A New Political Marketplace: The Web Snares Voters

by David S. Birdsell, Douglas Muzzio, Humphrey Taylor and David Krane

Political community and the prospects for informed choice depend largely on the capabilities of a nation's communication systems. Eighteenth century politicians in the United States ran essentially local races for a small group of white, male property owners who generally knew them. "Swilling the planters with bumbo" gave way to less direct forms of communication as electoral districts grew and the franchise spread. By the mid-20th century, newspapers and broadcasting systems mediated most citizens' contact with not only politicians, but one another. Beyond local contacts and friends acquired through face-to-face experience, most people learned of other voters through reports from newspapers, radio, and increasingly, television.

Over the past decade, computer-mediated communication (CMC)—on-line services, the Internet with its World Wide Web, e-mail—offer a new the prospect of instantaneous contact, now unfettered by distance, social class, or previous acquaintance. On some services, a Web page and unlimited e-mail cost less than $20 per month. Private citizens can join senior government officials on "chat" lines, and anyone with access to the Internet can post political opinions to a news group. CMC is hailed by some as the conduit for a more participatory government, and condemned by others as a threat to sound deliberation, perhaps to representative government itself. Will CMC expand access to politics, or will it benefit only a technological elite? Will it diversify political discourse, or provide demagogues with an attractive stump? As of now, there is precious little empirical evidence to clarify the picture.

The Baruch-Harris Survey Unit has polled more than 5,000 adult Americans over the past nine months, about 11% of whom say they access the World Wide Web, to ascertain the political potential of the new media. This research is in its early stages, but it suggests that the Internet, and the World Wide Web in particular, is already moving into the political mainstream, and will reach many millions of likely voters by the 1996 election. Our experiences in conducting these surveys also suggest the difficulty of understanding the on-line population, and why estimates of its size have varied so widely. Here we will sketch some of our preliminary results and suggest briefly how these media can be understood in the context of democratic governance.

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Usage Climbing Rapidly

The World Wide Web has grown phenomenally over the past eighteen months. From a base of about one million users at the end of 1994, 21.5 million people use the Web today.[1] Roughly 30% of these users access the Web for political information, and of these, an astonishing 90% say that they voted in the 1992 presidential election, placing them among the most politically active audiences using any form of communication.[2] These numbers reflect a steady increase in the Web-using population and a consistent interest in politics. In February of this year, Baruch-Harris reported that 9%—or 17 million—of all adult Americans accessed the World Wide Web and that one-third (33%) of that number—5.8 million—used the Web to get information about politics.[3]

Americans access the World Wide Web from multiple locations. Eighty-four percent of Web users access from home, 77% access from work, and 56% access from both home and work, while 19% access the Web from locations such as schools and libraries. The prominence of these "other" locations suggests wider access to the Web than ownership or work-related activities would indicate. "Public" terminals provide access (though not necessarily an exclusive point of access) for roughly one fifth of those using the Web. Only 28% of Web users access the Web exclusively from a single location.

Overall, our results support some of the higher estimates of Web use in the United States.[4] We attribute our comparatively large numbers to the following two factors: 1) A generous definition of Web use, measuring how many people use the World Wide Web, regardless of frequency or subscriber status, and 2) more recent numbers. Though using different baselines, virtually all studies of the Web have measured a rapid increase in use. It is reasonable to expect that later surveys will produce higher numbers than earlier ones. [Note: The authors discuss these and other issues relating to measurement on p. 35.]

Who Uses The Web?

There are substantial demographic and socioeconomic differences between Web users and the general population. For example, while the Web is a predominantly male domain, more than one in three (35%) Web users are women. Nationwide, one in eight men (13%) have used the Web; one in sixteen women (6%) have. Web users are disproportionately white (85% of users while 79% of the general population). Age directly relates to use: 17% of 18-24 year olds have surfed the Web, while only 4% of those 50 and older have.

Americans with higher levels of education are more likely to use the Web than their less educated neighbors. While 24% of all college graduates have used the Web, the same is true of only 4% of those who have never gone to college. More than half (52%) of all Web users are college grads. Income is also directly related to Web use. While 19% of Americans earning more than $50,000 a year have used the Web, only 4% of those making less than $15,000 have done so. Nearly half of WWW users (48%) make more than $50,000 annually. Those who use the Web for political purposes reflect roughly the same characteristics.

Web users tend to be more liberal than the general population. Liberals comprise 22% of Web users, conservatives 25%; moderates make up 35%. Similar percentages of conservatives (28%), moderates (33%) and liberals (25%) seek political information on the Web. For comparison, according to the 1994 National Election Study, 36% of Americans characterized themselves as conservative, 27% as moderate, and only 15% as liberal.[5] As for partisanship, equal percentages of World Wide Web users call themselves Republican (26%), Democrat (27%), or independent (28%).

Numbers such as these suggest that while the Web draws nowhere near the audiences for television or traditional print media, it is well on its way to becoming an important medium for campaign communication. If the same num-

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ber of people who voted in 1992 turn out in 1996, the Web will provide political information to 5% of the predicted 1996 electorate, even if the medium fails to register a single new user between now and November. If, on the other hand, use of the Web continues to grow at even a 10% monthly pace (the user population has actually been growing at close to twice that rate since December, 1994), fully one-tenth of the 1996 electorate will be browsing the Web for political information by election day.[6]

New Media and American Democracy

Are these new communications technologies (including faxing and new uses for older media such as talk radio) good or bad for American democracy? Some feel these new media may improve democracy by expanding the country's political conversation and the citizen's sense of empowerment, considered by some theorists the essence of democratic practice.

Others fear that these new media formats are ushering in an era of "hyperdemocracy"—an inherently unstable form of direct democracy featuring "electronic town halls" and computer-TV interactive voting. The framers of the Constitution, fearing impassioned majorities and their tendency to tyrannize, rejected plebiscitary or "direct" democracy. "Representative democracy" was a defense against the "temporary errors and delusions" of the people.[7]

James Madison in *Federalist 10* offered the "extended republic" as the new nation's chief defense against "the mischief of faction." In Madison's view, majorities could be passionate, irresponsible, and oppressive. Geographic distances, however, made it hard for even the most motivated majority "to discover their own strength and to act in unison with each other."[8] Today, the bulwark of Madison's extended republic is easily breached by global, instantaneous communication in forms which can create political communities over

continental distances. CMC represents either the death of Madison's republic, or its evolution.

The new media can have a salutary effect on American politics and government, increasing opportunities for discussion and dissent. In this role, the new media are the modern equivalent of the soapbox, committees of correspondence, the bully pulpit, the village square, and the town hall. The Internet and the World Wide Web provide novel ways for officials and constituents to engage in two-way conversations. They are a modern means by which citizens can petition and instruct their elected representatives, diminishing political and social alienation and increasing self efficacy and participation.[9]

If the new media "democratize" political knowledge, democracy is improved, because the level of information available to the citizenry helps determine how well it can control government. The effect can be to render elite control more tenuous and "undermine existing constellations of power."[10] As Madison put in his *National Gazette* essays in 1791, when he was an opposition leader in the House, access to multiple information outlets mitigates the influence of the dominant opinion molders by enabling "every good citizen to be a sentinel" of the republic.[11]

If, on the other hand, the new media are available principally to wealthy citizens, or whites, or men; or if they encourage in all users a vitriolic, uncivil rhetoric, it may accelerate atomization rather than provide its cure. Politicians who can appeal directly to ideological interests without regard to geographic boundaries may be able to become more extreme, and less sensitive to the niceties (such as they are) of face-to-face political discourse. Those who distrust the new media correctly point to the physical separation entailed in its use: people typically alone, typing at a keyboard, interacting with unseen correspondents through a medium that problematizes commitment and personal identity. Are these isolated internet us-

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ers just typisting alone, or are they creating a new kind of democratic community?

Knowing what role the new media will play requires of course elaborate empirical research not only into the circumstances of use, but into the content available and the behaviors enacted online as well. Our early research suggests that those using the new media to improve political discourse will have to cope with skewed demographics, access limitations, and a user population difficult to understand. Yet, they can benefit from an apparently widespread medium with a growing reach and an increasingly, if imperfectly, diverse constituency. Whatever their influence, the online population will constitute a significant percentage of the 1996 electorate, and presumably, an even larger segment of voters in 2000. We should know them better soon.

Endnotes:

[1] These results are drawn from a national telephone survey of 1005 adults, conducted by Louis Harris and Associates between April 19 and 22, 1996.

[2] These political and voting figures represent the responses of Web users in only the latest of the five surveys. Hence, the sample size (76 users) is relatively small, but suggestive.

[3] These four Harris Polls were conducted by telephone within the United States August 31-September 3, 1995, November 2-6, 1995, November 9-21, 1995, January 18-22, 1996. For each of these surveys, roughly 1,000 respondents were interviewed, with a maximum sampling error of +/- 3%. Again, statistics based on Web users from one survey only are based on n's of about 100 or less.

[4] A low estimate is provided by the Times-Mirror survey fielded in the late spring of 1995 and a high estimate (prior to the present analysis) by the CommerceNet/Nielsen survey fielded in late summer 1995. See Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press, *Technology in the American Household: Americans Going Online . . . Explosive Growth, Uncertain Destinations* (Washington, DC: October 16, 1995); CommerceNet/Nielsen, "The CommerceNet/Nielsen Internet Demographics Survey, Executive Summary, October 30, 1995 <http://www.commerce.net/information/surveys/exec_sum.html>.

[5] National Election Studies, "Party Identification 3-Point Scale 1952-1994," <http://www.umich.edu/~nes/resourcs/nesguide/toptables/tab2a_2.htm>.

[6] Fifty-five percent of the voting age population (VAP) actually went to the polls in 1992 based on data from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995*, and Kimball W. Brace, ed., *The Election Data Book: A Statistical Portrait of Voting in America: 1992*. If the same percentages hold up for 1996, the Census Bureau's estimated VAP (available at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdem/voting/proj/votepg1.asc>) of 196,509,000 will produce a turnout of 108,079,950.

[7] *The Federalist Papers*, New York: New American Library, 1961, p. 82.

[8] Ibid, p. 83.

[9] Louis Bolce, Gerald De Maio and Douglas Muzzio, "Dial In Democracy: Talk Radio and the 1994 Election," *Political Science Quarterly*, 1996, forthcoming.

[10] Eric Schickler, "Democratizing Technology: Hierarchy and Innovation in Public Life," *Polity* 27(Winter 1994), pp. 175-199.

[11] Madison quoted in Richard K. Matthews, *If Men Were Angels: James Madison and the Heartless Empire of Reason*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995, pp. 214-215, p. 158.

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One Example of the Internet Explosion
America Online Subscribers

May 1996	6,000,000
Feb. 1996	5,000,000
Feb. 1995	2,000,000
Jan. 1994	550,000
Jan. 1993	219,000
Aug. 1992	181,600
June 1991	130,600

Source: America Online (figures do not include trial memberships)