

Who Surfs?

**New Technology, Old Voters and Virtual Democracy in the
1996 and 1998 US Elections**

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Abstract

This study considers the consequences of the Internet for civic engagement and, in particular whether technological change will widen the pool of activists, or whether it will reinforce the participation gap between the engaged and the apathetic. The first section outlines alternative theories of internet activism. The next develops a typology of net users, and analyzes their social profile and civic attitudes in the 1996 and 1998 US elections. The conclusion considers the implications for whether this new medium has the capacity to transform which voices are heard in American democracy.

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The more that Internet use explodes, the more hyperbole and hot air arises concerning its possible consequences for public life. Similar hopes and fears about the power of technology to transform democracy accompanied the rise other media like the wireless, talkies and television (see, for example, Douglas 1987). Systematic research has started to explore the impact of politics on the net for parties, candidates and election campaigns; for new social movements, interest groups and organizational activism; and for the policymaking process and governing in an information age (see, for example, McLean 1989; Budge 1996; Rash 1997; Bellamy and Taylor 1998; Hill and Hughes 1998; Davis and Owen 1998; Neuman 1998; Kamarck this volume).

This study considers the potential consequences of the Internet for civic engagement, in particular whether new technology will widen the pool of those who participate in politics, or whether it will reinforce the existing participation gap between the engaged and the apathetic? The first section outlines the debate between mobilization and reinforcement theories of Internet activism. The second section goes on to analyze the social background and civic attitudes of activists in the 1996 and 1998 American elections. The political use of the net has grown sharply since it first became available in the early 1990s. This process has changed the typical profile of users. To monitor developments, evidence is drawn from a series of surveys conducted by The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press from 1995 to November 1998 (*). The conclusion considers the implications of the findings for the future of politics on the net and whether this new medium has the capacity to transform whose voices are heard in American democracy.

Mobilization and Reinforcement Theories

Interpretations about the potential for expanding political participation through the internet differ sharply. On the one hand **mobilization** theories claim that use of the net will facilitate and encourage new forms of political activism. Enthusiasts such as Nicholas

Negroponte (1995) and Michael Dertouzos (1997) believe virtual democracy promises a cornucopia of empowerment in a digital world. Schwartz (1996) emphasizes the potential for a virtual community. Rheingold (1993) argues that bulletin board systems are democratizing technologies, used to exchange ideas, mobilise the public and strengthen social capital. Grossman (1995) anticipates the opportunities for shrinking the distance between governed and government using the new communication technology. Budge (1996) argues that the web will facilitate direct democracy. The strongest claims of mobilization theories are that net activism represents a distinctive type of political participation which differs, in significant ways, from conventional activities like working for political parties, organizing grassroots social movements, or lobbying elected officials. By sharply reducing the barriers to civic engagement, leveling some of the financial hurdles, and widening the opportunities for political debate, the dissemination of information, and group interaction, it is thought that more people will become involved in public life. For enthusiasts, the net promises to provide new forms of horizontal and vertical communication, which facilitate and enrich deliberation in the public sphere.

Yet in contrast **reinforcement** theories suggest use of the net will strengthen, but not radically transform, existing patterns of political participation. From this more skeptical perspective, this media will serve to reinforce, and perhaps even widen, the participation gap between the have and have-nots. Owen and Davis (1998) concluded that the Internet does provide new sources of information for the politically interested, but given uneven levels of access there are good grounds to be skeptical about its transformative potential for democratic participation(Owen and Davis 1998: 185). Murdock and Golding (1989) warn that the familiar socioeconomic biases which exist in nearly all conventional forms of political participation seem unlikely to disappear on the net, even if access gradually widens to the electronically disadvantaged. If so, the new medium may merely reproduce or even exacerbate the gap between the information-rich and information-poor. Hill and Hughes (1998: 44) argue that Internet activists are self-selecting so that the Internet does not change people, it simply allows them to do the same things in a different way.

One reason why the internet may reinforce existing patterns of participation is provided by the 'uses and gratifications' perspective in political communications (Blumler and Katz 1974; Rubin 1994; McQuail

1997). This account stresses that, given varied media choices, the audience has certain predispositions and needs which motives them to seek different programs and sources: people going out for the evening, for example, may turn to *Movielink.com*, those interested in socializing can go to an AOL chat room, while those wanting international news may listen to the online BBC *World Service*. The primary functions served by the media are those such as information-seeking, social companionship, and entertainment. This account may be particularly suitable for the Internet where, far more than with television or newspapers, users actively exercise choice (clicking to another web site, joining a different user group, emailing colleagues), thereby controlling the communication process. This assumes that the choice of media sources is essentially purposive, fulfilling certain needs in the audience, rather than simply habitual (if we usually return to a few book-marked sites), or incidental (if we surf at random).

There are therefore good reasons why both the mobilisation and reinforcement theories may be plausible. In the midst of the rhetoric and conjecture it is difficult to find systematic evidence which can throw light on this debate. Given the pace of change in communications, with use of the Web growing by leaps and bounds, we cannot hope to have conclusive answers about future developments. Much depends upon the political and economic conditions, for example how far the public sector intervenes to level the playing field for access. Political activism on the net can also be expected to vary according to the electoral context, for example levels of participation may be different in low-key mid-term elections or in presidential contests. For all these reasons, we need to compare whether patterns of use in the 1996 election are maintained or change in the 1998 contest.

Analyzing Net Activism

This study analyzes patterns of net activism in the United States from 1995 to November 1998, using evidence from the *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, which has carried out some of the richest surveys of Internet users based on over-sampling the user community⁽¹⁾. The June 1995 survey contained 997 online users, drawn from a representative telephone survey of the general population of 3,603. The October 1996 survey covered 1,003 online users. The November 1998 survey contained 1,993 internet users drawn from a representative telephone

survey of 3,184 adults. We also use the May 1998 Pew survey of Media Consumption (N.3002) and the November 1998 post-election Pew survey N.1005) to understand net activism in the mid-term elections. People were questioned in these surveys about a wide range of media habits including use of old and new media, as well as about their political knowledge, partisanship and political trust. The comparison of the 1996 and 1998 campaigns also allow us to compare patterns in the different environments created by presidential and mid-term elections. These surveys allow us to explore four related issues:

- ?? The first issue concerns **access and use**. Is the internet in the process of becoming a new mass media? In particular, how rapid has been the expansion from 1995-98 in Internet access and in political activism on the net? If mobilization theories are correct then political use on the net needs to spread beyond an elite minority into the general population.
- ?? The second issue concerns whether the net provides **alternative sources** of political information. If claims that the net will transform democracy are correct then online information should displace, not merely supplement, use of traditional news media.
- ?? The third issue concerns the **social profile** of net activists. Early studies commonly found that, compared with the general population, net users were over-represented among those with higher education and income, among men, and among the younger generation (Davies and Owen 1998: 156). Support for mobilization theories could be found if the social differentials evident in the mid-1990s have gradually closed as the user community has expanded.
- ?? The last issue concerns the **political profile** of net activists. In particular, compared with the electorate, are net activists distinctive in their civic attitudes, such as their levels of political trust, knowledge, and interest? And are they different in their party preferences and policy attitudes?

Answers to these questions help us to understand whether net activism involves a distinctively new form of political participation, as mobilization theories suggest, or whether it represents 'new wine in old bottles', as skeptics argue.

Has the Internet become a New Mass Media?

Mobilization theories assume that use of the Internet will expand so much within the next decade that it will eventually rival, and perhaps

even over-take, the size of the audience for television and the printed press. The overall rate of growth online has been phenomenal: the number of Americans using online and Internet services has been doubling every twelve months for the past two years⁽⁴⁾. Pew surveys found that the proportion of Americans who ever went online to access the internet surged from 14% in 1995, to 23% in July 1996, 36% in November 1997, and 41% in November 1998. By November 1998, Pew estimated that over half of all Americans (57 percent) used a computer at home or at work, while 43% owned a computer, 35% used email, and 13% had bought something online⁽⁵⁾.

[Table 1 about here]

Many believe that Internet use has been exploding worldwide but today access varies considerably across advanced industrialized societies, let alone among developing countries. In the fifteen-country European Union, the EuroBarometer estimates that about 12% of citizens had access to the internet in Spring 1998. But there are marked cross-national differences since the proportion was lowest in Greece (3%) and Portugal (6%) while in contrast about a third or more of all citizens has access in the more affluent countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland⁽²⁾. Therefore in the EU, at present only Scandinavia seems to reflect levels of access in the United States⁽³⁾.

The extent of the news revolution caused by this growth in the United States becomes apparent if we compare regular use of conventional and online media. Precise estimates about use of internet news vary over time, as both news events and the way people think about Internet 'news' continues to change. Nevertheless Pew surveys suggest that the percentage of Americans regularly getting news from the Internet (where 'regularly' is defined as at least once a week) more than tripled over two years, rising from 11 million users in June 1995 to 36 million in May 1998, or 20 percent of all Americans. As shown in Table 1, similar levels of use are evident among those who regularly go online to communicate with others via discussion lists and chat groups, while slightly fewer go online for entertainment news (14 percent) or financial information (10 percent). Within the space of just a few years, the regular audience for online news has become larger than many traditional media such as for mainstream news magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* (15 percent), listeners to talk radio (13 percent), let alone viewers of minority outlets like PBS *Newshour* or *C-Span* (4 percent).

The growth of the net provides a major rival to traditional news media outlets. The most common activities which engage about two-thirds of all Americans continue to be reading a daily printed newspaper and watching the local evening TV news. The majority also regularly catch radio news sometime during the day and listener-ship has expanded during the last decade. In contrast network news has suffered a dramatic hemorrhage of viewers due to the fragmentation of cable and satellite stations, and the Balkanization of the television audience: today just over a third (38 percent) regularly tune into Jennings, Brokaw and Rather. The drop has been precipitate: according to Roper polls almost half of all households (48 percent) watched network news every evening in 1975, compared with one quarter in 1997 (Davis and Owen 1998:136). To some extent this merely reflects the dispersion of the network audience to cable and satellite, as people may now find MSNBC or CNBC more convenient for their schedules than NBC News at 6.30pm. But this phenomenon, combined with the growth of the net, has clearly caused greater competition for the major networks.

Why Do People Go Online?

Therefore in America, in terms of the size of its total audience, the Internet can increasingly claim to be a mass media. This supports the transformative potential of this media. But is there a common experience of the net, so that we can talk about the effects of exposure to being online, much as we might discuss the influence of network news, violent movies, or talk radio? If so, then it is legitimate to generalize, as both sides of the debate often do, about the experience and attitudes of 'on-line users'. Yet the fragmentation and segmentation of the Web, and the myriad of uses which the internet can serve, means that perhaps we need a more cautious approach. Given the choices about where to go and what to do in the digital world, the question arises whether we have a shared experience of the Web at all and therefore whether it constitutes a mass media in the conventional sense.

The need to refine our concepts of net users may be particularly important for types of net political activism. It is generally agreed that political participation is not a single and uniform activity, but rather a multidimensional phenomenon (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1996). That is, people who regularly donate money to campaigns, or contact their congressional representative, are not necessarily involved in other dimensions like

party work, or community activism. There are different costs and benefits associated with different types of participation. The main categories distinguished by Verba and his colleagues concern voting, campaign work, communal activity, and contact specialists. In addition a few citizens are active across all dimensions, while some are involved in none.

Following this approach, participation in virtual democracy on the net can be understood to involve many different types of activity. Someone checking the web pages of The Christian Coalition, or reading Time/CNN's *AllPolitics*, for example, may be engaged in a different sort of activity to someone discussing the l'affaire Lewinsky in users groups, or emailing colleagues about the time of a community meeting. To explore the dimensions of net use the Pew surveys asked users about how often, if at all, they engage in a wide variety of activities, such as getting information about movies, travel or the Dow Jones, chatting with people in on-line forums, and engaging in political discussion. People were questioned about ten types of activity (see Appendix A for details) and we can map the overall pattern using factor analysis.

[Table 2 about here]

As shown in Table 2, in 1998 factor analysis revealed two distinct dimensions or types of activity on the net. On the one hand *general users* were most interested in using the net for news about current events, entertainment-related information about movies and hobbies, as well as financial information, using email, buying goods online, practical guidance about health, and communicating via online discussion groups. Just as many people turn mainly to the sports results or television listings or stock market results in traditional newspapers, so people seek a wide range of 'news', usually apolitical, on the web. While some of this activity may bring people in touch with public affairs, as people click from one topic to another, this process is more accidental than purposive. In contrast, *political activists* more often went online to engage in political discussions, to contact officials or groups about an issue, or to get specific information about the 1998 campaign. Therefore net political activists who sought political information or communication can be categorized as a distinct group within the online user community, as in society.

[Table 3 about here]

Were the net political activists a small minority? We can compare the most common general types of net activity, defined as those which occurred 'at least one a week' among online users during the 1998 campaign. The pattern in Table 3 shows that the most popular general uses included email (regularly used by almost three-quarters of online users) and work-related research (regularly used by almost half). Searching for information about politics and current events was the next most popular activity, used by 38 percent at least once a week. Yet more active forms of civic engagement were used by far fewer of those online in the 1998 campaign, including political discussion (used by 4 percent) and contacting officials or groups about politics (4 percent). The comparison of the 1996 and 1998 campaigns shows that the greatest increase in use has been in emailing, and there has also been some increase in the use of the net to get entertainment-related and financial information. In contrast the proportions engaged in the more political types of activity hardly changed. Wider access to the web seems to have expanded the audience for general interest subjects, such as information about the weather or movies, much more than the audience for political or international news.

What do we know about the minority (15% of all online users) who went online specifically to get information about the 1996 and 1998 elections? If we look more closely at the type of activities among this select group we find that the most popular activities included getting information about a candidate's voting record, participating in an online poll, sending email supporting or opposing candidates, downloading election information, and providing information such as email or mailing addresses (see Table 4). But in all cases this activity involved less than 5% of the total online community, and therefore an even smaller proportion of the general electorate.

[Table 4 about here]

Clearly use of the net will evolve further in subsequent elections. Like the early years of radio or television, access will gradually widen in the next decade. Different types of election - such as a more exciting and open presidential race in 2000 - has the potential to stimulate greater public engagement. Candidates may also develop new ways to communicate interactively via the Web. The passive web page, where people get vertical access to 'top-down' information, much as they would from conventional political leaflets, is gradually being superceded by more active designs allowing horizontal

communication among networks of citizens, and 'bottom up' feedback into the political process (Kamarck this volume). Nevertheless such interactivity seems likely to continue to appeal most to the small group of mobilized and interested activists, rather than reaching citizens with lower levels of political efficacy and confidence. The proportion of Americans currently involved in any form of online election activity suggests the need for caution about the transformative capacity of the web for democracy, at least in the short term. Online access and use has certainly expanded sharply in the last few years but the proportion of net political activists remains far smaller.

Does Online Information Displace Traditional News Media?

The most common political use of the net is to seek out information from a myriad of sources. But the question remains whether this represents a distinctive activity, as proponents of cyberdemocracy suggest. If people commonly browse the web to consult political sources not available elsewhere, such as the candidate web pages, non-partisan organizations like Project Vote Smart, and official sites like The White House web page, then this could encourage more active citizenship. The unmediated quality of candidate and party information, and some attempts at interactivity, are also potentially different to the messages which have been filtered by the press. Just, Crigler and Kern (1998) concluded that people typically browse several related sites on the Internet so that the Internet has real potential for making a broader range of topics and more diverse sources of information available to citizens. On the other hand, skeptics argue that many people are using the Net to access conventional media sources, like *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, or *Newsweek*, via the internet not the news stand. Previous studies have found that people who gravitate towards the online media were also likely to monitor the traditional media, so that there was considerable overlap (David and Owen 1988: 142; Hill and Hughes 1998:35). In this regard news is flowing through new channels, but it remains recognizably traditional journalism. This pattern alters when but not necessarily what we watch or read.

[Table 5 about here]

To examine whether online news sources displace, or supplement, traditional journalism we can use the Pew 1998 survey to compare those who regularly use online and conventional news media. The correlation confirms that use of online news was weakly but significantly associated with use of newspaper ($r=.08$ $p.>01$) and radio news ($r=.07$ $p.>01$), but there was no significant association with use of television news. This pattern was even more evident among the smaller group of net activists, who proved most interested in learning about the campaign from any available news media. There is also some direct evidence about this issue. Among people who regularly get news online, a few (11 percent) said they were using other media sources less often but this was more or less balanced by others (16 percent) who reported using other sources more often.

Additional evidence is available in Table 5, which looks at where people seeking political news went on the web during the 1996 and 1998 campaigns. The most commonly visited sites were those for the old media: national newspapers and network TV. Cable TV sites were also popular. In contrast, candidate and official government sites proved slightly less popular, as did some of the non-profit organization sites like Project Vote Smart or Policy.com. This pattern suggests that news is not necessarily a zero sum game: hearing an item about Vigra or Lewinsky on CNN can spark interest in going online to learn more about these stories, and vica versa⁽⁶⁾. In the short-term the use of online news seems to supplement, rather than replace, conventional channels. In the long-term, however, given the attractions of the net for the younger generation, it remains unclear whether this pattern will be maintained in future decades or whether online sources will gradually come to replace older types of media production and distribution.

[Table 5 about here]

What is the social profile of online news users?

For advocates of cyberdemocracy the opportunities provided by the net will eventually lower the barriers to participation and widen access to those currently excluded from the policymaking process. The low costs of setting up a web page, for example, and free email, means that even a small organization with an imaginative and effective design can appear as professional on the Net as much larger rivals. Unlike costly TV ads, with web pages smaller parties like the Libertarians or Greens can

compete on a more or less level playing field with the Democrats or Republicans. Yet skeptics argue that the familiar socio-economic disparities in political participation, evident throughout public life, are unlikely to disappear on the Net (Murdock and Golding 1989). In the 1996 election online users displayed a clear pattern in their education, income, gender and age. Online users in general, and online political activists in particular, were more likely than average to be well-educated, affluent, younger and male (Davis and Owen 1998: 156; Hill and Hughes 1998: 29). Yet have these social differentials gradually closed over time as the audience has widened?

[Table 6 about here]

Table 6 shows the social profile of those who went online for news about politics during the 1998 campaign compared with the general electorate. The general trend has been for gradual closure of gender differences in online use in recent years, as women are found in greater numbers among new users. Nevertheless if we focus just on use of the net for political news the results confirm a marked gender gap persists in 1998, a pattern which reflects the broader gender gap in conventional forms of civic engagement such as party membership and interest group activism (Flammang 1997). The online gender gap is most marked among the older generation, but it also persists among the under-thirties where young men are the most frequent online users.

There is also a significant generation gap among online news users, with the disparities particularly evident among the under-thirties and the over sixties. One remarkable feature of the results is the predominance of young people seeking news online when this group is least likely to turn to traditional sources like newspapers. The May 1998 Pew survey found that among those in their twenties, more went online the previous day (38 percent) than read a newspaper (28 percent) or magazine (35 percent). In contrast this pattern was reversed among the older groups. If this represents a generational shift in news habits, as seems plausible, then the gradual process of cohort change may eventually produce a major change in how people get their news, whether inky lino-type or wired. This provides some of the most important evidence in support of the mobilization thesis, if online information is now reaching the younger generation who are currently least engaged in the political process and least attentive to conventional news media.

The disparities in terms of class and educational background confirm that online users remain atypical of the general public. In 1998 the most affluent (with a household income over \$75,000) were more than twice as likely to seek news online as their proportion in the total electorate. In contrast the poorest groups, and those with high school education or less, remain strongly underrepresented among online news users. If we compare the background of online users in the 1996 and 1998 elections the trends show income and educational disparities continue although they have closed slightly with the widening size of the online community. The familiar socioeconomic biases found in conventional forms of political participation like voting are therefore currently replicated in cyberdemocracy. The one exception to this usual pattern is found in terms of race, where the evidence shows that minorities are represented proportionally in the news online community.

What are the political attitudes of net activists?

The mobilization thesis suggests that the new media will attract groups who might otherwise be uninvolved in conventional forms of activism, especially the younger generation who have low levels of voting turnout and civic engagement, and those who feel alienated from mainstream society. In contrast, skeptics argue that 'to them that hath shall be given': the people most likely to prove motivated to communicate and organize via the web are also those who probably would become most engaged in traditional forms of political activism in parties, groups and lobbying (Hill and Hughes 1998: 43).

[Table 7 about here]

Table 7 compares the political attitudes of all online users and of net political activists in the 1998 election⁽⁷⁾. The results confirm that net activists tended to be higher than average consumers of all types of media news, including television and radio. Net activists also displayed particularly high levels of reported turnout: not surprisingly, those who were most motivated to seek out news about the election were far more willing to vote than the average online user. This pattern is clearly reflected also in levels of political knowledge: when asked which party had control of the House of Representatives net political activists were more likely than the average online user to get the answer right. There were no significant differences between net

activists and general online users in levels of political and social trust.

Does use of online news have any impact on the outcome in terms of votes and, in particular, what are the characteristics of net activists in terms of their partisanship? The pattern in 1996 and 1998 shows that the group of net activists proved similar to the online community as a whole in terms of their 1998 House vote. Nevertheless there was a significant difference between the online community and the general electorate in terms of approval of House Republicans where online users proved more positive (see Table 8). Moreover the pro-Republican partisanship of online users was not simply the product of the gender, income and educational biases among the user community, since approval of Congressional Republicans remained a significant factor in predicting online news use even after controlling for the social background of voters.

[Table 8 about here]

Conclusions and Discussion

For democracy, voices can be heard claiming that the Internet may produce the best of times, or perhaps the worst of times. This chapter serves to confirm the overall pattern of *reinforcement* rather than mobilization: net political activists were already among the most motivated, informed and interested in the electorate. In this sense, during recent campaign the net was essentially preaching to the converted. The net still provided a valuable service in widening the range of information which was easily available during the campaign. But the web seems to have been used more often as a means to access traditional news rather than as a radical new source of unmediated information and communication between citizens and their elected leaders. Whether the Internet has the capacity to reach beyond this group, and beyond these news sources, as access gradually ripples out to broader groups in the electorate, remains an open question.

Sweeping generalizations about the positive or negative effects of the digital age are common without distinguishing whether there is one online community or perhaps many. Previous studies have often assumed that there is a single type of experience associated with going online. Instead this chapter argues that we need to distinguish different dimensions of Internet use. What this study suggests is that, while we

may hope for a Virtual Democracy, with e-citizens becoming more politically engaged and informed, this activity may be confined to a minority. Some may choose to chat about Bill, Newt, and the Budget, or, more realistically, Viagra, Monica and Di, this does not necessarily click the mouse of other types of users. Only a few of the online community proved to be engaged in any form of political activity which can claim to be distinctively 'new'. Most online users are often using traditional journalistic outlets, like CNN or the New York Times, but from a more convenient source. Hence emails may gradually displace letters, Web pages may displace reference books, electronic newspapers may displace inky linotype. Communication flows through new channels, true. But will this have major political consequences for patterns of participation? In the midst of this process of change, prognostications would be foolhardy. We need systematic longitudinal panel studies examining changes in media use, and any subsequent impact in civic attitudes, to explore this process further. But there are persuasive grounds for skepticism about the more sweeping claims about the power of technology to change democracy as we know it. We all know that many tune-out from public affairs on MTV or the Home Shopping channel or the afternoon soaps. Given the fragmentation and choice of messages and activities available on the Net, users may never encounter politics in their web bookmarks of choice. In this sense, although evolving into a mass media in terms of numbers, the Net may never be a mass media in terms of a shared political experience. My Internet - where I go, what I read, what I do - is not your Internet. Such a customized media environment is both empowering for users but also frustrating for analysts. In this sense, Democracy.com looks more like anarchy than ABC News.

Notes

(*)I am most grateful to Andrew Kohut and The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press for generous release of the survey data on online users. The main surveys are those of online users in 1995, 1996, and 1998, the May 1998 survey of the public's media consumption, and the November 1998 pre and post-election surveys.

- (1) For details see <http://www.people-press.org>.
- (2) Eurobarometer 49 (Apr-May 1998). The survey asked "Do you have access to, or do you use,...the Internet or the World Wide Web?" The survey estimated the following percentage with access to the Internet: EU-15 12%, Sweden 39%, Denmark 35%, Finland 31%, Netherlands 23%, UK 20%, Luxembourg 11%, Italy 9%, Belgium 9%, Germany 8%, Ireland 8%, Spain 8%, France 7%, Austria 7%, Portugal 6%, Greece 3%. For more details about the Information Society Project surveys see <http://www.ispo.cec.be/>
- (3) In Spring 1998 Mediamark Research estimated that sixty-two million adult Americans (31.9 percent) have any online Internet access at home or work while forty-four million (22.3 percent) used the Internet within the previous month. See <http://www.mediamark.com/>
- (4) *The Statistical Abstract of the US* estimated that in 1997 about one in seven adults logged onto the net every month, rising to a fifth of all full-time workers, and a third of all college graduates. See <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/computer>.
- (5) 'The Internet News Audience Goes Ordinary' The Pew Research Center 16 January 1999.
- (6) Some evidence for this is provided in the May 1998 Pew survey where online users were asked "Have you ever gone online to follow-up or get more information on a news story you saw or heard in a newspaper or magazine or on TV?" In total 54 percent had done this, while 46 percent said they had not.
- (7) Unfortunately the evidence about public opinion on many of these items is not strictly comparable since it comes from different surveys. The comparisons which can be made can be found in "News Attracts Most Internet Users" The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, December 16 1996.

Table 1: Regular Use of News Media by the General Public, May 1998.

	Regular Users (%)
Read Daily Newspaper	68
Watch Local Evening TV News	64
Listen to Radio News	52
Watch Network TV News (CBS, ABC or NBC)	38
Watch TV News Magazines (eg <i>60 Minutes, Dateline</i>)	37
Watch Weather Channel	33
Go online at least once a week(*)	→ 25
Morning TV News (eg <i>Today Show, CBS This Morning</i>)	23
Watch Cable News Network (CNN)	23
Go online to get news at least once a week	→ 20
Go online to use discussion lists/chat groups (*)	→ 20
News Magazines (eg <i>Time, U.S.News, Newsweek</i>)	15
Listen to National Public Radio (NPR)	15
Watch TV Tabloids (eg <i>Hard Copy, Inside Edition</i>)	14
Go online to get information about entertainment (*)	→ 14
Watch Daytime TV Talk Shows (e.g. <i>Jerry Springer</i>)	13
Listen to Talk Radio	13
Watch CNBC	12
Daytime TV Talk Shows	10
Go online to get financial information (*)	→ 10
Watch MSNBC	8
Watch Court TV	6
Watch MTV	6
Listen to Rush Limbaugh's radio show	5
Read Business magazines (e.g. <i>Forbes, Fortune</i>)	5
Watch PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer	4
Listen to Howard Stern's radio show	4
Watch C-SPAN	4
Read Print Tabloids (e.g. <i>National Enquirer, The Sun</i>)	3

Note: Q: "Now I'd like to know how often you watch (or listen to or read)...Regularly, Sometimes, Hardly ever, Never". For online sources (*) the question was "Please tell me how often, if ever, you engage in each of the following online activities..." Regular use is defined as at least once a week.

Source: The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Media Consumption survey using a nationwide sample of 3,002 adults f/w 24 April-11 May 1998.

Table 2: General and Political Online Users, 1998

Type of activity	Online Users	
	General Users	Political Activists
Go online for news/information on current events, public issues or politics	.77	
Go online for news	.76	
Get entertainment-related information e.g. movies, hobbies	59	
Get financial information such as stock quotes	57	
Send or receive email	.52	
Purchased goods or services online	.49	
Get health or medical information	.46	
Communicate with others through on-line forums, discussion lists	.39	
Engage in online discussions about politics		.85
Contact or email groups or officials about political issues		.82
Go online for information about the 1998 elections		.55
% Variance	26	17

Note: The model uses Principal Component Factor Analysis with varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization suppressing coefficients below .35. See Appendix A for questions.

Source: The Pew Center for the People and the Press: Technology and Online Use Survey 1998 Over-sample of on-line users N. 1993. F/w November 1998.

Table 3: Frequency of Activities, All Online Users, 1996-98

Type of online activity	% At least Once Every Week 1996	% At least Once Every Week 1998
Send email	64	72
Do research for work	48	47
Get news on current events, public issues and politics	39	38
Get entertainment-related information e.g. movies, hobbies	30	35
Get financial information	23	28
Communicate via online forums, discussion lists, chat groups	23	22
Do research for school	22	14
Go online for information about the 1996 elections.	12	10
Get travel information	10	12
Engage in online political discussions	4	4
Contact groups and officials about political issues	2	4

Source: The Pew Center for the People and the Press: Technology and On-line Use Survey 1996. Over-sample of on-line users N. 1003. F/w October 1996. Technology and On-line Use Survey 1998 survey N. 1993 F/w November 1998.

Table 4: Online Election Activities, 1996-98 (*)

	1996	1998
Get information about a candidate's voting record		30
Participate in an online poll	34	26
Get or send email supporting or opposing a candidate for office		22
Download election information	56	20
Provide information such as your email/mailing address	31	18
Participate in online discussions	31	13
Get information about where and when to vote		12

Note: (*)As a proportion of those who went online to get news or information about the 1998 elections (15% of the online user community). Q80. "When you went online to get information about the elections, do/did you do any of the following..."

Source: The Pew Center for the People and the Press: Technology and On-line Use Survey 1996. Over-sample of on-line users N. 1003. F/w October 1996. Technology and On-line Use Survey 1998 survey N. 1993 F/w November 1998.

Table 5: Web Sites Used for Political News, 1996-98

	% Ever Visited Site 1996	% Ever Visited Site 1998
Network TV (CBS, NBC, ABC)	27	26
National newspaper sites (Washington Post, New York Times, LA Times)	38	23
CNN/Time AllPolitics	42	23
MSNBC	23	23
CNN/Time All Politics	42	23
Local community web site	20	22
Candidate web site (*)		17
House of Representatives, Senate or White House (*)		13
C-Span	25	12
PBS Online		9
CQ American Voter '96	7	5
The Drudge Report (*)		4
Project Vote Smart or Web, White & Blue (**)		3
Policy.com (**)		3
Online only magazines like Salon or Slate (**)		2

Note: Only asked of those who got political news online. ** Not asked in a comparable way in 1996.

Source: The Pew Center for the People and the Press: Technology and Online Use Survey 1996. Over-sample of on-line users N. 1003. F/w October 1996. The Pew Center for the People and the Press: Technology and Online Use Survey 1998. Over-sample of on-line users N. 1993. F/w November 1998.

Table 6: The Social Profile of Online Elections News Users, 1998

% of online users who got any news or information about the 1998 election from online sources	No	Yes	Sig.
ALL	90	10	
GENDER			
Men	44	60	
Women	56	40	.31**
RACE			
White	85	88	
Non-White	9	10	
AGE			
20s	14	25	
30's	22	24	
40s	18	33	
50s	15	12	
60+	31	7	.37**
INCOME			
\$75,000+	10	25	
\$50,000-\$74,999	14	17	
\$40,000-\$49,000	11	11	
\$30,000-\$39,999	11	8	
\$20,000-\$29,000	14	11	
<\$\$20,000	15	5	.22**
EDUCATION			
College Grad	25	39	
Some College	27	28	
High School or Less	48	32	.24**
N.	1378	144	

Note: The coefficient of the association was measured by gamma. **=.01
*=.05

Source: The Pew Research Center Post-Election Survey November 1998

Table 7: The Political Profile of Net Political Activists

	All Online Users 1998	Net Political Activists	Sig.
Read paper yesterday	70	76	.15**
Watched TV yesterday	63	68	.11**
Listened to radio news yesterday	47	51	.09**
Voted in 1998	56	78	.46**
Vote Republican 1998	42	44	
Vote Democrat 1998	41	40	.04
Know GOP hold House	62	80	.41**
Social trust: High	42	45	.04
Political Trust: high	28	26	.02

Note: 'Net Political Activists' are defined as those who engage in online discussions about politics, contact or email groups or officials about political issues or go online for information about the 1998 elections. The coefficient of the association was measured by gamma.

**=.01 *=.05

Source: The Pew Research Center Online Technology Survey November 1998

Table 8: Political Predictors of Online Election News Users, November 1998

	Coefficient	S.E.	R	Sig
Gender	.90	.22	.14	.01
Age	.04	.00	.23	.01
Education	.15	.06	.07	.02
Income	.19	.05	.14	.01
Vote 1998	.27	.22	.00	.24
Approval of Congressional Republicans	.18	.08	.06	.02
Approval of President Clinton	.01	.10	.00	.97
Constant	.55	.70		
-2 log likelihood	843.59			
Goodness of Fit	1316.07			
Nagelkerke R ²	.15			

Note: Logistic regression model with use of online news in the 1998 election as the dependent variable.

Source: The Pew Research Center Technology Online Surveys 6-10 November 1998.

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Appendix A:
The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press
October 1998 Technology Online Re-Interview.
Factor Analysis Items and coding for Table 2.

User Activities

General Users:

Q41 EMAIL

Do you ever send or receive email or electronic mail? (IF YES, ASK: Is this everyday, 3 to 5 days per week, 1 or 2 days per week, once every few weeks, or less often?)

- 1 Everyday
- 2 3-5 days week
- 3 1-2 days week
- 4 Once every few weeks
- 5 Less often
- 6 Never
- 7 DK

Q58 NEWS

How frequently do you go online to get News? Is this everyday, 3 to 5 days per week, 1 or 2 days per week, once every few weeks, or less often?)

(same coding as Q41.)

Q.62 ONLINE ACTIVITIES

Please tell me how often, if ever, you engage in each of the following on-line activities. First, how often do you go on-line to (READ...)

Q62A. Communicate with other people through on-line forums, discussion lists,

Q62B. Get financial information such as stock quotes or corporate information

Q62C. Do research for school

Q62D. Do research for work

Q62E. Get news and information on current events, public issues or politics

Q62F. Get travel information or services

Q62G. Get information about hobbies, movies, restaurants or other

everyday, 3-5 days per week, 1 or 2 days per week, once every few weeks, less often, or never?

NET POLITICAL ACTIVISTS:

Q.69 POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS

Do you ever engage in **online discussions about politics?** (IF YES, ASK: Is this everyday, 3 to 5 days per week, 1 or 2 days per week, once every few weeks, or less often?)

(same coding as Q62.)

Q.70 CONTACT OFFICIALS

Do you ever **contact or e-mail** any groups, organizations or public officials **about political issues or public policy questions?** (IF YES, ASK: Is this everyday, 3 to 5 days per week, 1 or 2 days per week, once every few weeks, or less often?)

Q78 ELECTION NEWS

Have you gone/ did you ever go online go get news and information about the 1998 elections? (IF YES, ASK: Is this everyday, 3 to 5 days per week, 1 or 2 days per week, once every few weeks, or less often?)