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Online and in the Know: Uses and Gratifications of the Web for Political Information

Barbara K. Kaye and Thomas J. Johnson

The uses and gratifications approach is well suited for studying the World Wide Web as a whole and for examining specific types of sites within the Web. This study, therefore, examines the uses and gratifications of accessing online sources for political information. A factor analysis revealed 4 primary motivations for connecting to online political information: guidance information-seeking/surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. Additionally, significant correlations emerged between the 4 motivations and amount of use, trust in government, feelings of efficacy, interest in politics, and the likelihood of voting.

In advancing an agenda for studying the Internet, several new technology researchers have advocated a uses and gratifications approach to examining the motives for why individuals use the Internet. These calls for the uses and gratifications approach to studying the Internet (Morris & Ogan, 1996; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996) echo the pleas of several uses and gratifications scholars (Palmgreen, 1984; Williams, Phillips, & Lum, 1985) to adapt that approach to the study of emerging communication technologies.

While researchers have increasingly turned to the uses and gratifications perspective to examine how individuals use the Internet in general (e.g., collective use of the World Wide Web, e-mail, chat rooms, and other functions; Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Kaye, 1998; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000) or for commercial purposes (Eighmey, 1997; Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999), little attention has been paid to how individuals use the Web for political information. Also, few researchers have taken the next step: linking audience Web use motivations with political effects. Finally, while most studies examine how gratifications predict political attitudes, this study examines the other perspective: How will political self-efficacy, the degree to which people

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believe they can influence the actions of politicians and government, and other political attitudes predict Web motivations?

Uses and Gratifications Approach

The uses and gratifications approach has been viewed by its proponents as a welcome antidote to earlier direct effects models by examining what people do with the media rather than what the media do to people (Katz, 1959). Uses and gratifications researchers assume that audience members actively search out media messages to satisfy certain needs, a change from earlier assumptions that audience members were an undifferentiated mass that passively receives media messages. Specifically, the uses and gratifications approach assumes that (a) the audience is active, (b) media use is goal directed, (c) media consumption can fill a wide range of needs, (d) people have enough self-awareness to know and articulate their reasons for using the media, and (e) gratifications have their origins in media content, exposure, and the social context within which the exposure takes place (McLeod & Becker, 1981). Later scholars have labored to strengthen the concept's theoretical framework by linking it to expectancy value theory (Palmgreen & Rayburn II, 1982) and to dependency theory (Wenner, 1982). To explain why audience motives for using the media do not always appear goal oriented, Rubin (1984) also distinguished between ritualistic television viewing (people who often consume media content out of habit and thus do not have well-defined gratification goals) and instrumental viewing (those who intentionally seek out media content to satisfy certain needs).

Uses and Gratifications and the Internet

While several early uses and gratifications studies examined how people use political information to gratify needs, later studies have moved away from political content to examine media use in general and use of entertainment media (McLeod & Becker, 1981). This has occurred at a time when political apathy and distrust of politics and politicians have increased and when the media increasingly have been blamed for having helped cause this political discontent (Fallows, 1996; Lichter & Noyes, 1996). Few studies have examined what motivates individuals to use the Internet for political information, although the Internet has been hailed as a tool to reinvigorate the democratic process by creating a new electronic public square that allows citizens to directly connect with each other and to contact government officials. The Internet also increases access to political information, which should create a better informed citizenry who participate more in political life and who have a greater influence on the political process (Bimber, 1998; Johnson & Kaye, 1998b, 2000).

While the uses and gratifications approach has traditionally been applied to the mass media, scholars have advocated that the approach be employed to examine new communication technologies (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Palmgreen, 1984;

Williams, Phillips, & Lum 1985). The uses and gratifications approach may be particularly well suited to studying the Internet. While individuals can attempt to gratify television needs through simply switching on the set and clicking the remote control, the two-way nature of online technologies such as e-mail, bulletin boards, and chat rooms requires audience members to be active users. Similarly, Web users actively search for information by clicking on links or using search engines, suggesting Web use is goal directed and that users are aware of the needs they are attempting to satisfy (Lin & Jeffres, 1998). Finally, because of the wide range of material available on the Internet, those who use any of its functions should be able to fulfill a variety of needs (Eighmey 1997; Kaye, 1998).

Perceptions of the media's ability to gratify needs are influenced by the attributes of the media, especially characteristic content and their mode of transmission (Perse & Courtright, 1993; Perse & Dunn, 1998). Indeed, studies suggest that different media can satisfy different needs. However, functionally similar media may serve similar needs and may even displace the time devoted to traditional media that are functionally similar if the new technologies are perceived to have a relative advantage over the earlier technology (Atkin, Jeffres, & Neuendorf, 1998). For instance, VCRs, which allow people to view movies at home, cut into time spent going out to see movies (Lin, 1993).

Television and the Internet, then, may gratify similar needs because they are structurally similar; Kaye and Medoff (2001) have described the Internet, especially the Web, as a cross between television and the computer. Indeed, studies that have examined motives for Web use in general find that, like television, the Web tends to satisfy entertainment, escape, and social interaction needs (Eighmey, 1997; Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Kaye, 1998; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

However, while the Internet may be structurally similar to television, it is not identical. Certain interactive functions of the Internet, such as e-mail, chat rooms, and listservs, do not compete functionally with television. But even major uses of the Web such as searching for product information, researching for work, and downloading software do not compete functionally with the act of passively watching television (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Nie & Ebring, 2000; Pew Research, 2000). Consequently, television and the Web do not gratify identical needs. While the Web in general may satisfy entertainment, escape, and social interaction needs, it may also gratify users' needs to find information about some feature of society or the world around them (surveillance).

Similarly, scholars suggest that while the Internet in general may largely satisfy diverse needs, specific functions of the Internet, such as e-mail and electronic news groups or bulletin boards, largely gratify information needs (Garramone, Harris, & Anderson, 1986; James, Wotring, & Forrest, 1995). Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) found that different functions of the Internet served different needs. E-mail satisfied information and entertainment needs. Information seeking predicted Web browsing, and convenience negatively predicted newsgroup, listserv, or bulletin board use. No motives they measured explained chatroom use. Finally, when respondents were

allowed to give open-ended answers to why they used the Internet, they typically listed information seeking rather than entertainment needs (Kaye, 1998; Nie, & Ebring, 2000).

Because certain Web content, such as online newspapers, serves surveillance needs, and because people predominantly list information seeking needs when asked open-ended questions about their Web use, politically interested Web users may be more likely to employ the Internet to gratify informational rather than entertainment needs.

Internet and Political Effects

Little attention has been paid to how well political attitudes predict Internet gratifications. However, several researchers have studied the extent to which the Internet is linked to political attitudes. Recent studies (e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1998; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000) have disputed the claim that the Internet is "a haven for isolated geeks who are unaware of important events occurring outside their cavelike bedrooms" (Katz, 1997, p. 72).

Indeed, in many ways Internet users appear to be model citizens. In general, Internet users report high levels of self-efficacy, the belief that one has the power to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1986), in this case influence government officials and the political process (Bonchek, 1997). Those who have high self-efficacy may rely on the Internet because it provides individuals a forum to voice their views to government officials and like-minded individuals. For instance, e-mail reduces both the cost and time of communicating with lawmakers, which may encourage more people to try to influence the political process (Bimber, 1998). The low cost of creating Web pages and sending out e-mail messages enables grassroots activists to better recruit, organize, and mobilize individuals. Also, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and Usenet groups provide an ideal forum for individuals of all ideologies and nationalities to express their views on anything from the budget deficit to the most recent episode of *Survivor III* (Hill & Hughes, 1998).

Those with high self-efficacy are more involved in politics and consequently are more likely to vote and engage in other political activities (Pinkleton & Austin, 1998). Internet users are also more politically interested (Johnson & Kaye, 1998b, 2000) and are more likely to vote (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Katz, 1997) than the general public. Furthermore, politically active Internet users score higher on these measures than general users (Hill & Hughes, 1998).

But while Internet users may appear to be model citizens and they believe they have the power to influence government, they do not necessarily express confidence in the government to carry out policies. Internet users report high levels of political distrust (Johnson & Kaye, 1998b; Katz, 1997). Researchers also fear that time spent on new technologies such as the Internet also could create social costs by reducing time spent on other valuable activities.[1]

Researchers differ on how strength of party affiliation is linked to Internet use.

Some argue that because some Internet users are political activists, they tend to be more partisan than the average individual (Bonchek, Hurwitz, & Mallery, 1996). Others suggest that the Internet tends to attract those who are disconnected from the traditional parties and are thus more independent or libertarian than nonusers (Georgia Institute, 1997; Katz 1997). Finally, some studies suggest that those who surf the Net differ little in strength of party support from nonusers (Pew Research, 1999).

Gratifications and Political Attitudes

While studies have not explored the link between Internet gratifications and political attitudes, past researchers have explored the relationship between traditional media motivations and political attitudes. McLeod and Becker (1974), in the first and perhaps most extensive examination of the relationship between media gratifications and political effects, found that a combination of gratification and avoidance measures explained a significant amount of the variance in a host of political effects variables, including issue accuracy, probability of voting, interest in the campaign, campaign activity, level of political discussion, and perceived differences between candidates after controlling for amount of exposure to the media. Among individual gratifications, using television to judge candidates and keep up with issues (surveillance measures) was linked to the most political effects variables followed by voter guidance. Later research reinforces McLeod and Becker's findings that media use expectations are linked to political attitudes and behaviors. For instance, several studies found that those who use the media for surveillance and voter guidance report high levels of political interest and political knowledge as well as a high likelihood to vote (Becker 1976; Garramone, 1985).

While researchers typically examine the effects of the news media on political attitudes, several scholars who have examined the link between the news media and politics over time suggest that researchers have the relationship reversed. That is, political attitudes and behaviors lead to news media use rather than vice versa. Those who are more involved and interested in the political process are more likely to seek out campaign information, as are those with higher levels of self-efficacy (Tan, 1980). Also, those who are more involved and interested in a campaign and those who believe they can influence the political process will use the media more purposefully (Chaffee & Schleuder 1986; Pinkleton & Austin, 1998). Therefore, those who are politically interested, involved, and more efficacious are likely to use the media to serve surveillance rather than entertainment needs.

Research Questions

Because past studies of traditional media suggest that political attitudes such as self-efficacy, political interest, strength of party support, political trust, and likelihood of voting predict informational rather than entertainment needs, such political

attitudes and behaviors are likely to predict informational rather than entertainment motives for using the Internet. Therefore, this study of the uses and gratifications of online sources will explore what needs will be satisfied by using the World Wide Web for political information, and it will examine how well factors, particularly self-efficacy, predict Web use motivations.

This study of the uses and gratifications of online sources examines three primary questions:

RQ1: What needs will those who use the World Wide Web for political information report they fulfill through online use?

RQ2: How strongly do motivations for Web use correlate with interest in politics, strength of party support, likelihood of voting, self-efficacy, and trust in politics?

RQ3: How strongly does self-efficacy predict motivations for using the Web for political purposes after controlling for other demographic, media use, and political factors?

Method

An online survey was designed to attract politically interested Web users. The survey was posted on the World Wide Web during the two weeks before and the two weeks after the 1996 presidential election (October 23 through November 20, 1996). Additionally, links were established to the survey from nine other politically oriented Web sites, such as PoliticsNow and Election Nexus, and notices were sent to media and politically oriented discussion groups, forums, Usenet groups, and listservs informing them of the survey.

By its nature the Internet poses a unique set of problems in guaranteeing a random sample of respondents. Unlike telephone and mail surveys, where samples can be produced through census lists and random digit dialing, the Web has no central registry of users, and e-mail addresses are so varied that they are virtually impossible to construct randomly, making Internet sampling very complex (Kaye & Johnson, 1999; Wu & Weaver, 1997). The intent of this survey was not to generate a random sample, but to attract politically interested Web users—those who would be more likely to use online media sources (see Table 1).

Web Use Motivations

Motivations for using the Web for political information were comprised of 18 statements derived from past uses and gratifications studies (Kaye, 1998; McLeod & Becker, 1974; McLeod & Becker, 1981).[2] Respondents indicated their level of agreement with the reasons for accessing the Web. Possible responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The items were then factored by principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Items were assigned to a particular factor if the primary loadings were greater than .60 (Stevens, 1986). Summated indexes of each factor were created by summing the individual variables, and reliability

Table 1
Profile of Respondents

DEMOGRAPHICS
Male: 75.5%
Female: 24.5%
Average age: 31.2
Bachelor's degree or higher: 61.9%
Ethnicity
White: 88.3%
Black: 2.8%
Other: 8.9%
Income
32.7% less than $25,000
45.1% between $25,001–$65,000
22.2% over $65,0001
Political Affiliation
Democrats: 36.5%
Republicans: 34.0%
Independent: 18.1%
Other: 11.5%
POLITICAL ATTITUDES
Strong interest in 1996 presidential campaign: 72.6%
Strong interest in politics in general: 70.8%
Low to moderate trust in the government: 88.1%
Moderate to high levels of self-efficacy: 92.9%
WEB USE
Hours per week on Web: 13.2
Hours per week on Web seeking political information: 3.0

analysis was conducted. Reliability for the four factors ranged from .64 to .85 (Cronbach's α). The four factors that emerged were guidance, information/surveillance, entertainment, and social utility (see Table 2).

Political Attitudes

Strength of party affiliation, likelihood of voting, political interest, trust in the government, and feelings of self-efficacy were correlated with each of the Web use factors and then used to predict Internet gratifications. Respondents were asked to report whether they view themselves as "strong Democrat," "lean toward Democrat," "strong Republican," "lean toward Republican," "independent," or "other". Categories were then collapsed into "strong partisan" (strong Republican and strong

Table 2
Motivations for Using the Web for Political Information Factors

	Factors			
"I use the Web for political information . . ."	1	2	3	4
Factor 1: Guidance				
to help me decide how to vote	.82	.14	.09	.04
to help me decide about important issues	.73	.21	.05	.15
to see what a candidate will do if elected	.69	.05	.11	.23
to judge personal qualities of candidates	.68	.05	.12	.10
for unbiased viewpoints	.62	.29	−.06	−.11
Factor 2: Information Seeking/Surveillance				
because information is easy to obtain	.21	.77	.15	−.00
to find specific political info. I'm looking for	.18	.77	.04	.16
to keep up with main issues of the day	.20	.60	.05	.27
Factor 3: Entertainment				
because it is entertaining	−.04	.07	.85	.05
because it helps me relax	.14	−.03	.66	.10
because it is exciting	.18	.26	.65	.06
Factor 4: Social Utility				
to give me something to talk about with others	.12	.10	.18	.82
to use as ammunition in arguments with others	.07	.24	.05	.75
Eigenvalue	5.51	1.92	1.33	1.21
Variance explained	30.60	10.70	7.40	6.70

Democrat combined), "weak partisan" (weak Republican and weak Democrat combined); "independent' and "other" were not collapsed. Respondents were also asked to indicate their likelihood of voting and their degree of interest in politics in general on a 0-10 scale.

A summated index measuring trust in the government was made up of the following items from the National Election Studies conducted by the University of Michigan (NES, 2001): "Most of our leaders are devoted to service," "Politicians never tell us what they really think," and "I don't think public officials care much about what people like me think." Two measures of political self-efficacy, the degree to which people believe they can influence the political process, were also employed: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does," and "Every vote counts in an election, including yours and mine." The response options for each attitude index ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The polarity was reversed on the second and third statements of the trust index and the first efficacy item so that responses would run from low to high levels of trust and efficacy.

Analysis

This study also employed correlation and regression analyses. The four factors were correlated with five attitude measures–strength of party affiliation, interest in politics, likelihood of voting, feelings of trust in government, and levels of self-efficacy. Hierarchical regression was conducted to examine the extent to which self-efficacy predicts motivations for using the Web for political information after controlling for demographics (age, income, gender, education) and political attitudes (strength of party affiliation, political interest, trust, likelihood of voting). The predictors were entered as blocks. Demographic variables were entered first, followed by strength of party affiliation, political interest, trust, and likelihood of voting. Self-efficacy was entered as the third block.

Results

Motivations

This study examines 308 responses to an online survey assessing the motivations for using the Web as a source of political information. The first research question addresses the reasons why individuals access the Web for political information. Factor analysis revealed the following four motivations for obtaining political information from the Web: guidance, information seeking/surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. Each factor had an eigenvalue of at least one (guidance, 5.51; information seeking/surveillance, 1.92; entertainment, 1.33; social utility, 1.21), accounting for 55.4% of the variance. Four of 18 motivational statements had factor loadings of less than .60, and thus were not included in any of the factors (see Table 2).

Individuals who connect to political sites for guidance reasons are generally interested in learning about the issues and the viewpoints of candidates and other information to guide their voting decisions. Information seeking/surveillance is a more purposeful activity than guidance and is defined as actively searching out specific political information and keeping an eye on the political landscape. Entertainment is using the Web for relaxation and amusement purposes, and social utility is using the Internet to reinforce decisions and arm individuals with information to use in discussions with others.

Motivations and Attitudes

The relationships between reasons for using the Web for political information and attitudes towards politics in general are the focus of the second research question. Respondents' levels of self-efficacy, strength of party affiliation, interest in politics,

likelihood of voting, and feelings of trust in government were correlated with each of the four Web use motivations (see Table 3).

Table 3
Correlations of Web Use Motivations

	Web Use Motivation Factors			
Use Motivations	*Guidance*	*Info. Seeking/ Surveillance*	*Entertainment*	*Social Utility*
Correlates (*r*)				
self-efficacy	.09	.14**	.14**	−.04
strength of party affiliation	−.08	.05	.07	.04
interest in politics	.07	.13*	.04	.26***
trust in government	−.15**	−.02	.12*	−.06
likelihood of voting	−.02	.04	−.04	.08

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Higher levels of self-efficacy are significantly, though weakly, associated with information seeking/surveillance ($r = .14$, $p < .01$) and entertainment ($r = .14$, $p < .01$). Those who believe they have a voice in government and have the power to change things are more likely to use political sites for entertainment or information seeking purposes.

Higher interest in politics is associated with accessing the Web for social utility ($r = .26$, $p < .001$) and information seeking/surveillance ($r = .13$, $p < .05$) reasons. Politically interested individuals are eager to discuss what they found on the Web with their friends and family, and they access political sites to look for information concerning candidates and issues.

Correlations revealed significant associations between trust in politics and guidance ($r = -.15$, $p < .01$) and entertainment ($r = .12$, $p < .05$). While entertainment is positively associated with trust, guidance is negatively related, indicating that the more people trust the government the less likely they are to turn to the Web for political advice or to see what others think about candidates or issues. Neither strength of party affiliation nor likelihood of voting was significantly associated with any of the reasons for seeking political information online (see Table 3).

Predictors of Web Use Motivations

The third research question asks how strongly self-efficacy predicts the reasons for using the Internet for political information. Regression analysis reveals that self-efficacy significantly predicts guidance ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$) and information seeking/surveillance ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$), and though self-efficacy is not a significant predictor of social utility, when added to the regression equation the model becomes

significant: $R = .44$, $R^2 = .20$, $F = (8, 200) = 2.75$, $p < .01$. Self-efficacy does not predict whether politically interested users will use the Internet for entertainment purposes.

Interest in politics is the only other political attitude that predicts any of the motivations for using the Internet for political purposes. Use of the Internet for social reasons is strongly and significantly predicted by an interest in politics ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$). None of the other attitude measures—likelihood of voting, strength of party affiliation, or trust in the government—explain the reasons people use the Web for politics.

Guidance. Levels of self-efficacy positively and significantly predict using the Web for political guidance after controlling for political attitudes and demographics ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$). Those respondents who feel that they can bring about political change and that their vote makes a difference go online for political guidance (see Table 4).

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Guidance

Predictor Variables	Regression 1	Regression 2	Regression 3
Gender	.14	.12	.14
Age	.09	.04	.01
Education	−.46***	−.47***	−.43***
Income	−.03	−.01	.00
Strength/party affiliation		.01	−.03
Political Interest		.11	.11
Trust		.01	−.08
Likelihood of voting		.08	.06
Self-efficacy			.21*
R^2	.232	.249	.282
Adjusted R	.202	.186	.213
R^2 change	.232	.017	.033
Sig. of change	.000	.000	.000

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Information seeking/surveillance. Levels of self-efficacy positively and significantly predict using the Web for the purpose of gathering political information ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$). When self-efficacy is added to the model, the R^2 change is 12.4% after controlling for demographics and other political attitudes. Moreover, self-efficacy predicts information/surveillance better than any other motivation.

Respondents who feel they have the power to bring about change use the Internet to seek out political information and survey the political scene. High levels of self-efficacy may empower users to search for specific political information that may not be available through traditional mass media that commonly filters information through gatekeepers (see Table 5).

Table 5
Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Information/Surveillance

Predictor Variables	Regression 1	Regression 2	Regression 3
Gender	.17	.15	.17
Age	.04	−.00	−.06
Education	−.17	−.20**	−.13
Income	−.07	−.05	.00
Strength/party affiliation		.14	.05
Political interest		.02	.02
Trust		.11	−.09
Likelihood of voting		.05	.02
Self-efficacy			.43***
R^2	.068	.103	.227
Adjusted R	.032	.032	.156
R^2 change	.068	.035	.124
Sig. of change	.115	.185	.002

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Entertainment. Neither demographics nor political attitudes predict whether politically interested Internet users go online for entertainment.

Social utility. Although self-efficacy does not predict whether a politically interested person uses the Internet for social purposes, the model becomes significant after it is added to the equation after controlling for demographics and other political attitudes (see Table 6).

Interest in politics significantly predicts the use of the Web for social utility ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$). Even after controlling for demographics, levels of political interest determine whether online users seek political information for social utility reasons. Respondents with greater interest in politics apparently go online so they can present an informed point of view when discussing politics with friends and family (see Table 6).

Demographics as predictors of Internet use. Education is the only demographic variable that significantly predicts uses of the Internet. Education is a significant and negative predictor of using the Internet for political guidance ($\beta = -.43$, $p < .001$) and social utility reasons ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

This study examined the uses and gratifications of political Web sites. It specifically looked at the associations between motivations for using the Internet and political attitudes (trust in the government, interest in politics, likelihood of voting,

Table 6
Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Social Utility

Predictor Variables	Regression 1	Regression 2	Regression 3
Gender	.06	.01	.02
Age	−.05	−.18	−.20
Education	−.21**	−.23**	−.21**
Income	−.04	.00	.03
Strength/party affiliation		.15	.12
Political interest		.32***	.32***
Trust		.04	−.03
Likelihood of voting		.11	.10
Self-efficacy			.15
R^2	.060	.181	.197
Adjusted R	.024	.115	.124
R^2 change	.060	.121	.016
Sig. of change	.163	.165	.008

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

strength of party affiliation, self-efficacy), and how well political attitudes, particularly self-efficacy, predict motivations for using the Web for political information.

The Internet provides a wealth of political information, including a considerable amount of material that has not been filtered, edited, or scrutinized by traditional media. Online political information can be accessed from home and at any time of the day or night. The large and growing volume of political information on the Internet, coupled with its convenient access, is thought to create a more highly informed, politically active, and influential public (Kurtz, 1995). Indeed, the respondents in this study who were already avid Internet users reported strong feelings of self-efficacy. This would influence their motivations for using the Internet for political information. In keeping with the assumptions of uses and gratifications, this study's respondents are active citizens who seek specific information via search services, click their way from site to site, and interact with others via chat rooms, listservs, and other two-way communication tools.

This Web-delivered survey specifically examined the motives of 308 respondents for accessing political Web sites. Reasons for connecting to politically oriented sites factored into four motivational categories: guidance, information seeking/surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. Accessing the Web for entertainment was not as strong of a motivation as guidance and information seeking/surveillance. Results from this research, then, support traditional media studies that have found that political attitudes are more strongly linked to measures of information seeking/surveillance and guidance than entertainment (Garramone, 1985; Becker, 1976). These results could largely be due to the nature of the type of sites respondents

typically visited. When individuals connect to political sites, it is likely they do so with goal-oriented purposes rather than just for the sake of entertainment gratifications offered by the Web at large. Therefore, guidance and information seeking/surveillance needs may be linked to more purposeful uses of the Web than just connecting for the sake of idle surfing. These findings support the work of Ko (2000) and Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), who have suggested that people use the Internet instrumentally rather than as a habit or to simply pass time.

Political attitudes are shaped by many different factors; for most respondents, their attitudes were formed long before the advent of the Internet. Self-efficacy emerged as the major predictor of how individuals who are already online use the Internet. This supports early studies that suggest that Internet users report high levels of self-efficacy (Bonchek, 1997). Self-efficacy influenced whether individuals used the Internet for guidance and for information seeking/surveillance needs. Like talk radio and call-in television, the Internet is thought to boost self-efficacy because it allows viewers or listeners the opportunity to hear individuals like themselves articulate their political views.

Political interest was the only other political variable that predicted motives for using the Internet. Political interest also correlated with social utility and information seeking/surveillance, but only the relationship between political interest and social utility remained significant after controlling for demographic and political variables.

There is little denying that the Web is becoming an important medium that is taking its place alongside television and newspapers. It is becoming an increasingly influential medium and one that people are turning towards for serious and reliable information. Many incumbent politicians, candidates for office, and issue-oriented organizations have established Web sites in recognition of the power the Web has in garnering support and influencing voters. During the 1996 presidential election all of the major presidential candidates had Web sites. Moreover, the Pew Research Center discovered that about 20 million Americans (12% of the voting population) used the Internet to keep up with the campaign, and 2% listed the Internet as their primary source of political information ("Pew Research," 1996). Political observers suggest Internet campaigning came of age in the 2000 campaign as the Web became a major vehicle for candidates to raise campaign money and to sign up volunteers (James, 2000). Voters are also increasingly relying on the Internet for political information. One UCLA study (2000) found that the Internet (67%) ranked only behind books (73%) and newspapers (69%) as the most important source of information.

The demographic profile of this survey's respondents closely mirrored those found in other surveys conducted during the 1996 presidential campaign that used mail or random digit dialing. Although this study's findings cannot be generalized to the public at large, it does give insight into the online behaviors of politically interested Internet users—the group that was sought out for study.

It has been recognized that in situations where probability sampling is not feasible, non-probability sampling is acceptable (Babbie, 1990), and there are many instances when it is the preferred method (Babbie, 1990; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). The

Web is conducive to purposive sampling because (as this study did) subsets within the larger population of Web users can be identified and solicited through announcements and connecting links posted on key online sites and topic-related discussion groups (Bimber, 1998; Johnson & Kaye, 1998a, 1998b; Kaye & Johnson, 1999). Purposive sampling, however, generates results that are not representative of the larger population. Still, careful use of this sampling technique can produce samples that may be representative of a specific subset of the population (Babbie, 1990; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991).

Future research could perhaps employ a stratified sampling technique, where a random sample is notified via mail, telephone, or e-mail of the survey's existence and asked to participate in the research. Also a larger number of online respondents could reveal additional motivations. Further, as the number of people who use the Web on a regular basis continues to grow and people settle into patterns of use, motivations for using the Web for political purposes could be derived from open-ended responses rather than from motivations found in other studies.

This study was conducted during the 1996 campaign when the Internet was just emerging as a source of political information. Similar research should be conducted in future campaigns to determine if motives for using the Internet have changed as the Internet has become an increasingly important vehicle for political information.

Notes

[1] Some studies dispute the notion that Internet use leads to social isolation (Also, some scholars have noted that often people spend considerable time online socializing such as sending emails and talking in chat rooms; ActivMedia, 1998).

[2] "I use the Web for political information because. . ." I rely on it for unbiased viewpoints; information is easy to obtain; because it is exciting; to see how the candidates stand on various issues; to judge the personal qualities of candidates; to help make up my mind how to vote in an election; to judge who is likely to win an election; because it is entertaining; to remind me of my candidates' strong points; to give me something to talk about with others; to find out about issues affecting people like myself; to find specific political information that I'm looking for; to keep up with the main issues of the day; because it helps me relax; to see what a candidate would do if elected; to use as ammunition in arguments with others; to enjoy the excitement of an election race; to help me make up my mind about the important issues.

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