

"The Only Criterion for Membership Is a Modem"

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Several aspects of online political discourse never cease to surprise me. Foremost among these is the inability of extremely bright people to understand that they themselves are not ordinary citizens.

Andrew Sullivan had a minor classic of the "bloggers-are-just-ordinary-folks" genre recently. Referring to David Brooks' New York Times op-ed piece about a group of young right-leaning writers, Sullivan commented that "Like the blogosphere itself, it's an open group. And the only criterion for membership is a modem."

Um, no. Take a closer look at exactly who is on this list:

- A DC-based book author, former White House aide, and senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. (Also an apparent ABD doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago.
- A contributing editor to the American Conservative and doctoral candidate in history at the University of Chicago.
- A DC-based research fellow at the Cato Institute who is ABD in philosophy from the University of Maryland.
- A DC-based writer and journalist who has worked for the Cato institute, Reason magazine, and The Economist, and who earned a bachelor's degree from NYU.
- A DC-based writer, lawyer, and doctoral candidate in government at Georgetown, with degrees from Duke and the USC Law School.
- A DC-based opinion journalist with an Ivy League undergraduate degree, a University of Chicago MBA, and a pre-journalistic career as a management consultant.
- A DC-based staff writer for the Weekly Standard with an undergrad degree from Columbia.
- A DC-based book author and senior editor at the National Review, who graduated summa cum laude from Princeton.

The men (and one woman) on this list are hardly a representative cross-section of the American public, and they nicely illustrate the fundamental paradox of online political discourse. When everybody has a modem, the people who end up getting read are not middle schoolers or a, as NBC News anchor Brian Williams imagines, "guy named Vinny in an efficiency apartment in the Bronx who hasn't left the efficiency apartment in two years." They are overwhelmingly educational, social, business, and technical elites.

The book shows that if we consider not the people who post, but the people who actually get read, the blogosphere is more elite-dominated than any form of traditional media. A well-pedigreed blogosphere can often be a good thing, but we should think twice before repeating platitudes about how the Internet is democratizing the public sphere.