uncensored commentary, have exploded in popularity.

Blogs can perform traditional journalism, aggregate news reported by other entities, and provide opinionated commentary. The specific content that blogs

provide varies widely. Bloggers vary in expertise, renown, and formal occupation. (Schudson 2011) Some blogs act as subsidiaries of larger companies or organizations; others are small and completely independent, perhaps operated by one person writing in her living room. (Herring et al 2005) The readership of blogs, both in size and demographics, also varies dramatically. (Herring et al 2005) Indeed, perhaps the only consistent aspect of blogging is that if a blogger produces content that readers deem worthy of amplification, the blogger's readership will grow as awareness of the blog spreads across the internet. Research that attempts to understand the role and influence of blogs is in its early stages, but it suggests that certain blogs are having a moderate but increasing impact on political participation and communication.

One valuable way to understand the function of blogs is as public arenas which serve as places where citizens can advance "problem claims". (Maratea 2007) Traditionally, "public arenas" in the media have been far from public: large media corporations have controlled the dissemination of information and acted as barriers to access. (Maratea 2007) But in the last decade, the internet has removed some of those barriers and increased access to a wider swath of unfiltered information. (Gallo 2004) Blogs in particular tend to operate as "common conversations" rather than the elite roundtables frequently seen in the mainstream media. (Maratea 2007) As a result, one main consequence of blogs has been to blur the traditional roles assigned to various media functionaries. (Schudson 2011) Professional journalists and bloggers, writers and readers, old media and new media, for-profit and non-profit organizations—all of these traditional distinctions have become harder to identify.

(Schudson 2011) As these roles have been muddled, tensions between old and new media have often risen. (Tremayne 2007) In particular, the lack of professional constraints placed on bloggers has led some to worry that blogs will ultimately be known as the domain of irresponsible amateurs working mischievously against the public good. But others predict that the absence of formal constraints is precisely what will make blogs so powerful, allowing for a more democratic free-flow of ideas that are better aligned with the concerns of the public. Recognizing blogs as venues for advancing “problem claims” is therefore particularly effective at explaining how blogs tend to subvert traditional authority.

But do blogs really pose a fundamental challenge to the power and scope of old media? Fairly recent scholarship suggests that blogs come nowhere close to capturing the audience of traditional sources of news. As of 2008, for instance, far more Americans still consume their news through traditional sources without ever venturing onto the blogosphere. (Woodly 2008) Given the still-limited portion of the population that regularly consumes blogs, any sweeping generalization about the potential for blogs to substantially redirect public discourse should be restrained. That said, there is ample evidence that certain blogs have gained legitimacy not just among their audiences, but also among mainstream journalists and websites.

(Woodly 2008) In these instances, various public claims makers on particularly well-read blogs have had their claims incorporated into the mainstream media’s news narrative, and their issues have gained widespread traction among the public.

(Woodly 2008) In addition, blogs have increasingly (and effectively) interacted with hubs of social media, such as the websites Facebook and Twitter, which have been

able to amplify the grassroots claims that are being concurrently discussed on blogs. (Schudson 2011)

It is therefore clear that blogs have gained at least a foothold, if only a moderate one, in contemporary political discourse. If the trends of the past several years are any indication, blogs are developing into a sustained presence in contemporary political life, a medium gaining in both legitimacy and respect. Scholars should continue to investigate how blogs interact with more established news outlets, paying particular attention to how news gets translated between new and old media. How do large media organizations account for the gap in “journalistic standards” between old and new media as they adapt claims made on the blogosphere into their coverage? Why do certain issues advance from blogs into mainstream discourse while other (seemingly-important issues) fail to make that leap? And how does the rise of partisan cable news networks, which themselves interact with “objective” mainstream media outlets, impact the prospect for more grassroots advocacy to become national news? Future research should focus not just on the nature of media structures; it should also consider more specifically the ways in which these structures interact. This paper seeks to study those mechanisms in further detail.

### **How Grassroots Claims Travel: The “Ground Zero Mosque”**

On December 8, 2009, the New York Times published an article describing a building about two blocks from the old World Trade Center site that had emerged as a popular prayer space for local Muslims. (Blumenthal and Mowjood 2009) A group of

Muslim-Americans had recently bought the site, the paper reported, with visions of building an Islamic Cultural Center that would serve as a more formal space for worship and other community activities. The paper noted the symbolism of having a Muslim prayer space close to Ground Zero—considered by many to be “hallowed ground”—where terrorists acting in the name of radical Islam committed one of the deadliest acts in American history. (Blumenthal and Mowjood 2009) Recognizing the project’s potential for inciting an emotional response from those who would be offended by an Islamic presence near the site, the paper nonetheless described the initial reaction to the plan as “encouragement from city officials and the surrounding neighborhood.” (Blumenthal and Mowjood 2009) It quoted the cleric in charge of the project, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, as explicitly intending the project to represent “a push back against extremists.” (Blumenthal and Mowjood 2009) And it described the reserved but principled reaction of Michael Bloomberg, the Mayor of New York, thusly: “If it’s legal, the building owners have a right to do what they want.” (Blumenthal and Mowjood 2009)

The initial story, in other words, suggested that the Muslim group’s planned expansion would remain a local issue and that, if the initial consensus of the community were any indication, it would proceed without much controversy. But on the same day as the initial *Times* story, a blogger named Pamela Geller, the owner and operator of the blog *Atlas Shrugs*, posted a reaction to the story. Geller, who had written online since 2005, had attracted a loyal following of very conservative readers—but not one large enough to make her considered more than a fringe figure on the blogosphere. Among the most mainstream political bloggers across the

political spectrum, she was best known as the architect of a site that promoted the incompatibility of Western values and Islam, making no distinction between the mainstream and extreme elements of the religion; a site that often used provocative and toxic language to declare the religion violent and primitive.; and one that advocated that Americans should rise up against the insidious threat of *sharia* law in America.

On this day, reacting to the *Times* story, Geller began her post: “I don’t know what is more grotesque...jihad or the New York Times preening about it.” (Geller 2009a) There was little other commentary—the post mostly contained an indented copy of the *Times* article—but it represented the first time that Geller weighed in on an issue that would eventually become her signature. She did not address the story again until two weeks later, at which point she expressed similar discontent. In a post titled “Mosque at Ground Zero: Adding Insult to Agony,” Geller warned that the construction project would amount to the imposition of “soft sharia” and “a hellish victory for global jihad.” (Geller 2009b) By responding to the *Times* article, Geller had used her independent platform to argue that the project should be subjected to greater scrutiny and that the media should treat it as controversial. But since she had written about the local project only twice in a period of weeks, her claim predictably gained little traction; she had not yet used her platform to consistently repeat her claims, nor had she produced sufficient outrage among her readership to convince any larger conservative media organizations into giving the project major attention. Thus conservative media organizations such as Fox News hardly covered the story during

December and January, acknowledging it only a handful of times (and when they did mention it, doing so anecdotally and without controversy).

Indeed, after those initial weeks, public media discussion of the “mosque” controversy completely disappeared for nearly four months. Neither Geller nor any major media organizations mentioned it. Of course, the nature of the issue had not fundamentally changed: the group intending to build the Cultural Center was continuing with its plans, gradually working its way through the local regulatory process. But media organizations, from the oldest forms of mainstream media to the newest sources of independent journalism, treated the issue as if it did not deserve significant coverage. The considerations that led to the absence of coverage by larger organizations were likely similar to those chronicled by Gans in his 1979 study: among others, a combination of values-based, economic, and journalistic concerns. (Gans 1979) That Geller did not pursue her claim beyond the initial two posts suggests that, for whatever reason, she too did not consider it worthy of more consistent coverage. And larger national partisan media organizations also ignored the issue, indicating that these outlets did not independently consider the issue worthy of coverage, and were not struck enough by Geller’s rather brief claim to pursue it further.

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After four months almost entirely out of the media spotlight, the New York Community Board responsible for overseeing the Park 51 project passed a resolution of support on May 5, 2010. (Salazar 2010) The board explicitly noted that it had no formal authority to tell the owners of the land what to do with it; the fact that they



chose to build an Islamic Cultural Center was entirely their choice. (Salazar 2010) In fact, the architects of the project had been fully involved with the local board in an explicit attempt to preempt any controversy that would result from a lack of transparent communication, not because the organizers of the project were legally compelled to seek permission. Nonetheless, the ease with which this latest development could be manipulated into a distorted but entertaining narrative— that local New York City officials had expressed “support” for a “mosque” next to Ground Zero—was enough for Geller return to the issue.

On May 6, Geller responded to the board’s resolution with a post titled “Monster Mosque Pushes Ahead in Shadow of World Trade Center Islamic Death and Destruction.” (Geller 2010c) She claimed that the Park 51 Center would represent further “Islamic domination and expansionism” and a “giant victory lap.” (Geller 2010c) Thus began a series of weeks during which Geller, seizing both on the positive reception of her claims in larger arenas, the swift rise of the controversy, and her own increasing visibility, blogged about the project and its developments almost daily. In a post on May 14<sup>th</sup>, for instance, she referred to the Cultural Center as the “9/11 Mosque”—a catchy title that would stick as her claims increased in visibility—and called on her readers to attend a community meeting in order voice their opposition. (Geller 2010) Almost all of her posts contained similar elements: rhetorical attempts to link the builders of the Cultural Center with the terrorists of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the repeated assertion that those who practiced Islam were inherently violent and ultimately incapable of recognizing Western values. By early

September, according to the media watchdog group Media Matters, Geller had blogged about the “Ground Zero Mosque” over 200 times. (Media Matters 2010)

Geller’s posts in early May did not exist in isolation; they overlapped with coverage from other larger news outlets that appeared to independently assess that the issue was becoming increasingly important. After the community board’s resolution, for instance, the *New York Post* ran a prominent article on May 6 titled “Mosque Madness at Ground Zero.” (Topousis 2010) Given that the Post’s story ran on the same day that Geller returned to the issue, it did not appear to be a specific reaction to her claims. But other news sources did appear to be affected by the intensity and magnitude of Geller’s advocacy—especially Fox News. In the first month of its coverage as the controversy steadily gained steam, Fox News would frequently include Geller as a commentator in discussions on the issue.

Her May 15<sup>th</sup> appearance on the popular show *Huckabee*, hosted by former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, exemplified these regular appearances. (Huckabee 2010) Sitting in front of a large and supportive studio audience, Huckabee respectfully introduced Geller as “the executive director of the organization ‘Stop the Islamization of America’.” (Huckabee 2010) Geller was greeted with cheers from the audience. Asked why she opposed the construction of the “mosque and the cultural center,” Geller answered calmly: “Ground Zero is hallowed ground, and I think it is an outrage and an insult and it’s humiliating...to be building a mosque that basically embodies the very ideologies that inspired 9/11.” (Huckabee 2010) When Huckabee challenged Geller about the peaceful intentions of the mosque, Geller sidestepped the question, declaring that a better memorial would be a center that

would work to “expunge the violent texts that inspired this violent jihad.” (Huckabee 2010) In sum, Geller spent roughly five minutes equivocating Islamic terrorism and the entire religion of Islam, making no distinction between the perpetrators of 9/11 and the architects of this particular project. Huckabee, the host, challenged Geller only once on her views, and even his one challenge was apathetic at best, containing qualifying phrases of support and including no follow-up questions. At the end of the five minutes, as the studio audience cheered for Geller’s appearance, Huckabee shook her hand and thanked her for coming on the program.

The entire segment, therefore, served to legitimize Geller’s claims about the outrageousness of the mosque. The format of the show contained no attempt to provide a substantial adversarial perspective, nor did it attempt to identify the essential facts that guided the controversy. The show did not even present it as a “debate” between two equally legitimate advocates. Rather, the segment provided a supportive environment in which Geller could broadcast her claims to a larger audience. By introducing Geller as the director of her self-created organization, the show implicitly portrayed her as an expert on Islamic issues in the US. The network was offering Geller the company bullhorn, a vehicle through which she could promote her outrage and dramatically increase the visibility of her concerns. The fact that this was one of many appearances for her—and the fact that many of her concerns were so uncritically adapted into the larger narrative of Fox News coverage—offers compelling evidence that the network was significantly influenced by Geller’s independent advocacy, especially the daily blog posts on her website. Although the format of Geller’s other appearances varied—some operated as a

roundtable with other contributors, others as a “debate” between two guests, and still others as solo interviews between her and a host—the environment in which she appeared to discuss the issue was almost always the same: mostly absent of any tough questions and providing legitimacy (if not tacit support) for even her most controversial, divisive claims. This was the second stage of the process transforming the controversy from grassroots claim to national debate: partisan news organizations (in this case, the organizations were overwhelmingly organs of Fox News) adapting Geller’s advocacy into their larger media narratives.

Indeed, by the middle of June, Fox News was not limiting its coverage of the “mosque” controversy to when Geller appeared; it was quickly becoming one of the network’s most frequently discussed issues, spanning a wide range of programs and formats. If Tuchman’s term “symbolic annihilation” refers to an organization’s underrepresentation of a certain issue or group, one could construct a similar term for the overrepresentation of an issue that seems disproportionately promoted in relation to the issue’s actual effect on viewers. (Tuchman 1978) Still, Fox News was not alone in its emphasis: other organizations generally considered partisan news sources—such as the popular political websites *The Drudge Report* and *The Daily Caller*, as well a prominent radio show hosted by pundit Rush Limbaugh—were also increasingly discussing the controversy. On June 9<sup>th</sup>, for instance, a substitute host for Limbaugh, Mark Davis, proclaimed to his audience that Muslims building a cultural center near Ground Zero would be tantamount to the Japanese building a cultural center next to Pearl Harbor. (Limbaugh 2010) Still, despite the attention given by these other organizations, it was the overarching News Corporation

umbrella, with its variety of platforms and influential nightly talk shows, that predominantly drove the partisan narrative. Sensational stories about the implications of the “mosque” would appear on the Fox News website. The story would be discussed on Fox News radio. And nightly talk shows such as *Glenn Beck* and *The O’Reilly Factor*—shows extraordinarily successful at reaching mainstream conservatives—would consistently broadcast segments debating the merits of the project. If, as Gitlin originally wrote, “framing bias” refers not just to the content of news but also to the emphasis that particular news items are given, then the impact of framing emphasis was demonstrated by the sheer amount of coverage given to the “mosque” dispute, which positioned the issue as one to which viewers should pay increased attention. (Gitlin 1980)

More than to break news on any new developments, the segments appeared designed to rehash the same points of concern: that the cultural center would offend certain constituencies such as victims of 9/11; that it could possibly have ties to more radical Islamist groups; and that it would represent the creeping imposition of Islam on American society and values. During the same period, Geller continued pounding away at the issue and even outdoing her own previous rhetoric, referring several times on her blog in late June to those affiliated with the mosque as “Islamic supremacists.” (Geller 2010c, Geller 2011d) The larger partisan organizations, in an attempt to sustain the legitimacy of the issue, did not dare elevate their rhetoric to that level, but their coverage increasingly reflected the urgency of Geller’s concerns. By this point, the frequency of Geller’s posts had become a winning strategy: she was being consistently featured on a larger platform, and her claims were being heard by an

increasingly large portion of the American public. By the end of June, the controversy had been elevated from one on the fringe of political discussion—relegated to the oft-muted extremes of public discourse—to one in which large conservative outlets considered the issue a central point of national debate. Given the sensational nature of some of the partisan coverage, it seemed that Fox News in particular was framing its reporting, as Gentzkow and Shapiro had theorized, around what the organization perceived its viewers wanted to consume: the narrative that aligned with many viewers' previously held beliefs. (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006) Viewers who perceived Muslims as cultural outsiders were likely satisfied by coverage that viewed Muslims suspiciously. Among these viewers, Fox News' "reputation for quality" was likely bolstered by the prominent coverage given to the issue. (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006) The fact that these viewers would approve of the coverage—making them more likely to watch Fox News in the future—made it economically beneficial for Fox to incorporate the "Ground Zero Mosque" narrative into their coverage, even if that narrative was considered by other portions of the public to be a fringe issue.

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By the time consistent coverage on these partisan outlets continued into July, with little evidence that the leaders of the project would back down as a result of criticism, national political leaders—either former politicians who were now media commentators or, in some cases, politicians themselves, began weighing in on whether the construction project should proceed. The progression from partisan news coverage to national political issue was not perfectly linear; many local politicians

and a handful of national figures had in the past already interjected. But July (and into August) represented the first period during which the issue became a mainstream political controversy—an issue on which most “serious” political figures were expected to have an opinion.

As Fox News continued to promote the potentially serious ramifications of allowing the “mosque” project to continue, the organization began to roll out many of its more well-known commentators. In order to understand how the debate began to consistently include top political figures, one must first consider the dual relationship that many paid media contributors have with their employers and the political world. Although the exact details are somewhat unclear, many Fox News contributors are former national politicians who, although they do not currently hold office, are active in promoting various causes, such as endorsing candidates and working to get candidates elected. Many of these former politicians are generally understood to have an intention of returning to politics; indeed, many of them are considered potential presidential candidates in the next election. Such was the case for Sarah Palin, who lost as a Vice Presidential Candidate in 2008 and who parlayed her increased visibility and bolstered credentials into a highly-paid job as a Fox News Commentator. Thus, when Palin first wrote a message on Twitter about the controversy on July 18<sup>th</sup>, she did so both as an arm of the Fox News machine and as one of the most influential politicians in the country: “Ground Zero Mosque supporters: doesn't it stab you in the heart, as it does ours throughout the heartland? Peaceful Muslims, pls refudiate.” (Condon 2010) Palin generated as much publicity from her misspelling of the word “repudiate” as she did with her foray into the local

issue, and she was careful to differentiate between peaceful and violent Muslims. But her advocacy nonetheless represented an important moment in which a national political superstar considered the issue worthy of comment.

Three days later, Newt Gingrich, another paid Fox News contributor and a potential 2012 presidential candidate, would also generate a flash of publicity by writing on his website in opposition of the cultural center project: “The time for double standards that allow Islamists to behave aggressively toward us while they demand our weakness and submission is over.” (DeLong 2010) Commentators like Gingrich were blurring the line between partisan media analyst and political activist. They were not currently active politicians, but they were national political figures whose opinions were considered by the media to be “serious” and perhaps representative of a certain portion of the conservative electorate. By injecting themselves into the dispute, these commentators were both fulfilling their roles as paid contributors and making a strategic political decision to raise their profiles among conservatives deeply concerned about “culture war” issues. That these figures decided to jump into the fray furthered the perception that this controversy was important and began to suggest to the mainstream media that it was worthy of consistent coverage.

Former politicians were not the only political figures during this period becoming increasingly active in framing the context of the debate. Many rank-and-file politicians were also beginning to comment publicly on the specific details of the New York “mosque” and the larger implications of the project on post-9/11 American society. In the middle of July, Peter King, a Congressional Representative



from New York, gave an interview on Fox News in which he called for a complete investigation into the funding for the “mosque,” citing among other factors the radicalization of the American Muslim community. (America’s Newsroom 2010) “This can’t be looked at as an isolated incident,” he argued, “when you have so many mosques and so many Imams and so many mosques in this area and our country who are not cooperating with law enforcement.” (America’s Newsroom 2010) King’s suggestion that the project may have ties to more radical Islamic groups, as well as his implicit (if vague) connection between the project and al-Qaeda-type terrorism, was similarly found in a host of other comments by other significant conservative politicians. The comments seemed to build on one another; as the rhetoric escalated, so did what was generally deemed acceptable in the realm of well-publicized conservative discourse. Conservative media outlets, eager to capitalize on the increasing popularity of the issue and the willingness of elected officials to venture into the conflict, enthusiastically publicized these officials’ claims. And Geller continued blogging daily about the issue, appearing at events and protests to promote her cause and making appearances in the media. The issue had made the full transition from the blogosphere to traditional media, now operating far more as an “elite roundtable” than a “common conversation”. (Maratea 2007) The little morsel of a story that she had begun publicizing months earlier was continuing to gain national importance, and the noteworthiness of her name—and the associated increase in intellectual and economic goods that came with it—was increasing.

The decision of many elected officials to join the debate was complicated by an important factor: 2010 was a midterm election year, and thus many influential

political figures were up for reelection. As a result, the decision for a campaigning politician to issue comment was as much a tactical political strategy as it was a desire to weigh in on the direction of the country. The controversy was becoming important enough that a candidate's position on it could arguably affect an electoral race; it was also important enough that a candidate could use the issue's divisive platform to garner attention. This operated as a two-way relationship: candidates understood that media appearances were opportunities to increase their visibility, and media organizations correspondingly looked for willing participants to fill their many hours of daily air time. In particular, conservative incumbents and candidates seized on the traction that the story was receiving on conservative media outlets to express outrage about an issue that, when discussed in its distorted form, appeared to appeal to the sensibilities of "reasonable" people. Attacking or demonizing those considered by a portion of the electorate to be non-members of American cultural life—in other words, attacking groups traditionally marginalized and lacking in formal political power—had been a tried-and-true political tactic (and in many cases, a winning strategy) almost since America's founding. (Bernstein 2005) The fact that partisan media outlets had lobbed up the issue like a volleyball, as if to beg for national politicians to enter the field and spike the ball down with authority, made these politicians' entrance into the debate even easier.

Because the central facts surrounding the dispute had been so distorted by partisan media outlets—distortions first engineered by Geller in her original claims—inaccurate information and misleading hyperbole had been so thoroughly adapted into the partisan media narrative that those claims went basically unchallenged by even

mainstream political figures. Partisan organizations generally understood as maintaining a liberal slant, such as the cable news network MSNBC, were by this point providing a moderate amount of coverage of the dispute, pushing back against some of the claims they identified as inaccurate. But their coverage did not reach nearly the intensity of the coverage by their conservative counterparts. As a result, candidates pressured to comment on the issue were facing an electorate more aware of the short, distorted narrative of the controversy than the complete version. The impact of the distorted narrative on voters was evident in opinion polls: an August poll done by TIME Magazine, for instance, found that 61% percent of respondents opposed the project while only 26% approved. (Altman 2010) Those responding to the distorted coverage included not just those who regarded Muslims as non-members of American culture—in the poll, almost one-third of respondents believed that Muslims should be barred from “running for president”—but indeed a majority of the country. (Altman 2010) Faced with the public’s strong disapproval of the project, mainstream establishment politicians were increasingly pressed for comment, especially President Barack Obama. Many media and political figures argued that, because the issue had become a referendum on American values, it was necessary and proper for the President to provide guidance on an obviously local issue. Others argued that it should be left up to New York City residents to debate. As more rank-and-file politicians and candidates continued to elevate their rhetoric, it seemed increasingly possible that the President would comment.

Finally, on the evening of August 13, the President held a press conference at a dinner with Islamic religious leaders, a pre-planned event intended to acknowledge

and celebrate Ramadan. Speaking at the event, he retraced the path of generations of Muslim-Americans, noting that they were an essential part of the fabric of American life. Many of them, he noted, died in the 9/11 attacks. Finally, regarding the exploding controversy, he stated:

“As a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakeable. The principle that people of all faiths are welcome in this country and that they will not be treated differently by their government is essential to who we are.” (Post Editor 2010)

The fact that the President of the United States had taken up the issue ensured that the rest of the political class, even those who thus far had chosen to remain silent, would be forced to accept that the local project was now a national one. For some, the President’s comments increased the political benefits of objecting; for others, it meant that they would be asked about the issue despite no political interest in volunteering an opinion. But it was clear that the President’s comments signified that even those at the highest levels of political life would recognize the issue’s legitimacy. The next day, after various political figures expressed outrage over his original remarks, Obama qualified his original statement, noting that he was not commenting on “the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there” but on more general principles that should be consistently respected. (Henry 2010) Many analysts perceived that the President was stepping back from his original comments—likely for political reasons, sensing the toxicity of the issue—and that his qualification would further legitimize the opposing position. (Henry 2010) But few people at this point were debating that the issue was now worthy of debate. Whereas commenting on the controversy in its initial stages was once seen in establishment circles as trivial, now it was seen as exactly the opposite: major political figures were now expected to opine in order to

provide proof of their seriousness. In addition, there now existed two easily-distinguishable establishment political positions on the issue—one position emphasizing the respect of religious freedom, another vehemently opposing the construction of the project—that could form the basis of an “objective” media narrative. (Skocpol and Williamson 2012)

The newfound availability of that narrative, combined with the establishment political class’s embrace of the controversy, finally signaled to the mainstream media that the issue was worthy of full-scale, intense coverage. Certainly the most well-known, mainstream sources had been providing moderate coverage for some time; a few of them had even featured Pamela Geller as a panelist. But despite the attention they had given the issue, it had generally been regarded as a secondary one. Now, the fact that even the President was weighing in confirmed for mainstream sources that the issue was nationally important, that it was worthy of some sort of bipartisan debate, and that it should take precedence over many other national issues. On the national news programs of the three major television networks—CBS, ABC, and NBC—the shows in the days following Obama’s statement almost always featured a prominent segment on the controversy. Many of those segments led their respective half-hour programs. Minor progressions in the debate were consistently featured on the leading pages of the two most well-known mainstream newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. And on the Sunday talk show *Meet the Press*—perhaps the best example of a mainstream-media source that is generally regarded as unbiased but which largely exists as a soundboard for the political establishment—a panel of politicians and pundits was convened on August 22 to discuss the issue in

greater depth. (MSNBC Editor 2010) On that show, the “mosque” debate was given far more air time than any other, framing the issue as the most pressing and significant near-term one that faced the country. By this point, media organizations at every level of perceived legitimacy were treating the issue as unambiguously important: large mainstream media corporations, large partisan media entities, and, of course, Geller herself.

It is worth emphasizing here the incentives that make it lucrative for mainstream media organizations to maintain standards of “journalistic objectivity” and more general devotion to the political establishment. Prominent political talk shows such as *Meet the Press* rely on high-ranking political figures to recognize the show’s high status and legitimacy, just as politicians appear on *Meet the Press* as proof of their own high political status. It is a mutually-dependent relationship that is constantly reinforced. In particular, *Meet the Press* derives much of its legitimacy from its high-status guests: congressmen, presidential candidates, and other prominent political leaders. In the case of the “mosque” debate, had the show authoritatively adjudicated the partisan dispute and attempted to establish the facts of the case, political leaders, in this case mostly conservative ones, would have almost certainly rebelled against the program. Perhaps they would have threatened to not appear in an environment in which their claims could no longer go relatively unchallenged. By withholding access, those in the political establishment could have stripped the program of some of its mainstream legitimacy, which would have then threatened the program’s lucrative position as a leading network news show on Sunday mornings. It was therefore far more economically beneficial for the program

to act as a non-adversarial platform for political figures to advocate their views, only occasionally maintaining a pose of journalistic toughness so as not to make too obvious the show's relatively uncritical acceptance of competing claims. Given these insidious but powerful socio-economic incentives, mainstream organizations such as *Meet the Press* were unsurprisingly willing to legitimize the issue once high-ranking political figures had done the same.

Revealingly, once the “mosque” issue had been fully embraced as a mainstream controversy, Geller was mostly excluded from mainstream discussion and debate, even though she had made a few mainstream appearances during the period when the issue had been treated as less prominent. Now, presumably cast as a figure too extreme for civil mainstream discourse, she was steered aside in favor of more “serious” commentators, liberal and conservative, who fit within the limits of acceptability established by the gatekeepers of mainstream airtime. But while in one sense Geller was not featured on these outlets, in another sense she was practically ubiquitous: her original claim had made it from the depths of blog oblivion onto the most famous and consumed media sources in the country. She had found a path that allowed the claims of someone on the margins of political discourse to be heard. Her prominent role in engineering this controversy revealed a particular pathway for peripheral claims to travel: she had planted the seed of her claim within partisan media organizations, which had led to the involvement of a handful of national political figures, whose own involvement led to the widespread and intense coverage of the mainstream media.

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The trajectory of the “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy—the fact that a grassroots claim originating on the blogosphere could be so uncritically adapted into the larger media narrative—has important normative implications for the nature of democratic discourse. Scholars such as Gans have long argued that major media organizations serve as the gatekeepers of political discussion, setting the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable opinion and promoting the establishment political authority that fits within those boundaries. (Gans 1979) Anything outside of that relatively narrow window of conventional wisdom, this view holds—particularly the views that dare to challenge political authority—are severely limited from participation and are framed as “extreme”. (Gans 1979; Martrea 2007) The potential for the internet to challenge this structure—to serve as an alternate and unregulated media outlet, in which citizens can engage in a wider range of political discourse and even induce larger media outlets into allowing certain issues past the mainstream gates—would no doubt produce noticeable shifts in the relationship between ordinary citizens and the issues that are typically regarded as nationally important.

Those on the liberal blogosphere, along with other political and media voices, expressed dismay that the “Ground Zero Mosque” issue, so seemingly at odds with the values that a substantial portion of Americans identify as essential, would be elevated to national prominence and ultimately be treated as worthy of debate among reasonable people. What these critics were advocating—however unintentionally—was that the establishment gatekeeper model, when functioning properly, serves various important functions that prevent demagoguery from becoming reported as legitimate news. The standards of “objective” reporting that have endured since the



1920's among traditional media figures have served an intended role; when those standards have been broken, reporters and media outlets have often been criticized and rendered less credible by other members of the media. (Schudson 2011) One of those rules, perhaps the most basic one of all, is that a media outlet ensures that its reports are grounded in demonstrable facts. When many observers of the "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy noticed that such a basic journalistic tenant was being violated—perhaps because what they perceived as demagoguery was being advocated by a major political party and thus was passed through the gates of acceptability—they objected to the way the debate was being presented.

Critics were right that several essential facts guiding the narrative were often distorted or misreported by outlets at every stage of the controversy. The project was originally dubbed by Geller the "Ground Zero Mosque," and that name was repeated constantly by other media organizations; in fact, the construction project was neither at Ground Zero (it was one-tenth of a mile away) nor did it have any formal association with the site. (Gore and Henig 2010) Within the name "Ground Zero Mosque" was the implicit assumption that the project's focus was a mosque; in fact, the leaders of the project intended to build a multi-faith cultural center, and a mosque was going to be only one component of the building. (Gore and Henig 2010) Seemingly adapting Geller's original narrative into their reporting, media organizations presented the "mosque" as the only mosque anywhere near Ground Zero since 9/11; in fact, there had been two other mosques in the area, one four blocks and one roughly twelve blocks from Ground Zero, to say nothing of the prayer services that were conducted at the Park 51 site in the year before the project's

leaders bought the property. (Gore and Henig 2010) It seemed that the longer that these distortions were repeated in public, the less media figures were held accountable for repeating them.

The particular pathway of these claims—from blog to partisan news to politicians to mainstream media—seemed to more easily allow for the distorted facts to travel. Geller’s consistent use of demagoguery to advance her claims showed that she was entirely uninterested in aligning herself with any traditional journalistic standards. Of course, there were few incentives for her to do so: she ran her own blog, which was free from the restraints commonly imposed on journalists and commentators who work for larger organizations. Likewise, she was not dependent on fact-based analysis in order to sustain her own legitimacy among her readership; if anything, her followers became more devoted as her unhinged rhetoric increased. Her place on the blogosphere had allowed her to advance a “problem claim” that almost certainly would have not originated in mainstream news organizations. (Maratea 2007) Once Geller was able to demonstrate on her independent forum that the issue had staying power, Fox News began to adapt her claims into their narrative, and the network seemed to willfully perpetuate many of Geller’s distortions, aware that framing its narrative around hostile identity politics would appeal to a large portion of its audience. Since scholars have shown that a significant portion of Americans are hostile to those they perceive as “non-members in American cultural life,” and since scholars have demonstrated that Muslim-Americans have been a particularly persecuted identity group in the post-9/11 era, it is entirely unsurprising that a Fox News narrative rooted in hostile identity politics would captivate its audience. (Edgel

et al 2010; Panagopoulos 2006) Once that narrative had been consistently repeated for months, pushed heavily by Fox News and other partisan organizations, a segment of politicians in the heat of campaign season were not surprisingly willing to uncritically regurgitate it for political gain. At all of these steps, each relevant actor—the original blogger, partisan media organizations, and politicians—had an incentive to advance the narrative that Geller had originated.

But perhaps most noticeable was that mainstream sources—the ones generally regarded as “objective”—were in many cases willing to reproduce Geller’s distortions once the controversy had been adapted into mainstream dialogue. To be sure, certain mainstream sources attempted to clarify some of the basic facts involved—for instance, running what they referred to as “fact-checking” segments about the precise location of the project and its intended function. But at other times, the same sources continued framing their news segments around the “Ground Zero Mosque,” implying that it was exclusively a mosque and that it would be at Ground Zero. The inaccuracies had become so entrenched in public consciousness that mainstream news organizations were unwilling to fundamentally reshape the prevailing narrative. This appears to be a consequence of “objective” journalism: presenting the legitimacy of each position on an issue as equivalent as long as it is expressed by a major political party. (Skocpol and Williamson 2012) By presenting each side as entirely legitimate, the media risks acting as stenographers for the concerns of well-known political leaders, even if those concerns are rooted in the distorted version of the controversy. (Skocpol and Williamson 2012) The onerous task of establishing the facts—of determining which political claims are grounded in

fact and which are not—is, in many cases, ultimately left to the consumer of the news.

By traveling along this particular pathway, claims that would have otherwise been ignored by traditional journalists were successfully broadcast to a far wider audience. Major cable news outlets such as Fox News, which have become influential enough to drive (or at least significantly guide) the news agenda, operate as the critical link in this process: they provide a claim with its first national exposure, and do so willing to perpetuate half-truths and outright inaccuracies if those distortions align with the narrative that the network's viewers seek to consume. Claims focused on identity politics seem to provoke particularly emotional reactions among viewers, providing partisan cable news sources across the political spectrum with the economic incentive to advance them. Indeed, a similar claim centered on identity politics—a conservative website's story about an Obama Administration official, Shirley Sherrod, who had made racially controversial remarks at a speaking event in July 2010—followed a nearly identical path (though it increased in visibility far quicker, becoming a nationally-discussed issue within a couple of days of its appearance on the blogosphere). (Stolberg, Dewan, and Stelter 2010) The official was quickly fired by the Obama administration, a reactionary response to the scale of the controversy and the outrage expressed in the media and by politicians. (Stolberg, Dewan, and Stelter 2010) Only later was it revealed that the video clip of the official's remarks had been strategically edited by the original conservative website, prompting the Obama Administration to offer Sherrod her job back (she declined). (Stolberg, Dewan, and Stelter 2010) As in the case of the "Ground Zero Mosque"

debate, cable news sources capitalized on the spectacular nature of claims about religious and racial minorities. The fact that this type of pathway could encourage the magnification of manipulative claims about cultural minorities raises important questions whether partisan news sources, despite the scope of their influence, should be regarded as worthy of legitimacy, and whose role it is to vet these kinds of claims.

Nonetheless, the specific path taken by the “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy provides concrete evidence that blogs have the ability to reduce the barriers to access that have traditionally limited the scope of public discourse. The removal of those barriers would seem to allow citizens more direct access to the national conversation that is intended to act as a reflection of their concerns. Large corporations, as recent research suggests, would then have less control over the dissemination of information and would represent less of a barrier to access. (Maratea 2007) The democratization of discourse is not a partisan development: just as Pamela Geller’s claim was successfully received by a larger audience, liberal groups could find similarly receptive partisan media organizations such as MSNBC to broadcast grassroots claims about issues typically ignored by large media organizations (though one could reasonably dispute that MSNBC is the liberal equivalent of Fox News). If, as expected, blogs continue to rise in influence and a wider swath of Americans become aware of their value, the medium will become more widely recognized as a legitimate agenda setter. Blogs will be seen as vehicles through which news can still be disseminated and priorities can still be framed, but by actors who are less affected by traditional corporate pressures and incentives. If corporate media conglomerates no longer have the same ability to serve as gatekeepers—if citizens are increasingly

turning to alternative sources of media to gauge which issues they should consider important—then corporate media organizations, in turn, will have to increasingly adapt grassroots concerns into their coverage in order to maintain their legitimacy. Finally, if corporate media sources do not adapt, they will be more widely recognized as projecting a discourse that is misaligned with the actual concerns of the public. On the one hand, this two-way process of reorganization has the potential to lead to further polarization, with individuals seeking out only the sources of news that they believe are aligned with their political views. But the process also has the potential to substantially diversify what is considered “acceptable” public discourse. A diversified discourse would no doubt more accurately reflect the wide range of dynamic concerns and priorities that are held by citizens.

### **Conclusion**

Substantial research has been done on the intersection of politics and the media in American society, but less work has been devoted to understanding the specific processes that allow local issues to become amplified and transformed into national controversies. The actions of political and media institutions, from local to national actors and small to large sources of news, are deeply interwoven and constantly acting in response to one another. The analysis of the controversy surrounding the “Ground Zero Mosque” underscores the complicated and dynamic interplay between these phenomena, particularly their relative contributions to what emerges as a common national discourse. Rather than acting as an aggregated reflection of citizens’ concerns and priorities, as many would find normatively

desirable, the discourse that is ultimately produced is manipulated by a host of actors. It is deeply affected, as past research has repeatedly demonstrated, by economic, cultural, and political considerations that are often far removed from the issues that actually affect rank-and-file citizens.

Local issues do not become national controversies on their own. Rather, they are given prominent status by the actors who deem the issues worthy of more widespread discussion. Based on the trajectory of the controversy discussed here, this paper has identified one specific pathway that allows for local claims to evolve into major national disputes. The pathway is unique to the digital age: a grassroots blogger first begins writing consistently about an issue, making a claim about the issue's importance; that issue is subsequently adapted into the coverage of partisan news organizations such as Fox News; noticing the increasingly polarizing debate, a handful of politicians then offer comment; and once those politicians join the fray, mainstream media coverage finally begins in full. The claim can travel incredibly fast or, as in the case of the issue examined here, it can rise in visibility over many months.

What is especially striking about the "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy is that it seemed to disappear as quickly as it exploded. By November 2010, the controversy had mostly receded to the local New York City communities that had a vested stake in its outcome. National news outlets, meanwhile, had shifted their coverage to other election-season issues. The particular timing of the controversy's ascendance and subsequent disappearance supports the theory that many actors—especially conservative cable news and politicians themselves—aided in the

manufacturing of a controversy that otherwise would have received far less attention. In September 2011, the project's organizers opened an Islamic Center inside the project site with relatively little fanfare. The opening received only scattered national coverage. To the degree that it was discussed in the national media, it was not presented as a referendum on American values. Indeed, much of the coverage adopted an almost incredulous tone over the fact that the controversy could have become so spectacularly contentious in the first place.



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