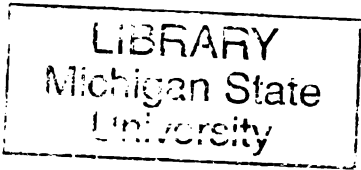


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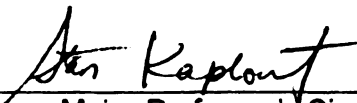
THE SELF AND ONLINE POLITICS: A SOCIAL
PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO POLITICAL
COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN THE
UNITED STATES

presented by

Benjamin Gross

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**THE SELF AND ONLINE POLITICS: A SOCIAL
PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO POLITICAL COMPUTER-
MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

By

Benjamin Gross

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

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ABSTRACT

THE SELF AND ONLINE POLITICS: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO POLITICAL COMPUTER- MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN THE UNITED STATES

By

Benjamin Gross

As computers have become a more prominent part in the daily lives of people in the United States, social researchers have begun to grapple with the impact of this new technology on our everyday lives. Foremost among these concerns is how people understand and connect to politics, and how these new forms of interaction have an impact on political discourse in the United States. In this dissertation, my focus is placed upon how an Internet user will seek information about politics, which kinds of other people will the user likely prefer interacting with online, and whether the offline social living environment of the user has a meaningful effect on these behaviors. Drawing on quantitative analysis, I attempt to explain and illustrate how the social attitudes, offline living environments, and political identities of the users impact how they connect to politics in cyberspace.

**This dissertation is dedicated to Brenda Sue and William T. Gross, Sr., my mom and dad,
who are the most wonderful and inspirational people that I have ever known.**

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Chapter One
An introduction and literature review of political computer-mediated communication in the United States.

Abstract

This chapter is intended to illustrate the overall layout of this dissertation and discuss the important issues which will be addressed. The author will explore what important questions have not been properly addressed in the current literature regarding online politics. An appropriate research plan in order to fill many of these gaps in the study of computer-mediated political communication is then outlined.

Introduction

Technology and the media are having profound effects on the social worlds of people in a wide variety of ways, including new information technologies such as the internet. Whether one encounters its presence at work, in the home, at school, or in a local coffeehouse, virtually everyone seems to be connected to the internet to the point where escaping its grasp for just one day seems increasingly improbable. People have come to use the internet for almost every facet of daily life, whether the task involves conducting everyday business transactions, finding a date, keeping in touch with family and friends, or to seek out news in order to keep up with what is happening in the world.

As the internet becomes more common to everyday life, questions about its effect on the social life of its users have surfaced. These concerns serve as the starting points for the main research questions I intend to address in my dissertation. While there are an endless number of areas which the internet might affect interpersonal relationships and intrapersonal attitudes, I will focus on the area of US politics. My main concern will be on the relationship between a person's political attitudes and self-concept, and how those

factors may influence how a person may approach the internet to generate, support, or possibly challenge these characteristics of the self.

This study will incorporate the social psychological literature on self and identity with what others in political science and computer-mediated communication have said about the effects of the internet on contemporary political life in the US. In particular, my objective is to address three core issues:

1. How does the self-concept mediate the ways in which someone uses the internet, and what implications do these findings hold in regards to political activity and discourse in the US?
2. Are people willing to use the internet as a communications vehicle for challenging their viewpoints and gaining exposure to a greater variety of informational sources, or do people use it to reinforce previously held beliefs and make them more hostile to opposing viewpoints?
3. Do politically partisan blogs and candidate e-mail messages differ significantly from the content of mainstream network news coverage in terms of their frameworks and definitions of the candidates themselves, and if so, in what ways?

A Review of Previous Online US Presidential Races

The last years of the twentieth century saw the internet grow in importance within US politics. In the 1996 US presidential election, both President Bill Clinton and Republican challenger Bob Dole launched their own websites aimed at disseminating campaign and candidate information directly to internet users. This was the first US presidential election in which both major party candidates used an official website (Klotz 2004), and the volume of interactions was extraordinary. Since then, the utility and popularity of campaign websites has expanded exponentially, as every major party politician running for the US Presidency now uses websites hoping to accomplish multiple aims: To raise money, to gain volunteers, and of course to offer information to

visitors. During the 2004 Presidential Campaign, 63 million Americans consumed news online, which also includes 4 million people donating money to a campaign website, 7 million signing up to receive a candidate listserv email, and 34 million who used the internet to research where candidates stand on the issues (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005). Politicians understood the value of being able to transcend the limitations of coverage by media organizations and embraced the chance to speak in an unedited fashion to a large audience. Research has found that Presidential candidates generally use the internet to serve four main functions: to inform the public, to connect with voters, to get people involved in the campaign, and to mobilize their supporters (Schneider & Foot 2006).

However, the politicians themselves are certainly not the only ones who seek these advantages. In the years since the 1996 US election, the rise of political blogs, chat rooms, list-serve e-mails and message boards have given any US citizen with access to the internet a chance to both send and receive enormous amounts of political information to other internet users. Even the media organizations themselves run websites which are updated constantly, continuing to have a relevant voice in the political discussions taking place both on-line and off-line.

In the years since, candidates have learned how to meet an array of different campaign needs via the Internet through a variety of trial-and-error methods (Kamarck 1999; Foot & Schneider 2002; D'Alessio 2000). However, the works of Schneider and Foot (2006) indicate that by the 2004 Presidential election, all the presidential candidates were actively using the Internet for the purposes of *informing* the public and *involving* people with the campaign. Others have shown how politicians such as Howard Dean used

a combination of online communication techniques to develop communities based on shared support of his candidacy, helping him quickly emerge as a leading candidate during the Democratic Presidential primaries of 2004 (Davis 2005); practices that were quickly adopted by his competitors in order to match his ability to mobilize volunteers and raise money (Hull 2006; Davis 2005). In particular, he had found a new way to make others feel a strong personal connection to their candidate, stunning political pundits with the high levels of personal connection and commitment made by his volunteers (Stromer-Galley and Baker 2006), which is the kind of interactivity all politicians seek in their online campaigns (Klotz 2004)

Before the 2004 general election started, it was clear to all that the Internet was a space where candidates should be constructing identities and meaning while developing frameworks around personal character and issues, in addition to meeting basic organizational functions such as raising money. For better or worse, the Internet had become a space where attacks (accurate or not) were launched, daily blogging had enhanced feelings of personal attachment to candidates, and sophisticated forms of influence became major strategic focal points in a highly combative election (Williams 2006; Trammell 2006; Stokes 2006). Today, all serious candidates for the US Presidency implement campaign strategies via the Internet while their supporters (affiliated and unaffiliated with the official campaign) circulate online to give their candidate a web presence.

The latter point above is an important one; that is, the politicians themselves are not the only ones who have access to online communication devices. The Internet is a place where politicians, media organizations, various political organizations of all types,

and millions of individual users simultaneously co-exist with one another. At their best, these users engage in well-meaning political discourse with others, seeking to influence the beliefs of others and learning from others to become better informed citizens. Users even find the internet a place where they can volunteer for political activism with others who share a common identity or interest. At their worst, users embark hate-filled rhetoric, intolerance of opposing viewpoints, and spread misinformation, retarding political discourse.

Not surprisingly, the existence of such an environment has drawn the interests of social scientists of all kinds over the past decade. In sum, researchers have disagreed upon two major questions. First, does the Internet make people more or less politically active and informed? Second, does the Internet integrate people in society into an increasingly unified ‘commonality’ global village of perspectives, or does the Internet lead people to become bitterly divided into partisan camps where they only interact with like-minded people?

Important Questions Still Unresolved

As debates about how the Internet affects political discourse have surfaced in recent years, relatively less attention has been paid to the social psychology of the Internet user. Theorists and researchers have mainly attempted to categorize the Internet as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for the public at the aggregate level. However, the domain of analysis in this dissertation mainly takes place at the individual level, focusing on which traits and beliefs lead people to use the Internet in differing ways.

The work here recognizes the Internet user as capable of selecting and rejecting the messages they receive. Additionally, the online users are capable of challenging and

transforming the meanings of messages that they receive, making discussion of overall aggregate effects much more complicated. However, the Internet offers the unique ability for people to create their own messages and distribute them to a large audience themselves, bypassing most forms of gate-keeping and censorship from others. Within this dissertation, attention will focus upon *which ways different sources of information described the 2008 presidential contest, while illustrating specific examples of how meaning was constructed in differing ways*. Additionally, statistical analysis will be used to determine whether these differences in campaign coverage by source were significant or not. The results will be tied into theoretical perspectives about online politics that have developed in recent years which often speculate why these differences may be taking place.

By incorporating what social psychologists have uncovered regarding the self-concept and social identities. *Researchers have often overlooked how Internet users have many important self-definitions and motivations that they bring with them when they sit down at their computer monitor*, and there are likely to be great variations between one user and the next in regards to how and why the Internet is used. As this literature is further incorporated into the study of Computer-Mediated Communication, discussion can turn to *which characteristics are important motivates that explain why people act as they do online, and how this overlaps to what the self experiences in their offline social life*.

Furthermore, the relationship between the public and politicians has been transformed by new communicative technologies. Political discourse today takes place within more two-way communicative processes, with more interaction between message

senders and receivers taking place than in previous eras. The presence of the Internet creates the opportunity for users to feel an increased sense of personal connection to the candidates, and immerse themselves in political news from sources of their own choosing at high rates of consumption. Additionally, the Internet user can even become a producer of political news and experience daily contacts with the political candidates at all times of the day or night, with few restrictions. Continuing to focus on individuals, it is important to see *which specific identities and social attitudes may correlate with different patterns of news exposure and interpersonal communication when one uses the Internet.*

Moreover, it may be that some people rarely or never use the Internet to keep up with political issues, using this technology as an enabler which helps them ‘drop out’ of political discussion in the pursuit of endeavors that he/she finds more interesting and important. The Internet did not make a person politically apathetic, but the user’s apathy caused him/her to avoid politics altogether, investing their personal time and energy elsewhere. While some people may feel more informed and personally connected to politics because of the Internet, others are likely to become more distant and less informed than ever before as well, retreating into their own personalized life-world when they go online. This dissertation aims to uncover *which people* are likely to become more involved and which ones become less involved, and *identify important attitudes and identities which are responsible for these differences.*

Those with Internet access in their homes now have the opportunity to read an enormous amount of information about political candidates and issues, which would seem to be a welcome device for any functioning democracy. However, these benefits may come with unforeseen costs; as this massive expansion of political communication

may motivate the self to engage in selective exposure and self-selection in order to avoid feeling overwhelmed and confused. Additionally, the public run a risk of over-exposure to politics, which can cause people to lose a sense of efficacy and trust in government institutions and the news media themselves. Within this dissertation, *statistical comparisons between different types of people will be made in order to find if high levels of Internet news consumption correlates with feelings of distrust towards these institutions.*

These premises and research questions are the primary focus of this dissertation, which will address all of these concerns in a five chapter format. The remainder of this chapter will illustrate how I chose to test and measure these questions, and validate my choices of methodologies. Chapters two through four will be devoted to resolving these questions through empirical testing and discussion. Finally, chapter five will provide a summary of key findings, discuss any relevant shortcoming which may occur, and provide insight and direction in regards to where future research should be directed.

An Overview of this Dissertation

I plan to address a number of different research questions in three separate chapters within this dissertation. Each chapter will focus on the effects of computer-mediated political communication on the 2008 US presidential election. All chapters will seek to incorporate self-concept literature, personal identities, media frames, social psychology, and social attitude theories into the study of internet usage and its relation to political involvement and activity.

My second chapter will focus upon the content of internet news sources and the way they shape political discourse during the 2008 presidential election in the US. This

chapter is intended to both describe online political discourse as well as finding whether different news sources qualitatively cover major political news topics and candidates in significantly different ways. The main hypothesis of this chapter is to find out whether various online news sources differ in content, and if so, in what ways? What kind of assumptions do they make about the US political landscape? What do these writers think should be of primary concern to their readers which helps to set the agenda for the presidential election?

Chapter two will address how media frames are constructed and maintained during the election: What specific words/phrases became popular during the most heated weeks of the campaign, what labels were attached to the candidates and their policies, and to what degree did the political blogs echo what was being reported on the websites of independent news sources? Also, were the political parties and candidates effective at defining themselves and the public agenda on their own terms and phrases, or did other sources of information on the web reject and/or modify them, leading to a redefinition of the candidates, their policies, and the national agenda?

Overall, this chapter will employ both quantitative and qualitative analyses to resolve my research questions. In regards to the former, the recording of data into categorical measures will permit the usage of chi-square analysis in order to determine whether different online news venues vary significantly in terms of how they cover the presidential election and define the candidates. These values can be used to illustrate whether different internet news providers are showing meaningful differences in what frameworks (Lakoff 2004; Gamson & Modigliani 1989) they employ, whether partisan

sites use more inflammatory language than other sites, and whether those who read these sites engage in productive political dialogue with each other or not.

While an exhaustive analysis of all online political communication content is virtually impossible to do (Jones 1999), my plan is to focus on a variety of highly relevant and heavily-viewed sources that are the most likely to impact large groups of people. The next section contains a list of forty specific internet sites that will be randomly selected on a daily basis for content analysis. These websites include a variety of different writer and user characteristics, which should add validity and make the findings more applicable to a larger group of internet message users. The findings in chapter four will incorporate the internet postings of all types of message producers: the candidates themselves, their political party, other major figures within the respective parties, various independent media organizations, partisan political writers, and even the general public itself to see what kinds of messages are being produced and how they had a material impact upon the 2008 US Presidential campaign.

Chapter three will integrate important self-construal and identity theories from to examine whether the internet makes people more or less politically informed and active. While some have suggested that the presence of the internet increases political activity and knowledge among its users, positively benefitting communities (Rheingold 1995; Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002; Weinberger 2005). Others have been concerned about the negative effects of the internet (and other communicative technologies) on groups of people at a societal level (Putnam 2000; Margolis & Resnick 2000; Galston 2005; Keen 2007).

My hypotheses are similar to what Eric Uslaner (2004) has claimed: the Internet

does not make a person more or less community oriented or political all by itself. Rather, people bring their offline selves to the internet, and then engage in user-specific driven uses and gratifications online (McLeod & Becker 1981). More specifically, how a person uses the internet in terms of political activity and information is *influenced by* both their political identities and their overall self-concept.

Within this chapter, my aim is to show that *levels of political activity and political knowledge are not dependent upon the amount of time spent online, but rather by a mixture of the user's identities and self-construal*. I am interested in how people have a tendency to see themselves overall: in individualist terms or interdependently to others. My interest is to see whether people tend to think of themselves within mainly self-referent individualist attributes (such as thinking that I am smart or funny, for example) or within some collective relationship to others (such as being an American or a Republican, for example). In order to do this, I will use elements from the twenty-four question Singelis (1994) self-construal scale. Twelve questions from this scale will be used to determine how the survey respondents predominantly see themselves, and then classifying the responses as being either self-referent or other-referent in their nature.

By using this instrument, I will be able to classify respondents along a continuous individualist-collectivist measure of the self, where the respondents range between holding an exclusive preponderance to see oneself as a member of larger social groups (a “we” orientation) versus those who see themselves wholly within idiosyncratic personal qualities (a “me” orientation). These kinds of approaches have been theoretically supported by other scholars of the self-concept, who have noted that the self operates within a continuum of possible identities (Hewitt 1989) and locates social and personal

identities between polar opposites which pull in competing directions (Brewer and Gardner 1996), yet producing a measurable and relatively stable self-concept amenable to quantitative measurement techniques (Kuhn and McPartland 1954; Stryker 1980; Serpe 1987; Sedikides and Brewer 2001; Prentice 2001; Rosenberg 1979; Wright, Aron & Tropp 2002). Previous research has explored, for example, how this balancing act can be affected by culture (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Kashima et al 1997; Roberts & Helson 1997) and by time period (Zurher 1977; Baumeister 1986; Gergen 1991; Demo 1992).

This dissertation embraces the self-construal scale (Singelis 1994) as an admittedly crude but useful tool in measuring tendencies of the self to think and act in a way that either leans towards individuality or through relational/collectivist aspects of the self. This instrument is not designed to explore the vast complexities of the self or how it changes from one situation to the next, nor does it refute that people contain a virtually endless amount of identities within their self-concept. Instead, it is a pragmatic tool where respondents describe themselves mainly in general tendencies and understandings. Relationships between self-construal and online politics are not expected to explain all the complexities between competing identities and political behavior. Rather the findings will serve as a starting point to examine how the self relates to online politics and should lead to future research which will motivate and inspire future research bridging these two fields of study.

There are some who question whether this is the best measure of the self-concept (Cramer & Grace 2003) and the validity of self-construal scales (Levine et al 2003). However, the Singelis (1994) self-construal scale will not be applied to measuring individuals from cultures whose values, customs and daily practices differ substantially

from the United States, reducing these questions of validity for the project being outlined here. However, in order to address these criticisms, the index used will be subjected to factor analysis with full confidence in the validity of this measurement instrument.

Nevertheless, the use of the self-construal scale has become commonplace within social psychology in recent years. It has surfaced in important current research involving a wide range of topics, from emotional management (Nezlek et al 2008), interpersonal relationships (Lydon et al 2008) Social Networks (Yeung et al 2008), and perceptions of organizational fairness (Holmvall & Bobocel 2008) just to name a few. While these measures will be somewhat crude and not intended to fully illustrate the full complexity of the self, they will suffice for the purpose of categorization of survey respondents. By scoring respondents along this range, we can see both if different users will use the internet to meet their political interests and personal motivations.

What is predicted is that each group will differ significantly in terms of whether they use the internet to become more politically informed and active. Instead of simply predicting that those who use the internet will be changed by it in terms of political activity and knowledge, these categories incorporate the “uses and gratifications theory” (McLeod & Becker 1981) of media audiences, acknowledging that different people will be motivated to use the internet in different ways. Specifically, I predict the following hypotheses to be true:

H1. Those that have strong political identities will be more likely than others to become politically active and on the Internet. --- People with strong social identities rooted in political interests will meet those needs to become politically active by using the Internet more than those who do not.

H2. Those that have strong political identities will be more likely than others to seek political information on the Internet. --- This is also consistent with Uses and Gratifications theory. People who have strong social identities rooted in political interests will search the Internet for political information at higher rates than those who lack strong beliefs about politics.

H3. Those who are interested in politics will be more likely than others to become politically active and on the Internet. --- Consistent with Uses and Gratifications theory, people which are interested in politics will show higher levels of online political activity that other users will.

H4. Those who are interested in politics will be more likely than others to seek political information on the Internet. --- Also consistent with Uses and Gratifications theory, people which are interested in politics will show the highest amount of time seeking out information on the Internet.

H5. There will be a Positive relationship between Self-Construal and an interest in politics. --- People who have a propensity to incorporate important others into their own self-concept will be more likely to take an interest in political issues. Those who see themselves as unique individuals may have less interest in pursuing collectivist needs via political movements.

H6. There will be a Positive relationship between Self-Construal and holding strong political identities.--- Since collectivists may be more likely to take an interest in political issues, they are also more likely than individuals to develop stronger and more intense political beliefs than others.

Overall, chapter three will focus on how internet usage varies depending on user characteristics and self-concept. It is not enough to say that the internet makes people more or less knowledgeable or politically active. Instead, the user brings an offline self when using the internet. These factors then mediate the effects of the internet on politics in the US. By using a survey which encapsulates all of these factors and measures of political activity both online and offline, quantitative measures of association can be found to indicate whether these personal characteristics have an effect on politics beyond mere exposure to the internet.

Chapter four contains hypotheses which will attempt to uncover which types of internet users are more likely to behave like “Cyber Balkans” (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson 1997) and if these users are similar to “Single-Issue” users (Bimber 1998). In other words, what leads a person to use the Internet in a way that reinforces their socio-political identities and what personal needs are these users satisfying with their patterns of online behavior? Are those needs similar to other types of Internet users?

Chapter four will attempt to understand which variables are related to the desire of the individual user to act like a “Cyber Balkan” in their online political activities, and whether there are any similarities in the characteristics of these users to accelerated pluralists, who invest the vast majority of attention towards one topic that is important to them. This often has the effect of making a person an expert on one topic at the expense

of lacking knowledge about other issues.

Bruce Bimber (1998) points out that there are at least two identifiable traits of Internet users that lead towards single-issue predominance in usage, or an accelerated pluralist usage pattern:

1. They seek information only for issues that they find personally interesting.
2. They are likely to have weaker political affiliations to a specific party because their political orientation is more issue-based than ideological.

Likewise, Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson (1997) identify at least five traits that are common practices of a cyber Balkan, which includes the following:

1. They tend to define their “community” by those who share their values rather than those who share their geographical proximity.
2. They have a desire to be surrounded by like-minded individuals and/or avoid people who disagree with them.
3. They feel uneasy when they are exposed to an oppositional point of view.
4. They tend to believe that a person should leave a community/group if they do not share the views of the other members.
5. They tend to hold more extreme political identities, as they are more likely to receive constant reinforcement from like-minded others.

Overall, I have two main objectives in chapter four. One of those objectives involves a hypothesis, and the other seeks to uncover the antecedents of cyber Balkan patterns of online political computer-mediated communication. ***My first hypothesis within this chapter predicts there is a correlation between the core identifying features of Cyber Balkans with the traits Bimber believes lead to accelerated pluralism.*** It will be argued that these two groups of people are likely to have similarities in their patterns

of online behavior and may not be entirely mutually exclusive categories.

My second objective in this chapter is *to identify specific Attitudes, Beliefs, and Motivations which may explain why someone becomes a cyber Balkan*. In doing so, this dissertation hopes to develop a more integrated and sophisticated view regarding why people are interested to use the internet to pursue narrow interest deeply while largely ignoring other political issues, and to figure out what the common characteristics of users that engage in these patterns of internet usage are.

Chapter four will try to predict the levels of cyber Balkanization of internet users using linear regression techniques with data collected through an online survey. A number of survey questions will be developed in order to capture “Cyber Balkan” as an index measure which contains the five dimensions which are outlined above, then regress that variable against a variety of independent variables that capture a wide array of user characteristics. The specifics of the independent variable measures will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

There are a series of independent variables that are predicted to have a significant relationship to the dependent variable of cyber Balkanization. As mentioned earlier, it is believed that these concepts are both a function of three main independent variables: user attitudes, beliefs, and personal motivations. Each of these three independent variables can be further subdivided into the following (the predicted relationships between these variables and cyber Balkanization are indicated as + or - in parenthesis):

Attitudes & Beliefs (7): Trust in the News Media (-), Trust in the Government (-), Trust in Other People (-), Perceptions that the user has Like-Minded Friends/Family (+), and lives in a Like-Minded Community (+), the Strength of their Political Identity (+) If the user is politically independent (-)

Motivations (5): User enjoys engaging in arguments (-), User wants to avoid criticism when expressing viewpoints (+), User feels anger towards political opponents (+), User desires bolstering/support from others online (+), User has an interdependent self-construal (+)

Overall, there are twelve independent variables which will be used to try to predict the desire to behave online in a cyber Balkan fashion. Additionally, the demographics of age, race, education, and gender will also be included for two purposes: to see if there are any intervening/interacting macro-sociological variables that are of interest, and (2) to see if cyber Balkan online behavior are related to any offline trends in the US public that are relevant only to certain age groups, racial groups, etc...

Several attitude and belief variables were added to see how offline characteristics of the user's life are related to their online behaviors. There are three variables that deal with trust: in the news media, in the government, and in other people in general. My aim is to see whether there is a connection to align oneself to self-selected communities and selective exposure patterns to online information has anything to do with a disregard and distrust towards relevant institutions and the general public. It is predicted that there will be a negative relationship here: that a lack of trust in the government, the news media, and the general public causes one to channel their behavior to a narrow group of self-selected similar others.

Likewise, I predict that there are correlations between offline realities and online actions; that there is probably a positive correlation to surrounding oneself to similar others both online and offline. As James House (1992) points out, the traits of a person's immediate environment impact their attitudes and beliefs a great deal, which he refers to as the "proximity principle". Others have pointed out (Quan-Haase et al 2002; Hampton & Wellman 2002, Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002) that online and offline behaviors

tend to complement one another instead of being mutually exclusive of each other. That being said, I have included three measures to capture the homogeneity of a user's local environment: asking about the perceptions of how much the user thinks their views are the same as their friends, family, and their local community. These measures are predicted to have a positive relationship to cyber Balkanization.

Next, I included variables that seek out relationships between a person's political values and their tendencies to act in a self-selecting way. First, I want to know if Independents are less likely to engage in biased exposure patterns on the internet than Republicans or Democrats. It is predicted that self-identified partisans will be more likely to have a positive relationship to online Balkanization. In addition to this, the strength of the user's political affiliations are predicted to have a positive relation to the dependent variable, as those with strong attitudes/beliefs are less likely to seek out discrepant information.

Lastly, I want to see if there are specific motivations that might drive internet users to act in ways that meet the needs of the self. As theorists have pointed out about the functions which attitudes serve (Katz 1960; Herek 1986; Shavitt & Nelson 2000), it has been found that people hold attitudes for any of the following four functional reasons: *to express their values, to make sense of information, to defend their self-esteem, or to accomplish goals*. With this in mind, I chose five motivations which comply with these functions in examining why an internet user may choose to act in a self-selecting way to online information and communities.

In regards to expression of values, it may be the case that (1) the user enjoys engaging in arguments, and (2) also feels anger/hostile feelings about political

opposition. It is predicted that cyber Balkans will be relatively low on the first trait and relatively high on the second. The prediction is that a cyber Balkan does not enjoy being challenged in their political views, nor do they wish to spend time/energy trying to convert their opponents. Instead, they prefer “preaching to the chorus” while likely gaining reinforcement and a sense of personal connection to those who feel similar to themselves.

Additionally, the need to bolster self-esteem can be another key motivation to becoming a cyber Balkan. It is predicted that self-selecting political activity online is positively related to those who have a strong desire for acceptance of their beliefs and feel discomforted by criticism of their views. These people also want to find a feeling of connection to similar others, as the user seeks a sense of community, belonging, and reinforcement by contacting like-minded others on the Internet. Moreover, the need to belong will be strongest for users whose self-construal is more interdependent, as these people exhibit a stronger desire to connect their political actions/ideals to similar others.

Overall, chapter four is geared to finding two things. The first is to find whether there are meaningful correlations between the tendencies of cyber Balkanization with traits that are more commonly associated with accelerated pluralism. In addition to this, confirmatory factor analysis can be conducted on this measure of Balkanization in order to discover if this concept consists of multiple dimensions. Second, this chapter focuses exclusively upon what *offline* personal aspects of internet users are more or less likely to drive them towards Balkanizing behavior online. Both of these inquiries will be addressed though quantitative measures using an online survey. The specifics of how each variable will be measure will be discussed in detail within the methods and

measurements section, along with a discussion of how the online survey will sample and be distributed to people who are engaged in politics online in the US.

In conclusion, chapter five will summarize the findings of this dissertation. Within this final chapter, the author will also explore the possible shortcomings that may exist in either the data or methods. This section will include a disclosure of any issues that emerged during the data collection process, as well as how the author resolved these matters. Lastly, discussion will be centered on what these findings imply for future researchers of computer-mediated political communication, and recommendations will be made regarding where future research should be directed.

Summary

This dissertation intends to *illustrate three important relationships* between computer-mediated political communication and social psychology. First, that *the presence of the Internet greatly transforms political communication in a wide variety of ways*. Not least of which is the blurring of the boundaries between audiences, journalists, and newsmakers taking place every day in online political news reporting.

Second, I intend to show that *the effects of online political communication are not uniform among its users*. Rather, the identities and self-construal of the Internet user greatly impact whether the person become more or less involved and informed about politics. Irrespective of the time spent online, some types of users will become more politically oriented, some other types will exhibit no interest in politics, and there will even be people who show interest in politics without increased levels of activity.

Third, it will be shown that *Balkanizing behavior, self-selectivity and highly polarized political attitudes are not unrelated to offline behavior*. Instead, there are

correlations to online and offline behaviors and attitudes. Furthermore, some of the motivations and offline living conditions of Cyber Balkans will be identified, with the hopes that more traits will be uncovered by future research.

Chapters three and four will focus exclusively upon the Internet user, and how their personal characteristics are related to the political messages they receive online. But, before approaching this topic, an analysis on the sources of online politics during the 2008 US Presidential election needs to be addressed in order to appropriately understanding the nature of online political discourse. This exploration will take place next in chapter two.

CHAPTER 2
Political News Sources on the Internet: Similarities and Differences during the US Presidential Election of 2008.

Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how online media sources helped to create imagery and identities around the Barack Obama and John McCain campaigns during the 2008 US presidential election. A literature review covering the most common types of online news sources was conducted and discussed. Finally, a content analysis of 537 news postings conducted over the final six weeks of the Presidential campaign will uncover how the race was covered differently by a variety of online news sources.

Introduction

Every year more Americans go online to meet a variety of personal interests and accomplish a wide range of tasks. In 2008, the US Presidential election created a great deal of interest and participation among the public, as the Internet became an important marketplace of information and locale of political interactivity. In this chapter, I will focus on those who supplied the Internet with political news. For example, who created imagery around the candidates, how did different sources cover the major issues of the election, and what did these writers define as important?

The current time period sees a massive transformation taking place, aided by modern technological advances, that has the effect of blurring the lines between audience, source, and reporter which is often referred to as “convergence” (Pavlik 2008; Dessauer 2004). The US is now seeing the rise of “Producers” (Bruns & Jacobs 2006: 6), where people are simultaneously becoming the producers and consumers of knowledge. This is quickly bringing an end to the traditional “top-down” news broadcasting (Gillmor 2006)

that defined political communication from most of the 20th century (Pavlik 2008). Today, the presence of the Internet has empowered the mass audience and politicians alike. This allows these individuals to speak directly to millions of users without the filter of a media organization to edit or limit what they want to say.

The 2008 Presidential election in the US involved the co-existence of professional journalists, newsmakers, and mass-mediated audience members simultaneously attempting to provide interpretation and commentary to politics online. Compared to any other Presidential election, the US public saw a more decentralized and multi-perspective public sphere. However, this is not to say that the content being presented is always of the highest quality, nor is the public free from bias and manipulation. Rather, we see that different types of online news sources often vary greatly from one another in a variety of important ways, which will be illustrated here.

Democracy and the Public Sphere

An ideal democracy requires communication and debate among an informed citizenry that takes place within a public space or forum. Jurgen Habermas (1989) defines the public sphere as “a network of communicating information and points of view” that gradually transforms public opinion.....must be accessible and inclusive (Pavlik 2008: 96). The Public Sphere refers to the set of practices that members of a society use to communicate about matters they understand to be of a public concern. It is “a sociological term for signifying how people, if at all, speak to each other about what their condition is and what they ought or ought not to do as a political unit” (Benkler 2006: 178). As Cass Sunstein (2007: 25-27) explains, a well-functioning public sphere should contain at least these three important qualities:

- 1. Speakers have access to a wide array of people*
- 2. Speakers have access to voice their concerns to both institutions as well as to a heterogeneous public.*
- 3. People will be exposed to a wide variety of people and views, ensuring both widely shared experiences and exposure to diverse views.*

According to Habermas (1989) the ideal-type of rational debate and discourse in society has been limited by the existence of corporate agendas and the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a wealthy few. This situation has limited the pursuit of truth, has marginalized a wide array of perspectives, and led to a decline in citizen interest and participation. For much of the twentieth century, the public sphere was a system dominated by one-way communication tools. Public opinion was said to be manufactured among passive consumers of news messages artificially by those in power of the media (Saco 2002). Information sources within the public sphere in all advanced modern societies were heavily influenced by the owners of those structures. Therefore, whether it was the government or private enterprise, it was primarily a one-way technological “hub-and-spoke” model kind of structure that lacked feedback loops and was prohibitively high in cost for most people (Benkler 2006: 175). This structure led to a relatively passive news consumer (Benkler 2006; Saco 2002; McChesney 2004; Dessauer 2004) that received finished goods rather than being part of a conversation. The public sphere was limited in the number of perspectives being presented (Gans 2003), leading to unreported facts and absence of multiple viewpoints.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, statements coming from the media can now be seen as invitations for a conversation, particularly on the Internet.

Jurgen Habermas (1989) sees technological expansion as “vital to the development of a

meaningful public sphere, as innovations and advancements in technology permit new messengers into the public realm. This empowers the masses and providing avenues to both produce and consume information with others” (Saco 2002: 64). Key to these hopes is that the Internet prevents any specific points of control or concentration of undue power or influence; it is “flat” (Benkler 2006: 177). The Internet is being seen as a corrective to the shortcoming of the public sphere, improving democracy by enabling citizens to be exposed to more perspectives. They become more informed and knowledgeable, challenging the concentration of power (Bahnisch 2006; Gans 2003; Benkler 2006; Saco 2002). Even though clustering will most likely take place around information that the public finds interesting and engaging, additional sources will still provide a variety of opinions while also serving as a watchdog over society and its institutions (Saco 2002; McChesney 2004, Benkler 2006; Sunstein 2007; Banisch 2006). Moreover, the presence of the Internet greatly alters the public sphere simply by enabling news consumers to access another news source besides print, television, and radio has transformed the media landscape (Dessauer 2004).

Many aspects of the 20th century model of news reporting and the relations between source-journalist-audience have become outdated today (Pavlik & Ross 2000). There have long been three major kinds of participants in the world of news: Journalists, Newsmakers, and the Audience. However, the public sphere in the US has now become a place where “everybody has the ability to make the news....and newsmakers can no longer control the tide as easily as they once did” (Gillmor, 2006: 45). This situation is often referred to as “convergence” (Pavlik & Ross 2000; Pavlik 2008; Gillmor 2006) where these three constituents overlap and influence each other in the dissemination of

political news in the US. Convergence refers to the blurring of the lines between consumer and producer.

The public has become empowered and interactive, which has changed the ways news is both produced and consumed. Many feel that journalists have sat in a privileged position when it comes to informing the public. They feel that this has skewed the democratic process (Gans 2003) and has served as a motivation for non-journalists to become reporters. This serves as a challenge for the journalist to redefine the reporter-source relationship. Any audience member or source can now contradict or challenge the information directly to a large audience via their own computer-mediated communication tool, whether it is through the medium of blogging, emailing, etc... (Pavlik & Ross 2000). Journalists themselves are using the Internet to research stories, increase their speed of communication with sources, and are even going online to get story ideas (Pavlik & Ross 2000). All of these examples are seen as evidence of convergence taking place between news organizations, audiences, and sources.

Additionally, the public and newsmakers themselves have begun to use low-cost technologies like emails, websites and blogs to speak directly to the public without the filtering of news media organizations. Research has indicated that 48 million Americans have posted content to the Internet, much of it in the form of a blog (Pavlik 2008: 75). Although people are known to blog for a wide variety of reasons (Nardi et al 2004) many non-journalists have now taken to blogging in order to discuss and report US political news. They are also providing commentary of both newsmakers and the mainstream media themselves. Some of these blogs, while still lagging behind more traditional sources in terms of daily readership, have gained an impressively large following in a

short amount of time. Moreover, the most popular political bloggers are not powerless and anonymous audience members that spout off their personal dissatisfactions into the emptiness of cyberspace, ultimately having no effect on US politics.

A significant number of these blogs are now quite influential, affecting politicians, political parties, legislature, public opinion and other coverage of political news by professional news organizations. Blogs (such as the liberal huffingtonpost.com and the conservative drudgereport.com) now boast more than a million unique visitors per day. Meanwhile, many other blogs on both the political left and right have seen their readership double over the last year (Perlmutter 2008). These points will be revisited later in this dissertation.

Convergence can also be found by the newsmakers themselves, who have turned to the Internet as a way to directly report campaign speeches and political imagery directly to the public without the filtering of professional journalists. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Barack Obama and John McCain both spent a considerable amount of effort each day communicating directly to the public via Internet technology. Their campaigns continually produced original material to the public in the form of speeches made and blogs written by candidates themselves. As will be seen later, these candidates were able to socially construct perceptions about themselves and their opponents directly via a multitude of online news media websites. These messages were placed for easily accessible consumption by millions of potential voters each day, without any filtering from professional news organizations.

Before moving into my content analysis of how different news sources portrayed the candidates and issues during the 2008 US Presidential election, a deeper discussion

involving the strengths and weaknesses of each participant will be presented. Although the boundaries between these constituents continue to blur, it should be noted that the motivations of audiences and newsmakers to use these communicative tools often stems from a dissatisfaction with professional journalism (Kaye & Johnson 2006; Singer 2006; Perlmutter 2008; Pavlik 2008). Politicians aim to use computer-mediated communication tools in an attempt to set the public-agenda to their own preferences. They purposively speak about the topics they want the US public to consider in their own language, without the interference or judgments of professional journalists.

Meanwhile, many citizens (particularly the bloggers themselves) have a large amount of contempt and distrust of the professional news media industry in the US. Public opinion polling consistently shows that news media organizations are “increasingly drawing the ire of the American public” (Klotz 2004: 128). In polling, the public often strongly expresses the view that news media is biased against their political views (Manjoo 2008). The public often sees journalists as too entrenched with the political elite to ask difficult or challenging questions (Gans 2003). In sum, many people feel highly dissatisfied with the quality and content of news reporting for a variety of reasons that will be discussed in the upcoming section. Because of this, these people have taken it upon themselves to act as a corrective mechanism for what they consider to be sloppy and biased journalism. As Robert McChesney (2004: 57) added:

“Democracy needs journalism to act as a watchdog of the powerful, disseminate truth, and present a wide array of informed positions on important issues but the US news media currently fails at all three duties largely due to corporate ownership and the pressures for profit maximization.”

The current trend has led to expansion of the public sphere, and some proclaim that we are seeing the end of “gatekeeping” with the “gushing” of information from various sources and mediums (Gillmor 2006: 46) now occurring (Benkler 2006; Margolis and Resnick 2000). It is process which cannot be prevented by any specific political or news organization in the US (Winograd & Hais 2008).

The Journalists

In the US, the mainstream news industry has long consisted of well-known institutions and large corporations that produce an enormous amount of news that reaches millions of Americans each day. In previous eras, these organizations generally distributed their news via a specific medium, such as a newspaper or a television. However, this is no longer the case. Instead, network television news, prestigious national newspapers and cable television networks are also present on the worldwide web. Each day, they are continually supplying online users with news content just as they do within their more traditional mediums. Indeed, the mainstream news media are still playing a major role in creating shared experiences and exposure to topics (Sunstein 2007; Davis 2005; Gillmor 2006).

Media organizations have been using the Internet to increase the overall range and volume of news stories presented. The virtually limitless space offered by the Internet allows journalist to report an increased the number of news stories, as well as a greater variety of news stories (Klotz 2004). For example, news stories regarding international issues and crime have usually been reported online rather than in print or on television. It has been speculated that this occurs in an effort to customize these stories to niche audiences rather than to larger heterogeneous traditional media audiences (Klotz 2004).

Overall, there has been a rise in demand for hybrid journalism (traditional forms plus interactivity) that is likely to change content of news, but has been a struggle for traditional news media organizations to design and implement (Pavlik 2008). These problems become further exacerbated by the immediacy of the Internet, which leads news producers to place a premium on speed. Too often, journalists are pressured to value “getting it out” over “getting it right” (Klotz 2004: 128). The ever-presence of user accessibility to the Internet sets an ever-increasing premium on speed for news organizations. Today, “breaking stories” will often be reported perpetually as continuing work-in-progress for the public, where facts can be placed and retracted as new information comes in (Klotz 2004). This harms public confidence in the dependability of the news stories they receive.

In general, the public requires the mainstream news media to construct a shared focus and public salience to political issues (Sunstein 2007). Because of their extensive informational and economic resources, these organizations have a significant advantage in the performance of investigative journalism over all other forms of reporting (Benkler 2006). In general, news organizations and professional journalists see themselves as a ‘mirror’ of reality, which they aim to capture through the professional practices of neutrality and objectivity (Singer 2006; Gans 2003; Schudson 2003; McChesney 2004; Gillmor 2006).

However, there are concerns that these professional practices can not be either objective or neutral because journalists themselves are too far removed from the citizenry and the lives of common people (Gans 2003). Robert Park (1940) argued that news organizations produce what it thinks audiences will be interested in. This process

involves the use of subjective judgments by news organizations, where content ultimately reflects what reporters believe are the audience's hopes and fears. More importantly, subjective decision making could never be avoided in journalism even though it runs counter to the professional values of objective and neutral reporting (Park 1940; McChesney 2004; Gans 2003).

In addition, journalists lack any full measure of independence and influence. Journalists are the employees of large multinational corporations, which inevitably influence the production and attention to topics, which journalists largely refuse to recognize (McChesney 2004). In this view, journalists yield too much power to those in charge to determine the public agenda. Just as importantly, what they keep quiet about too much in order to maintain working relationships with their sources over time (McChesney 2004; Gans 2003; Bagdikian 2004).

Herbert Gans (2003) describes news organizations as being remarkably similar to factories, where news is processed in a predictable fashion like all other manufactured goods. News organizations place their emphasis on speed, routine, efficiency and profitability in news production in order to maximize profit. Probing in-depth research presents a problem for the organization due to the pressures of keeping budget low and maintaining high levels of profitability (Gans 2003; McChesney 2004; Bagdikian 2004). As a result, journalists tend to regard anything done by the government or other ruling elites as legitimate news (Gans 2003; McChesney 2004). Consequently, they rarely consider the possibility that their sources are taking advantage of the journalist-source relationship in order to influence the public in the desired direction.

Journalists also must maintain relationships with sources that can give them

consistently credible stories over time. In the world of politics, that often means high-ranking political officials (Gans 2003). Therefore, journalists often develop relationships with high-government officials, political insiders, and research institutions which can make facts and figures available to the press efficiently and effectively. This group of people is sometimes referred to as “Para-journalists” (Schudson 2003). These Para-journalists hold the power to create newsworthy events and often have a disproportionate influence on what gets reported, since journalists rely on these sources for information (Gans 2003).

US political journalists are not generally willing to challenge or antagonize their sources for fear of losing them and access to information, which keeps them from a rigorous examination of issues. Instead, journalists are much more comfortable “casting political debate in terms of strategy and spin rather than locating facts...are “obsessed” with spin and the spinsters” (McChesney 2004: 68-69). Moreover, raising questions of truthfulness can seem awfully close to be seen by the audience as “taking sides” in a partisan debate, “making them notoriously reluctant to use the word ‘lie’ when describing the statements of public officials” (McChesney 2004: 82). In general, journalists are facing a great struggle for independence from their sources due to convergence. They are all too often embedded into the organizations that they are covering (such as Iraq war) in ways that are harmful to the reliability of news stories (Pavlik 2008: 101) Television news is also heavily engaged in the use of “talking heads” which comment on the news rather than covering it. In particular, cable news networks often substitute talk, opinion, and argument for news (Downie & Kaiser 2003).

Overall, there are three main critiques of the US news media: (1) too few

information collection points, leaving a multitude of viewpoints underrepresented in the public arena: (2) Too much control has been concentrated into the owners of the media over what is said and how it is evaluated: (3) Pressure to maximize audiences and profits leads to shoddy reporting and infotainment (Benkler 2006: 197). The third concern was addressed in-depth by Downie & Kaiser (2003) whose work examines in detail the market pressures on news production. In general, the economic constraints and demands of television news media cause them to do very little investigative journalism. Their main intention is to supply “infotainment” to a large audience in order to maximize ratings, rather than uncovering the causes or relevance of such events to the community. As many local news directors point out, local television does little original reporting of significant community issues. This happens because news producers and directors doubt that viewers will have any interest or patience to watch longer and more complicated stories, especially when these stories lack vivid photos or video (Downie & Kaiser 2003; Schudson 2003).

TV news in the United States is characterized by the following elements: the constraints of time in producing a news broadcast, a shortage of staff due to high capital investment, the power of video and the temptation to rely on such footage, high levels of competition to attract viewers, and ownership pressures to maintain high profit margins. All of these elements combine in the production of news broadcasts which all too often distort reality. National network and cable news channels have also found itself increasingly concerned with profit margins in recent years. Before the 1980's, most national news broadcasts were viewed by their owners as a public service to the community, but those times have changed. Today, national news broadcasts are very

competitive and profit oriented (Downie & Kaiser 2003). At the same time, audience sizes for each traditional news source “are currently dwindling” as there are so many producers of news in the US today (Pavlik 2008: 129). This makes the competition for viewership even stronger and accelerating the pressure to substitute infotainment over quality information and investigative reporting.

Also, in this rapidly expanding news marketplace there are many suppliers of political information. Advertisers and producers of news programs fear losing their thin niche segment of the audience and slicing it too thinly. The end result is that the news is less controversial or probing and more entertainment-oriented (Benkler 2006).

The Issue of Bias

Concerns about the organization motives of corporate media owners and the credibility of news producers in the US often lead to accusations of media bias from both liberals and conservatives (Dye 1990; McChesney 2004; Graber 2005; Alterman 2004; Goldberg 2003; Manjoo 2008; Pavlik & Ross 2000). This has been referred to as “*hostile media phenomena*” (Vallone, Ross & Lepper 1985), where people believe that the news media is *biased against their own viewpoints and beliefs*. Although the current work does not attempt to resolve whether the US news media is biased, it is important to recognize that the widespread perception of bias has affected audiences. Skepticism of messages being received creates a desire to find “the truth” from more “credible” sources, which has been a central motivation behind the rapid expansion of political blogging. Political blogging is rapidly on the rise mainly because bloggers and the public generally have a strong dislike and distrust of mainstream news media. These factors serve as a major motivation for why many bloggers have started to cover politics (Kaye and Johnson

2006; Singer 2006; Perlmutter 2008; Bruns 2006). Perhaps more than any other factor, *these feelings of distrust and cynicism towards the established news media industry are the driving motivational forces behind the growth of non-traditional news mediums*, such as the rapid growth of the blogosphere.

Some critics on the political left feel that the US news media have become intimidated by constant accusations of bias that come from the political right. In this view, the result is a hesitancy to act as a corporate or government watchdog for fear of further accusations (Alterman 2004; McChesney 2004). Instead, mainstream journalists “have become highly cautious; attempting to do nothing that would suggest it favors Democrats over Republicans” (McChesney 2004: 109). Additionally, they have been accused of engaging in “he said, she said” journalism (Singer 2006: 27), where journalists have become too willing to use anonymous sources that want to manipulate the journalist into reporting misinformation.

Furthermore, the nature of political reporting is often geared to what will be popular to large audiences instead of what is important for them to know (Schudson 2003; Gans 2003). Reports tend to lack any depth or complexity, especially on television. While this is not the product of an ideological bias, the competitive pressures of being the first to report, when combined with the audience demand for entertainment, create an environment where simplicity and scandal become preferred by the network over depth and complexity (Margolis & Resnick 2000; Mazzoleni 1987; Altheide 1985). These pressures seem to be increasing at the present time rather than decreasing (Pavlik 2008; Gillmor 2006).

Meanwhile, the political right has accused the mainstream news of having a

liberal bias, interested in promoting their agenda on a wide array of social and economic issues (Goldberg 2003; Graber 2005; Dye 1990). These critics point out that most US political journalists identify themselves as liberal (Dye 1990; Graber 2005). Journalists are largely autonomous from the organization to select which stories are reported while enjoying minimal editing or censorship while doing so. They assert that content analysis of evening television news programs show overwhelming support for the maintenance of the welfare state in the US (Goldberg 2003; Graber 2005; Dye 1990).

The Audience

Many of the issues discussed in the previous pages have created a demand for audience members to challenge traditional journalism by actively selecting, reporting, and analyzing news on their own (Lasica 2003). It even creates the possibility that people don't need journalists at all to obtain political news (Klotz 2004). Today, content creation is now shifting from the hands of a few professional journalists to the people who make up that society. In particular, the Internet "makes everyone free to observe, report, question, and debate, not only in principle, but in actual capability via blogging and email" (Benkler 2006: 272). The audience need not be limited to reading the opinions of opinion makers and judging them in private conversations but can interact with an array of other audience members to vote intelligently (Benkler 2006).

For the first time, news media audience members have now become the active participants of news production (Gillmor 2006). In particular, the Internet has helped to create a "decentralization" of news production (Bruns 2006) which combines both one-way and two-way forms of communication (Kaye and Johnson 2006). Production of the news today is currently transitioning to being "more of a conversation rather than a

lecture” according to Dan Gillmor (Bruns 2006: 19).

Audiences are no longer passive spectators in the public sphere but can become creators and primary subjects where individuals now can publish alongside commercial media and government entities (Benkler 2006). Research has shown that the Internet has made it possible for more voices to be heard, with deeper discussion regarding hard news topics taking place online (Hamilton 2004: 214). Some view the Internet as a great improvement to the public sphere. They point out that the Internet offers greater depth, convenience, more involvement with audiences and instant accessibility to users, improving American journalism as a whole (Dessauer 2004). The presence of the Internet also allows for greater depth in storytelling, various forms of presentation, and more news being produced for the public to consume (Pavlik & Ross 2000; Gillmor 2006).

Traditional news mediums such as newspapers and television have not been particularly adept at allowing the audience to offer direct feedback, criticism, and re-definition of the messages they receive (Pavlik 2008; Gillmor 2006). However, the Internet contains virtually no legal or financial barriers to prevent any member of the US population from launching their own “weblogs”, often called “blogs” for short. Blogs could be defined as an online journal in which the most recent entries are added to the top of the document (Klotz 2004). The rise of blogs has given voice to those who otherwise do not hold political power and had also previously lacked the ability to disseminate facts or opinions towards a large audience. The space where these bloggers co-exist with each other has often been referred to as a “blogosphere”; which can be thought of as an open forum in which information is offered, revised, extended, or refuted in an electronically enabled and decentralized marketplace of ideas (Singer 2006). Blogs have been heralded

by media scholar Jay Rosen as an “extremely democratic form of Journalism” (Gillmor 2006: 29).

Research has shown that people blog to document experience, provide commentary or opinions, self-expression, to communicate ideas, and to connect with others (Nardi et al 2004; Klotz 2004). The practice of political blogging has placed an emphasis on transparency and personal authenticity of the blogger in a more post-modern approach to seeking truth (Singer 2006; Manjoo 2008). Many of these political bloggers are creators of original news content in addition to being critics of mainstream news reports. Blogging is often viewed as a form of freelance journalism where the restrictions of professional objectivity are being replaced by those who use information to reinforce particular perspectives, reject arguments being made by opponents, and to make persuasive arguments in favor of a candidate or policy (Gillmor 2006; Lasica 2003). The Internet also speeds up the news process. This offers the ability to link quickly to similar stories, and can increase the range of stories being reported in the news, allows for user interactivity with the news story (Dessauer 2004).

Additionally, the Internet also facilitates the opportunity to access original documentation from government and business organizations relatively easily for users. The possibility of collecting original content and broadcasting findings offers bloggers and reader alike to form their own news broadcasting. This completely removes large news organizations from the process of news production. Unlike previous eras, anyone with access to the Internet has the ability to seek out primary documents, such as government reports, that they previously relied on journalists to interpret and report for them. Moreover, any person who accesses these documents can also report their

interpretations and opinions to others by launching their own blog report. Here, audience members are reporting political news to other audience members while completely bypassing professional journalists altogether (Klotz 2004).

Blogging: the good, the bad, and the ugly

Political bloggers tend to pride themselves on their ability to act as “fact-checkers” and “watchdogs” of both the government and the media (Sunstein 2007: 139; Gillmor 2006; Perlmutter 2008). In doing so, they are able to effectively document abuses of power and illustrate falsehoods. This process has been referred to as “Gatewatching” by conservative InstaPundit.com blogger Chris Reynolds (Bruns 2006). Here, the blogger places a focus on where the information is coming from, challenges its quality, provides personal reaction, and then provides suggestions to audience members in terms of what information deserves their attention. In doing so, blogs are believed to reduce the power of the journalistic profession in regards to altering public opinion with inaccurate or biased information (Bruns 2006), and, as Reynolds adds, “to shame people into doing their jobs better” (Singer 2006: 28).

The ascent of political blogging is also a direct expression of the news audiences’ desire for a wider range of available perspectives than had otherwise been previously available through traditional media (Bruns 2006). While the relationship between bloggers and journalists may be seen as antagonistic, their co-existence can serve as an effective “editorial function” to mainstream news reporting (Benkler 2006). This serves as an effective news supplement tool for audiences (Gillmor 2006). Some believe that this will improve the quality of journalism, as “Journalists can now expect that someone out there is going to fact-check just about anything they write” (Singer 2006: 28). The

ever-presence of blogs in the public eye forces news organizations to improve journalistic standards and quality.

As with all other people and organizations, the news media can make mistakes, and blogs can serve as a corrective editorial function which will improve the quality of mainstream journalism. Instead of being an all-out rejection of mainstream news quality, blogs can be used as “probers” or could even be viewed as “niche journalism” that acts as a complement to traditional news sources (Gillmor 2006: 103). David Perlmutter (2008) shows several illustrated case studies where these positive functions all overlap. He notes how both conservative and liberal blogs had been able to educate audience members about the Iraq war beyond the scope of what network news coverage has offered. Simultaneously, these writers indicated how media reports and/or government policies had made crucial mistakes.

Blogs also have an ability to influence mainstream news production even in the selection of news topics, indicating that there is really a symbiotic relationship which exists between the two (Singer 2006; Trammell and Britton 2005). Cases such as the DailyKos.com reporting of the Blackwater Corporation’s increased involvement in Iraq and the DrudgeReport.com coverage of Bill Clinton’s sex scandal involving Monica Lewinsky (Klotz 2004), are examples of where bloggers were the first to break new content. Their attention to these stories drove the mainstream networks to further investigation. Through the efforts of bloggers, news stories such as the Dan Rather “Memogate” scandal in 2004 and Trent Lott’s controversial racial remarks at Strom Thurmond’s 2002 birthday party became heavily reported on television and newspapers (Perlmutter 2008).

These examples all illustrate the power of the audience, and indicate that the consumption of mainstream news messages is no longer passive. Instead, receivers of news messages can become very active agents that can react to, counter, and sometimes even refute the facts presented in political news. The current time period sees a hybrid of both the producer and consumer of political news reports (Bruns 2006). Audience members have gained “the capability to become a key source of news stories for others, even if many are heard only by a relatively few people” (Gillmor 2006: 139). These writers hold the ability to provide “random acts of journalism” and “micro-news” to a small but passionate niche audience (Lasica 2003).

However, there are still serious concerns about blogging. Perhaps first among these concerns involves the quality of the information reported and the lack of professional practices from the bloggers themselves. Overall, concerns are arising “about the credibility, reliability, accuracy and trustworthiness of these content producers exist, however.....along with concerns that blog producers have no training in professional or ethical journalistic standards” (Pavlik 2008: 116).

Additionally, the negative side of eliminating “gatekeepers” results in an information forum filled with falsehoods and inaccuracies from people who have little or no accountability for publishing them (Wachbroit 2004). Ultimately, there are no punishments and few consequences for spreading untruths and inaccuracies through blogging. Because of this, news quality suffers when professional reputations are not at stake (Sunstein 2007; Gillmor 2006). Blogs are also criticized for being an enormous source of misinformation and personal bias (Keen 2007; Wachbroit 2004; Klotz 2004; Bahnisch 2006). Perhaps even more troubling is that bad information is seamlessly mixed

in with reliable information for consumption by the online public (Wachbroit 2004; Manjoo 2008).

Because of their open format with other audience members, blogs are especially prone to the rapid spreading of misinformation about candidates and topics. Blogs can be a place which fosters blunders, falsehoods and extremism (Sunstein 2007) that all too often reduces political debates into “sniping, snarkiness, and spin” (Bahnisch 2006: 144). Moreover, blogs allow writers to discuss politics in a very episodic, personalized and anecdotal way, where political issues can “become personalized reports of self-referential egotism” (Bahnisch 2006: 145). Political issues become peripheral to the personality of the writers themselves (Trammell 2006; Keen 2007), falling well-short of any idealized vision of a healthy and vibrant public sphere (Keen 2007).

Additionally, comment boards from these blogs are often guilty of spreading bogus claims, even unintentionally, that can even be purposely spread by anonymous readers who also suffer no consequences for making such claims (Stokes 2006). Other errors may occur when bloggers link or base their reports to incorrect stories that are being reported by other Internet users. This usually comes in the form of reports generated by their other fellow bloggers (Williams 2006; Gillmor 2006). Some believe that bloggers primarily provide “punditry” rather than true journalism by primarily offering readers heavy doses of opinion and analysis (Bruns 2006). Others claim that blogs largely serve as merely a new platform for rhetoric-filled political persuasion (Bahnisch 2006).

Journalists point out that blogs rarely report original content, but simply repackaging news stories already produced by journalists, providing only personal

commentary and quick links to alternative perspectives for their readers. Many journalists contend that this provides only a minimal added-value from the original stories themselves (Singer 2006; Gillmor 2006). Because of this, bloggers often face a large amount of severe criticism from journalists. Blog writers are often ridiculed by journalists because reports may purposely containing falsehoods, lack impartiality, and engage in unethical and unprofessional behavior in their reporting of the news (Bruns 2006; Singer 2006; Sunstein 2007; Bahnisch 2006; Keen 2007).

Nevertheless, the Internet enables audience members to utilize a low-cost technology in order to originate and challenge political claims in a space that is accessible to millions of other users. This fact has not been overlooked by the major political parties in the US, who have increasingly turned their attention to these mediums in order to address the public on their own terms and words. The following section addresses how politicians and parties use tools like blogs, websites, and email lists to meet their needs and influence the US public.

The Newsmakers

Perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of new communicative technologies have been the targets of the news themselves, in this case, the presidential candidates. Before the creation and growth of the internet, journalists and media organizations served as a powerful “gatekeeper” to the candidates. During this period, there were only a limited number of opportunities for politicians to speak directly to a national audience in their own terms. The constraints of time, space, topic, and differing interpretations that can be inserted by the mediator of the message can place powerful constraints and limitations upon the goals of the candidate in some form. Now, political candidates are increasingly

turning to the web to communicate directly to the public without the filter of traditional news media gatekeepers (Pavlik 2008). Traditionally powerful political groups have increasingly been able to efficiently use these low-cost methods. They do so in order to reach out to those who are not party members while also forming coalitions within the party in order to meet a variety of important goals. This is sometimes referred to as “post-bureaucratic” political campaign organization (Bimber 2003).

In previous elections, candidates and parties continually developed an understanding of how the Internet could be exploited to better disseminate information to audiences and improve their fundraising abilities (Bimber 2003). Research has indicated that there are four important types of practices on US presidential campaign sites. These functions include *informing* users with news, *connecting* the campaign to other political actors (much as to the party or linking to important endorsers), *involving* people to take actions to support the campaign (such as volunteering time or donations), and *mobilizing* the user to connect with others in the campaign with the hopes they will facilitate offline action for the campaign, such as hosting a rally (Schneider and Foot 2006).

In the 2004 US presidential race, virtually all candidates for office were using their website to at least inform and involve candidates. Some candidates were using trial-and-error methods to effectively improve their ability to mobilize and connect supporters. However, all candidates were using their website to inform potential voters and enable the user to sign up for more information or donate their personal time/money. These two elements had already become the core components of online campaigning (Schneider and Foot 2006; Margolis and Resnick 2000). This chapter will delve deeper into how the campaigns utilized their informing functions during the 2008 US Presidential race.

Previous research by William Benoit (2007) has illustrated some general overall tendencies in the communication patterns of political campaigns and the media in the US.

Over the past couple of decades, he found the following five propositions to be true:

1. Discussion of personal character is more common in primary elections, while attacks and discussion of policy become more common during general elections.
2. Those who trail in the polls will make more personal attacks.
3. News coverage tends to over-report character and polling data while under-reporting policy.
4. Democrats will discuss policies more, and character less, than Republicans.
5. Messages from candidates will use more acclaims and fewer attacks than messages from other sources

While these points serve as an important piece in my analysis of the 2008 US Presidential election, it is important to note that little attention was given to online communication being created by political candidates or non-affiliated bloggers. Later in this chapter, data will be analyzed to see if these tendencies more or less prevailed in this most current election or if these patterns had changed.

Nevertheless, political parties have found that computer-mediated communications can put a “human face” on an organization (Gillmor 2006). Political campaigns used computer-mediated communication as “Parasocial interaction” to give users “the illusion of a face-to-face relationship” (Stromer-Galley & Baker 2006: 117). The increased personalization contains the possibility for a political message to fall “under the radar” from politics and seem more personal, likely resulting in being more persuasive to the reader (Trammell 2006: 135). Of course, all of this activity overlaps simultaneously with appearances on television, radio, and links to online news sources (Margolis & Resnick 2000). The reports stemming from the campaign are often

distributed widely to journalists following the campaign each day. Meanwhile, campaign websites often feature favorable reports towards the candidate offered by the press. This illustrates once again the blurring of the lines between sources, newsmakers, and audiences (Bimber & Davis 2003).

Presidential Candidates and the Presentation of Self

During the 2008 presidential election, both Barack Obama and John McCain were able to use the Internet to talk about whatever topic they wanted to focus upon at that given moment. They both used the Internet to define their own stances on the issues in their own choice of words and imagery. Via the Internet, candidates were better able to wield this completely unfiltered communication tool to directly respond to any allegations made by their opponent. The candidates were also able to create an impression of their opponent through their carefully crafted choices of language and topics to frame or define their opponent as they would like their audience to view them. Moreover, online communication reflects campaign strategy; it is unfiltered and unedited by anyone outside of the campaign and delivered directly to the public (Bimber & Davis 2003).

In particular, email lists are a highly valued resource for campaigns (Bimber and Davis 2003) as emails are easily forwarded to a wide audience and carry instant credibility for campaigns. They are perhaps even more effective than campaign websites for reaching the public (Cornfield 2004). In the final days of the 2000 US Presidential race, George W. Bush's campaign was sending email to over 600,000 recipients per day (Bimber & Davis 2003: 64). Volunteers and campaign representatives urged people to "get out the vote" for their candidate. However, campaigns have a need to be efficient in

email listserv connections with the public, as too many messages causes “activist fatigue” (194) from too much “cheap-talk” (Bimber 2003). Campaigns need to utilize alternate sources of communicating online to supporters in order to avoid “abusing the privilege” of group email (Bimber & Davis 2003: 52).

Along with email, Presidential candidates use websites to define where they stand and assign identities to their opponent. It is important for the website to convey both verbal cues and non-verbal visual cues to the user (Goffman 1959) to let the viewer know that the candidate fulfills the viewer’s expectations of “the presidential role”. Self-Presentation on a website becomes particularly critical in a competitive environment where the opponent is also utilizing online communication technologies to paint a portrait of the candidate and shape voter’s perceptions (Bimber & Davis 2003). Candidates must show that they are capable of filling the role of President because they have the personal characteristics of trustworthiness, strength, competency, empathy, morality and experience (Williams & Kaid 2006: Bimber & Davis 2003). The candidates use their home page *to illustrate and emphasize* these qualities of their self while attempting to undermine the user’s confidence in whether the opponent has these characteristics.

Research about the websites of George W. Bush and Al Gore during the 2000 US presidential election showed that authenticity and personalization were seen more favorably and memorable than other information presented. This election was really the first where *both candidates* used the Internet for the purposes of finding and bolstering support, supplying information, presenting policy stances, and discussing opponents (Bimber & Davis 2003: 85). Remarkably, neither candidate really utilized the ability to create identities regarding their own character and assigning definition around their

opponent (Margolis & Resnick 2000). Instead, these sites were fairly inflexible and primarily involved one-way communication from sender to receiver, rarely offering new information or effectively linking supporters to one another.

During the 2004 US Presidential race, both George W. Bush and John Kerry used “self-referential framing” for both issues and personal attributes. They also actively created “attribute frames” to describe the personal qualities of self and opponent (Williams & Kaid 2006: 85-86). Additionally, almost all mentions of opponents within these websites were negative (Trammell 2006) a trend which continued in the 2008 US presidential election. Moreover, this race saw both candidates utilize their website in more sophisticated ways in regards to raising money and create networking possibilities for Internet users. Additionally, the election saw improvements in fostering more two-way communicative tools to make the user feel more personally connected to the candidate.

Later in this chapter, I plan to show how Barack Obama and John McCain defined themselves and each other. In addition, comparisons of how the candidates used self-referential and attributive frames will be made versus how other online news sources also created imagery and interpretation of the candidates during this election. However, before moving into my methodology and findings, some discussion should be made to define what media frames are and why they are important to study.

Media Frames and Political Discourse

As an operational definition, one may view a frame as a cognitive map which helps a person understand how information is to be recognized, understood, and processed (Lakoff 2004). Media frames can be understood as “a central organizing idea for news

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content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is using selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Entman 1993: 52). Frames can also be seen as a tactic of persuasion, used in politics in order to get the voting public to think of any given social issue within their own language and terms. They are important because they organize information, help us make value judgments, and set priorities within any given debate. Moreover, people have a tendency to accept only facts which fit within the frame, as frames are pervasive yet critical to political discussion and thought, as they structure our ideas and our reasoning (Lakoff 2006). In a very real sense, frames are at the heart of political debate, as those who are able to activate frames built around their own assumptions and worldviews will control political discourse and thought (Lakoff 2004).

Still, people are not necessarily slaves to frames, even though these can be both pervasive and powerful. Lakoff (2006) also conceives of political discourse consisting of differing interest groups and competitors trying to place their frames into the minds of others. So instead of one dominant frame dominating political discourse, several competing discourses exist simultaneously in a marketplace of ideas. The audience may be thought of as the consumers of frames as they experience political content in the news media, shifting through content and experiencing a variety of views and assumptions. “On most policy issues, there are competing packages available....one can view policy issues as, in part, a symbolic contest over which interpretation will prevail.” (Gamson & Modigliani 1989: 2)

It is imperative that we view the media as multivalent, where frames have been simultaneously created by a wide variety of opinion leaders, professional politicians, news journalists, and the general American public over time. As Gamson and Modigliani

(1989) add, every policy issue has a culture, and there is an ongoing discourse that evolves and changes over time. Political discourse, as well as political frames, will change as social circumstances and political values also change. Media frames, or the social construction of meaning, should not be thought of as inflexible. Instead, they offer readers a way of thinking about an issue and suggest interpretation and meaning to the reader. Both language and non-verbal communication such as photos can be used to construct meaning around the candidates and issues. As an example of such research on political discourse and media frames, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) uncovered five major frameworks that defined European political coverage in the media: Conflict, Human-Interest, Economic Consequences, Morality, and Responsibility frames.

Methodology: the 2008 Presidential race and online news coverage

Instead of focusing upon one type of message or news source in uncovering frames, the purpose of this study was to see *if* these types of sources varied significantly from one another in their news coverage, and if so, *how* they differed. For example, were blogs more or less likely to discuss issues than the candidates or journalists? Which topics were the most prevalent during the election, and which news sources were more or less likely to cover particular issues? Did these stories portray the supported candidate in a positive light, or focus mainly on defining an opponent in negative terms? Also, did the writers of these stories allow the candidates to speak in their own words, or did they try to put words in the candidate's mouths and try to interpret their thoughts via the filtering of the writer?

With these kinds of questions in mind, I set out to observe online political news stories and postings for roughly the last forty days before the Presidential election. These

news stories were purposely selected from different but very popular news sources, and I read fourteen presidential race news stories per day: two popular leftist blogs, two popular conservative blogs, John McCain's website, The RNC website, Barack Obama's website, the DNC website, two randomly selected network TV websites (CBS, NBC, ABC), CNN, Fox News, and a prominent national newspaper (either the New York Times or the Washington Post). When visiting each website, I selected the first story that I saw on the website about the 2008 US Presidential race. Although the site may have supplied many stories at any given time, I assumed that the reader would prefer to read the article which was the most recent or seemed to be the "headline" story. This decision was based upon factors such as the size of the headline or whether the story placement was made in the central area on the website, for example.

The four daily blogs represented the "audience" portrayal of that day's political news. The four "candidate" websites cover the perspectives of the news "source", and all of the others represent traditional news media organization online reports. The selection of which specific blogs to be used depended on their popularity and stated (or assumed) partisanship. Many of these had been previously identified by Adamic and Glance (2005) as having a stated or otherwise easy to identify general partisan stance. In many cases, these blogs are already well-known among the US public as having an openly stated allegiance to a political party (such as redstate.com or the liberal DailyKos.com) ideology, or agenda. Overall, I was able to read and encode 537 online articles during this time period.

The purpose of this was to learn whether different sources really were substantially different from each other in covering the election. For example, were any

sources really “biased” in the sense that they are disproportionately negative to one candidate and positive to the opponent? Were some sources more likely to talk about the issues, while others focused primarily upon punditry and personal flaws? Were blogs more likely to use inflammatory language and anger than the more mainstream news? Were the candidates using their ability to talk directly to the audience to talk about themselves, about the issues, or about their opponent? By using a closed coding system to measure these differences, I answer those questions statistically while also qualitatively finding the most important words/phrases being used during the campaign that were so critical in constructing meaning during the election.

As the researcher, it was necessary for me to make a few key decisions in order to collect the data. First, I made every effort to access information from the Internet from a variety of different sources at random times during the day in order to avoid coverage errors. Second, the online user was assumed to be selecting entirely from the most popular online news websites for information. Therefore, I selectively chose to look at only the most popular political blogs, established mainstream news websites and official candidate websites. There is no reasonable way to conduct a content analysis project of all online presidential news coverage, so it became necessary to assume that a “typical” person would seek information from the most popular and generally credible sources. A listing of all the online news sources that were among the sampling frame can be seen in appendix A. Third, I randomly sampled the internet at different times of the day and night in order to avoid coverage errors in online content. In doing so, I hoped to capture an adequate cross-section of differing types of online users and exposure patterns.

Analysis and Findings

Question #1: *For each article, I asked if the article was mainly about Barack Obama/Joe Biden or John McCain/Sarah Palin? Are these candidates generally portrayed by the media in a positive or negative framework?*

Table 1 seeks to find if different online news sources were disproportionately favorable or unfavorable to the Presidential Candidates. By categorizing each article in terms of who is the main focus of the article and how were they portrayed, analysis of source differences could be made. The Chi-Square from this analysis was extremely large (321.83, $p < .000$) and indicates that different sources cover the campaigns in different lights. We can see from table 1, that liberal blogs portrayed the McCain/Palin campaign negatively 50 out of 79 times, while portraying the Obama/Biden camp negatively only 3 times during that same time period. Conversely, conservative bloggers illustrated the Obama/Biden campaign negatively 51 out of 80 times, and only portraying them in a positive light a mere four times during the race. This is not a surprise, but does indicate that blog reports have a strongly partisan bias, and lack objectivity in their news reporting.

Additionally, the websites of the campaigns were mostly used to attack their opponent. Table 1 indicates that out of 78 GOP website news stories, 56 (71 percent) articles portrayed the Obama campaign in negative terms while the remaining articles were in praise of the McCain/Palin campaign. On the other hand, while the Democratic Party websites portrayed McCain/Palin negatively 50.8 percent of the time, they also spent a considerable amount of effort (44.3 percent of the articles) attempting to portray their own candidate favorably. This indicates that while both candidates were willing to attack their opponent via the Internet, the Obama camp utilized their website

considerably more often to talk about the positive aspects of the Obama/Biden ticket, while the GOP websites seemed designed mainly for attacks.

Table 1: Candidate Framing by Different Sources

			What is overall Frame of Article?					Total
			No Valence or Neutral	Obama/Biden Positive	Obama/Biden Negative	McCain/Palin Positive	McCain/Palin Negative	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	52	34	44	14	95	239
		%	21.8%	14.2%	18.4%	5.9%	39.7%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	10	14	3	2	50	79
		%	12.7%	17.7%	3.8%	2.5%	63.3%	100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count	5	4	51	11	9	80
Total		%	6.3%	5.0%	63.8%	13.8%	11.3%	100.0%
	Democratic Party Site	Count	3	27	0	0	31	61
		%	4.9%	44.3%	.0%	.0%	50.8%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	0	0	56	22	0	78
		%	.0%	.0%	71.8%	28.2%	.0%	100.0%
Total			Count	70	79	154	49	185
			%	13.0%	14.7%	28.7%	9.1%	34.5%
								100.0%

Overall, the most “balanced” reporting came from the mainstream news websites, although a disproportionate number of these articles seemed to be critical of the McCain/Palin campaign. Although the coverage from mainstream news media sites was neutral 21.8 percent of the time, they were also critical of the McCain/Palin ticket 39.7 percent of the time, while being critical of the Obama/Biden ticket 18.4 percent of the time. When these percentages are added together, we can see that the news media organizations covered the election in negative frames 58.1 percent of the time.

Question #2: What is the relationship between the media sources and whether the candidates speak for themselves? Are the writers or opposition candidate within these stories attempting to “speak for them” and define in their own words what the candidate stands for? Likewise, is the candidate able to speak about their opponent and redefine their stances in different language?

Next, differing sources were analyzed to see which ones were more likely than others to allow Barack Obama to define himself and the political issues directly in his own quotations. Table 2 indicates that Barack Obama was most likely to assert where he stands on the topic of issue that day (whether it be personal character, policy stance, etc...) via his own website, something he took advantage of in 27 out of 61 (44.3 percent) of the postings. Interestingly, GOP blogs and party websites also allowed Barack Obama to be quoted directly many times, but virtually all of those were made in order to refute the claim he was making, or as being evidence of deficiencies (such as poor character, relationships to ACORN, etc..). Overall, the Chi-Square statistic was significant (13.535, $p = .009$) indicating that some sources were more likely to allow Barack Obama to define important moments and issues in his own words, while others were less likely to.

Table 2: Does Source Allow Barack Obama to assert his stance in his own words?

			Is Barack Obama directly quoted?		Total
			No	Yes	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	179	60	239
		%	74.9%	25.1%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	65	14	79
		%	82.3%	17.7%	100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count	57	23	80
		%	71.3%	28.8%	100.0%
	Democratic Party Site	Count	34	27	61
		%	55.7%	44.3%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	54	24	78
		%	69.2%	30.8%	100.0%
Total		Count	389	148	537
		%	72.4%	27.6%	100.0%

Interestingly, GOP websites and Conservative Blogs often took direct quotes from Barack Obama regarding personal character questions and policy stances, but did so mainly to illustrate why these ideas were troublesome. So although these sites were

willing to quote Obama and give him voice, it was largely to serve as the beginning of an attack, as we can see from the large amounts of negative framing that came from these sources in table 1 earlier.

However, John McCain did not utilize these sources the same way as Obama. As can be seen in table 3, McCain was able to assert his own stance in only 20 out of 80 (25 percent) of conservative blog articles, and 24 out of 78 times (30.8 percent) of GOP website stories. This is reflective of a strategy where most of the efforts from these writers were spent trying to assign identities and construct perceptions of Barack Obama, and not spending as much effort attempting to illustrate or define McCain. Not surprisingly, McCain was rarely directly quoted in the Democratic Party websites, as they allowed him to voice his stances in his own words only 6 times in 61 articles that were read, a mere 9.8 percent of the time.

Table 3: Does Source allow McCain to assert himself in his own words?

			Is John McCain directly quoted?		Total
			No	Yes	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	137	102	239
		%	57.3%	42.7%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	45	34	79
		%	57.0%	43.0%	100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count	60	20	80
		%	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
	Democratic Party Site	Count	55	6	61
		%	90.2%	9.8%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	54	24	78
		%	69.2%	30.8%	100.0%
Total	Count	351	186	537	
	%	65.4%	34.6%	100.0%	

Interestingly, mainstream news organizations were very permissive to the McCain camp, allowing him to speak in his own terms in 42.7 percent of their news stories, where

table 2 showed that Obama was able to do so only 25.1 percent of the time, bringing into question whether the traditional news media really had a favorable bias to Obama and was dismissive of McCain. Overall, these sources differed significantly in terms of how often they allowed McCain to voice himself (Chi-Square = 29.658, $p < .000$)

The next part of the analysis looks at how different sources tried to describe the presidential candidate and assign meaning and definition to the candidate that were not in the terms of the candidate's choosing. Table 4 shows that Obama and Biden were particularly successful in being able to define the McCain campaign in terms of their own words and frameworks within traditional media organization news stories, doing so in 37.7 percent of all mainstream news articles. At the same time, writers and pundits used their own words to construct imagery or definition around McCain, something that was done 40.2 percent of the time. Taken together, it can be seen that people other than McCain were describing his platform and actions in their own words 77.9 percent of the time in news media organization, which may have given some conservatives the impression that the news reporters were working against them and showing bias.

We can also see in table 4 that Obama was active in assigning identity and frames onto McCain within Democratic Party websites, doing so 25 times out of 61 postings, or 41 percent of the time. At the same time, liberal blog writers and pundits were defining the McCain campaign in their own words and frameworks as well, as 46.8 percent of these articles saw the writer or pundit within the story define McCain's stances or character in their own words. Again, these differences were found to be statistically significant (Chi-Square = 131.06, $p < .000$), showing that writers and candidates were able to voice critiques and redefine McCain's stances and image in their own words

largely through traditional news sources, democratic party websites, and the liberal blogosphere.

Table 4: Which Sources are allowing others to define John McCain?

			Who is assigning perception and meaning to McCain?			Total
			Nobody	Writer or Subject	Obama or Biden	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	53	96	90	239
		%	22.2%	40.2%	37.7%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	33	37	9	79
		%	41.8%	46.8%	11.4%	100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count	49	23	8	80
		%	61.3%	28.8%	10.0%	100.0%
	Democrat Party Site	Count	19	17	25	61
		%	31.1%	27.9%	41.0%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	64	14	0	78
		%	82.1%	17.9%	.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	218	187	132	537
		%	40.6%	34.8%	24.6%	100.0%

Additionally, we can see in table 5 below, political writers and pundits were disproportionately creating meaning in their own wording around Obama within conservative Blogs (in 53.8 percent of those articles) and GOP websites (in 55.1 percent of those stories). Meanwhile, the GOP candidates themselves were defining where Obama stands in their own words 43.5 percent of the time in mainstream news articles, while the writers of these articles attempted to define Obama 29.3 percent of the time. Taken together, writers and opponents were able to try to define where Obama stands 72.8 percent of the time in traditional news organization articles online, which is similar to the 77.9 percent of the time that writers and opponents try to shape where McCain stands. It is likely that *both Democrats and Republicans* feel that the traditional news media reporting “work against them” given these findings, but fail to recognize that these patterns of putting words into the candidate’s mouth is something that *these sources do to*

both candidates, not only their own. Findings like this may give some justification to the “hostile media syndrome” theory discussed earlier.

Table 5: Does the Article allow others to define where Barack Obama stands?

			Who is assigning identity to Obama?			Total
			Nobody	Writer or Subject	McCain or Palin	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	65	70	104	239
		%	27.2%	29.3%	43.5%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	51	17	11	79
		%	64.6%	21.5%	13.9%	100.0%
	GOP Blog	Count	20	43	17	80
		%	25.0%	53.8%	21.3%	100.0%
	Democrat Party Site	Count	49	11	1	61
		%	80.3%	18.0%	1.6%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	15	43	20	78
		%	19.2%	55.1%	25.6%	100.0%
Total	Count	200	184	153	537	
	%	37.2%	34.3%	28.5%	100.0%	

The pattern seems to show that McCain and Palin used traditional news outlets themselves *to refute the claims made by the Democratic Party nominee, and attack Barack Obama in terms of both policy and personal character. The GOP campaign often relied on a mixture of pundits and conservative bloggers to construct negative beliefs and perceptions about Obama.* These differences were statistically significant (Chi-Square = 133.605, $p < .000$) showing that some sources were willing to allow others to develop meaning around Obama in their own words, while some did not often do so.

Overall, these findings suggest a few things. First, the traditional news media seem to allow both candidates the opportunity to describe themselves in their own terms. Both McCain and Obama were able to speak directly to the public within the stories of CNN, Fox, MSNBC, the network news sites, and the New York Times in their own words. Nevertheless, both of the candidates found ample opportunity to voice their

opposition towards the candidate of the other party within these sources, an opportunity both parties engaged in heavily. Second, the news media seems to promote a fairly open dialogue between the candidates, where the writers themselves are disproportionately unlikely to voice their own opinions about the candidates or define them within the language and frameworks of the writes themselves. In terms of perspective, the news media organizations relied heavily on the candidates themselves to discuss themselves and their opponents, while other perspective and definitions were underreported, consistent with the top-down approach to political reporting that Herbert Gans discussed earlier. Third, these findings suggest that the traditional news media journalists are concerned about *the perception of being biased* by their readers, and are more willing than other writers (the candidates and bloggers) to take a hands-off approach to the public debate, allowing the candidates to be quoted directly and being more likely to keep their own perspectives and interpretations to themselves.

Question #3: Is anyone criticizing the Coverage of the Election? Where are these criticisms coming from?

So where are the critics of the news media and their coverage? Not surprisingly, these criticisms come mostly from the blogosphere. Table 6 shows that bloggers, particularly the conservative ones, were most likely to voice criticism of the political coverage (their articles criticized the media coverage 33.8 percent of the time). Interestingly, the candidate and party websites seemed particularly cautious against portraying the media as biased or that they were doing a poor job. The Democratic Party sites criticize the media only once in 62 stories, while the GOP websites criticize them only 3 times out of 78 stories. In sum, more than half of criticism about news media coverage of the candidates and the election came from bloggers, who often voiced

frustrations about the coverage and claim that the media worked against their candidate, as both sides demonstrated the “hostile media phenomenon” discussed earlier, where both sided felt that the news media favored the opposition’s candidate. Once again, these differences were found to be statistically significant (Chi-Square = 50.031, $p < .000$)

Table 6: Which Sources are criticizing the media coverage?

			Is the media Criticized?		Total
			No	Yes	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	216	23	239
		%	90.4%	9.6%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	71	8	79
		%	89.9%	10.1%	100.0%
	GOP Blog	Count	53	27	80
		%	66.3%	33.8%	100.0%
	Democrat Party Site	Count	60	1	61
		%	98.4%	1.6%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	75	3	78
		%	96.2%	3.8%	100.0%
Total		Count	475	62	537
		%	88.5%	11.5%	100.0%

Question #4: Are the articles in some sources more likely to cover the election as a “horserace” that is full of polling numbers and pundit advice?

Perhaps the reason that conservative bloggers felt that the news media was biased was related to the “horse race” framework that dominated their coverage. Table 7 shows that online news stories referred to an Obama advantage 107 times out of the 537 news stories that were covered here, while McCain was said to lead or be gaining momentum only 8 times during this same time period. The polling reports consistently mention that Obama is “in the lead” or is “winning” key states and national polls. By the last few weeks of coverage, most news stories that discussed John McCain nearly always followed up with phrases such as “trailing in the polls”, or “running out of time”, and would allow Obama or Biden the opportunity to suggest their campaign was “desperate”.

Table 7: "Horserace" Coverage by News Source

			Is anyone seen as being in the lead?			Total
			Not Mentioned or Tied	Yes, Obama leading/gaining	Yes, McCain leading/gaining	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count %	151 63.2%	84 35.1%	4 1.7%	239 100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count %	63 79.7%	15 19.0%	1 1.3%	79 100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count %	74 92.5%	3 3.8%	3 3.8%	80 100.0%
	Democrat Party Site	Count %	57 93.4%	4 6.6%	0 .0%	61 100.0%
	GOP Site	Count %	77 98.7%	1 1.3%	0 .0%	78 100.0%
	Total	Count %	422 78.6%	107 19.9%	8 1.5%	537 100.0%

Overall, thirty-five percent of all mainstream news stories referred to polling numbers which indicated Barack Obama was leading or gaining momentum in the polls. Interestingly, both bloggers and party websites seemed very unlikely to talk about poll results or horserace coverage. This “horserace” framework was predominantly a product of the news media organization news stories, findings which are consistent with many critics of mainstream political news coverage. These findings were significant (Chi-Square = 77.24, $p < .000$), and show that “horserace coverage” was almost exclusively the domain of mainstream news coverage online.

Question #5: How do sources differ in terms of what topics are covered? Are different sources more likely to talk about political issues, the personal character of the candidate, or to cover the election as a “horserace” that is full of polling numbers and pundit advice?

Horserace coverage was not the only way in which different sources had a propensity to cover the presidential election in varying ways. Table 8 shows that there are strong and significant differences (Chi-Square = 106.523; $p < .000$) in the topics that were under discussion in political news coverage during this time period. In particular,

the blogs (both liberal and conservative) were more likely than other sources to talk about the personal character of the candidates and significantly less about specific issues, such as foreign policy or health care.

At the same time, both of the candidate websites were disproportionately likely to talk about the issues and policy while downplaying poll numbers. The Democratic websites discussed political issues 47.5 percent of the time, while GOP party sites talked about the issues 64.1 percent of the time. However, the GOP websites were also likely to speak about personal character (doing so 24.4 percent of the time) while the Democratic websites did so only 8.3 percent of the time. Additionally, as already mentioned, the news media organizations were overly focused upon polling numbers, which were often the centerpiece of the news story. They were much less likely to talk about personal character of the candidates when compared to the blogs, but also less likely to talk about the important political issues than were the candidate websites.

Table 8 is interesting because it shows that different sources were likely to emphasize different topics, trying to set the agenda and focus the public's attention to different places. While mainstream news organizations are often preoccupied with giving snapshot and scoreboard like reporting of the race, the candidate websites were largely the places that discussed the issues themselves. As we have seen, the Obama sites often defined Barack Obama's stances on many key issues, while the McCain sites often tried to define where their opponent stands and to question his character. Simultaneously, the blogs were places in which personal character was often discussed, along with polling numbers and other items, such as writer or pundit speculation and predictions of what should be happening or will happen next.

Table 8: Topics Covered During the Presidential Race by Source

			What is article discussing?				Total
			Other Topics	Political Issues	Personal Character	Political Horse Race	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	46	76	24	93	239
		%	19.2%	31.8%	10.0%	38.9%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	21	16	21	21	79
		%	26.6%	20.3%	26.6%	26.6%	100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count	20	23	26	11	80
		%	25.0%	28.8%	32.5%	13.8%	100.0%
	Democratic Party Site	Count	20	29	5	7	61
		%	32.8%	47.5%	8.2%	11.5%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	5	50	19	4	78
		%	6.4%	64.1%	24.4%	5.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	112	194	95	136	537
		%	20.9%	36.1%	17.7%	25.3%	100.0%

Question #6: Did the articles coming from different sources use different amounts of anger or hostility towards a candidate? Does the writer suggest that the campaigns are purposely being deceitful or dishonest to the public?

Finally, I tried to understand what levels of hostility and skepticism were being drawn out by different sources. Table 9 shows that, perhaps not surprisingly, blogs showed the most animosity and anger in their news stories. In the 79 liberal blog stories I read, 32 of these stories (40.5 percent) were personally hostile towards John McCain and/or Sarah Palin, while only 1 story attacked Barack Obama or Joe Biden. Similarly, the GOP blogs attacked Barack Obama and/or Joe Biden 29 times out of 80 times (or 36.3 percent of the articles).

However, hostilities were also seen in the websites of the candidates as well. Although we saw earlier that the candidate websites were hesitant to show contempt for the news media coverage, they did show hostility towards the opposing candidate. Table 9 shows that the Democrat Websites were hostile towards McCain/Palin 17 times out of

61 stories, while the GOP sites attacked Obama/Biden 33 times out of 80 stories. In both cases, these figures exceeded expectations based on the null hypothesis that different media sources showed the same patterns of behavior.

Table 9: Does the Writer Express Hostility Towards the Candidate?

			Hostile towards Candidate?			Total
			Yes, toward McCain or Palin	No	Yes, toward Obama or Biden	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	19	204	16	239
		%	7.9%	85.4%	6.7%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	32	46	1	79
		%	40.5%	58.2%	1.3%	100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count	5	46	29	80
		%	6.3%	57.5%	36.3%	100.0%
	Democrat Party Site	Count	17	43	1	61
		%	27.9%	70.5%	1.6%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	0	45	33	78
		%	.0%	57.7%	42.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	73	384	80	537	
	%	13.6%	71.5%	14.9%	100.0%	

The news media organization websites were the least likely to engage in personal attacks on the candidates, doing so below expected levels for both Barack Obama and John McCain. Again, these findings are consistent with the critiques of some media scholars that these organizations are very concerned about being accused of bias and losing critical market share, and are therefore less willing to openly criticize or attack the candidates during the election than others were. Likewise, it also supports the critiques that journalists have made towards the blogs: that they are sites that focus on personal character and hostility, and are detrimental to serious political discussion and insight into the important issues of the day. These findings were significant (Chi-Square = 174.923, p

<.000) and show that some sources of news tend to be more venomous towards candidates than others are, and too often in the direction of party bias.

Table 10: Does the Article Accuse the Candidate of Dishonesty?

			Dishonest?				Total
			No	Yes, GOP	Yes, Democrats	Yes, Both candidates	
Where does article come from?	Media Organization	Count	193	19	19	8	239
		%	80.8%	7.9%	7.9%	3.3%	100.0%
	Liberal Blog	Count	63	14	0	2	79
		%	79.7%	17.7%	.0%	2.5%	100.0%
	Conservative Blog	Count	62	4	14	0	80
		%	77.5%	5.0%	17.5%	.0%	100.0%
	Democratic Party Site	Count	53	8	0	0	61
		%	86.9%	13.1%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
	GOP Site	Count	46	0	32	0	78
		%	59.0%	.0%	41.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	417	45	65	10	537
		%	77.7%	8.4%	12.1%	1.9%	100.0%

In regards to skepticism, I wanted to know if different sources varied in questioning the claims being made by the candidates. Table 10 shows that the blogs were more likely than the news media to question the claims being made by the candidates, but they predominantly only challenge the claims made by their opponents. We see that 14 out of 79 (17.7 percent) of liberal blog stories accused McCain and Palin of being dishonest, while only 2 accused *both* Obama and McCain of being dishonest, and *none* of those stories singled out Obama for dishonesty. Likewise, Obama was accused of dishonesty 14 times out of 80 (17.5 percent) of conservative blog stories, but only accused McCain of doing so on 4 occasions

Interestingly, we see that the mainstream news media organizations were entirely **balanced** in their claims of candidate dishonesty. Table 10 shows that 19 traditional news **media** organization articles accused the Obama camp of dishonesty and 19 accused the

McCain camp of dishonesty, while 8 articles accused both candidates of doing so.

Meanwhile, we can see that the GOP websites had a disproportionate amount of accusing Obama of dishonesty, doing so 32 times in 78 (41 percent) of their news stories. This is almost entirely a function of the “BarackBook” theme that was run by the rnc.org website, a continuously updated chronicle of questionable Barack Obama relationships and potentially scandalous cover-ups or conspiracies he was believed to be engaging in, which served as the leading story of this website on a daily basis during the US Presidential election.

These differences were statistically significant (Chi-Square = 105.331, $p < .000$) and suggest once again that source differences in election coverage are real across a wide array of dimensions: from what topics are discussed, in regards to whom is able to make their claims in their own words, in levels of hostility, where different sites were more likely to question the facts, yet while also seeming to exhibit very high levels of political bias within blogs and candidate websites. Meanwhile, traditional news coverage often engaged in a lot of “top-down” reporting; relying on the candidates themselves to fill the spaces of their articles while placing a strong emphasis on polling numbers.

Discussion and Conclusion

These figures indicate that different online news sources were highly likely to portray the candidates in varying ways from each other. In particular, the bulk of political blogs contained a heavy dose of negativity towards the opposition’s candidate, while spending significantly less time and effort praising their own candidates. While bloggers often complain about bias in news media organization coverage, they ironically seem to show the highest amount of bias in their own reporting. Reading the blogs illustrates the

“hostile media” hypothesis; as writers from both the right and left criticized the coverage of their candidate, and sometimes even suggested this bias was intentional. In contrast, media organizations were the only source category that reported neutrally at least 20 percent of the time, exhibiting the least amount of favoritism towards any candidate. All other sources engaged in negativity towards their opponent at disproportionately high rates.

Meanwhile, mainstream news had a propensity to cover the election as a contest. Similar to what Williams (2006) found in earlier elections, the prevalence of horse-race coverage predominated over detailed attribute and issue content of the issues and candidates. The news media were also more objective in their criticisms of the candidates, and did so in more civil terms. However, blogs and mainstream news both had a tendency to see the candidates in a negative light, which could have an effect on voter turnout and apathy during a general election.

If one were interested in hearing candidates discuss the issues, their best option was to go directly to the candidate websites. On these sites, the candidates talked about the issues more often than did other sources, although they also had a tendency to speak in terms of personal character as well. Both candidates spent a great deal of time trying to use the Internet as a medium to define the election. Much effort was spent trying to describe themselves in characteristics that were desirable of performing a presidential role, and questioning their opponent’s ability to do the same. Candidate websites are informative, yet are clearly constructed with the motivations of persuading the reader to think in ways which are desirable to the candidate’s platform. Perhaps the best strategy

for a web surfer interested in gaining unbiased political knowledge is to seek out information from multiple sources in order to avoid a reliance on one perspective.

Taken together, the criticisms that journalists and bloggers make towards each other seem to have some justifications. The reports coming from blogs often seem biased and hostile, which fuels criticism made by journalists about blog reporting. In contrast, reports from media organizations largely rely upon candidate quotes framed between poll numbers, often speculating about what may happen next or how it voters may be swayed. Bloggers portrayed journalists as being too comfortable with their careers and too embedded with political elites to risk challenging facts or in giving voice to critics, and used these feeling to resonate with an Internet public that may have felt similarly.

I think future research should focus on the feelings that journalists and bloggers have towards one another, and how those feeling effect their selection of news stories and their methods of reporting. For example, research may find that bloggers wear their poor reputations with journalists as a badge of honor, while journalists place a high premium on objectivity so that articles will not be seen by peers as low-quality rhetorical pieces. Likewise, experiments may also indicate whether blog postings are more or less persuasive than news articles, and under which conditions and topics? In this chapter, I have assumed that all articles are equally likely to be persuasive to the reader. However, it may be the case that blog viewers enjoy reading a favorite blog but do not consider the stories to be accurate. Just because one prefers to read blogs and does so consistently, this does not necessarily indicate that they believe what they read. It is possible that readers are entertained by blog reports and share the writer's feelings on the topic, yet are skeptical of the facts or perceived bias, using mainstream news as a supplement.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of areas for future research regarding political information on the Internet. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it would be interesting to see how consistently supplying negative messages about candidates to subjects over multiple days in an experiment affect the subject's interest in politics. While it may be expected that negativity towards the candidates would dampen the public's interest, the Presidential race of 2008 appeared to be as lively and intense among the public as any in recent memory. Does the presence of the Internet, by giving direct connections to political groups and candidates, make Internet users feel an extra sense of importance or vested interest in the outcome of the election? Alternatively, it is possible that the enormous amount of political stories being reported via so many news sources could lead to information overload and social withdrawal. While social theorists have long suggested that such a situation could arise with an expansion of communicative technology (Sunstein, 2007; Manjoo 2008; Cooley 1998), research has yet to show this.

As blogs are still relatively new, it will be interesting to see how their business models may change over time. How will these online news sources generate revenues? Will they be uniquely different from other major news sources, or will it lead eventually to the same type of conflicts suffered by Mainstream news media? (Hamilton 2004). Given their levels of partisanship and rhetoric, it is not improbably that the most influential of bloggers will receive financial support from political parties in the future. Will this make their reports undesirable for readers, given their economic incentive to generate biased reports? How will the quality of the reports be altered, and how might the influences of money and power make these articles feel disingenuous to the reader?

Overall, the 2008 election, as seen on the Internet, showed a high amount of

convergence. Hundreds of reports were generated by politicians, journalist, and bloggers each day and placed alongside one another for the Internet user to consume. In the next two chapters, the emphasis will shift from the senders of online political news to the receivers. The remainder of this dissertation will examine whether Internet users engage in high levels of selective exposure in online news consumption, and if these patterns are related to the personal characteristics and motives of the users. Additionally, specific identities thought to drive differential usage patterns will be explored, as will the implications that these findings suggest for future political discourse in the US.

CHAPTER 3

The Self Goes Online: How Personal Attributes Mediate Political Activity on the Internet.

Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to incorporate social psychological literature regarding the self to the study of online politics. It is proposed that the presence of the Internet, by itself, does not alter political activity or attention in the US. Instead, the political identities and self-construal of Internet users drives whether people use computers to meet their political interests. An online survey was distributed to 640 respondents during the winter of 2009 to test four specific hypotheses made in order to clarify the relationship between personal characteristics and online politics.

Introduction

Since the earliest days of the Internet, people have wondered how this new technology would alter everyday life. Some feel that the Internet can help facilitate and expand the principles of democracy, strength the public sphere, and create a public which is more active and informed about politics than ever before. Alternatively, there are others who see a dark side to the presence of the Internet, seeing it as a device which can enable people to ignore important societal issues altogether in the pursuit of personal pleasures and entertainments.

But while this debate has generally centered around aggregated statements of how the Internet is universally “good” or “bad” for society as a whole, *there has been surprisingly little consideration of how identities (both personal and social) can lead to widely variant patterns of usage from one person to the next.* Individuals have an offline self that they bring to the computer when they sit down to use it; and these identities are

likely to shape what we seek out online. There is reason to believe that some Internet users will seek out spaces where they can become more informed and/or politically active, while others will look to avoid these issues. In a sense, *the arguments being made are not mutually exclusive; the Internet leads to both high levels of political activity for some types of users yet will simultaneously have no positive impact on political activity levels for other types of users.*

The next section will explore the debate regarding how the Internet has a positive or negative effect on communities and politics. I will then introduce some important findings about the self-concept and identities that must be considered in serious discussion of how and why people use the Internet. At that point, four hypotheses will be developed and tested showing how the Internet usage of people with varying identities and self-construal types will engage in significantly different patterns of exposure and activism regarding online politics.

Community and the Internet

As mentioned earlier, there are some scholars who feel that the Internet will atomize people and make them disconnected from their community needs similar to the effects of television (Putnam 2000), and are sometimes referred to as “Dystopians” (Katz & Rice 2002B). For dystopians, the Internet can be seen as primarily an individual-centered entertainment and shopping venue, where serious collective political action is unlikely to surface (Putnam 2000; Galston 2002; Galston 2004). The Internet is viewed as an electronic technology which allows us to consume hand-tailored entertainment in private, even utterly alone. People may become reasonably well-informed spectators of public affairs, but many fewer will actually partake in politics (Putnam 2000). In other

words, Putnam sees the Internet as rendering our leisure time as more private and passive “spectatorship” (Jensen 2006: 40); where more and more of our time and money are spent on goods and services consumed individually and a declining interest in making personal sacrifices towards the common good (Putnam 2000). Yet, when people do undertake political action, it is too often something that requires no more effort than a few seconds of pointing-and-clicking, often in the form of donating money instead of personal time (Putnam 2000), which is heralded as being far from ideal or adequate for a healthy democracy. People will typically spend little/no personal time with meaningful offline political activities, but will instead sign up for mass mailings or other passive consumption of information that requires virtually no forms of personal commitment or sacrifice (Putnam 2000: 63).

Others have emphasized that time spent on the internet acts as a substitute for other offline activities such as spending time with friends and family, leading users to feel a sense of isolation from their immediate community, even leading to higher rates of depression for those who use the internet for several hours a day (Klotz 2004). Contrary to utopian claims, the Internet is likely to resemble a contentious and chaotic marketplace of ideas containing many different groups, leading to little consensus or collective unified action (Vacker 2000). Some have even suggested that the quality of material being reported on the Internet is increasingly problematical, with concerns that this may lead to an even further reduction in political participation (Katz & Rice 2002B).

Additionally, since the Internet is a vehicle that enables the user towards endless choice and personal selection, some scholars feel it is unlikely that the Internet can reduce already declining social capital or sense of community among users (Galston

2002, 2004; Wachbroit 2004; Putnam 2000). They discount any notion that online groups are solutions for our current civic ills, let alone be comprehensive models of a better future (Galston 2002). These scholars generally see what they refer to as “Choice”, “Voluntary”, or “Associational” communities being distinguished by: low barriers to exit, low barriers to entry, and interpersonal interactions shaped by mutual adjustment (Galston 2004; Putnam 2000; Wachbroit 2004; Sunstein 2007; Bishop 2008). These characteristics lead to online communities that are highly homogenous, where there are low levels of personal commitment, and activities are largely centered on personal interest and entertainment; while noting that the ability to easily ignore people does not create any incentives for accommodation (Galston 2005). Moreover, these kinds of groups threaten to undermine democracy and traditional community (Wachbroit 2004; Sunstein 2007) while fostering intolerance.

By their very nature, Internet groups are almost entirely selective communities with very low barriers to entry and no barriers to exit. These “weak” communities are not seen as sufficient for meaningful social change, as people often leave these communities whenever asked to sacrifice personal time or effort for the cause. They act as a pseudo-community (Putnam 2000) and do not create meaningful ties which are bonded strongly, the kind of connections that can emotionally connect people to make personal sacrifices towards a cause (Galston 2004). These communities have no tangible real-world value, as memberships in them are by-and-large characterized by low levels of commitment and do not often lead people to participate in “real” off-line activity.

According to Putnam (2000) the Internet only exacerbates the decreasing amounts of social trust and social capital that have been suffered over the last 40 years, a trend

which has cut across all population and geographic sections of the US (Putnam 2000). Moreover, Putnam (2000:171) sees “virtual social capital” as “a contradiction in terms” and purports that at a macro level, the Internet will lead to decreasing amount political involvement and possibly less knowledge of political issues across society, especially among younger people. In this view, the enthusiasts of “virtual community” who see these networks as the basis for utopian communitarianism are overly optimistic about the emergence of the Internet. Rather, this new communicative technology is more likely to fragment the public and make them too passive and individualistic to engage in political endeavors (Putnam 2000).

Critics of this perspective point out that before the advent of the Internet there had already been a move from all-encompassing socially controlling communities towards more individualized and fragmented personalized “networked” communities (Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002; Wellman 1999). For decades in the US, people have lived their lives through a series of overlapping personal social networks or partial communities, giving way to the opportunity of “networked individualism” (Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002). Overall, people have remained connected to their communities, but do so in a more socially networked and selective way. Individuals manage their social networks as a more-or-less selective community, and utilize this network to obtain information, personal support, and develop a sense of belonging (Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002; Wellman 1999). Moreover, these scholars point out that the Internet has been unfairly blamed for a loss of civic-mindedness and political involvement. To the contrary, the presence of the Internet actually encourages and creates

new forms of connectedness and involvement for its users, which often leads to higher levels of civic engagement (Hampton & Wellman 2002; Haythornthwaite 2007).

These scholars, sometimes referred to as “utopians” (Katz & Rice 2002B), point out that there *is* a positive connection between online and offline activities that leads to more civic engagement. The Internet can expand community by making people “Glocalized” (Hampton & Wellman 2002), which allows people to re-define community to include people living beyond their immediate locale rather than replacing them with like-minded others who live far away. The Internet is viewed as a tool which empowers people to become more active both within their local communities while also transcending the limitations of time and space (Giddens 1991) making Internet users both more locally and globally active than are non-users. Most importantly, however, is a rejection that online and offline behaviors are mutually exclusive. Instead, online activities have the ability to generate increased knowledge and interest in a person’s community and make them more active in their local communities and national political interests.

Findings have shown that those who use the Internet are found to be more informed about what is happening within their community than are those who do not (Kavanaugh & Patterson 2002; Katz & Rice 2002A; Oates & Gibson 2006). As a refutation of dystopian claims, researchers have shown that online community members have report the kinds of strong emotional and social bonds commonly associated with local community (Haythornthwaite 2007). Additionally, others have noted that Internet users were also more likely to engage in political activities such as voting, and also that the Internet provided a platform for a significant amount of additional forms of political

activity that were not available offline (Katz & Rice 2002A). The Internet is not a substitution for political life, but a vehicle which empowers and creates activity: The more time people spend on the Internet, the more they are involved with organizations and politics, both offline and online (Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002: 31).

Instead of seeing the Internet as a distinctly separate entity from the communities which we physically live within, these scholars support the notion that these communities often overlap (Davis, Elin, & Reeher 2005; Kolko 2003; McKenna 2007); that being a member of an online community does not make one less connected to an offline community (Rice et al 2007; Rheingold 1995). Instead, people interact with many of the same people in both spheres (Quan-Haase et al 2002) a point which others have claimed extends to political communication in the US (Jensen 2006). Moreover, others have argued that the Internet has been effective at reaching people who might not have been interested in the political process, engaging and encouraging them to become active participants in the political sphere, and emphasizing a positive relationship between time spent online and political activity (Davis, Elin, & Reeher 2005; Katz & Rice 2002A). Online political activity is seen as a supplement to offline political behavior; where both mutually reinforce each other rather than act as substitutes. If a person uses the Internet to discuss politics, there is reason to believe they will become more interested and involved in politics offline as well, which may genuinely create new forms of community-oriented activism.

These scholars see the Internet as a vehicle which leads a resurgence of community, goodwill and democracy. In their view, people flee to the Internet to find the purpose, affect and community that are otherwise absent in their lives during this

postmodern era (Wise 2003). They envision the Internet as a space where all voices could be heard, greatly reducing the influences of media elites and opinion leaders in the democratic process. This is partly due to the fact that these people themselves are enlarging their own social networks and increasing their number of daily interactions (Weinberger 2005).

The Internet serves numerous positive functions for users, such as becoming more knowledgeable and integrated in local community affairs and expanding a person's sense of community belonging (Rheingold 1995). Ultimately, the Internet is a space where new community ties can be developed, new coalitions can be nurtured, and individuals can even mobilize with people that they may have otherwise never even met (Anderson 2003). Having a space where an endless amount of possible new connections can be made while simultaneously enabling people to form stronger ties to the people they know offline can only be a good thing for communities and democracy.

What is striking in this debate is how rarely (if ever) utopian or dystopian scholars have considered any social psychological components of the people who are actually using the Internet. While these theorists have sought correlations between time spent online and increased levels of political activity, for example, nobody in this debate has really considered that *some people* will be motivated to seek out politics while others will not. The effects of the Internet are unlikely to be uniform across all types of people across society, leading to a decisive seismic shift towards one direction or another. It seems more likely that people who are oriented to collectives and are interested in politics will become even more connected to these goals by using the Internet, while those who are excessively individualistic may use the Internet similarly as Putnam (2000) sees it: as a

means of private news consumption that does not translate into political activity.

Additionally, it seems plausible that those Internet users which are uninterested in politics and/or do not define themselves in collectivist terms will become interested in politics *regardless* of how much time they spend online.

Although there has been much debate over how the internet affects political knowledge, activity, and beliefs of its users, it has almost entirely developed in the absence of social psychological literature about the self-concept. This has left the current discourse of how politics on the internet affects its users both fragmented and incomplete. The integration of recent developments within social psychology regarding the self-concept along with the varied arguments made by computer-mediated communication scholars should prove to be beneficial in a number of ways. It is likely that mere exposure to the Internet does not lead to any uniform impact, nor do all users share the same motivations or experience the same patterns of exposure. Instead, the self-concept of users impacts how people use the internet. Differences in the overall self-concept are likely to have strong impacts on what any specific person will see on the internet, who they talk to, whether they are persuaded by the information they see, whether they become involved in political activities, and whether they use the internet as a source of information.

As Eric Uslaner (2004A: 108) claims, “There is little evidence that the Internet creates meaningful new communities, and even less that the Internet breaks down traditional social ties or trust in others.” The Internet does not uniformly make people become one way or another. Instead, people bring their offline identities and self-concepts with them when they sit down at the computer; that the Internet “allows us to

become ever more ourselves” (Katz & Rice 2002B: 13). Put another way, the Internet does not remake people’s personalities. We bring our prior selves online; the Internet neither creates nor destroys trust and communities (Uslaner 2004B). As an example of how these users may differ, earlier research has show that online political activists are more likely to be well-educated, affluent, younger, and male than other Internet users (Norris 2002; Owen 2006). These attributes were believed to affect the type of political discourse that existed on the Internet while raising concerns that there was an under-representation of those who were less educated, female, poor, and/or older which left a gap in the representativeness of online political actions and discussions.

Moreover, the Internet is not likely to create the kinds of communities that generate social trust, but excels in bringing together people who already share something in common (Uslaner 2004B). The Internet does not create a new world; activities undertaken online generally reflect people’s interests and experience (Klotz 2004). As Eric Uslaner (2004A: 108) explains “While the Internet makes the world better in some ways, and worse in others, it is not transforming: if you want to make a revolution, you have to go offline.” Where previous research has made attempts to show large-scale changes on political discourse across US society due to the existence of the internet, this research project attempts to specify *which people* will be the most affected by the presence of internet exposure, and *in what direction* will the internet impact the direction and intensity of their beliefs, as well as *what specific kinds of behaviors* are likely to result from the combination of offline identities to online activities.

The Self and Identities

During the twentieth century, Sociology developed an enormous body of literature regarding the study and measurement of the self, particularly from Symbolic Interactionist theorists. Overall, the self was seen to be very fluid and in a constant state of change fueled by reflexivity and constant interactions with others, and could be thought of in generalities as a 'self as process' (Mead 1934; Blumer 1968; Cooley 1998). These theorists often placed an emphasis on how the self becomes a function of his/her situational and environmental settings, and called for qualitative observational methods to understand how people act and why (Blumer 1968, Mead 1934, Cooley 1998, Goffman 1959). Because these scholars discounted notions of a self that transcends situational demands and the expectations of others, methodologies designed to quantitatively measure the self-concept were not pursued.

However, the later part of the century saw the emergence of social psychologists asserting that people had tendencies to act in patterned ways based upon identities which they held a deep commitment towards (Stryker 1980, Serpe 1987, Burke & Reitzes 1981, McCall & Simmons 1978, Rosenberg 1978) and "identity" refers to internalized sets of meanings attached to roles played in a network of social relationships (Stryker 1980).

These theoretical premises assumed that the self was a stable object that could be quantitatively measured with the hopes of predicting human behavior. Much of the research within this 'self as object' paradigm set out to see *which identities* were important to people, how these identities are *related to social roles*, what *motivated people* to enact these identities, and *how these identities became salient* by situational factors (Stryker 1980, McCall & Simmons 1978, Burke & Reitzes 1981; Rosenberg

1978; Higgins 1987). In sum, the self should be seen as multifaceted, comprised of parts that are sometimes highly interdependent and sometimes not (Stryker 2000: 27).

Nevertheless, research within this paradigm was difficult due to the lack of quality measurement instruments of the self and the identities they hold. Perhaps the most popular measurement technique involved the “Twenty Statements Test” (Kuhn and McPartland 1954), where identity salience (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980) and Psychological centrality (Rosenberg 1978) could be captured by seeing which identities were the first to be listed in response to the question “I am ____” and other self-reporting techniques (Burke & Reitzes 1981). These efforts were supplemented by other social psychologists who were eager to understand how the self incorporates empathy with close others into their own self-concept (Wright, Aron, & Tropp 2002; Crandall, O’Brien, & Eshleman 2002). Other social psychologists pointed out the reasons and processes by which the self often minimized differences with others who share important identities in order to meet collective needs (Abrams & Hogg 2001; Turner 1999; Cerulo 1997; Howard 2000; Simon & Kampmeier 2001). Likewise, other researchers have discovered that the self-concept is multi-dimensional, and have attempted to illustrate just how many unique factors could be identified within the self-concept of an individual (Deaux et al 1995; Brewer & Gardner 1996).

Others have studied the tendencies of the self to be influenced by external social and cultural factors which the self is located within (Kitayama et al 1997; Kashima et al 1995; Roberts & Helson 1997; House 1992). For example, researchers had shown that people from different cultures (Kitayama et al 1997; Kashima et al 1995; Gecas & Burke 1995), age groups (Demo 1992), and time periods (Zurcher 1977) have a tendency to

define themselves within a certain dimension over time, such as how people think of themselves either in individualistic or collectivist terms. For example, Kitayama and colleagues (1997) showed that people socialized in Japanese culture tend to view themselves primarily in collectivist terms, seeing themselves with regard to how they are related to important others. In contrast, Americans were more likely to view themselves in individualist terms, where self-definition is based mainly on how unique and different they see themselves compared to others. Similarly, Louis Zurcher (1977) also found that different generations within the US varied in terms of defining themselves in individualist or collectivist terms, again showing that self-construal is driven by proximal social forces and the social contexts of the time periods they live within. Newer research within a similar vein has indicated that modern western societies have transferred the defining of identity from the group to the individual, making the external pressures of community less consequential than one's inner resource; where identity has become a problem, a goal, or a project (Dunn 2008).

In more recent times, social theorists have expounded upon how current social conditions and technologies are likely to uniquely affect the experiences and reflexivity of people living in modern times (Giddens 1991; Thompson 1995; Baumeister 1986; Cerulo 1997; Callero 2003; Wood & Smith 2005). Communication devices such as the Internet are thought to help the self transcend the limitations of personal experience and understanding that are imposed on it from immediate physical environments (House 1992; Goffman 1959) and empower people into pursuing "identity projects" (Giddens 1991: 107) and to have expanded their understanding of the world through vicarious experience and expanded interaction patterns (Giddens 1991; Thompson 1995; Agger

2004). In modern times within capitalist democracies, people find themselves in a culture that permits them to pursue desired identities and pursue a “life trajectory” (Giddens 1991: 109) where people can attempt to define themselves within an extraordinarily wide array of possible identities. As stated by Dunn (2008: 160) “The modern self is a complex collection of identities that nevertheless organizes itself around a constantly developing narrative that exhibits varying degrees of integration and coherency.”

Further works that explore relationships between the self and modernity have incorporated materialism and identities constructed via consumption patterns and an ethos of personal selectivity as an unalienable right of individuals (Schwartz 2005; Slater 1997; Dunn 2008; Walker 2008). These authors have discussed how these conditions force the self to find balance between independence and interdependence from others in a struggle which is simultaneously liberating but creates anxiety, a basic condition of living in modern life (Giddens 1991; Hewitt 1989; Schwartz 2005).

However, by the end of the 20th century, some scholars were pointing out that modern (or perhaps post-modern) living conditions had made previous conceptions of the self-concept antiquated. The basic premise of these theorists is that the self lacks a core or an organization; that there are simply too many identities and complex social situations available today for the self to navigate its way through life in such a straightforward or predictable fashion. Some have suggested a more post-modern approach to the study of the self is now necessary, sometimes referred to as ‘self as narrative’, where people are more or less a jumbled collection of stories and ephemeral roles that may or may not overlap with each other and is unlikely to be organized into a cleanly defined hierarchy of importance or commitment (White 1992; Gergen 1991; Holstein & Gubrium 2000).

Similar to the Symbolic Interactionists, they believe research of the self should focus upon “discursive practices” (Holstein & Gubrium 2000: 90) in social situations and how these identities are constructed and integrated with one another. Ultimately, it is purported that this is a superior way to understand people rather than assessing an overall structure of the self, and does not attempt to uncover how constellations of identities within it are organized.

Instead of driving social psychologists away from further studying the self, however, many have been attempting to incorporate these opposing and even incompatible viewpoints regarding the self-concept towards a more coherent whole; a perspective which conceives of the self as being both flexible and yet relatively stable and measurable guides much of the approaches towards synthesis (Stryker & Serpe 1994; Sedikedes & Brewer 2001; Stryker & Burke 2000; Stets & Burke 2000; Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe 2001; Wright, Aron, & Tropp 2002). The fruits of this research have indicated that the self-concept consists of several distinct core components which exist simultaneously with each other and vary in salience at any given moment (Rosenberg 1978; Stryker 1980; Deaux et al 1995; Brewer & Gardner 1996), leading to the emergence of the “tripartite self” in the current literature (Sedikedes & Brewer 2001).

The tripartite perspective of the self-concept contains three overlapping dimensions which are distinctive and yet often overlap with each other. These dimensions are defined as the *individual self*, the *relational self*, and the *collective self*. The “individual self” pertains to the aspects of the self-concept that are unique and idiosyncratic to the individual. The “relational self” incorporates the important social roles (such as being a “father” or a “student”) and the identifiable relationships that the

self has with specific other people (for example, the friendships someone may have with people named “Bob” or “Mary”), and looks at how these relationships impact the person’s own self-definitions of who they are. The “collective self” focuses upon the social groups which a person belongs to, and how that person incorporates these group memberships and perspectives into their own (Sedikedes & Brewer 2001). These membership groups are often more abstract in nature, and might include, for example, such traits as your political identity, nationality, ethnicity, or other organizational affiliations.

Development of the tripartite self-concept synthesizes and incorporates much of the literature of the twentieth century within social psychology, giving researchers a more complex but realistic view of the self-concept. While other leading researchers had previously focused almost exclusively upon one specific dimension of the self-concept in their research (Rosenberg 1978; Stryker 1980), the tripartite self seeks to gain a fuller understanding of the self by looking at how all of these identity components simultaneously co-exist with each other within the self over a person’s life. Within the self, each identity can become more or less salient as situations and contexts drive different identities to the forefront (Stryker, Owens & White, 2000). The tripartite self-concept purports that, at any given moment, an individual’s identity is altered by situational factors which make some of their identities relevant to the immediate situation more salient than others. Supporters of the tripartite self-concept also view the self as something which is both stable and fluid, persistent over time and amenable to a variety of measurement techniques (Deaux et al 1995; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Oyserman & Packer 1996; Sedikedes & Brewer 2001).

However, all of these complexities and conditions need not discourage one from conducting research on how the self-concept and identities may be related to attitudes and behavior. While the self may have a great many number of identities contained within a multidimensional self-concept, there is reason to believe there are very specific identities and self-construal difference that relate to how people use the Internet to become informed or involved. Moreover, the tripartite self conceptualization is a synthesis of previously divergent findings and assumptions about the self. This rubric of understanding sees the self as both process and object, recognizing that the self's behavior can at times be situation driven while still maintaining some tendencies to act according to patterns of personal characteristics and shared social identities.

The tripartite self-concept sees all people containing within them all of their co-existing identities at all times in all places. These identities may take their roots within personal values, important interpersonal relationships, previous experiences, and important group memberships. Moreover, this framework lends itself to studying the self within social situations, as there is little emphasis placed on analyzing all of the inner workings of the self, but rather focusing on those identities which are the most important and salient within the situation the researcher is interested in understanding.

In other words, *one does not need to uncover all of the identities held within the self-concept*, nor reveal how each are related to the other. Likewise, this conception of self concedes that people have an immeasurable number of identities in a social world that is complex and ever-changing. Nevertheless, people can be understood within these situations as actors which have a semblance of long-term permanency and some predictability where there are personal tendencies that relate their self to their social

environment. Although situational factors, identity conflicts, and external pressures that influence identity salience can alter how a person behaves in a social situation, measuring the most relevant identities of the towards a specific field of interest is likely to yield results that state how a person is likely to act in a given situation, with all other things being equal.

For our purposes, the situation of interest is how the political identities of individuals are related to how they use the Internet. What is known from previous research is that the Internet is really not introducing new people into political participation; it is strengthening the resources of those who were already involved (Oates & Gibson 2006) and that political partisans seem to strengthen their political interest and involvement via the Internet (Jensen 2006; Bimber 2003). There also seem to be important personal demographic variables that influence how someone uses the Internet for political information, as these users tend to be younger, male, and better educated than the rest of the public (Bimber & Davis 2003; Davis 2005; Owen 2006). So even though the Internet is a unique environment, users behave in accordance with the findings of the main personality theories, where personality-specific characteristics can explain differential behavior of people on the Internet (Amichai-Hamburger 2007; Davis 2005).

However, there is still more to be uncovered. Bruce Bimber (2003) calls for more research on this topic, suggesting that many personal variables have yet to be discovered regarding political info seeking and engagement on the Internet. However, it seems plausible that the Internet is unlikely to lead to great political transformations, but will extend “politics as usual” to a new turf (Katz & Rice 2002; Oates & Gibson 2006)

appealing to some users and not appealing at all to those who lack strong or clearly defined political identities.

With respect to seeking political information online, Bruce Bimber (2003) speculates that the Internet is a place where information costs fall and sources multiply, creating a situation in which the information-rich get richer and the information-poor stay poor. In short, people will generally use the Internet as a supplement to political information rather than as a replacement; that those who follow political news in traditional sources also follow it online (Bimber & Davis 2003). For the most part, it is the same audience. Research from Klotz (2004) indicates that only 50 percent of Americans say they enjoy keeping up with the news, and increased availability is unlikely to alter interest in it. While none of these authors made an attempt to utilize social psychological research on measuring identities, their findings do suggest that one should expect a relationship between political identity and the amount of political information the person seeks online. Those who lack an interest in politics or have weak political identities are unlikely to use the Internet for political purposes. However, those who are interested and knowledgeable about politics seem to use the Internet to meet these interests.

In regards to political identities, it has been found previously that people rarely change their political affiliations once they decide they are Democrat or Republican. People have the notion that a political party is filled with "your kind of people" (Bishop 2008: 23). Additionally, other research has shown that attitude strength and the importance a person places upon politics serve as the most important determinants of the amount of political behavior (Skitka & Mullen 2002). Yet, there is still a question

regarding whether there is a strong linkage between seeking out political information and being actively engaged in politics. Some have found that being informed does not necessarily seem to indicate political activity, as the new informational environment has not previously been seen to change levels of political engagement in any substantial way (Bimber & Davis 2003). However, other researchers have indicated that online political involvement supplements high levels of offline political activity, indicating that the Internet is a place where the usual “gladiators” come to participate (Jensen 2006: 49). This seems to be supported by the research of other scholars, who show there is very little evidence for the notion that the existence of new communicative technologies makes political activists out of ordinary people (Davis 2005). It is far more likely that people who are politically active offline will use the Internet to localize and disseminate information and engage in political actions more often than others will. The Internet is a medium for political influencing public opinion and policy, not just a space for discussion (Margolis & Resnick 2000).

Nevertheless, it appears that political activity is not clearly related to higher levels of time spent online nor political browsing and discussion, as these have previously been found to be unassociated with levels of political activity (Katz & Rice 2002B). This implies that social scientists need a deeper understanding user motivations and identities to understand these linkages between online attention and offline activity. Although some of these works have related political identity to political internet usage, they have not considered the self-construal of individuals as well in considering how these tendencies to see oneself predominantly within individualistic or collectivist terms may motivate some people to become active, while leading others to be more passive spectators of

online politics, bypassing offline political activity despite defining themselves as interest in politics.

These differences in personal self-construal may indicate why some scholars such as Putnam (2000) find civic engagement to be harmed by the Internet, and others such as Wellman (1999; 2002) find the Internet to lead towards increased levels of civic engagement. *Perhaps the self-construal combines with important political social identities that motivate people to become knowledgeable and connected, or occasionally to become knowledgeable but disconnected, or for some others to even completely avoid politics altogether, regardless of how much time they spend online overall.* The next section will discuss how the self strives to meet important personal desires and needs online, and explains how identities can serve as important motivations in their online patterns of behavior.

Uses and Gratifications: The Self goes online

While one can think of identities as the understandings, social roles and narratives that make up the self-concept, identities can also be thought of as containing a motivational element, as they move people to actions in a predictable manner (Stryker 2000; Stryker 1980; McCall & Simmons 1978). The combination of motivations and personality determine online interactions, where different types of people will use the Internet in varying ways to meet personal needs they seek to satisfy online (Amichai-Hamburger 2007).

This chapter adopts the assumption that people use the internet to meet personal needs and goals that they develop primarily offline. Overall, The Internet helps people meet these needs by finding others who share mutual interests while providing the

freedom to choose the groups and social roles that suit them (Amichai-Hamburger 2007: 197). Additionally, the Internet permits the freedom to leave online groups with no negative social consequences when these needs are not being met.

Moreover, Internet users have certain predispositions and needs that motivate them to seek different programs and sources, often referred to as “Uses and Gratifications Theory” (Norris 2002: 60). This is a prominent theory in Mass Communications Research which purports that “individuals have needs and wants that can be satisfied through media consumption” (Traudt 2005: 200). Uses and gratifications theory sees media audiences as active recipients of messages, where “social and psychological elements mediate the persuasiveness of messages; stresses individual usage and choice” (Rubin 2002: 525-526). In short, uses and gratifications theory is rooted around five basic assumptions (Rubin 2002: 527-528) illustrated in the following:

1. People choose media content; their selection and use of media is goal-driven, purposive and motivated
2. People actively select and use communication devices to meet their needs or desires
3. Our predispositions, living environments, and interpersonal interactions shape what we expect in media communications; responses are filtered through our personalities, social categories and relationships
4. The media compete with other forms of communications and interactions for our attention; the ability of the media to gratify personal needs varies between different people
5. Our own initiative mediates the patterns and consequences of media use

While these are the basic premises of online communication, the theory recognizes that there will be occasions where uses and gratifications assumptions will be violated. For example, there are likely to be meaningful differences in personalities that moderate differential uses and exposure to differing stimuli, such as attention to news sources and the need for cognition, or personality traits such as masculinity or aggression leads to

increased desires to play violent video games (Rubin 2002). In some instances, the existence of certain individual characteristics may heighten or intensify the influence of messages, or may even provide a necessary condition for attention and influence to take place at all (Rubin 2002). As a consequence, the media rarely have direct effects on all users; instead, there are important differences in the selection and attention to messages which is problematic since people can differ in a virtually infinite number of ways (Rubin 2002: 507).

Uses and gratifications theory recognizes that personality, social context, motivation and availability all impact the possible influences of the media (Rubin 2002) but that personal motivations have a strong impact on what messages that we seek and attend to online. Perhaps most importantly, this theory indicates that Internet users are active participants in their online experiences that can either challenge or ignore what they see on their computer screens. The Internet does not make the user become one way as so many of the scholars discussing online community have insisted; rather, the user utilizes the Internet to meet their own interests and needs, virtually all of which were formed prior to their online usage. Furthermore, by measuring the most relevant identities and motivations regarding politics and combining these with how the individual sees his/her own general self-construal (or understanding), research should be able to indicate how various users approach the Internet in differing ways.

Hypotheses

Given the theoretical discussion regarding the self and the basic tenets of uses and gratifications theory, some predictions of how the online self is expected to pursue online politics begin to emerge. In this section, I specify six specific hypotheses.

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H1. Those that have strong political identities will be more likely than others to become politically active and on the Internet. --- This is consistent with Uses and Gratifications theory. People who have strong social identities rooted in political interests will meet those needs to become politically active by using the Internet more than those who do not.

H2. Those that have strong political identities will be more likely than others to seek political information on the Internet. --- This is also consistent with Uses and Gratifications theory. People who have strong social identities rooted in political interests will search the Internet for political information at higher rates than those who lack strong beliefs about politics.

H3. Those who are interested in politics will be more likely than others to become politically active and on the Internet. --- Consistent with Uses and Gratifications theory, people which are interested in politics will show higher levels of online political activity that other users will.

H4. Those who are interested in politics will be more likely than others to seek political information on the Internet. --- Also consistent with Uses and Gratifications theory, people which are interested in politics will show the highest amount of time seeking out information on the Internet.

H5. There will be a Positive relationship between Self-Constraint and an interest in politics. --- People who have a propensity to incorporate important others into their own self-concept will be more likely to take an interest in political issues. Those who see themselves as unique individuals may have less interest in pursuing collectivist needs via political movements.

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H6. There will be a Positive relationship between Self-Construal and holding strong political identities. --- Since collectivists may be more likely to take an interest in political issues, they are also more likely than individuals to develop stronger and more intense political beliefs than others.

Methods

Data used to test these hypotheses were collected using an online survey during February, 2009. This survey purposively sampled those individuals who were members of either a political or non-political facebook.com group. Approximately 30 separate facebook.com groups were contacted and each member was personally invited to take this survey by clicking on a link which took them directly to the website that hosted the survey. During this time period, 624 different respondents completed the survey. The results were recorded by a website provider named zapsurvey.com and were coded by the author upon the respondent's completion of the survey.

Variable Construction and Measurement

There will be six variables used in this chapter: online political activity levels, online political information seeking, having an interest in politics, the strength of political identity, independent self-construal, and collectivist self-construal. The variables "online political information seeking" and "online political activity online" will be used as dependent variable, and regressed against all of the other variables mentioned above in three separate models. The first model will contain only two key specific identities (political interest and strength of political identity), a second model that includes independent and collective self-construal, and a third model which includes some interaction variables. The results from the second models will indicate whether a person's

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self-construal has any direct effect upon political activity online and political information seeking online, while the third will indicate if these independent variables have meaningful interactive effects on the dependent variables.

Additionally, regressions will be performed to predict whether an interest in politics or the strength of a person's political identities can be predicted by their self-construal. Analysis in this chapter seeks to find out if self-construal has more of a direct or indirect effect on political participation levels on the Internet, and whether collectivists or individualists are more likely to be political participants online. Before testing the six hypotheses in this chapter, a brief discussion of how each of these variables was measured will be conducted.

Measuring Self-Construal

It should be noted that my factor analysis of the data suggests that the Singelis (1994) self-construal scale was two-dimensional. I used eight questions from this scale, and found that two significant dimensions emerge by the analysis of the initial Eigenvalues using direct oblimin rotation in table 11. The rotated component matrix (see table 12) indicated that five of these eight questions loaded onto a single factor (component 1), while others loaded onto the other component. Looking closer at these dimensions indicated that component one reflects the respondent's degree of collectivist sentiments, while the other dimension points to how much the user sees him/herself in unique and idiosyncratic ways. After standardizing all of these eight observed indicators, I created two separate indices for self-construal: a five-item "collectivist self-construal" index, and a three-item "individualist self-construal" index.

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Table 11: Factor Analysis of Self-Construal Scale
Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	1.986	24.823	24.823	1.986	24.823	24.823	1.986
2	1.719	21.483	46.306	1.719	21.483	46.306	1.719
3	.985	12.314	58.619				
4	.879	10.982	69.602				
5	.734	9.171	78.773				
6	.679	8.490	87.263				
7	.600	7.496	94.759				
8	.419	5.241	100.000				

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table 12: Component Loadings
Matrix for Self Construal

	Component	
	1	2
Likes being Singled Out	-.041	.594
Think of Self as Unique	.075	.848
Like to feel Different	-.016	.796
Will Stay in Group when disagree	.596	-.079
Happiness Depends on Others	.695	.005
I respect Group Decisions	.563	-.022
Respect Modest People	.559	.080
Self-Image Depends on how Friends See Me	.715	.015

The individual items were simply added together and were also unweighted in the calculation of these indexes. Both will be used measures will be used to regress against

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the relevant dependent variables in this chapter: political activity online and political information seeking online.

Measuring Strength of Political Identity

This variable was constructed in two parts. First, six separate five-point Likert-scale questions were asked to indicate where the respondent stands on a number of well-discussed and prominent political issues (Tax Levels on the Wealthy, Size of Government, Government Regulation, Social Welfare Spending, Gay Marriage, and Separation of Church and State) to determine the direction and strength of political identity by adding all of these scores together (where the maximum “conservative” score was +12 and maximum “liberal” score would be -12). However, since strength of political identity was our only concern here, this variable used the absolute values of each respondent: thus, all negative integers were transformed to positive numbers, so that -12 would now be +12, -11 to +11, etc...giving this variable a range of 0 (no political affiliation) to +12 (strong political affiliation to a political party).

Table 13: Factor Analysis Results for Strength of Political Identity
Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.402	56.706	56.706	3.402	56.706	56.706
2	.913	15.216	71.922			
3	.562	9.374	81.296			
4	.407	6.778	88.073			
5	.405	6.752	94.825			
6	.310	5.175	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

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In doing so, the respondents are *not* identified by their conservative or liberal tendencies, but instead by the degree of intensity they hold these values. In a sense, this variable separates the politically minded from the apolitical. Factor analysis indicated that this measure is one-dimensional, as can be seen from the data in tables 13 and 14.

Table 14: Component Loadings Matrix for Strength of Political Identity

	Component
	1
Rich Taxed Too High	.817
Gov too big	.799
No More Separation Church & State	.485
Gay Should be able to Marry	.741
Gov should reduce Poverty	.798
Too much Gov Regulation	.822

Measuring Political Interest Levels

This variable was measured using two separate five-point Likert scale questions to indicate the amount of interest and commitment the respondent had to their political beliefs. The questions asks the respondent if they feel certain that their political views are correct, and asks him/her how interested they are in following political issues. Responses ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, with an option for having no opinion or not sure.

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These questions had a correlation of .581, which was found to be significant at a 99 percent confidence interval. This can be seen in table 15. Overall, the scoring of this variable ranged between -4 (not being interested in politics) to +4 (being highly interested in politics).

Table 15: Correlated Measures for the Variable Political Interest

Correlations

		Political Certainty in my Beliefs	Politically Interested
Political Certainty in my Beliefs	Pearson Correlation	1	.581**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	624	624
Politically Interested	Pearson Correlation	.581**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	624	624

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Measuring Political Activity Online

This index asked the respondent five Yes/No questions to indicate the political actions they have taken online. These actions included the following items: signing an online petition, using the internet to meet for offline political action, donating money, volunteering time, or trying to persuade others to vote for their candidate in online discussion. Data that indicates the loading and Eigenvalues for these analyses can be seen in tables 16 and 17, respectively.

Each “Yes” to the relevant survey question (listed in appendix b at the end of this dissertation) was scored as 1 point, each “No” scored as 0, giving the index a range of scores from 0 to 5. Factor analysis (see table 16) indicated that this measure is one-dimensional.

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Tax	Loan	Policy
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4	5	6
7	8	9
10	11	12
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22	23	24
25	26	27
28	29	30
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34	35	36
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40	41	42
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52	53	54
55	56	57
58	59	60
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64	65	66
67	68	69
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322	323	324
325	326	327
328	329	330
331	332	333
334	335	336
337	338	339
340	341	342
343	344	345
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349	350	351
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361	362	363
364	365	366
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Table 16: Factor Analysis Results for Political Activity Online

Total Variance Explained						
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.220	44.403	44.403	2.220	44.403	44.403
2	.855	17.098	61.502			
3	.730	14.600	76.101			
4	.650	12.995	89.096			
5	.545	10.904	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table 17: Component Loadings Matrix for Political Activity Online

	Component
	1
Signed Online Petition	.850
Lead to Offline Action	.703
Donated Money Online	.731
Persuade Others Online	.506
Volunteered Time via Online Action	.717

Measuring Online Political Information Seeking

This variable asked the respondent to indicate if he/she had sought political information from any of four possible sources online (message boards, emails, blogs, or a popular online news source, such as cnn.com, for example). Each “Yes” response was scored as 1 point, and all “No” responses were scored as 0. Those who found news online from each source were scored as a 4 (maximum) and those who sought political news from none of those sources were scored as a 0. Factor analysis indicated that this measure is one-dimensional, which can be seen in tables 18 and 19.

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Table 18: Factor Analysis Results for Political Information Seeking

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.921	48.029	48.029	1.921	48.029	48.029
2	.872	21.811	69.841			
3	.758	18.951	88.792			
4	.448	11.208	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table 19: Component Loadings Matrix for Political Information Seeking

	Component
	1
Looks for Online News	.530
Reads Political Blogs	.809
Receives Email from Candidate	.624
Reads Political Message Board	.773

Data Analysis and Results

Hypothesis 1: *Those which have strong political identities will be significantly more likely than others to become politically active and on the Internet. --- And Hypothesis 3 --- Those who are interested in politics will be significantly more likely than others to become politically active and on the Internet.*

Table 20 is used to predict the dependent variable “Political Action Online” using three models. The first model uses only two independent variables: interest in politics, and the strength of their political identity. While these two variables have a moderately strong correlation with each other (Standardized Beta = .356, P = .000), this correlation indicates that they are quite distinct. The second model seeks to find if there are any direct relationships between collectivist self-construal and individualist self-construal to

the dependent variable, Political Action Online. Meanwhile, the third model tests the interactions of all the predictor variables to see if any of these are significant and meaningful.

Table 20: Regression Results for Predicting Political Activity Online
Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.625	.211		2.970	.003
	Strength of Political Identity	.132	.019	.262	6.819	.000
	Interested in Politics?	.954	.210	.175	4.546	.000
2	(Constant)	.687	.209		3.286	.001
	Strength of Political Identity	.135	.019	.268	7.038	.000
	Interested in Politics?	.868	.209	.159	4.155	.000
	Collectivist Self-Construal Score	-.017	.019	-.033	-.888	.375
	Individualist Self-Construal Score	.103	.027	.144	3.827	.000
3	(Constant)	.868	.228		3.815	.000
	Strength of Political Identity	.094	.025	.188	3.822	.000
	Interested in Politics?	.737	.221	.135	3.341	.001
	Collectivist Self-Construal Score	.004	.038	.008	.114	.909
	Individualist Self-Construal Score	.058	.056	.081	1.046	.296
	Interact Pol Int & Pol Strong	.016	.006	.132	2.581	.010
	Interact Coll SC & Pol Strong	.000	.006	-.007	-.087	.930
	Interact Ind SC & Pol Strong	.005	.009	.051	.629	.530
	Interact Ind SC & Pol Interest	.007	.017	.020	.385	.700
	Interact Coll SC & Pol Interest	-.011	.011	-.052	-.986	.325

Dependent Variable: Political Action Levels Online

What was found in the first model is that both Strength of Political Identity (Standardized Beta = .262, $P < .000$), and Interest in Politics (.175, $P < .000$) have positive and significant relationships in predicting Online Political Action Levels. This data indicates that *we can reject the null of hypotheses 1 and 3*, and conclude that *those users*

who are highly interested in politics and have strong political identities engage in higher levels on online political activity than do other users.

In model 2, we can see that the coefficient of Collectivist Self-Construal was found to be both negative and not significant, indicating that collectivist self-construal does not have a direct effect upon online political action levels. Interestingly, Individualist Self-Construal was found to have a positive and direct effect with online political activity levels (Standardized Beta = .144, $P < .000$). On the surface, it would seem that collectivists may be more likely to be interested in politics and social movements. However, the data here suggests that individualists more likely to turn to their computers to feel connected to politics. Perhaps this is reflective of Putnam's (2000) claim that the Internet is largely a vehicle of individual entertainment or usage: while collectivists who are interested in politics may want to participate in physical proximity of others, individualists wish to connect in more distant terms, being able to plug in and out of politics on their own personal schedules and terms. Although this is not what was predicted and is beyond the scope of this chapter, this finding may serve as an interesting topic for future research.

Model three of this regression shows us that self-construal, whether it is strongly individualist or collectivist in nature, has no significant interactions with Political Interest or Strength of Political Identity. There does not seem to be any special combination between self-construal with Political Interest or Strength of Political Identity that led to an additional amount of online political activity. The only interaction term which was significant and positive ($P = .01$) was between political interest levels and strength of political activity. It appears that the combination of having strong political attitudes and

being interested in politics lead to significantly higher levels of online political activity levels than other Internet users. As can be seen in table 21 below, including self-construal proved to be useful in predicting online political activity (Incremental F = 7.028, P = .001), while the interactions in model three were not useful (Incremental F = .896, P = .483). Overall, it appears that model two was the best predictor of online political activity, suggesting that *self-concept has some direct effect upon this dependent variable*.

Table 21: Which Model Best Predicts Political Activity Online?

<u>Model</u>	<u>Adjusted R-Square</u>	<u>Incremental F-Test</u>
One	.113	40.817**
Two	.132	7.028**
Three	.137	.896

** F-Value is significant at the 0.01 level.

Hypothesis 2: Those which have strong political identities will be significantly more likely than others to seek political information on the Internet. ---And Hypothesis 4 ---- Those who are interested in politics will be significantly more likely than others to seek political information on the Internet.

Table 22 turns our attention to the dependent variable “political information seeking on the Internet” while using the same four independent variables to predict it: Independent Self-Construal, Collectivist Self-Construal, Interest in Politics, and Strength of Political Identity. Similar to our previous analysis, three separate models are used. The first model predicts political information seeking using only two independent variables: interest in politics, and the strength of their political identity. The second model seeks to find if there are any direct relationships between collectivist self-construal and individualist self-construal with the dependent variable. Meanwhile, the third model tests the interactions of all the predictor variables to see if any of these have significant and meaningful impact on political information seeking.

Using the data from Table 22, we can see from the standardized beta coefficients of model one that the independent variables “Strength of Political Identity” (Beta = .131, P = .001) and “Interest in Politics” (Beta = .262, P < .000) have positive and significant effects with regards to how much political information one seeks online, as predicted in our hypotheses. The data here indicates that *we can reject the null of hypotheses 2 and 4, and conclude that those who are interested in politics and have strong political identities will seek out more political information online than do other people*

Table 22: Regression Results for Predicting Online Political Information Seeking Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.674	.095		17.597	.000
	Strength of Political Identity	.049	.015	.131	3.232	.001
	Political Interest	.186	.029	.262	6.470	.000
2	(Constant)	1.673	.095		17.588	.000
	Strength of Political Identity	.050	.015	.132	3.258	.001
	Political Interest	.185	.029	.260	6.374	.000
	Collective Self Construal	.016	.015	.042	1.097	.273
	Individualist Self Construal	.018	.020	.034	.892	.373
3	(Constant)	1.558	.113		13.784	.000
	Strength of Political Identity	.078	.021	.206	3.744	.000
	Political Interest	.291	.056	.410	5.243	.000
	Collective Self Construal	.029	.029	.076	1.021	.308
	Individualist Self Construal	-.017	.042	-.032	-.410	.682
	Inter SC Coll & Pol Strong	-.002	.005	-.026	-.334	.738
	Inter SC Ind & Pol Strong	.010	.007	.121	1.467	.143
	Inter SC Ind & Pol Interest	-.015	.013	-.065	-1.203	.229
	Inter SC Coll & Pol Interest	.000	.009	-.002	-.029	.977
	Inter Pol Int & Pol Strong	-.019	.009	-.205	-2.168	.031

Dependent Variable: Seeking out political information on the internet

Model 2 seeks to discover if there are any direct relationships between Self-Construal and Political Information seeking online. However, the coefficients for

Individualist and Collectivist Self-Construal were not found to be significant. The data shows that Individualist Self-Construal Internet users did not seek out more political information online than did others. We can see from the data in this chapter that the driving direct influences on differential usage regarding online politics is an interest in politics and a strong affiliation to a political party rather than the overall self-construal of the Internet user.

Model three shows that Self-Construal does not have any meaningful interactions with Political Interest and Strength of political identity. The only significant interaction term in model three was between Political Interest and Strength of Political Identity, which strangely enough was a negative (Beta = $-.205$, $P = .031$). This may suggest that only one of these qualities is necessary to seek out information on the Internet, where there are no additive effects between these two personal aspects that cause a person to seek out additional political information online.

Overall, table 23 indicates that *Self-Construal is not an important predictor of online political information seeking, nor is any of the interactions meaningful*. Model one is the best predictor of online political action (Incremental $F = 38.481$, $P < .000$). Table 13 shows that while the political identities and motivations of the user are important factors in information seeking, the overall self-construal is not. Model two provided no improvement to the prediction of the dependent variable (Incremental $F = 1.002$, $P = .368$), nor did model three (Incremental $F = 1.458$, $P = .202$).

Table 23: Which Model Best Predicts Online Political Information Seeking?

Model	Adjusted R-Square	Incremental F-Test
One	.107	38.481**
Two	.107	1.002
Three	.111	1.458

** F-Value is significant at the 0.01 level.

Hypothesis 5: There will be a Significantly Positive relationship between Self-Construal and an interest in politics. — And Hypothesis 6 — There will be a Significantly Positive relationship between Self-Construal and holding strong political identities.

The next analysis in this chapter wants to understand if Self-Construal is a predictor of an Interest in Politics and Strength of Political Identity. If so, it might have direct effects on Political Activity Online and Online Political Information Seeking. Table 24 shows that Political Interest levels has no significant relationship to Collective Self-Construal (Beta = -.05, P = .213) but does have a very weak yet positive and significant relationship to Individualist Self-Construal (Beta = .091, P = .023). These findings suggest that *we can, at least partially, reject the null of hypothesis 5*, and conclude that in this population those who have an individualist self-construal are slightly more likely than others to become interested in politics.

Table 24: Regression Results: Self-Construal and Political Interest

Coefficients					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.904	.012		76.816	.000
Collectivist Self-Construal Score	-.005	.004	-.050	-1.246	.213
Individualist Self-Construal Score	.012	.005	.091	2.273	.023

Dependent Variable: Interested in Politics?

R-Square = .011; R-Square Adjusted = .008; F = 3.369*

However, the results in table 25 show that there is no relationship between Self-Construal and the Strength of Political Identity. Both the Individualist (Beta = -.019, P = .638) and Collectivist (Beta = .001, P = .976) self-construal have near zero and non-significant relationship to the Strength of Political Identity. These findings show that *we*

cannot reject the null of hypothesis 6, indicating there are no direct relationships between Self-Construal and Strength of Political Identity.

Table 25: Regression Results: Self-Construal and Strength of Political Identity

Coefficients					
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
1	(Constant)	5.822	.129		.000
	Collectivist Self Construal Score	.001	.041	.001	.976
	Individualist Self Construal Score	-.027	.057	-.019	.638

Dependent Variable: Strength of Political Identity

R- Square = .000, Adjusted R-Square = .000, F = .112

Other Relevant Findings Coming from the Data Analysis

The correlation matrix in table 26 yields some interesting findings. We can see that the correlation between the two dependent variables (seeking out political information and online political activity) is very large and positive ($r = .576$, $p < .000$) indicating that the politically active are also seeking out political news online. It seems that those who are active in online politics and seeking news are many of the same people, or the ‘political junkies’ that Margolis and Resnick (2000) pointed out dominate online politics. Interestingly, correlation analysis shows that seeking out political information have a positive correlation with time spent online ($r = .169$, $p < .000$) and also correlates with the direction of political identity (where positive scores indicate conservative scores, negative scores indicate liberal scores), showing that Liberals spent more time seeking out political information in this sample ($r = -.079$, $p = .048$), although this effect is apparently very weak.

Table 26: Correlation Matrix of Important Chapter 3 Variables

Correlations

		Collectivist Self Construal Score	Individualist Self Construal Score	Seek out political info on internet	Political Activity Online	Strength Political Identity	Political Interest	Political Identity	Time Online
Collectivist Self Construal	Pearson Correlation	1	-.004	.030	-.041	.001	-.044	.094*	-.015
	Sig. (2- tailed)		.922	.453	.302	.975	.270	.019	.707
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624
Individualist Self Construal	Pearson Correlation	-.004	1	.057	.153**	-.019	.098*	-.041	.055
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.922		.155	.000	.637	.014	.301	.167
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624
Seek out political info on internet	Pearson Correlation	.030	.057	1	.576**	.224**	.309**	-.079*	.169*
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.453	.155		.000	.000	.000	.048	.000
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624
Political Activity Online	Pearson Correlation	-.041	.153**	.576**	1	.295**	.308**	-.226**	.215**
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.302	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624
Strength of Political Identity	Pearson Correlation	.001	-.019	.224**	.295**	1	.356**	-.290**	.026
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.975	.637	.000	.000		.000	.000	.517
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624
Political Interest	Pearson Correlation	-.044	.098*	.309**	.308**	.356**	1	.042	.026
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.270	.014	.000	.000	.000		.291	.509
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624
Direction of Political Identity	Pearson Correlation	.094*	-.041	-.079*	-.226**	-.290**	.042	1	-.097*
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.019	.301	.048	.000	.000	.291		.016
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624
Time Online	Pearson Correlation	-.015	.055	.169*	.215**	.026	.026	-.097*	1
	Sig. (2- tailed)	.707	.167	.000	.000	.517	.509	.016	
	N	624	624	624	624	624	624	624	624

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There were similar findings regarding political action online, where the politically active were found to be online more than others ($r = .215$, $p < .000$) and more liberal ($r = -.226$, $p < .000$). These correlations might suggest that political liberals in the US are turning to the Internet to find connection and take action more so than are conservatives, seeking out in cyberspace rather than (or perhaps as a complement to) face-to-face interactions.

Discussion and Conclusions

These results strongly suggest that the main variables among those that we have examined that drives political activity online is an interest in politics and a strong identity with a political party, which supports hypotheses 1 and 3. People interested in politics and that have a strong sense of connection to a specific party ideology used the Internet to pursue and promote their political values online. They used their computers to make connections and become involved, while those who were not political did so at significantly lower levels. The significance of independent self-construal in model one may also suggest that those who are strongly individualist may spend more time online than others. Perhaps these people look to the Internet to connect politically from a distance rather than to be in close physical proximity to other people who share their views and wish to act.

Overall, there seems to be a linkage between offline identities and online behaviors. The data shows that the people who conducted political actions online were those who had long been interested in politics and had a strong sense of connection to a political party, consistent what Margolis and Resnick (2000) have found. The Internet is a new battleground for the same political gladiators that also do battle against each other

offline. This is certainly consistent with “Uses and Gratifications Theory” discussed earlier. People bring important identities with them to the Internet, and these identities channel where the user spends their time and attention. Given the many possible items to focus attention on the Internet, people who are interested in politics seek to satisfy their interests and motivations such as political activism and news seeking. Internet usage is not making a person more or less political by itself. Instead, the identities of the computer user which determines whether a person seeks out information online or not.

Although this is beyond the scope of this chapter, future analysis may show that online political people spend disproportionately more time online. The Internet is a medium which allows the politically minded to seek collaboration and form movements among like-minded individuals, activities which take a great deal of time and effort. Future research may better indicate whether or not ‘political junkies’ that spend more time on the Internet than other people do would reverse some of the declines in social capital that Putnam (2000) has decried previously. In other words, is the time being spent online forming tangible and valuable social capital and political movements, or is much of this investment in personal time and energy proving to be unfruitful? Research questions that shift from the motivations of the user to the efficacy of these online efforts could prove to be very useful.

However, it is still unclear to how network ties encourage or discourage activism (Snow & McAdam 2000: 63). Others have pointed out that structural and political inequalities in combinations with the constraints within the political system are likely to dampen the effects of extensive political change stemming from Internet communications (Margolis & Resnick 2000). There is a danger to assume that increased grassroots

political activism and community building can fully be able to transcend offline realities. Longitudinal and qualitative research conducted among politically active Internet users could prove to be very informative as well.

Finally, other research could better identify which other important identities are related to differential rates of online political activity and information seeking. Surely, there are many more identities that serve as political motivations and make collectivist social identities salient when a person sits down at their computer. Likewise, the everyday offline living situations and relations to other institutions (such as the potentially competing demands of work and family, and the influence of friends) are likely to impact online behaviors, and these factors have not been addressed here. Using a variety of methodological approaches, future research could clarify and illustrate these important relationships to online politics.

CHAPTER 4
What Makes Someone a Cyber Balkan? Finding the Linkages Between Social Psychology and Self-Selectivity in US Politics Online.

Abstract

This chapter uses survey data collected in the winter of 2009 to uncover the possible linkages between community selectivity, online selective exposure patterns, and the personal characteristics of the computer user. The purpose is to uncover which personal attitudes, values, living environments and motivations can likely lead a person to become a cyber Balkan. Several potential independent variables will be discussed and explored while also indicating what these results mean regarding the quality of political discourse in US politics today.

Introduction

Concerns have grown about the possibility of the Internet creating a more politically divisive and polarized nation, a claim that has been made by political researchers such as Stanley Greenberg (2004). From such a vantage point, the Internet is seen as having the potential to divide users by areas of interest, creating polarization via selective attention (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson 1997; Sunstein 2007; Bishop 2008).

Other critics have pointed out that the Internet by its very nature is antithetical to political action because time spent online is primarily a solitary activity devoid of meaningful contact or action with others (Putnam 2000). In this view, the Internet acts as a substitute for time that could have been spent productively offline and with other people: Hence according to this view, the more time someone spends online, the less time they spend offline in activity with others. Consequently, increased online activity will

result in a more politically ignorant and uninvolved user that will be less likely to take offline political action (Nie & Erbring 2005; Putnam 2000).

However, earlier chapters in this dissertation have pointed out that the effect of the Internet on individuals and communities may not be uniform. Some will challenge the viewpoints of others through rigorous debate, others will drop out of political discussion entirely, and there will be those who look to surround themselves with like-minded others. I have predicted that the self-concepts and identities of the user determine whether one expands or narrows their own horizons. In particular, those who narrow their horizons will receive focus here in chapter four.

This chapter aims to uncover *why* someone acts as a cyber Balkan online and attempt to understand *what motives of the self are being met* in behaving this way? Additionally, this chapter seeks to *uncover the relevant connections between offline living environments and online balkanization*. Does being surrounded by like-minded others offline translate into a desire for the same online? Also, *which beliefs and values* are contributing to the desire to self-select their communities and patterns of online interaction?

Overall, this chapter attempts to understand the personal and social factors which cause one to act as a “Cyber Balkan” (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson 1997). A cyber Balkan is defined as a person that (1) tends to define their “community” as containing those who share who regardless of physical proximity share one’s own values, (2) Prefer to be surrounded by similar others online, and (3) selectively expose themselves to websites where they expect others to confirm their own pre-existing viewpoints. In this sense, a cyber Balkan exhibits similar offline and online behaviors, and their

values/attitudes drive these behaviors. Additionally, cyber Balkans have motives, such as a desire to maintain a sense of certainty in their beliefs, a tendency towards dogmatism, and to express anger towards political opposition. All of these points will be explored later in this chapter. In short, Cyber Balkanization can be thought of as patterns of actions and self-selection. I assume that these actions are motivated by a person's attitudes regarding different topics and how they deal with disagreements.

Ultimately, these divisive qualities spread both online and offline, mutually reinforcing one another. Online relationships are likely to be brought into one's everyday offline life and vice-versa, indicating overlap between the online and offline self (McKenna 2007; Kolko 2003). The Internet mirrors everyday life. What people do online is pretty much what they do offline (Uslaner 2004; Katz & Rice 2002; Margolis & Resnick 2000). As a result, it is feared that public discourse in the US will be reduced to a place where "We don't know, can't understand and can barely conceive of 'those people' who live just a few miles away" (Bishop 2008) if their views are substantially different than our own. In addition, these homogenous groups tend to march towards extremes (Sunstein 2009; Manjoo 2008; Bishop 2008; Sunstein 2007), which is a central point of concern that will be explored throughout this chapter.

Like-Minded Selected Communities and Attitude Polarization

As noted earlier, some scholars feel that online communities are little more than self-selected pseudo-communities where people share a common identity (Galston 2004; Putnam 2000; Norris 2004). The Internet is believed to likely develop more common beliefs-values groups based on non-affective ties; where people can join and quit at the click of a button with no feelings of obligation (Levine 2004). The Internet is seen as a

place of consumer choice meets lifestyle: where individuals can transform their abstract world-views into virtual worlds. Specialized communities can be constructed to reflect any particular philosophical, identities or ideological perspective to reinforce their own pre-existing worldviews within a narrow range of dialogue and challenge (Vacker 2000). Increasingly, Americans are seen to be segregating themselves into their own political worlds, blocking out discordant voices and surrounding themselves with reassuring news and views (Bishop 2008; Sunstein 2007)

In addition, people lack any accountability or responsibility within them, and can leave whenever they see fit (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 118) which detracts from “meaningful” and “real” communities offline. These Choice (self-selected) communities are distinguished by the following characteristics: low barriers to exit, low barriers to entry, and interpersonal interactions shaped by mutual adjustment (Galston 2004). Moreover, web groups are often driven purely on interest-based self-selection, where the basic norm for online group membership criterion centers on having a similarity in interests and viewpoints (Weinberger 2005). In other words, online political groups are typically places for support and agreement, which leads to patterns of reinforcement and extreme attitude formation (Sunstein 2009). Importantly, like-minded online groups are quicker than other groups to stop talking to members with contrary opinions and were more willing to exclude deviance and foster intolerance (Bishop 2008; Sunstein 2009).

Also, the ready availability of exit makes online communities more homogenous, and the ability to easily ignore does not create incentives for accommodation (Galston 2004; Putnam 2000). The Internet is seen to generally excel at coordinating self-selected organizing and mobility. As Robert Putnam (2000: 172) states, “Social networks based

on computer-mediated communication can be organized by shared interests rather than by shared space.” Overall, self-selected communities (both online and offline) intensify fragmentation and breeds attitude polarization among its members (Galston 2005; Sunstein 2007; Wachbroit 2004; Galston 2004; Sunstein 2009). People grow more extreme within homogenous groups as a way to conform; people hope to gain reward/status from the group for being even more extreme than the group average, propelling each other to move the whole group further away from neutrality (Bishop 2008; Sunstein 2009; Galston 2005).

What might be contributing to this process? Some have suggested that selective community and clustering into like-minded communities is an unconscious process (Bishop 2008). It has been suggested that Balkanizing may be a symptom of anomie; the sense of emptiness and disorientation brought about by industrial modern life. This sense of disconnection leads people to pursue their own community, and ultimately leads to a nation that is segmented by regions (Bishop 2008) both online and offline. It is suggested that selective community “clustering” is “a general reaction to a society, a country, and a world that were largely beyond an individual's understanding or control” (Bishop 2008: 255), suggesting that the rise of these communities are driven by important needs of the self living in complex modern-day societies.

While Bishop (2008) largely deals with the “unplanned polarization” stemming from the growth of like-minded communities, Cass Sunstein (2009: 34) claims that much of the polarization is “planned”, as people actively attempt to create their own like-minded communities and living spaces. This type of polarization is highly relevant to the study of online politics, as the Internet in a place which “allows us to become ever more

ourselves” (Katz & Rice 2002: 13). Sitting in front of a computer monitor where there are virtually endless possibilities to invest one’s time and attention enables the user to exert free choice in all that he/she attends to. The Internet enables us to confine our communication to people who share precisely our interests and values (Putnam 2000).

However, Americans have been heterogeneously sorting themselves into political parties the same way they had sorted themselves into like-minded communities, churches, and organizations since the mid-1970's (Bartels 2000; Putnam 2000). This is an important point because it indicates that *personal motivations drive selectivity and the polarization stemming from it*, and not necessarily the presence of the Internet itself. One should not suggest that rising polarization or selective communities are caused by people spending too much time online, or that the Internet prevents a reversing of this pattern.

Nevertheless, problems stemming from the growth and expansion of self-selecting can be seen in increased levels of political polarization in the US (Bishop 2008). In the realm of current day US politics, "Americans are increasingly living in communities and neighborhoods whose residents share their values and they are increasingly voting for candidates who reflect those values" (Abramowitz , Alexander & Gunning 2006: 88). It is a bottom-up process; driven by self-selection into like-minded communities both physically and socially (Oppenheimer 2005; Bishop 2008).

But to better understand Cyber Balkanization, focus needs to be shifted towards the personal identities and motivations of the user. The motives and self-concept that each user brings with him/her to the keyboard are different. Because of this, it is expected that cyber Balkanizing is prominent only among some specific types of Internet users. The rest of this chapter explores which characteristics are behind these patterns of

Internet usage. It will also examine and outline possible theoretical explanations which underpin selectivity and polarization online.

SIDE Theory and Online Interaction

Perhaps the most prominent theory explaining attitude extremism online is what is referred to as “Social Identity and De-Individuation (SIDE) Theory (Spears & Lea 1992). The roots of SIDE theory are based in previous social psychological works on social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel 1981). Additionally, a “social identity” is defined as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981: 225). In general, SIDE theory purports that the processes of depersonalization and de-individuation which occur offline when a person is immersed within a groups that shares the same social identity happen online as well (Spears, Lea, & Postmes 2007).

However, SIDE theory also posits that these effects can be particularly strong in online communication. Social identities can become even more powerful and consequential in online communication (Spears, Lea, & Postmes 2007) where a person is not in the presence of others, particularly those who are different from themselves. The personal physical isolation combined with the co-presence of similar others increase the salience of their group membership online while also deepening the effects of self-categorization and depersonalization of out-group members (Spears, Lea, & Postmes 2007). Moreover, online political groups are very likely to make group identities highly salient as in-group members are continually present while out-group members are absent, influencing the actions and thought processes of all of those involved within these

interactions (Sassenberg & Jonas 2007).

These elements of social isolation are crucial in understanding how groups produce extreme attitudes, as polarization is most likely to occur where group membership is made salient (Sunstein 2009). Like-minded people who engage in discussion with one another are more likely to adopt more extreme rather than more moderate variants of the group's shared beliefs (Galston 2005). These effects are particularly strong in online conversations where there is a lacking presence of out-group members, but reduced where we can see other people visually via a media-device (Walther, Gay, & Hancock 2005). In other words, being alone and surrounded by like-minded others where we are fairly anonymous and unaccountable for what they say or do produces attitude extremity.

There is a concern that on the Internet, many people are mostly hearing more and louder echoes of their own voices; which is of questionable value from a democratic standpoint (Sunstein 2007). Many Internet groups, especially those organized around support for political candidates or policies, are unified by the sense of personal camaraderie or shared values among its members. This drives people to a strong tendency towards group polarization (Sunstein 2009). If people on the Internet are deliberating mostly with like-minded others, they will be shifted to more extreme points. The most important reason for group polarization online involves the exchange of new information both through conversation and the selectivity of the news sources which are consumed by the user (Sunstein 2009). As Cass Sunstein (2007: 71) points out “When people deliberate together, they give disproportionate weight to ‘common knowledge’ and look to other in-group members as a reference point for ‘social comparison.’”

Likewise, the nature of the Internet makes it easy to find like-minded individuals to interact with and encourage people to strengthen their own pre-existing judgments (Sunstein 2007; Manjoo 2008; Sunstein 2009; Bishop 2008). Additionally, the ability of moderates to leave an online group at any time can fuel extremism (Sunstein 2009), where the ever-increasing levels of like-minded interaction can breed extreme attitudes and overconfidence while fueling political division (Sunstein 2007). Although new communicative technologies such as the Internet hypothetically permits the development and exploration of newly constructed 'identity-projects' (Giddens 1991), it is more often a space where people exploit their own current social identities and personality traits that were primarily formed offline in their everyday lives (Spears, Lea, & Postmes 2007; Margolis & Resnick 2000; Galston 2005; Putnam 2000; Norris 2004; Katz & Rice 2002). Since the Internet is a medium which enables the user to engage in a virtually endless array of choices of where to look and who to speak with, collectivist-oriented social identities thrive on the Internet. In regards to online politics, group belonging and interaction lead to depersonalization and de-individuation processes similar to but perhaps even stronger than in offline interactions (Spears, Lea, & Postmes 2007).

These perspectives are consistent with the major tenets of structural symbolic interaction and social psychological theories of the self. People typically hold numerous identities which compete for expression (Stryker 2000), and are motivated to seek out opportunities to express the identities which are the most important to their self-concept (Stryker 1980; McCall & Simmons 1978). Persons will seek out opportunities to act out the roles underlying salient identities, and those with strong identities will move people to select and engage in situations that evoke these identities (Stryker 2000). Furthermore,

Viktor Gecas (2000) has shown that value-based identities (such as political values) give meaning, purpose, and direction to individuals. They serve as a powerful motivational force for the self. Values serve as standards by which people live their lives; they “also tend to be both relatively enduring and trans-situational, tend to be less situational bounded” (Gecas 2000: 95) making them highly influential of a person’s behaviors.

As mentioned already, personal choice is a critical component to cyber balkanization. The ethos of the Internet is consumer choice, but these personal choices may have taken place without reflection or an awareness of alternatives (Levine 2004). Internet users have unparalleled discretion in choosing when and what communication to receive (Klotz 2004), but it is unlikely that individuals would search for information on topics in which they have no interest or find uncomfortable (Wachbroit 2004). People who hold different political identities make varying selections on what they wish to see and what they avoid via “filtering” (Sunstein 2007: 3).

To some extent, with all of the potential political messages one could read or see online, this selectivity is unavoidable. Without selectivity, people run the omnipresent risk of information overload: too many options, too many opinions, too many topics. However, there is a natural human tendency to make choices that do not disturb our preexisting view of the world (Sunstein 2007) unplanned encounters that disconfirm viewpoints often prompts one to reassess one’s own view and reduces attitude extremism (Sunstein 2007; Sunstein 2009). Unfortunately, many Internet users actively seek to find only what they want to see. They are conscientiously attempting to design a personalized communications universe of their own preferences online (Sunstein 2007; Bishop 2008; Sunstein 2009).

The Internet allows you to easily see exactly what you want to see (Sunstein 2007). People are actively developing personalized environments to seek connection and interaction with meaningful (like-minded and similar) others in a safe setting (Bishop 2008). Here, the self seeks out those who share their personal tastes, beliefs, styles, opinions and values. These processes result in “Cyber Balkanization” where the Internet produces “A Daily Me” in terms of exposure to political information. People will exclude troublesome issues or disfavored voices on a continual basis (Sunstein 2009: 79-80). These consumer preferences can have a devastating effect on the survival of democratic communities and lead to polarization if all one hears are echoes of one’s own concerns and perspectives (Wachbroit 2004).

The Daily Me: Consumer Ideology and Selective Exposure

Online political discussion in the US takes place in a cultural context that emphasizes the rights of free choice and personal independence. These rights are considered inalienable by most Americans, and are applicable to both consumer goods and personal ideologies or values. In general, the right and ability to be a consumer is the ideological birthright of the modern western individual, where all social relations, objects and activities can be transformed into commodities (Slater 1997). We see ourselves as people who choose, who are inescapably “free” and self-managing, who are allowed to make decisions of who we are and what we want to be (Slater 1997: 5).

Moreover, “individual choice dominates our sense of the social”, where personal interests center on choice, liberty, desires are the central and overriding social value in modern society (Slater 1997: 40). People in US culture have the right and ability to formulate their own plans and actions, and extend relationships to others nestled with a

consumption-based ethos of free choice (Slater 1997; Dunn 2008). To a large degree, a person becomes self-defining, achieving identity through choice, using his/her own motivations to determine what they desire and find interesting (Slater 1997). We seek connections to similar others through our lifestyles, whether these similarities take the form of materialistic status markers or shared ideological values (Dunn 2008). Moreover, these lifestyle groups are elective communities; memberships which we choose rather than have ascribed or allocated to us (Slater 1997).

These situations involving choices are seen more often in the US compared to other countries, which some have described as a “choice culture” (Iyengar & Lepper 2002: 77). The spread of consumption values spreads to the general society because consumption itself becomes a central focus of social life; we see ourselves as a society of choice (Slater 1997). These notions regarding consumer sovereignty “threatens to become an iron logic of all social interactions” in the US (Sunstein 2007: 80), and can be particularly fruitful in understanding how people behave online.

It appears logical that notions of consumer sovereignty act as catalysts to the rise of selective and largely homogenous communities, whether they appear offline or online. These kinds of communities, and the individuals who find themselves within them, produce decreased intergroup community and increased political fragmentation (Galston 2004). This can have harmful social consequences as people remain in the safety in the company of those with similar views and interests (Levine 2004; Sunstein 2007). Moreover, because *the Internet places virtually no restrictions on what the user attends to*, the problems associated with free choice and selective communities may be even greater than they are offline. Choice, as a core value, “has run amok on the Internet” and

wherever choice increasing becomes a core value, social bonds will tend to weaken (Galston 2005: 48).

Consumer sovereignty, the idea that individual consumers are permitted to choose exactly as they wish, underlies the motivations for users to produce “the daily me” each day. This occurs when people have the unlimited power to filter the information they receive (Sunstein 2007), and choose to engage in selective exposure patterns, a point which will be discussed in the next section. These commitments to consumer sovereignty will undermine political discourse if these kinds of Internet users have an insufficient understanding of social problems and shirk rights and duties to the community while continually stifling dissenting views (Sunstein 2007). Additionally, the exercise of choice can have powerful psychological consequences on the self, such as increased levels of confidence in their beliefs which in turn, reduces their motivation to challenge them (Iyengar & Lepper 2002).

These values, combined with the complexities of modern life, manifest themselves online in the form of selective exposure to particular types of users. People today have access to more information than at any other time in human history, and are required to decide what information they regard as true or false largely on their own devices (Vacker 2000; Manjoo 2008). Because of this, they are likely to expose themselves primarily to sources they already accept as trustworthy, and engage in patterns of selective exposure online.

Selective Exposure

While the Internet may be relatively new, social psychology has been aware of selective exposure for many decades. Selective exposure occurs when people focus their

attention upon sources with which they agree (Michener, Delamater & Myers 2004: 204-205). In general, people look to interpret and understand new information in a way that bolsters their previously held views. In particular, selective exposure is fueled by the personal motivations of the self such as interests, need, and goals which channel attention (Michener, Delamater & Myers 2004: 134). Additionally, important personal identities provide a basis for deciding where people focus their energies and cognitive resources (Michener, Delamater & Myers 2004: 92).

Research conducted by Muzafir Sherif (1934) showed that when people are presented information, they are likely to find evidence that confirms their own preconceptions. Brock and Balloun (1964) also showed that people focus more attention on messages that confirm their beliefs, and purposely tune out the messages that do not. These findings are also consistent with the theory of “Cognitive Dissonance” (Festinger 1957), which states that we steer clear of information that disconfirms what we think we already know.

Furthermore, people are also more willing to accept information they previously believed to be true at face-value, and tend to pick apart information that disconfirms those beliefs; a process referred to as “biased assimilation” (Lord, Ross & Lepper 1979). This suggests that selective exposure is related to *how someone thinks*; as people with strong identities or feel very certain about their beliefs are likely to engage in heuristic processing. Research has shown that our self-schemas influence how we select and process information, selectively focusing upon information towards the confirmation our most important and salient hierarchies (Michener, Delamater & Myers 2004: 94). The important points of these findings have strong implications regarding attitude

extremism and Internet usage regarding political communication.

We should expect to see that those individuals who have already made up their mind on where they stand ideologically will largely seek out only those sources that confirm these views. This process seems mostly intentional, as people have made decisions about what sources are credible and which are not. They have motivations to avoid discrepancy, which alters their behavior and selection on political news. The more control people have over their exposure to political information; the less likely they were to be exposed to ideas dissimilar to their own; with selectivity being highest among the strongly partisan (Mutz & Martin 2001; Bimber & Davis 2003; Iyengar & Morin 2006). The Balkanized would rather be comforted rather than challenged, making mutual understanding and meaningful discourse very difficult (Sunstein 2007). Research by Iyengar and Morin (2006) found that when Republicans were giving a choice of which news stories to read, they strongly preferred ones which displayed the Fox News Logo, while liberals had somewhat weaker but significant preferences for CNN and NPR stories.

Today, with the presence of the Internet, we live in a new order based on individual choice with the result of consistently living within a giant feedback loop (Bishop 2008). The paradox is that greater selection often serves as a motivation to reduce the number of places where we choose to receive our information from. The more heterogeneous the marketplace of ideas is, the more likely people will engage in selective exposure in order “to bolster feelings of certainty” (Bimber 2003: 209). Other research has indicated that when citizens are given a greater capacity to choose among multiple media sources, they are more likely to make selections that expose themselves to

narrower and more personally compatible viewpoints (Mutz & Martin 2001; Bimber 2003).

With media fragmentation, there are now Republican news organizations and Democratic news organizations, and each side feels a deep antipathy towards the other's sources (Manjoo 2008). People are drawn to the messages that are important to them, that reflect their interests, and do not upset their psychological equilibrium (Whillock 2000). The liberal blogosphere has been said to be "basically a giant echo chamber" of like-minded reinforcement (Manjoo 2008: 47) while network analysis has shown that conservatives, in particular, get their news from densely connected online news sources (Adamic & Glance 2005). The concern here is that the acquisition of new information does not make someone more politically knowledgeable if these users tend to avoid any information which disconfirms their pre-existing beliefs (Bimber 2003). Some have suggested that Americans have lost the ability to speak in a common civic tongue, as virtually all social and political issues seem to fall under some type of discord (Bishop 2008; Manjoo 2008)

However, it seems unlikely that *all* people using the Internet to gain political information are engaging in extreme forms of self exposure and constant reinforcement. One might suspect that *some kinds of users* are predisposed to these patterns based on their specific identities, values, and offline social relationships that overlap with what they do online. In the next section, these specific characteristics will be outlined, and predictions regarding how they impact online political behavior will then be illustrated and tested.

User Characteristics Potentially Tied to Cyber Balkanization

Although there seems to be important links between social identities and attitudes to selective exposure, many questions remain. For example, it is still unclear *what roles individual differences serve* in determining different levels of selective exposure patterns to media messages? (Bryant & Zillman 2002) In regards to online politics in the US, there seems to be evidence that selective exposure exists, but *who* is acting this way? Also, what specific identities, attitudes and personal characteristics are likely to lead a person to engage in high levels of self-selective online?

I predict that there are five major factors that impact whether someone acts as a cyber Balkan online: *offline living environments, trust levels, the Dimensions of a person's Political Identity, Personality and Demographic Factors, and Personal Emotions or Motivations*. Each of these factors will be discussed in further detail below, and will include predictions for whether they are positively or negatively associated with cyber Balkanization.

Offline Environments

As discussed earlier, there is likely to be overlapping between what people do offline and online. It seems reasonable to believe that those users who live in fairly homogenous political social networks offline want to find like-minded others online. James House (1992) illustrated the “proximity principle”, which states that people often feel the effects of society through interpersonal interaction and communications with people around us. Others have found that people living within like-minded communities don't often encounter political disagreement (Bishop 2008), and that online communities tend to complement offline relations (Katz & Rice 2002).

These immediate social and physical environments are also very likely to influence the attitudes and values of an individual. People within these realms are very likely to be members of a person's "reference groups" which are people we look to as a source of standards and identity, and "primary groups", the people that we are close to and interact with regularly (Mead 1934; Cooley 1998) having a profound impact on their socialization and development of self. The relationships formed with these people serve as important reference points for the "social comparison" of their political values to significant important others (Rohall, Millie and Lucas 41; Sunstein 2009: 26). The self is motivated to make social comparisons between in-group and out-group attitudes to achieve a positive social identity (Skitka & Mullen 2002). These primary and reference group members serve as an important benchmark for how we view our self, and finding consistency between the values we share with loved ones offline with our online encounters is likely to serve as a strong personal motivation for the Internet user.

In regards to this chapter, *homogeneity with these groups is the key: people with higher levels of cross-pressures within their primary groups are likely to have weaker political convictions and are more likely to be uninvolved with politics* (Orum 2001).

Through the construction of an online survey, my survey questions will seek to find out if respondents feel their friends/family share their political values. This survey also asks whether the respondent feels their community largely shares the same values that they do. It is predicted that there is a positive relationship here: *the more people perceive themselves as living within a like-minded offline social environment, the more likely they will engage in cyber Balkanizing behavior online.*

Trust

Overall, this dissertation considers three forms of trust: generalized trust in others, trust in the Government, and trust in the media. Putnam (2000) has indicated that most Americans believe that we live in a less trustworthy society than our parents did (Putnam 2000), which is likely to affect the motivations of the self. In regards to the first category, research has previously analyzed whether Internet users have higher or lower levels of trust in others than non-users have. Although Eric Uslaner (2004) found that Internet use neither increases or decreases general trust in others, surveys have shown that the lowest amount of trust in others is found in heavy Internet users (Robinson et al 2004). It has also been shown in other research that online political discussants are slightly *less trusting of others* compared to those who do not discuss politics on the Internet (Davis 2005). In short, I expect to find *a negative relationship between trust in others and cyber balkanization*, which appears to be consistent with many of the findings above.

In regards to trust in the government, Daniel Bell (1999) believed that people would find their sense of community in the corporate institutional structure; where corporations and government become seen as “community”. However, recent times have shown a loss of trust in traditional institutions, and that these institutions have been insufficient in satisfying people's needs for belonging (Bishop 2008). Furthermore, a lack of trust in government officials discourages people from participating in politics either offline or online, as the Internet provides enormous other possibilities which they can choose to invest their attentions (Davis 2003). Nevertheless, Richard Davis (2005) has found that online political participants are slightly *more trusting* of the government than the general public. I predict that people who hold higher levels of trust in the US

government will be *more likely to discuss politics online with like-minded others*, feeling some sense of connection and efficacy towards the institution. Those who trust the government will talk politics with similar others, while those who distrust the government are unlikely to discuss politics at all, due to a lack of efficacy which causes a sense of connection to politics (Uslaner 2004).

Lastly, research has indicated that people using the Internet for political information are more likely to distrust the traditional news media (Bimber 2003). Additionally, distrust of the news media is widespread and bipartisan among the US public (Sunstein 2007), as people often cite the belief that news organizations are biased against their own viewpoints. This has been referred to in the literature as “Hostile Media Phenomenon” (Vallone, Ross and Lepper 1985). Regardless of political affiliation, those who feel the media is stacked against them results in greater levels of distrust in mainstream news sources, making the media less persuasive to those who hold this belief (Manjoo 2008).

Moreover, it should be expected that those who seek out like-minded online communities and alternative news sources (such as a politically biased blogger) do so because of disdain for the mainstream news media. In turn, these users attitudes become Balkanized, or divided into small and hostile units of like-minded groups that pit themselves against dissimilar others. The more someone distrusts the mainstream media, the more likely they are attending to like-minded others for information, indicating a negative relationship between trust in the media and cyber Balkanization.

Dimensions of Political Identity: Direction, Strength, Emotion and Certainty

There are two dimensions of political identity that deserve attention here: the

direction (from conservative to liberal), and the strength of their identity (extreme versus moderate). In regards to the first point, conservatives were shown by Iyengar and Morin (2006) to be more willing to consume news which restricts them to perspectives that are likely to toe the ideological line, avoiding challenges to their strongly held pre-existing viewpoints. While strongly partisan users from all sides of US politics are likely to engage in cyber Balkanization, this chapter will test whether conservatives are more likely to engage in this kind of online selectivity as Iyengar and Morin (2006) suggest. In terms of the direction of political identity, *it is predicted here that being conservative will positively relate to cyber balkanization.*

Nevertheless, it is likely that anyone that identifies strongly with a particular political group will desire to surround themselves with people who share that social identity. People identify with a party, then adopt the ideology of the group to minimize in-group conflict or personal inconsistency. Those who have weak or moderate attachments towards a specific political group will be less likely to act as a cyber Balkan than those who feel a strong allegiance to their group. I predict to find that *those who identify themselves as “strongly” conservative or liberal will be more likely to engage in more cyber Balkanization than will moderates.*

Personality, Personal Motivations, and Demographic Factors

Other research has not found meaningful differences in online balkanization and most demographic factors (Bimber 2003). Nevertheless, I will see if there are any important relationships between cyber Balkanization with regards to four important demographic categories: age, race, gender, education. *However, I predict that there will be no relationship between these four demographic factors with Cyber Balkanization.*

Nevertheless, in regards to age, there may be at least some reason to believe that younger online users will be more prone to cyber Balkanization than others. Young people have been found by some researchers to be more likely to identify with like-minded communities and reject classic definitions of community (Galston 2002; Putnam 2000). Additionally, younger people are said to be more pessimistic about the government (Owen 2006) as well as the traditional news media (Bimber 2003). These factors have the potential to drive younger users towards like-minded others.

Personality factors are also expected to be related to online self-selection, namely the person's self-construal and the degree of closed-mindedness, or Dogmatism. In regards to the former, interdependent (collectivist) self-construal type values choice less than others and will be more opposed to the disharmony of group consensus (Iyengar & Lepper 2002), making them *more likely to practice online Balkanization*. Similarly, research on personality factors has shown that people differ in terms of Dogmatism, or how much open or closed-mindedness they exhibit in their thinking (Goldberg 1992, 1993). It is *predicted here that those who score high in dogmatism may be predisposed to selectivity*, and are self-motivated to avoid a complex marketplace of ideas online or offline. This makes them *more likely to be cyber Balkans than more open-minded people are*, as they are more uncomfortable than others with ambiguity and uncertainty in their political views.

Research has shown that argumentativeness is an important dimension of personality (Goldberg 1992, 1993). People vary greatly in terms of their willingness to engage in an argument. Thus, Internet users that like to argue are less likely to engage in selective exposure patterns than are those who avoid arguments. *My prediction is that*

those who do not enjoy arguments are more likely to cyber Balkanize.

In regards to feelings of certainty, it is already established that certainty is an important factor in selective exposure. Those who feel confident in their beliefs are more likely to engage in cyber Balkanizing behavior (Bimber 2003). Although certainty in political beliefs may overlap significantly to the strength of their political identity measures, this dimension will be tested as if the two are not. In general, I predict that *people who feel very certain about the correctness of their political stances will be positively related to cyber Balkanizing behaviors online.*

Likewise, people may only take interest in politics online in a very narrow-casted way, only following one key personal issue that is considered personally important. If a person attends only to stories that are of interest to them, they are likely to be surrounding themselves to similar others, whether intentional or not, which is bound to effect the strength of those attitudes by consistently engaging with people who share similar values and understanding on single topics. Thus, *those who are selective to only one topic of personal interest (show high levels of single-issue interest) are likely to show high levels of Cyber Balkanization.*

Emotions

I expect that there is overlap between the strongly partisan and feelings of anger towards the party of political opposition. Some have shown how current US political identities are often rooted in affective attachments to a social identity rather than specific policies. Political party affiliation in the US today often has more to do with social identity and social comparison than ideology (Bishop 2008; Dowd et al 2006) where people "pick a team" to compare the self to. People identifying themselves as politically

liberal or conservative often “adopt an appropriate ideological script” on political issues, which minimizes in-group conflict but increases out-group conflict (Skitka & Mullen 2002: 122). Additionally, the more dislike for opposition party, the more consistent ideologies they will hold, as ideologies may be a product of the desire to maintain affective consistency (Skitka & Mullen 2002).

In short, those who identify strongly with a particular group are likely to develop hostile feelings towards other political parties, and the self is then more motivated to be surrounded by like-minded others. Therefore, it is predicted that *those who feel anger towards people who don't share their political values will be more likely to segregate themselves*, having a positive relationship to cyber Balkanization.

It is also likely that the desire to Balkanize is be related to the stresses of modern-day life. *Some people may self-select which issues they attend to* because they wish to *avoid more aggravations in their life*, such as having a desire to avoiding arguments and criticism, while *desiring bolstering and support from others* who share their social identities (Bishop 2008).

As a final point, it is believed that time spent online is not related to being a cyber Balkan. It is proposed here that personal factors drive self-selectivity and Balkanization, not merely the amount of time spent on the computer. To show this, I have measured this as a variable, but *predict that time spent online is not related to Cyber Balkanization*.

Methodology

Data used to test these hypotheses were collected using an online survey during February, 2009. This survey purposively sampled those individuals who were members of either a political or non-political facebook.com group. Approximately 30 separate

facebook.com groups were contacted and each member was personally invited to take this survey by clicking on a link which took them directly to the website that hosted the survey. During this time period, 624 different respondents completed the survey. The results were recorded by a website provider named zapsurvey.com and were coded by the author upon the respondent's completion of the survey.

Dependent Variable Construction and Measurement

Cyber Balkanization, the dependent variable being used, was found by me to have more than one dimension when using factor analysis with direct oblimin rotation. The following table shows that the five questions I used to measure Cyber Balkanization in my survey yielded two separate dimensions (see table 27 below): one that more or less describes emotions and motivations of the user, and the other describing the values and actions of the respondent.

Table 27: Factor Analysis Results for the Variable "Cyber Balkanization"

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.746	34.914	34.914	1.746	34.914	34.914	1.651	33.028	33.028
2	1.065	21.300	56.214	1.065	21.300	56.214	1.159	23.186	56.214
3	.843	16.867	73.081						
4	.808	16.160	89.241						
5	.538	10.759	100.000						

At this point, I broke the dependent variable into two separate factors: the Motives of Cyber Balkanization ("CB Actions") which is comprised of the three items which loaded onto component one below (Comfort with similar others + Feeling Uneasy around difference + Change Topic to avoid arguing), and attitudes about what constitutes a community ("CB Community") which is comprised of the items "A Community

Comprised of Shares Values” and “People Should Leave Group if they Differ from the Others”. These factor loadings can be seen in table 28, and lead to my justification in determining which items aligned with one another.

Table 28: Rotated Component Matrix of Cyber Balkanization

	Component	
	1	2
Community comprised of Shared Values	-.098	.831
Comfy With Similar Others	.668	.223
Feel uneasy about differences	.821	.071
Change Topic to Avoid Argue	.682	-.060
Share values or leave group	.235	.640

In each variable, scores were added together to form a 3-item scale measure of “CB Actions” (where values range from -6 to +6) and a 2-item scale of “CB Community” (where values range from -4 to +4). Throughout the remainder of the analysis conducted in this chapter, the independent variables discussed earlier will be regressed each dependent variable separately. Table 29 describes the mean, standard deviation, and range for each of these measures. These two measures were also found to have a low and non-significant correlation to each other ($r = .042$, $P = .292$).

Table 29: Descriptive Statistics for both measures of Cyber Balkanization

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cyberbalkan by Motives	624	16	-8	8	-1.35	2.829
Cyberbalkan by Actions	624	8	-3	5	1.10	1.663
Valid N (listwise)	624					

Predicted Relationships to Cyber Balkanization

Table 30 is a summary of the predicted relationships of each independent variable discussed earlier and how each was measured.

Table 30: Predicted Independent Variable Relationships to Cyber Balkanization

Variable	Measurement of Variable Obtained by using...	Predicted Relationship to Cyber Balkanization
Perceived like-Minded Friends	Question "My friends share my political Views"	Positive
Perceived like-minded Family	Question "My family shares my political values"	Positive
Perceived living in a like-minded city	2 Survey Questions ($r=.301^{**}$)	Positive
Trust in Others	2 Survey Questions ($r=.465^{**}$)	Negative
Trust in Government	Question "I trust U.S. government to usually do the right thing"	Positive
Trust in the News Media	2 Survey Questions ($r=.431^{**}$)	Negative
Conservative Political Identity	Dummy Variable (Eysenck Scale) where 1 = Conservative	Positive
Strength of Political Identity	Eysenck Political Identity Scale (6 Questions; One-Dimensional)	Positive
Certainty in correctness of Political Beliefs	2 Survey Questions ($r=.581^{**}$)	Positive
Feeling Anger towards political opponents	2 Survey Questions ($r=.472^{**}$)	Positive
Age	1 Open-Ended Question (Continuous Measure)	Negative
Race (White or Non-White)	Dummy Variable(White= 1)	None
Gender	Dummy Variable(Male = 1)	None
Education Level of User	Dummy Variable (is respondent a college graduate?)	None
User has Interdependent (Collectivist) Self-Construal	Singelis Self-Construal Scale (3 Questions; One-Dimensional)	Positive
User avoids arguments	Infante and Rancer Scale (5 Questions; One-Dimensional)	Positive
User seeks bolstering and support in views	2 Survey Questions ($r=.343^{**}$)	Positive
User desires to avoid Criticism	2 Survey Questions ($r=.345^{**}$)	Positive
Dogmatism	Rokeach Scale (5 Questions; One-Dimensional)	Positive
Time Spent Online Each Day	2 Survey Questions ($r=.762^{**}$)	None
Selectivity in issues followed	3 Survey Questions (One-dimensional)	Positive

Wherever possible, multiple questions were used to measure each independent variable. However, three of these variables (Perception of having Like-Minded Friends, Perception of having Like-Minded Family, and Trust in the Government) would not correlate strongly or significantly to the other questions that were used in my survey to form a scale measure for these variables. In these instances, I am forced to rely on single-item measures. The construction of all other independent variables are comprised on multi-item scale measures, where correlations among 2-item scales are listed in the table below and factor analysis conducted on larger scales all yielded one-dimensionality of the underlying variable. A more detailed description which illustrates precisely what questions and scoring methods were used to calculate each variable is shown in Appendix A at the end of this dissertation.

Regression Results: “CB Actions” as the Dependent Variable

Table 31 shows the regression results when predicting Cyber Balkanization as defined by actions and motives. We can see from the data that variables connected to the personal emotions and motivations of the user, such as holding feelings of anger towards political opponents showed a positive and significant relationship ($Beta = .248, P < .000$) to the dependent variable. We found the same with respect to maintaining a desire to avoid criticism from others ($Beta = .141, P < .000$). Although the relationships are of moderate strength, these findings indicate that users who feel anger towards political opposition are more likely than other people to engage in Cyber Balkanizing behavior online, as are those users who wish to avoid criticism from others when expressing their viewpoints. Both of these points are consistent with the predicted relationships discussed earlier. These results suggest that *cyber Balkanization is highest among users that don't*

want to argue over whether their feelings and viewpoints are correct, and is particularly strong for people who feel disgust towards people whose political viewpoints differ from their own.

Cyber Balkanization was also found to have a modest positive and significant relationship with single-issue selective news followers ($\text{Beta} = .109, P < .000$), indicating that those who only have an interest in topics that are personally relevant or interesting to them are likely to avoid arguments or contrary viewpoints. There seems to be *a relationship between selectively choosing which topics to engage in and selectively deciding whom to engage in regarding online political discussion.* This is also consistent with predictions made earlier. Additionally, Cyber Balkanization was linked to the living conditions and social networks that people are within offline. Those who felt that their friends ($\text{Beta} = .173, P < .000$) and their families ($\text{Beta} = .074, P = .041$) share their values were more likely to engage in cyber Balkanization. Although these effects are somewhat weak, they are significant and in the direction that was predicted.

The results in table 31 also show that there are personality characteristics which drive online Balkanization. Two personality factors were shown to reduce Cyber Balkanization: The somewhat weak effect of having a Collectivist Self-Construal ($\text{Beta} = -.088, P = .009$) and the strong effect of Argumentativeness ($\text{Beta} = -.346, P < .000$). The third personality variable that also showed a positive but weak relationship to Cyber Balkanization is Dogmatism ($\text{Beta} = .085, P = .024$), indicating that those who dislike complexity and are uncomfortable with uncertainty are more likely to engage in online Balkanization and self-selectivity.

Table 31: Regression Results: Predicting Cyber Balkanization as defined by Actions
Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	-.961	.458		-2.099	.036		
Friends Share Views	.424	.088	.173	4.790	.000	.791	1.265
Family Shares Views	.154	.075	.074	2.047	.041	.786	1.273
Trusts Government	.136	.071	.068	1.922	.055	.829	1.207
Trusts Public	-.021	.055	-.013	-.380	.704	.814	1.229
Trusts Media	.022	.058	.014	.379	.705	.748	1.337
Is respondent a conservative?	-.468	.252	-.076	-1.854	.064	.605	1.653
Strength of Political Identity	.006	.031	.006	.181	.857	.811	1.233
Feels Certainty in Political Beliefs	-.006	.135	-.002	-.048	.962	.705	1.418
Feels Anger towards Opposition	1.028	.146	.248	7.029	.000	.825	1.213
Age	-.008	.010	-.030	-.855	.393	.814	1.228
Is respondent White?	.122	.253	.016	.482	.630	.928	1.078
Gender	.247	.192	.044	1.288	.198	.899	1.113
Is respondent college graduate?	.082	.195	.014	.419	.675	.877	1.141
Collectivist Self Construal	-.080	.030	-.088	-2.610	.009	.901	1.110
Argumentative	-.244	.026	-.346	-9.376	.000	.753	1.328
Dogmatism	.103	.046	.085	2.263	.024	.727	1.375
Time Spent Online	-.056	.052	-.036	-1.078	.281	.905	1.105
Single Issue Selectivity	.116	.037	.109	3.157	.002	.857	1.167
Lives in Like Minded City	-.075	.054	-.049	-1.372	.170	.801	1.248
Avoids Criticism	.604	.149	.141	4.054	.000	.845	1.183
Bolsters Viewpoints	.242	.145	.061	1.673	.095	.780	1.282

Dependent Variable: Cyber Balkanization defined by Online Actions

R-Square = .381; Adjusted R-Square = .360

Durbin-Watson Statistic = 1.933

F-Statistic = 17.669**

This finding is certainly consistent with my predictions. Also of interest is that the variable "Time Spent Online" has no significant correlation to Cyber Balkanization (the

online actions of the Internet user) (Beta = -.036, P = .281). This indicates that *time spent online, in and of itself, does not make one more self-selective*. In other words, spending time on the Internet leads one to avoid online arguments or steer themselves towards interactions that reinforce their own viewpoints.

While table 31 indicates there are numerous personal motives, personality dimensions and offline living environments that are related to Cyber Balkanization, there are a number of interesting characteristics that are apparently *not* related. First, the results show that none of the political identity or strength variables are significantly related to Cyber Balkanization. It seems that online selectivity is not a function of being either conservative or liberal, nor is it a product of having strong political identities, or even feeling highly certain that your political views are correct. *These variables in and of themselves are not enough to constitute online self-selectivity. An online political partisan who feels strongly about his/her political views is not necessarily going to avoid counter-views online and surround themselves by like-minded people.*

In the final part of analysis within this chapter, the dependent variable is redefined based upon the findings of factor analysis conducted earlier. All relevant findings will be discussed and the implications of these findings will be illustrated.

Regression Results: “CB Community” as the Dependent Variable

This section considers and measures Cyber Balkanization as a tendency or a person to define a community in terms of being a collection or social network of like-minded rather than other common and traditional definitions. Table 32 shows that a very strong and positive relationship with Cyber Balkanization exists with those who feel like they live in a like-minded community (Beta = .541, P < .000). The size of the

standardized beta here is surprisingly large, and indicates that *those who live in cities where they feel most people share their viewpoints believe that people who do not share the same viewpoints as other community members should leave it*. People that live in cities where other people mainly share their views seem to believe that a community is comprised of people who share your views, whether they live close to you or not.

Again, this indicates that there is a strong amount of overlap between online and offline Balkanization. When people cluster together and share like-minded views, they tend to become more intolerant of dissention and lose empathy for people who do not share their viewpoints, even to the point of not considering those people as part of their communities. *Instead, people from like-minded areas seem to define community as something that is personally selective and reinforcing, likely creating more extreme attitudes and values over time.*

The results from table 32 also indicate that there are four other personal characteristics and motivations that are related to how people define their community in terms of selectivity: A desire to avoid criticism from others (Beta = .292, $P < .000$), Collectivist Self-Construal (Beta = -.068, $P = .031$), Argumentativeness (Beta = .082, $P = .018$), and Age (Beta = .065, $P = .050$). Other than living in a like-minded city, the desire to avoid criticism from others was the strongest factor in the tendency to define community by those who share their views, which is consistent with my predictions.

The final two variables related to the community definition of Cyber Balkanization, Argumentativeness and Age, are hard to interpret. In regards to the former, the data indicates that those who like to argue are more likely to be self-selective in regards to who they consider to be part of their community, which seems counter-

intuitive. It may be the case that while people may enjoy arguing with dissimilar others, these people still do not consider those holding differing views as part of their community at the end of the day.

Table 32: Regression Results: Predicting Cyber Balkanization as idea of Community Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	.222	.251		.885	.376		
Friends Share Values	.004	.049	.003	.078	.938	.791	1.265
Family Shares Values	-.074	.041	-.060	-1.792	.074	.786	1.273
Trust Government	.067	.039	.057	1.725	.085	.829	1.207
Trusts Public	.018	.030	.019	.582	.561	.814	1.229
Trusts Media	.007	.032	.008	.234	.815	.748	1.337
Is respondent a conservative?	-.121	.138	-.034	-.877	.381	.605	1.653
Strength of Political Identity	.023	.017	.045	1.348	.178	.811	1.233
Political Certainty in Beliefs/Values	.131	.074	.063	1.771	.077	.705	1.418
Feels Anger towards Opposition	-.156	.080	-.064	-1.952	.051	.825	1.213
Age	.011	.005	.065	1.965	.050	.814	1.228
Is respondent White?	.009	.139	.002	.064	.949	.928	1.078
Gender	-.173	.105	-.052	-1.641	.101	.899	1.113
Is respondent college graduate?	-.166	.107	-.050	-1.556	.120	.877	1.141
Collectivist Self Construal	-.036	.017	-.068	-2.160	.031	.901	1.110
Argumentative	.034	.014	.082	2.379	.018	.753	1.328
Dogmatism	.028	.025	.040	1.135	.257	.727	1.375
Time Spent Online	.046	.028	.051	1.625	.105	.905	1.105
Single Issue Selectivity	.003	.020	.005	.141	.888	.857	1.167
Live in Like Minded City	.483	.030	.541	16.188	.000	.801	1.248
Avoids Criticism	.733	.082	.292	8.970	.000	.845	1.183
Bolsters Viewpoints	.130	.079	.055	1.637	.102	.780	1.282

Dependent Variable: Cyber Balkanization as Definition of Community

R-Square = .462; Adjusted R-Square = .443

Durbin-Watson Statistic = 2.063

F-Statistic = 24.638**

More research could be fruitful in determining whether this relationship is valid or not. Likewise, the results also show that older people are more likely to define their community in terms of including people who share their own values. Yet, there is no theoretical justification that I can find to indicate why that would be true. Overall, I am skeptical of this finding, and would suggest that more research be conducted before accepting this relationship as valid.

Nevertheless, table 32 also indicates that several dimensions discussed earlier *are not significantly related* to defining community in self-selective ways. First, there were no significant relationships between a user's political identities and Cyber Balkanizing. Similar to findings from earlier, these variables in and of themselves are not enough to cause online self-selectivity. *An online political partisan who feels strongly about his/her political views is not necessarily going to avoid dissimilar people online or offline, and avoid considering different others as part of their community.* Additionally, time spent online had no significant correlation to Cyber Balkanization as an idea of community (Beta = .051, P = .105). This indicates that *time spent online does not make one more community exclusive*. It cannot be said that the amount of time spent on the Internet leads a person to redefine who he/she considers to be a part of their community.

Discussion and a Summary of the Findings

While this chapter has focused on the causes of cyber Balkanization, others have already commented on its social consequences. Personal choice combined with social fragmentation leads some users to constantly engage in politics online, while others may never encounter any politics online via their favorite websites and bookmarks (Norris 2002). This is troublesome because the like-minded citizens of cyberspace may develop a

type of civic life that involves little or no exchange among those who hold different opinions, reinforcing fragmentation and factionalism (Margolis & Resnick 2000).

The hypermedia of the web can create more social discourse and fragmentation, preventing any centralized construction of consensus and unification (Vacker 2000). Additionally, a system of limitless choices is not necessarily in the interest of self-government and democracy. When people's preferences are either a product of excessively limited options or when the preferences of these past choices leads to the narrowing of their own horizons (Sunstein 2007). As these majorities grow within communities, whether they be online or offline, minority beliefs retreat from political life and fuels divisive national politics in a bottom-up fashion (Bishop 2008).

William Galston (2002) warns that we should not organize our lives around the fantasy that community entrance and exit can always be cost free or that we can wall ourselves off from those who are different without paying a long-term social price. The potential breakdown of common experiences and shared experiences via fragmentation makes it more difficult for the nation to address social problems via misunderstanding and enmity (Sunstein 2007). However, this need not be the future of political discourse in the US. Balkanization, whether offline or online, can be reduced by more heterogeneity in groups. Exposure to competing political arguments can reduce intolerance and feelings certainty in the correctness of our own arguments (Sunstein 2007).

In this chapter, I have shown that cyber Balkanization is not a universal process which is experienced among all Internet users. Rather, the personal characteristics and motives of different users drive people to engage in variant levels of Balkanization. Additionally, time spent online does not lead people to become more intolerant. Instead,

an identification of the conditions which motivate desires to seek homogeneity and community selectivity can reduce political intolerance, aiding public discourse.

Admittedly, capturing a concept such as cyber Balkanization is not easy to do using an online survey. The results in this chapter could be bolstered by using other methods that could also measure this same concept (such as participant observation, sometimes referred to as 'Triangulation of methods' (Denzin 1979). In doing so, research could show other processes that make identities become salient online, and illustrate the levels of hostility one faces within homogenous groups when voicing dissent online. Similarly, experiments could be conducted to see whether people engage in selectivity as the number of options are increased, or decreased in the presence of similar others, etc...

While this chapter looks to see how offline identities and environments overlap with Internet activities, more research is needed to document other ways in which there are connections between these two environments. The results here show that there are relationships in online behavior that have offline consequences and vice versa, as these two spaces seem to continually reinforce each other. This is a claim that future research may be able to better illustrate. Additionally, future works can extend beyond politics to show how social networks can become homogenized in all realms of social life and organizations.

Findings Summary: Cyber Balkanization defined by Actions of the Internet User

The findings within this chapter seems to support theorists such as Bill Bishop (2008) who see political self-sorting being a result of close physical clustering of like-minded people, taking place offline and online as well. The analysis here shows that *those living in politically homogenous communities in their physically proximate face-to-*

face environments also like to be surrounded with like-minded others when they use the Internet. When a person lives in an environment where the vast majority of primary groups members share a political viewpoint, this person becomes an online cyber Balkan.

While it has been suggested earlier that cyber Balkanization may be higher for people who have a collectivist Self-Construal due to a desire to maintain harmony and avoid conflict, the results show that Internet users who have a high level of collectivist are *less likely* to engage in self-selectivity when discussing politics online than others. The finding not surprisingly indicate that *those who enjoy arguments are less likely to engage in cyber Balkanizing behavior*, and are more likely than other users to engage in online debates or challenge their own views with others who feel differently.

Also, cyber Balkanization did not correlate significantly to any specific demographic factors. An Internet user's age, race, gender or education levels did not make them any more or less likely to avoid dissenting viewpoints online. These findings are consistent with my predictions, and have also found support from the work of Bruce Bimber (2003) as well. Additionally, the results show that there is no relationship between Cyber Balkanization and time spent online. This rejects notions that time spent online will lead to some kind of natural clustering of like-minded people, and that the Internet "makes" a person less tolerant of dissention or more self-selective due to exposure to the Internet over long periods of time each day.

Finally, there were no significant relationships between levels of trust and cyber Balkanization. While it had been suggested earlier that distrust of others would lead people to be more selective in regards to who they interact with, this was apparently not the case. Being distrusting of the media, the government, or the general public did not

significantly affected levels of online selectivity and any avoidance of online debate.

Findings Summary: Cyber Balkanization as defined by self-selective community

In general, *People who like to voice their opinions on the Internet while avoiding criticisms seem likely to be opposed to criticism in their communities as well, whether online or offline.* These findings suggest that Balkanizing behavior is strongly related to people who dislike dissent and are motivated to avoid defending their viewpoints from others who question the validity of their claims; that these people engage in high amounts of selectivity in whom they consider to be members of their communities and life-worlds.

This community definition of Cyber Balkanization has a negative relationship to Collectivist Self-Construal, which is not surprising although it is not what I predicted to find. It is possible that collectivists are more likely to be inclusive of others, and are less likely to ostracize or exclude others from their sentiments due to holding differences in political attitudes and values. In this sense, collectivists have a definition of community which has more empathy and compassion, while seeing an importance to sharing a connection to people even if differences in values are strong.

Also similar to earlier findings, there is no relationship between the amount of time spent online and the tendency to self-select their community based on shared values. While some theorists may have been concerned that spending time online may be destructive to communities and lead to a lack of civility towards others (Putnam 2000), spending time online in and of itself seems to be insufficient in terms of self-selectivity and intolerance of heterogeneity within their social networks and communities. The Internet is neither wholly 'good' nor 'bad' for communities. Of relevance here are the

personal characteristics of the users and the offline environments that he/she find themselves within.

Finally, the tendency to self-select into like-minded communities was not found to have any relationship to trust levels. Cyber Balkanization is not a phenomenon of the angry or paranoid who suffer from high levels of distrust. The data shows that people who trust the news media, the U.S. Government, and the general public are just as likely to be Cyber Balkans as those who do not. Trust does not seem to be related to either conceptualization of Balkanization in this study.

CHAPTER 5

Findings, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Introduction

In the final chapter of this dissertation, my goals are to summarize the main findings and to discuss some of the problems that were encountered. Four important findings are identified and briefly discussed. Next, some of the limitations of this dissertation will be discussed, largely revolving around methodological issues pertaining to the online survey and content analysis interpretation. At the end of this chapter, discussion will focus upon how these problems could be reduced in future research will also specifying where future research interests should be directed.

Summary of Main Findings

The data analysis shows at least four main conclusions that contribute to our understanding of computer-mediated political communication in the US. The first of these findings is that *different news sources differed significantly in terms of political coverage*. The US Presidential race of 2008 shows that mainstream online news sources favor portraying the political landscape as a horserace, relying heavily on direct candidate quotes and polling numbers as the staple of their daily political coverage. Nevertheless, these sources were less likely to show overt political favoritism or bias towards a candidate, and portrayed the election in more civil terms than bloggers did.

Blogs openly questioned the credibility of the candidates and questioned their claims, but in a very predictable fashion. Conservative blogs overwhelmingly relied on negative character portrayals of Barack Obama, and virtually never questioned the claims made by the GOP. Likewise, liberal blogs tended to discuss personal character of the candidates more than the issues, and in a direction which favored the Democratic Party.

More than any other sources, the blogs criticized mainstream news coverage and hurled accusations of bias towards journalists and media organizations, which the candidates strongly avoided doing on their websites.

The websites of the candidates focused almost exclusively on issues and personal character. These sites were a constant battleground for both candidates, as they continually attempted to construct public perception of themselves and their opponent. Barack Obama spent more time discussing the issues than John McCain did on his website, yet still made plenty of efforts to portray McCain as an undesirable choice. At the same time, John McCain and the GOP Party website spent an enormous amount of time trying to discredit the claims of Barack Obama and illustrate flaws in his character and judgment.

It is easy to imagine that, given where an Internet user received the bulk of their online news, the beliefs and perspective of different users would diverge widely. Blog readers probably feel more hostility and would probably exhibit more extremism in their viewpoints than others. Whether reading a highly partisan blog is the cause or effect of politically extreme attitudes is hard to determine, given that Internet users drawn to blogs are likely the most partisan to begin with. Nevertheless, further research could better document both the positives and negatives that political blogs contribute to levels of political civility, and if these news sources provide an overall benefit to the public sphere.

The second major finding of this dissertation is that *user identities and personality variables affect Internet usage*. What this dissertation shows is that people who are interested in politics use the Internet to find political news and to get involved. Likewise, people who lack strong identification with political parties or are uninterested in politics

may still spend much time online. However, they are not anymore politically knowledgeable or connected by doing so. Their attention is drawn elsewhere, satisfying other needs. These findings are consistent with the “Uses and Gratifications” theory of media usage discussed in chapter three. *People use media instruments to fulfill their personal interests. Because of this, it is nearly impossible to show that the Internet will have an overall positive or negative effect on political discourse.* Some users will become more politically active and informed, while others will ignore politics altogether.

While specific identities related to political activity on the Internet were found to be important predictors of online usage, overall self-construal did not. There does not seem to be any evidence here that individualists are more likely to use computers than other people, or that collectivists are more or less likely to seek political connections on the Internet. *Although strongly held political identities and personal characteristics seem to account for different patterns of online behavior and attention, overall tendencies of how one views him/herself seem to be irrelevant.* Nevertheless, future research should continue to identify these important personal characteristics, and document how different types of Internet users will vary in their usage patterns.

Third, the data also indicated that *the total amount of time spent online showed mixed results with regards to online political behavior.* Chapter three showed that the amount of time spent online had small but positive and significant relationships to political activity levels or political knowledge seeking on the Internet. However, Chapter Four indicated that time spent online did not have any significant relationship to cyber Balkanization. *It appears that high levels of Internet usage does not necessarily make people less civil or more intolerant of opposing viewpoints.* Interestingly, chapter three

found that there was a small but significantly positive relationship between political liberalism and time spent online. Although these findings may be an anomaly based on this sample, future research might better show whether the Internet is a catalyst of liberal political activity in the US. Likewise, there may be identifiable personality differences between conservative and liberals that might induce differential rates of online political exposure patterns, such as having a greater interest in learning to use new communicative technologies, for example. While these ideas are beyond the focus of this dissertation, future research may better illustrate how conservatives and liberals vary in terms of how much time they spend online.

Fourth, this dissertation shows that *there appears to be links between online and offline balkanization*. Patterns of selective exposure to information and the desire to seek out communities of like-minded people seem to be based in offline living environments and personality characteristics of the Internet user. It does not seem accurate to say that the Internet act as a boon to local communities, nor is it universally separating all of its users into a social world full of like-mindedness. *However, people who live in strongly like-minded communities offline, seem to desire the same in cyberspace*. Personal motivations and characteristics also seem to drive selective exposure patterns online. The findings in chapter four indicate that *those who don't like to argue and are closed-minded are more likely to act as cyber Balkans, as are people who feel much anger towards political opposition*.

Again, the presence of the Internet by itself is not a catalyst for Balkanizing behavior patterns. *Even though the worldwide web is a space where a user can maximize personal preferences and must engage in at least some level of selectivity, these patterns*

do not necessarily lead to decreased levels of civility in the public sphere. Extremism in political attitudes can also be formed in offline environments and social circles, which the Internet user brings with him/her when they use their computers. Overall, the data suggests *it is unfair to blame the Internet for rising levels of political extremism or incivility.* Findings in this dissertation show that extreme political attitudes are not related to the amount of time spent online. Additionally, both personal characteristics and offline social factors were shown to be related with selectivity patterns where people avoided dissent in their online political communications. Yet, it is important to recognize that *the Internet has the potential to reinforce these patterns of offline behavior.* Future research should focus on identifying other offline environmental factors and personality characteristics that could lead to patterns of selectivity and intolerance, and how these variables could potentially interact with each other.

At this point, a brief discussion about the limitations of this dissertation should be discussed. The next section is intended to point out some of the difficulties that were encountered in obtaining the data, including some of the potential pitfalls involved in measurement and sampling. During this discussion, I will point out ways in which these problems could be averted in future research.

Limitations of the Dissertation

This dissertation used two different data sets: a collection of 537 online news articles that were subjected to content analysis, and an online survey which had 624 respondents. For the sake of clarity, it should be pointed out that the content analysis served as the basis of my findings in chapter two, while the survey responses were

analyzed in chapters three and four. The issues encountered concerning each data set will be discussed separately here.

As with any content analysis research project, much of the data classification was subject to the interpretation of the reader. First, there were a number of cases where frames overlapped, and I had to rely on my judgment to classify the article. For example, it was sometimes unclear whether an article focused mainly on defining the Obama campaign positively or the McCain campaign negatively. Whenever multiple frames were used within the article, I often relied on the headline or photos used in the article as a sort of tie-breaker. My justification for doing so is that these images and text are likely to impact the reader's interpretation and cognitive processing. While this seemed to help reduce uncertainty, other researchers could potentially interpret the information differently.

Second, these articles were only a small sampling of all online content over a six week time span, starting in early September and ending the night before the election. This chapter did not intend to be an exhaustive examination of all political content posted to the Internet during this time period. Instead, I relied upon a selective sampling of the most viewed political information posted online during the US Presidential election. Additionally, some sources (such as [cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com)) offered a multitude of political content simultaneously. I addressed my attention towards selecting the first political news story that caught my eye when I accessed each site. It seems plausible that others would have selected different stories, or browsed around each site to select the most in-depth story, for example. Other analysis may have also tried to sample multiple stories within a source that offered multiple stories, as another example. Nevertheless, I feel that my

selection of articles give a valid sampling of online news content during the election season.

The online survey proved to be a difficult endeavor that led to a number of concerns. First, the extensive number of variables I tried to measure resulted in a survey which was probably too long. Although practice surveys indicated that the average time spent filling out the survey was only about eleven minutes, I suspect that the length of the survey depressed response rates, a concern I will revisit later. Additionally, my concern about the length of the survey caused me to rely on fewer scale items and measures than I would have preferred. By trying to measure dozens of variables in an online survey, I found myself trying to measure important concepts through the use of five or less questions in virtually all cases. As I reduced the number of questions in a concern about low response rates, I sometimes found myself left with few measurement scale items which did not correlate well. This sometimes resulted in a couple of variables whose measurement relied upon one question responses, as can be seen in appendix B. Variables such as "Trust in the Government" and "Perceptions of living within a like-minded community" were subject to this problem.

Variable measurement also proved to be difficult for two important concepts within this dissertation: 'Self-Construal' and 'Cyber Balkanization'. In regards to the former, the Singelis (1994) self-construal scale was found to be multi-dimensional, which led to difficulties in the interpretation and measurement of this important variable. This scale is not recommended for future research, as responses to this scale turned out to be very difficult to interpret, and of questionable validity. Measurement of the latter, cyber Balkanization relied upon a number of untested survey questions that were written by the

author, as no well-known scale to measure this concept exists. While I don't consider the measurement of this variable to be severely flawed, better quantitative measurement of cyber Balkanization (and other forms of Balkanization) requires the development of a more reliable and sophisticated index measure.

Sampling also proved to be difficult on three accounts. First, facebook.com would not permit a random sample to be obtained, stating that this would not be in the best interests of its users. However, Facebook.com executives decided it would be okay for me to sample within groups that I belonged to and within groups whose administrators agreed to participate. While these administrators served as gatekeepers, I was fortunate enough to persuade sixteen of them to participate in this study. Their generosity allowed me to send invitations to 7,057 different facebook.com users to take my online survey.

Second, this study suffered from low response rates. Overall, there were 627 responses out of 7,057 invitations sent, or an 8.84% response rate. The refusal rate for this survey is equal to 1 minus .0884, which equals 91.16% of the overall sampling frame. However, it is difficult to state these rates with any certainty because (1) there is no guarantee that the emails sent to these individuals was ever received, and (2) people join and quit facebook.com groups all the time, so there is no clear way of knowing that the same people were contacted in the follow-ups. Furthermore, the survey was only available online for one month (until I received at least 600 responses) so it is probable that those who waited too long to respond or had not been on facebook.com during that time period could not respond quick enough to participate. In addition, some of the responses were ineligible for the survey (40 in all) because the respondent was either a

non-US citizen or under the age of eighteen. Given the limitations imposed upon me by facebook.com, there was no way to avoid these kinds of complications.

Third, there seems to be response bias in the sample. Given the number of questions in the survey and the low response rate discussed above, it seems likely that this sample consists mostly of those who are the most interested in the topic area. Despite the use of a personal invitation along with multiple follow-up contacts made by me, responses were hard to come by. Given the nature of facebook.com as a place where users like to avoid solicitors and privacy settings, perhaps these low response rates could not have been avoided.

Nevertheless, I contend that this sample, while imperfect, contains a large number of somewhat diverse Internet users who are representative of a much larger population. While the response rates are low and are cause for concern, I point out that the sampling procedure used here was more of a hybrid between purposive and random sampling techniques, and note that the Internet really does not lend itself to pure random sampling (Davis 1999). Overall, I feel that this dissertation was still able to adequately locate a sizable and relevant population to sample. In future research, the hiring of an online surveying company should be able to sample a more diverse population and be able to produce higher response rates. In doing so, the results of future research may be better able to attract those who are less interested in politics and are politically independent, making the findings more applicable to the US population than they are now.

Directions for Future Research

While chapter two was useful in illustrating how different sources covered politics differently, no emphasis was placed upon the receivers of these messages to see if

the messages were influencing these readers. Also, further research could be conducted involving the selection of which sources Internet users decided to attend to and which reports they believed to be true. Experimental research methods could be useful for showing the ability of online news reporters to persuade the public. The use of experiments could also see how people complement their online news consumption to the sources they see and read offline, illustrating commonalities and differences in the patterns.

In future research, different sources of news could be pitted against one another within experiments, seeing if some kinds of news sources are more persuasive than other ones, and under what conditions are different sources of news preferred by the reader? These kinds of questions remain unanswered, particularly when comparing stories received by bloggers versus other news stories. For example, it seems plausible that people read blogs for entertainment purposes and supplementing these perspectives with mainstream news stories, which they still trust more in terms of reporting objective facts.

Also, while the findings in this dissertation point to some of the personal characteristics and motives involved in online political activity and cyber Balkanization, these findings are still preliminary and in need of further investigation. Future research should also try to identify other personality factors, beliefs, values, and living conditions which lead Internet users to be self-selective in regards to politics and community. By locating such influences, social psychologists and experts within the field of computer-mediated communication can steer the public towards important improvements of the public sphere.

Nevertheless, quantitative research will need to find better measurements for key variables such as identity, self-construal, and cyber Balkanization. The development of better measures for these elusive and abstract concepts would be very fruitful in terms of the quality of future research. However, research pertaining to cyber Balkanization and political identities can benefit via the application of qualitative methods as well. In order to improve the validity of research in this area, qualitative research such as participant observation could illustrate dimensions and relevance of these concepts despite the limitations of measurement techniques that this field of research currently faces.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Content Analysis Coding Sheet used in Chapter Two

C01: ID Number of the document (starting with the number 0001)

C02: Name of the News Source

C03: Code Identification of the news source

10= DailyKos.com	20= powerlineblog.com
11= huffingtonpost.com	21= Instapundit.com
12= crooksandliars.com	22= littlegreenfootballs.com
13= americablog.com	23= michellemalkin.com
14= talkleft.com	24= andrewsullivan.com
15= eschaton.com	25= redstate.com
16= talkingpointsmemo.com	26= vodkapundit.com
17= smirkingchimp.com	27= wizbangblog.com
18= digbysblog.blogspot.com	28= drudgereport.com
19= wonkette.com	29= allamericanblogger.com
30= BarackObama.com	
31= JoeBiden.com	
32= Democrats.org	
33= MoveOn.org	
41= JohnMcCain.com	
42= Vice-President Website	
43= Republicanparty.org	
44= Townhall.com	
51= Abcnews.com	61= Wallstreetjournal.com
52= Nbcnews.com	62= Newyorktimes.com
53= Cbs.com	63= Washingtonpost.com
71= Cnn.com	81= Yahoo.com
72= Msnbc.com	82= Msn.com
73= Foxnews.com	83= News.google.com

C04: Month of the Posting

9= September

10= October

11= November

C05: Date of the Posting

C06: Does the message attempt to define where an opposing party candidate stands, or to assert where the supported candidate stand?

0= Does not attempt to define any candidate stand

1= Yes, opposing party defines where an opposing candidate stands

2= Yes, writer pundit defines where a supported candidate stands

3= Yes, multiple sources define the candidate

C7: Does the message allow the candidate do define his stance with Direct Quotes

0= no

- 1= Yes, Obama or Biden
- 2= Yes, McCain or Palin
- 3= Yes, Both Candidates

C08: what is the issue of concern?

- 1= War in the Middle East (issues)
- 1= Jobs/Economy (issues)
- 1= Environment (issues)
- 1= Foreclosure/Debt (issues)
- 2= Personal Character of Candidate
- 3 = Political Polling/Strategy (horserace)
- 4= Other

C9: Does the message try to refute (or respond to) another claim that some other issue should be at the top of the presidential agenda?

- 0= No
- 1= Yes

C10: Is the message personally hostile towards the presidential candidate?

- 0= No
- 1= Yes

C11: If so, does the hostile message draw attention to a specific policy as well?

- 0= No
- 1= Yes

C12: Does the writer portray candidate as insincere or lying?

- 0= No
- 1= Yes

C13: What is the overall frame of the article?

- 1= Neutral or No Valence
- 2= Obama Campaign Positive
- 3= Obama Campaign Negative
- 4= McCain Campaign Positive
- 5= McCain Campaign Negative

C14: Does the writer seem skeptical of candidate or policy?

- 0= Not Skeptical
- 1= Skeptical towards the candidate
- 2= Skeptical towards the policy issue
- 3= Skeptical towards both candidate and policy

Appendix B: Alphabetical Listing of Each Survey Item used

Age

Currently, what is your age? _____

Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer)

I enjoy a good argument over a controversial issue

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

Arguing with people typically creates more problems for me than it solves

(SA = -2, A = -1, NS = 0, D =1, SD = 2)

I get an unpleasant feeling when I realize I am about to get into an argument

(SA = -2, A = -1, NS = 0, D =1, SD = 2)

I enjoy defending my point of view on an issue

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

I consider an argument to be an exciting intellectual challenge

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these five closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +10 to -10.

Certainty in Political Beliefs

My support for Democrats or Republicans tends to vary from one issue to the next.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

I don't feel that I would ever support any other political party than the one I support now.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to -4.

Cyber Balkanization defined by Online Actions/Behaviors

I feel more comfortable when I am around people who think similarly to me .

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

When someone expresses a political view to me that is different from my own, it makes me feel uneasy.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

When confronted to a political view that is different from mine, I prefer to talk about something other than politics.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these three closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +6 to -6.

Cyber Balkanization defined by beliefs about a Community

I think that a community is a group of people that share your values whether they live physically close to you or not

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

If a person does not share the values of a group, they should leave it voluntarily.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to -4.

Dogmatism (Rokeach Scale)

It is only when a person devotes him/herself to an ideal/cause that life becomes meaningful

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

It is never necessary to restrict a person's freedom of speech

(SA = -2, A = -1, NS = 0, D = 1, SD = 2)

For most questions, there is many possible right answers

(SA = -2, A = -1, NS = 0, D = 1, SD = 2)

Extremely tolerant people probably have few opinions of their own

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

A group that accepts too much difference of opinion among its members cannot exist very long

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these five closed-ended questions were then summed

together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +10 to -10.

Education

Please indicate which of the following describes your current level of formal education.

- ☐ Some High School (=0)
- ☐ High School diploma (=0)
- ☐ Some College (=0)
- ☐ Associates Degree (=0)
- ☐ Bachelors Degree (=1)
- ☐ Some Graduate School (=1)
- ☐ Masters Degree (=1)
- ☐ Post-Graduate or PHD (=1)

--- Education was measured as a dummy variable.

Frequency of Time spent online

How much time per day do you spend online? _____

How much time per day do you spend yesterday? _____

----These two open-ended questions were than averaged together to measure the variable.

Gender: (1 Categorical Measure)

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male (= 1)
- ☐ Female (= 0)

---Gender was used as a dummy variable.

Perceptions that user has Like-Minded Family

I think that most of my family shares the same political values as me

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

Perceptions that user has Like-Minded Friends

I think that most of my friends share my political values

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

Perception that user lives in a Like-Minded Community

I think that most of the people in the city I live in share my political values

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

Most people in my community think the same way as me most of the time

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

---The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to -4.

Political Activity Levels

I have signed an online petition during the 2008 Presidential election (Yes = 1, No =0)

I have used the internet to help myself participate in an offline political action (such as a protest) (Yes = 1, No =0)

I have donated money ONLINE to a political campaign in 2008 (Yes = 1, No =0)

I have actively tried to persuade others THAT I MET ONLINE into changing their minds during the presidential election (Yes = 1, No =0)

I volunteered time to a Presidential campaign during the 2008 election (Yes = 1, No =0)

---The responses from these five closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +5 to 0.

Political Identity of Respondent

The rich are too highly taxed.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

The federal government is too big.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

There would be fewer problems in our country if we would eliminate the separation of church and state.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

Gays and lesbians should be able to marry or at least be treated as married under law if they so desire.

(SA = -2, A = -1, NS = 0, D = 1, SD = 2)

I believe that the economy performs best when government regulations are kept to a minimum.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

The government has a duty to reduce poverty by enacting programs aimed to transfer money from the wealthy in order to assist people of modest means.

(SA = -2, A = -1, NS = 0, D = 1, SD = 2)

----The responses from these six closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +12 to -12.

Political Information-Seeking

I go online for political news. (Yes = 1, No =0)

I read a political blog at least once a week (Yes = 1, No =0)

I read or post comments to a political message board. (Yes = 1, No =0)

I have signed up to receive news email from a political organization (Yes = 1, No =0)

----The responses from these four closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to 0.

Politically Interested

In general, I consider myself a person who is interested in politics

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

When it comes to political issues, I have very strong opinions.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to -4.

Race

I would describe myself as being

- _____ Caucasian/White (=1)
- _____ African-American/Black (=0)
- _____ Asian (=0)
- _____ Hispanic (=0)
- _____ Native-American Indian (=0)
- _____ Middle Eastern (=0)
- _____ Mixed Race (=0)
- _____ Other (=0)

--- Race was used as a dummy variable.

Self-Construal: Collective (Singelis Self-Construal Scale)

(Each question is scored from +3=Very Much like me, to -3 = Not like me at all)

- _____ I will stay in a group if they need me, even when I am not happy with the group.
- _____ My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me.
- _____ It is important to me to respect the decisions made by the group I am in.
- _____ I respect people who are modest about themselves.
- _____ My self-image largely depends on how close friends see me.

---The responses from these five closed-ended questions were standardized, then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +15 to -15.

Self-Construal: Independent (Singelis Self-Construal Scale)

(Each question is scored from +3=Very Much like me, to -3 = Not like me at all)

- _____ I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards.
- _____ I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects.
- _____ I set a high value on traits that differentiate me from other people.

---Responses from these three closed-ended questions were standardized, then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +9 to -9.

Single-Issue Individual News Seeking

Instead of following all political news, I tend to follow only an issue that is important to me.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

I tend to seek out a lot of news about a few issues that I follow passionately.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to -4.

Trust in the Government

You can trust the government in Washington D.C. to do the right thing most of the time.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

Trust in the News Media

Whenever the news media reports a story, I feel confident that their facts are accurate.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

There is so much bias in the news that it is difficult to figure out what is really going on.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to -4.

Trust in Other People

Most of the time, people can be trusted to do the right thing

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

In general, people will take advantage of you if they are given the chance to do so.

(SA=2, A= 1, NS=0, D = -1, SD = -2)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +4 to -4.

User desires bolstering/support from similar others online

I go online to find information that I can use as ammunition in arguments against others.

(1=Agree, 0 = Disagree)

I go online to find out about issues that are affecting people similar to me.

(1=Agree, 0 = Disagree)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +2 to 0.

User wants to avoid criticism of others when expressing self

I use the internet to say what I want about politics without having to hear the criticisms of others.

(1=Agree, 0 = Disagree)

The internet is a space where I can say whatever I am feeling without having to endure censorship from others.

(1=Agree, 0 = Disagree)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +2 to 0.

User wants to express anger about political opponents

I feel anger towards those who are voting against the candidate I support for president.

(1=Agree, 0 = Disagree)

I dislike those people who oppose my political values

(1=Agree, 0 = Disagree)

----The responses from these two closed-ended questions were then summed together to measure the variable. Values of this variable ranged from +2 to 0.

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