Media and Politics in the Changing Media Landscape

On November 11, 2016, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg found himself in the unexpected position of defending Facebook’s editorial policies, despite the fact that Facebook is not a news organization. Zuckerberg’s defense was necessary because of Facebook’s lingering “fake news” problem, which drew intense public scrutiny in the final stages of the 2016 presidential election. Several fake news stories were posted and shared widely on Facebook during the campaign, and even though Facebook was not founded as a news company, the exponential growth in people reporting they get their news from the site effectively makes it one. According to a 2016 Pew study, 44 percent of U.S. adults get news on Facebook. Initially Zuckerberg responded to fake news criticisms by citing an internal study showing that the fake news stories amounted to only a small fraction of Facebook’s content and claiming the idea that fake news could influence the election was “a pretty crazy idea.” Yet several fake news stories went “viral” during the campaign. At one point, Facebook’s own algorithm for “trending news” promoted a fake news story claiming that Megyn Kelly, a Fox News anchor publicly criticized by Trump, announced she was supporting Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. As the election came to a close, the emergence of several online outfits admittedly dedicated to the express purpose of disseminating fake news and revelations that Russian television network RT was also producing fake news stories underscored the severity of the problem. The image included here is a screenshot from a satirical fake news story announcing Zuckerberg’s death amidst his repeated denials of a fake news problem at Facebook. Eventually Facebook, along with Google, announced plans to combat fake news.

One of the most appealing features of digital and social media is that capturing and sharing news and information is cheap and easy—enabling ordinary citizens to share information with wide audiences from anywhere. Yet the dissemination and sharing of fake news and misinformation raises serious concerns. Social media are not just a tool for sharing stories; they are also a sourcing tool for traditional and digital journalists. Ease of access means that digital and social media provide additional channels through which news consumers can be duped with false information shared by anyone. The digital
media environment provides audiences with many affordances, such as convenience and access; the fake news examples highlight the serious misinformation challenges imposed by the contemporary media environment.5

This chapter describes and explains how the changes in mass media and communication technology have influenced media and politics in the United States. These changes include the dramatic expansion of choice brought about by cable television, the explosion of political websites, news websites, and blogs on the Internet, the pervasiveness and social media; and the expanding number of platforms through which media content is made available. In particular, this chapter examines how changes in our modern media landscape have influenced news habits, the practice and profession of journalism, campaigns and campaigning, engagement, activism, citizenship, political organizing, polarization and discourse, political learning, and democracy more generally.

THE EXPANSION OF CHOICE

The most significant change in the modern media environment is the dramatic expansion of content choice—the wide array of entertainment and public affairs content available to us at any given time or place. Seemingly endless content is available on mobile devices, online, and through our television and computer

Source: The Shovel.
screens, made available through media companies scrambling to make their content ready for consumption across a host of distribution mechanisms. This expansion has important consequences for the news profession, news content, citizens, politicians, and governance. More and more people are seeking political information online and through social media. These trends are only accelerating as mobile access to the Internet continues to proliferate and improve.

Citizen Learning and Knowledge

Early projections about the effect of the Internet on political knowledge predicted that because the Internet provided more information from many venues at a low cost, it would naturally enhance levels of political knowledge. For many people, this has in fact been the case—those who are interested in politics become better informed and exhibit higher levels of political knowledge as choice expands. However, the expansion of choice provided by the many outlets on cable and the Internet also expands the number of outlets offering entertainment content. The implication of this is that for many, namely those uninterested in politics, the expansion of choice decreases the likelihood of encountering political information and becoming more informed. Instead, the high-choice environment provides many alternatives to public affairs content. The end result for political knowledge is that with more content choices comes a widening gap in political knowledge between those who are interested in politics and those who are not.6

Social media, however, may provide incidental exposure to political information even for those not interested in politics. Candidates and political organizations are using social networking sites to send messages and share information. Hence, people may be getting political information even when they don’t seek it, and the savviest political operations make use of individuals’ existing social networks.7 For example, Facebook’s newsfeed function means that when one person “likes” political profiles or messages, a notification is shared with their entire network. Research has shown that explicitly political use of Facebook influences political behavior.8 Incidental exposure can occur through social networks—those who are politically interested often share information with their networks on sites such as Facebook or Twitter. If online networks operate similarly to the way research suggests traditional social networks function, we would expect online interaction about that shared information to stimulate conversation and the exchange of information. Even though people often have like-minded online social networks, that would not prohibit (and may possibly help) those who are less politically interested from becoming politically engaged and learning from those in their social networks who are more interested. Indeed, some research suggests that possibilities for learning from this sort of incidental exposure through social networks are promising.9 However, much of the political information shared on social media is shared with strategic goals in mind, not democratic values. Campaigns dole out heavy volumes of banal announcements and policy-free attacks, providing
clear evidence that a lot of political communication on social networks is not informative. This provides one explanation for why research identifying healthy rates of incidental exposure to political information on Facebook does not reveal correlated improvements in user political knowledge.

Political learning from news is influenced by the way information is presented and the way people process information. Some research suggests learning from digital media may be more difficult. Traditional media provide cues about where to look first, such as the main headline on the front page. The way information is presented on the Internet actually facilitates whether learning occurs. On news websites, image-heavy layouts encourage more learning and recall than classic print-heavy displays. The complexity of the information on the page in print displays hampers the search for information and inhibits object recognition and recall. Simple page layouts are also preferred to noisy, distracting designs. The Engaging News Project’s study on news sites’ page layouts illustrates a clear news recall advantage for contemporary, clean, image-based layouts relative to complex text-style displays. News audiences’
increasing reliance on digital and social media for news underscores the urgency for a better understanding of learning, recall, and engagement when news is presented in different displays across various platforms. Figure 4-1 shows the growth in social media use between 2013 and 2016. In just four years, social media has experienced substantial growth as a source of news.

**MEDIA POLARIZATION AND SELECTIVE EXPOSURE**

Beyond learning effects, the expansion of choice has prompted other concerns about the implications of the changing media environment. The expanding number of outlets and distribution mechanisms has created economic incentives for media organizations to isolate markets and provide special interest programming. This is true of cable entertainment venues such as HGTV, Lifetime, and Nickelodeon and extends online and to the political arena. As a result, most cable television packages have at least three major twenty-four-hour news networks, which together reflect a political continuum from MSNBC on the left, to CNN in the middle, to Fox on the right. Online there are countless partisan and ideologically oriented news sites and blogs. Scholars have been interested in three questions emerging from this fragmentation: (1) Are new media outlets more polarized than traditional outlets? (2) Do audiences purposely seek out news that agrees with their partisanship? (3) What are the implications when citizens seek out only the news that fits their viewpoints?

Several content-based studies have examined whether outlets in the new media environment are more polarized than traditional broadcast or print media outlets; evidence clearly suggests they are. For example, in a content analytic study, Sean Aday, Steven Livingston, and Maeve Herbert found that Fox News reporting about the 2003 Iraq War was more supportive of the effort than CNN’s coverage, supporting the view that Fox's news is oriented toward the political right. A host of other studies demonstrate the polarized partisan orientations of the three major cable news networks. In a direct comparison of traditional media versus new media outlets, Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling’s study of the 2006 midterm elections found that well-known political blogs and FoxNews.com were more partisan than stories produced by traditional news wire services.

A potentially more important question is whether citizens take advantage of the diversity of content available in today's media environment. When people choose news or public affairs information, how do they choose? Researchers have spent much time investigating the degree to which people engage in partisan selective exposure—the behavior of allowing political beliefs to dictate media choices. Partisan selective exposure predicts that citizens purposefully select pro-attitudinal messages and deliberately ignore counter-attitudinal messages. The research clearly suggests that partisan selective exposure does occur—conservatives are drawn to Fox News and liberals repelled by Fox.
However, partisan selective exposure is not absolute; its occurrence depends on the individual, the information, and the context.\textsuperscript{17}

The evidence about whether the Internet and social media enhance or repress partisan selective exposure is mixed. The Internet is clearly a contributor to the vast expansion of media choices available; it provides countless opportunities to explore viewpoints of all kinds. Further, there is limited evidence of cross-party sampling of content. Matthew Hindman, for example, finds some website traffic that crosses ideological lines where twelve of the top fifty political websites receive or send traffic from the other ideological “side.” However, his research provides more evidence of online political factions or echo chambers than cross-ideology traffic; he illustrates that web traffic is most common between websites of the same ideological viewpoint.\textsuperscript{18} Several other studies also document that online users seek out like-minded information, while others show a large proportion of the public still samples heavily from mainstream outlets.\textsuperscript{19} Some differences in findings are explained by different research methodologies.

Evidence of selective exposure behavior on social media is still emerging but is increasingly important to understand as more people are turning to these platforms for information on news and public affairs. Researchers have identified some amount of like-mindedness among individuals in the same social networks, but an important factor in whether selective exposure occurs on social media is determined by individuals’ user behaviors in social networks. People report avoiding political information on social networking sites by blocking, “unfriending,” or hiding those who post counter-attitudinal information,\textsuperscript{20} but exposure to cross-ideological content still occurs with some regularity, though less often than like-minded content. In a 2015 study of more than 10 million U.S. Facebook users, Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada Adamic report that “friends” are much less likely to share news content when it comes from news sources they disagree with. Friend networks were exposed to about 15 percent less counter-attitudinal content relative to content they agreed with, and they engaged with (as defined by clicking) 70 percent less disagreeable content than agreeable content. This selectivity limited exposure to counter-attitudinal news more than Facebook’s algorithm for ranking stories in the news feed.\textsuperscript{21}

The research suggests clear patterns of citizen gravitation toward like-minded information. Though selective exposure is variable across individuals, messages, and contexts, these behaviors are documented in cable television selections, Internet use, and social networking behaviors. It is no surprise that the next questions scholars have asked are about the impact of partisan media and selective exposure. Early concern around the topic of selective exposure focused on the potential for a spiral of selective attention where partisans seek out information only from sources supportive of their view while never getting exposed to opposing viewpoints. Other researchers have suggested that selection of pro-attitudinal content does not necessarily mean partisans are rarely
exposed to information from opposing viewpoints. Many experimental studies demonstrate negative effects from exposure to one-sided information, such as increasing dislike or hostility between the partisans on the other side and the strengthening of partisan identities.

Jennifer Jerit and Jason Barabas demonstrate the relationship between the characteristics of the new information environment and the problem of partisan perceptual bias, which is the different interpretation of facts that members of opposing parties sometimes hold. They find that partisan perceptual bias is rooted in the news environment and the way we learn information when it does not fit with our predispositions. These scholars conclude that “even though aggregate levels of knowledge increase as information in the mass media becomes more plentiful, both Democrats and Republicans learn at different rates depending on whether the information they encounter squares with their partisan predilections.” Emerging evidence suggests additional and perhaps less anticipated consequences from changes to the media environment, such as direct effects on the political behavior of elites in Congress and growing levels of partisan sorting and negative political affect in the mass public. Even though citizens prefer like-minded information and opportunities for selective exposure abound, concerns about online echo chambers or spirals of complete selectivity and avoidance may be overstated. Attempts to actively avoid counter-attitudinal information are not as strong as once thought, and once people are confronted with counter information they often spend time consuming that information. Moreover, the enormous volume of entertainment content available means that the negative impact of partisan media will always be tempered by the high proportion of users and audiences that opt out of political content altogether.

CHANGING NEWS HABITS AND POLITICAL JOURNALISM

Changes to the modern media landscape have dramatically altered news audience behaviors and the practice and profession of journalism. Over the last several decades, studies have shown the many ways political news content of the broadcast era was significantly influenced by the constraints of journalism and the news making process. Now researchers must confront the impact of the contemporary media landscape, some aspects of which are constantly changing and dramatically altering news reporting routines and the dissemination of news content.

New versus Old and Media Hybridity

There are many ways modern changes to the news media environment are influencing news content, but there is particular interest in how new platforms and distribution mechanisms for news influence the provision of information to citizens. How has the availability of news been affected? How has the depth and focus of news coverage been affected? These are particularly important
questions because a parallel consequence of changes to the media environment has been competitive stress and economic hardship for traditional news media—print media in particular. For example, in 2009 the Hearst-owned Seattle Post-Intelligencer became the first major metropolitan daily to cease publication of its print version, shifting all resources to its digital platform. Newsweek magazine published its final print edition in December 2012 to channel resources to its online news offerings. Daily newspaper circulation continues its steep decline, and between 2004 and 2014, 126 local newspapers across the country died out, succumbing to untenable economics. As news becomes more readily available from more sources—and from a diverse array of sources—many traditional venues of news gathering are losing resources daily.

There are mixed opinions about whether conflicting pressures from the emergence of digital and social media offset one another. One view is that the diversity of content available in the digital news environment eases past concerns about consolidation among traditional media outlets restricting diversity in viewpoints. This perspective views the “open source” nature of journalism in the contemporary information setting as a democratizing force. Others suggest that the emergence of so many new distribution mechanisms for news has not increased or sustained diversity of content because most news content is still produced and gathered by the same traditional outlets—and is simply aggregated content shared and distributed through a variety of news brands and platforms. At the same time, news gathering by those key traditional outlets is being hampered by more competition for attention and audiences, and many aspects of peer-produced content fall short of democratic ideals.

Though this debate is vigorous, empirical evidence is not yet sufficient to settle the argument. Research on content differences between online and traditional news shows that local newspaper and television outlets’ online coverage does not differ substantially from their traditional coverage, suggesting the addition of web versions of newspapers and news stations does not expand news diversity. The entry of digital-native news outlets into markets could have an effect if enough emerge and if they can attract audiences. A 2010 Pew study shows that most communities have seen a rise in the diversity and number of outlets when considering online and offline media, yet the same study acknowledges most of the content still comes from traditional media, particularly newspapers, and that papers are now offering less content than ever before. Matthew Hindman’s study of locally oriented websites finds very little evidence that web-native local media outlets have emerged online. Rather, most online local outlets are simply the online versions of local newspapers and television stations. Among those he finds, the audience metrics are dismal. The online audience for local news spends only a tiny fraction of time consuming local news online. In their 2015 study on the health of local information ecosystems, Philip Napoli and colleagues find high variability in the degree to which traditional and digital forms of local media combine to sufficiently address the
critical information needs of local communities. Depending on a host of factors, including the socioeconomic status of the market, some communities’ critical information needs are met, while others are often left lacking.34

Comparisons of print and online media outlets also find much similarity across traditional and online news. Recent analyses of coverage of the 2016 presidential primaries show content patterns reflective of traditional broadcast media—revealing the same old audience preference for game frame–style campaign reporting. When political strategy is featured in campaign stories, online news venues earn more page views.35 In his analysis of how new and traditional media covered the debate about U.S. involvement in the 2011 Libyan civil war, media scholar Danny Hayes finds much more similarity than difference between coverage provided by new and traditional media; new media were widely variable in the degree to which they offered substantive coverage, just as were traditional media. New media did have more source diversity than traditional outlets and less reliance on White House sources, but this positive finding is tempered somewhat by the fact that some of the additional sourcing was attributed to analysis provided by their own journalists. This research underscores an apparent paradox of the current media environment: increasing media abundance seems to do little to diversify news content.36

In terms of website venues for campaign news, the Engaging News Project’s research on the 2016 presidential primary reveals coverage trends reflective of campaign coverage provided by traditional media (heavy emphasis on horse race and strategic frames, see Figure 4–2), which presents challenges for arguments for more substantive issue coverage. The report also provides reasons for optimism: clickbait, low-information headlines attracted fewer page views when compared to traditional headlines, and stories containing more discussion of substantive issues resulted in more time on page, even after controlling for article length. There is no evidence that digital audiences exhibit higher levels of demand for superficial campaign coverage relative to broadcast and cable audiences.37

While it makes some sense to compare old and newer forms of news, what the research consistently shows is that digital forms of news are here to stay and that traditional media are not rendered obsolete or irrelevant as a result. According to media scholar Andrew Chadwick, media systems such as that of the United States can now be described as “hybrid,” where both old and new media exert substantial influence on the interplay between the public and public officials. This hybrid view argues that both old and new media logics are still in play and stresses the importance of understanding how they fit together and interact to influence elite and mass behavior. The lens of media hybridity facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the implications of the changing media environment and avoids simplistic conclusions.38 For example, though Donald Trump has been dubbed “the first Twitter candidate,” his successful use of Twitter in 2016 was largely predicated on the manipulation of old media logics. Trump was a master of using well-timed newsworthy tweets to disrupt the news cycle of mainstream media. He effectively used a new media platform
to change the narrative of traditional media by serving up material he knew they could not help but cover.

**Social Media and News Use**

Drastic upticks in public reliance on social media platforms for news also reflect hybridity in our media system. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter do not gather their own news content, but a substantial proportion of the content served up and shared on these platforms comes from traditional media or longstanding incumbent political players. In January 2016, 52 percent of U.S. adults reported learning about the campaign during the last week from Facebook, 45 percent reported doing so from Reddit, while 43 percent reported learning about the campaign from Twitter. Figure 4-3 illustrates patterns of using social media news by age cohort in 2016.
Research on Twitter shows some of the reasons social media as a sole source of news consumption may not adequately replace the information content in eroding forms of traditional news such as newspapers. The volume of soft news on Twitter more than doubles the volume of hard news, and user selections about who and what to follow will ultimately determine the amount of informative content one encounters on microblogging sites such as Twitter. A 2015 Pew report on Americans’ use of Twitter for news finds that users who actively tweet dedicate about half of their tweets to news, and a little more than half of users (54 percent) tweeted about news at least once during the four-week period studied. News sharing on Twitter is about more than just retweeting; among news tweets, nearly 40 percent contained original content. Retweets and replies accounted for 49 percent and 13 percent, respectively. The data also reflect the prevalence of soft news on Twitter. Among the three most tweeted news topics, entertainment and sports accounted for 28 percent and 25 percent.
of tweets respectively, while tweets about politics and government comprised only 17 percent. Just as in the case of other high-choice media environments, social media users’ degree of interest in political news determines their rates of exposure. Depending on the platform, news exposure is likely determined by the news interest and sharing behaviors of one’s social network. Research also suggests that even when Facebook feeds produce incidental exposure to more political news than individuals otherwise might encounter, there is no correlated increase in their overall levels of political knowledge.41

Though much of the news and political information served and shared on social media is gathered and disseminated by traditional media, several features of social media make political learning opportunities distinct from those provided by traditional media. First, social media are network centered, which means that individuals can construct social networks in ways that either limit or maximize their potential for learning from or engaging with political news. Networks can be composed of people generally uninterested in

![FIGURE 4-4 Exposure to Cross-Ideology News and Opinion on Facebook](image)


Notes: Figure shows proportion of content that is ideologically cross-cutting for shares by random others (i.e., not in network), shares from within individuals’ social networks, shares that appeared in the News Feed, and shares that individuals clicked on.
politics or people interested in politics. Similarly, networks can limit or expand information capabilities by being either diverse in perspective or one-sided. Like-minded networks allow self-selection into exposure to a silo of largely agreeable information. Research shows that although there is ideological diversity and cross-ideology content sharing within networks, social media users are more likely to see and engage with shared news content from outlets they usually agree with. Figure 4-4 shows the proportion of cross-ideology content shared, seen, and clicked by liberal and conservative Facebook users.

A second distinguishing feature of social media relevant for political learning is that they allow direct one- and two-way communications between political elites such as candidates, politicians, and party leaders and the public.42 This means that elites can share their messages in completely unfiltered forms.43 Researchers Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner argue that this combination of like-minded networks and unfiltered communication from elites keeps messages intact, allowing opinion leaders to have unprecedented message control and persuasive impact.44 Political elites are among the most followed on social networking sites like Twitter, and people who follow politicians and other political elites are often opinion leaders in their own right and actively exert influence in online and offline networks.45 Though traditional institutions of journalism have a heavy presence on social media sites, political elites now have their own competing channels for messages un-interfered with by journalist watchdogs. In some cases, those unfiltered messages will be shared and re-shared by networks of followers. Some social media platforms provide significant opportunities to disrupt mainstream media’s independent hold on public attention.

Evidence suggests that campaigns are well aware of this and seek to maximize these strategic advantages. Though some accounts tout the interactive potential between citizens, voters, officials, and political candidates, campaigns are focused on the win and only participate in strategies of “controlled interactivity” where the engagement opportunities afforded by these platforms are used only in ways that benefit the campaign. Most often they are used to make citizen-supporters work in concert to achieve strategic campaign goals or to attract earned coverage from the mainstream media.46 The size, attentiveness, and political engagement of the networks politicians accrue on platforms like Facebook and Twitter show their strategic potential. Politicians’ networks are large, and so are those of opinion leaders within networks. And social networks pay quite a bit of attention to politicians’ content. Figure 4-5 shows the proportion of social media users reporting various levels of attention to elites’ posts on social media. Figure 4-6 shows the political activity and potential influence of political opinion leaders in social media networks.
Mobile News Consumption

The public gets more news than ever through social media, and the means by which most people access social media is changing too. Nearly 80 percent of time spent on social media platforms happens on mobile devices, and the growth rate of mobile news consumption since 2013 is dramatic. In 2015, 99 out of 110 major news outlets had more mobile web visitors than desktop web visitors, and mobile use is only increasing. Figure 4-7 shows the growth in reliance on mobile devices for news since 2013.

The explosion of mobile is reflected in politicians’ behavior as well as news industry practices. During the 2016 presidential election contest, every detail of the race was accessible to mobile news audiences no matter their location. News outlets are formulating best practices for mobile as they compete for audience attention in the saturated media environment. Well-resourced and savvy news outlets are adopting “mobile first” strategies to meet audiences on their smartphones and tablets, and we do not yet know what this means for the information available in news content.

Systematic and detailed content analyses of differences in news content across platforms is difficult to obtain, but anecdotal accounts of campaign
FIGURE 4-6 Opinion Leaders’ Social Network Size and Political Activity


Notes: First graph shows the average number of Facebook friends and Twitter followers. N = Facebook: 2,626, 954, 488, 689; N = Twitter: 155, 93, 47, 82. Second graph shows political activity in online networks. Original data collected in Norway in 2011.
communication strategies and empirical data on audience behaviors provide telling evidence. The potential that social media and mobile devices have for reaching younger audiences means that political practitioners and news media package their messaging in ways that allow easy sharing on mobile devices. In electoral politics these strategies are particularly important; campaign messages conveyed through social media have some of the strongest mobilizing effects.50

Research on lingering digital divides shows that the informative potential of mobile as a sole means of accessing the news is dismal. Karen Mossberger and colleagues find that the likelihood of seeking news online drops significantly absent high-speed Internet access in the home.51 Pew data show similar evidence: between 2010 and 2015 respondents grew increasingly likely to report that not having broadband at home is a major disadvantage in several key areas such as finding new job opportunities, gaining new career skills, learning about or accessing government services, and getting health information. Respondents were
13 percent more likely to report not having broadband at home as a major impediment to keeping up with the news. Though mobile provides more opportunity for Internet access for many who might not otherwise have it, there are important differences in access and utility relative to what high-speed Internet on computers provides. From an information-seeking and learning perspective, mobile-only Internet access does not operate interchangeably with high-speed computer access.

Mobile news seeking and consumption are limited by problems with functionality and connectivity. Smaller screens are prohibitive for learning and information seeking. Larger screens equate to more time spent in applications and more data downloads. People learn less from video when they watch on a small screen, and screen size is negatively correlated with ease of reading, clarity of information organization, and reading time; small screens also require more time spent scrolling for information.

Mobile connection speeds present another hurdle for news seekers. Mobile users are notorious for how quickly they abandon slow-loading content. Four out of five users click away if a video stalls while loading. If content is slow to load, they will defect after only a second or two of waiting. News providers are doing whatever they can to avoid the problem of making people have to click and wait in the mobile environment, such as Facebook’s agreement with news outlets to put news stories directly into news feeds and Gmail’s efforts to facilitate saving linked content to read later. Though high-speed wireless has improved exponentially, even the fastest wireless is relatively slow when compared to high-speed Internet on a traditional computer and is not likely to catch up to wired Internet.

There is also some evidence that attention itself is limited on mobile devices. Two recent experimental studies using eye-tracking software to monitor news consumption on computers, tablets, and smartphones found that relative to mobile users, computer users spent more time reading news content and were more likely to notice links on the page. Web traffic data for news sites reveals similar patterns. Figure 4-8 shows the average minutes visitors spent on selected major news sites by their mode of access: desktop computer, mobile web browser, or mobile app. Figure 4-9 shows audience reach by mode of access, and Figure 4-10 shows total user minutes by site for these same cases.

Attention to news is quite high among mobile users who download apps for news; the time spent on sites via mobile apps dwarfs time spent on sites through desktops or mobile web browsers. However, a closer look at Figure 4-9 shows this is somewhat misleading. Though app users spend much more time on news sites, the proportion of people doing so is only a fraction of the audience reached by access through desktops and mobile browsers. As evidenced by Figure 4-9, there is a reach versus attention tradeoff. Though mobile browser users’ presence on news sites is only fleeting, audience reach is greatest through this mode of access. The manner of access associated with the most apparent news engagement has the lowest reach, and the manner of access with the shortest attention span has the broadest reach. But it is clear that time spent on sites on desktops is more than double the time spent through mobile browsers, which is the manner by which most mobile users arrive to sites.
The problems of reach and attention are not too surprising in light of what we know about Americans’ media preferences in the face of high media choice. Only those with the highest levels of political interest will purchase or download apps for news on their mobile devices. Among these individuals we expect to see high levels of attention to and engagement with news. But what these data suggest is that most mobile users encounter news online through web browsers, a lot of which is likely a consequence of click-based incidental exposure to news. These patterns hold in Figure 4-10, total user minutes by site for these same cases. Desktop minutes outnumber mobile web browser and mobile app minutes for all but the New York Times, more evidence that attention from mobile browser–based audiences is relatively fleeting.59

A 2015 Pew analysis of the top fifty digital news sites shows similar patterns: only ten of the top fifty sites had higher rates of mobile time than desktop

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**FIGURE 4-8 Average Minutes Visitors Spent on News Sites, Access via Desktop, Mobile Browsers, and Mobile Apps**

![Graph showing average minutes spent on news sites via desktop, mobile browser, and mobile app](source.png)


*Note: Web traffic data are from comScore Media Metrix and Mobile Metrix; estimates are from March 2016.*
time per visit, and for half of the top fifty sites desktop visitors spent 10 percent or more time per visit. When Pew looked at total visitors, the data show that few outlets have more desktop traffic than mobile. The apparent reach versus engagement tradeoff is present in the Pew analyses too: reach is relatively better on mobile devices, but engagement and attention are more substantial on desktops and laptops. What the audience reach statistics show is that only a fraction of online audiences are getting mobile news through apps, which means that most mobile visitors to news sites are spending very little time there. If we can assume that those most interested in news are the ones who purchase or download news apps, that very big gap in time spent between mobile browser users and mobile app users is reflective of the now familiar political knowledge and interest gap between those who are interested in politics and those who are not. The mobile setting presents challenges for a mass public with already low levels of interest in political news. However, research on how mobile access affects
civic and political engagement finds that use of mobile technology can enhance engagement for some, depending on user competence with mobile technology and the size and composition of their social network.60

### Changing Reporting Routines

One finds further evidence of media hybridity in traditional journalists’ use of digital and social media in their reporting and sharing of news. Though digital and social media compete with traditional news organizations and journalists, they also serve as a tool to supplement coverage and maximize the influence of their work. Journalists use social media sites to cover stories in real time and from any location. Social networking sites allow a different manner of news sourcing and news sharing, providing another venue of communication to

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**FIGURE 4-10** Total Usage Minutes Spent by Visitors on Selected News Websites, March 2016


Notes: Web traffic data are from comScore Media Metrix and Mobile Metrix; estimates are from March 2016.
audiences outside the constraints of the normal media platforms. Depending on
what media company they work for, social media can allow journalists to work
outside of traditional market demands, allowing more flexibility in their posting
of information. To be sure, use of social media such as Twitter has its own set of
prohibitive constraints (i.e., 140 character limit), but tweets create another ave-
 nue for sharing content—and to a different type of audience. In fact, in her study
of national journalists, Ashley Kirzinger finds that this supplemental venue tends
to produce a high-quality political news product—addressing more substantive
topics than what we find in traditionally distributed political news content. It is
no surprise that traditional journalists and news organizations are dedicating
more and more resources to looking to digital and social media for sources and
story ideas as a routine part of their news gathering. The complex interdepen-
dence between traditional and digital media lend credence to the concept of a
hybrid media system. Digital media are supplementing traditional news content
in ways that can at times enhance the substance populating the political informa-
tion environment, at least when considering national journalists and national
political news. Digital and social media have transformed the manner in which
political reporters produce and share information, the communication avenues
made available to journalists via social media such as Twitter are shaping and
adding complexity to the political information environment.

Citizen Journalists

Expectations about the impact of citizen journalism have been mixed. Jay
Rosen, scholar and staunch advocate of citizen journalism, defines citizen
journalism as “when the people formerly known as the audience employ the
press tools they have in their possession to inform one another.” Citizen jour-
nalism has great potential for expanding the diversity of viewpoints and
sources and for access where journalists’ reach is limited or during major
breaking crises and events. Yet some enthusiasm for the benefits of citizen
journalism has been dampened by concerns about nontraditional journalists’
lack of ethical and professional training and a failure to classify content as
professional journalism versus citizen generated.

Research on citizen journalism provides support for both views. Studies
comparing citizen journalism websites with websites of traditional news orga-
nizations revealed that citizen journalism sites are more likely to offer a plural-
ity of views and more diversified content, use more diverse sources, and offer
more interactivity and multimedia features than traditional news. Research
also shows an increasingly important role for editorial gatekeeping on citizen
journalism websites.

Fears about citizen journalists’ lack of news norms and routines and pro-
fessional training relate to bias and misinformation. A lack of professional
journalistic training or oversight may result in biased or unverified and inac-
curate information. An example of potential problems that can emerge from
citizen journalism behaviors occurred after the April 15, 2013, bombings at the
Boston Marathon, when erroneous information from crowdsourcing was
posted to the user-generated news website Reddit. The false leads linked a missing innocent student to the bombings; his family subsequently received death threats and was forced to deactivate their son’s missing persons Facebook page. The missing student was later found dead, and Reddit made a public apology. The posting and instant dissemination of false information can harm individuals and hinder investigations.

Research provides support for concerns about citizen journalism; a survey-based study comparing the effects of user-generated news and news from traditional and professional media finds that consuming citizen journalism content negatively correlates with political knowledge while consumption of traditional/professional media positively correlates with political knowledge. However, the same study finds that consuming citizen journalism holds a positive relationship with both off- and online engagement; this suggests citizen journalism may have negative implications for knowledge but positive influences on citizen engagement with news.

Blogs

Blogs are a popular source of online political information; their growth over the last several years has captured the attention of researchers who are interested in the democratic consequences of blogging and blog readership. Blogs emerged in the late 1990s and are used primarily as an outlet for sharing information and commentary. In the political sphere, blogs have been characterized by commentary peppered with links to news items or other supporting materials. By 2008 the number of blogs had skyrocketed, with thousands more started each day. In such a crowded field, most bloggers’ voices go largely unheard, but there is little doubt that the blogosphere as a whole has some political impact—even if that impact is exerted by a prominent few.

Traditional journalism has an uneasy relationship with the blogosphere; there is little doubt that blogs have had an economic impact on the news business and journalism more generally. At least initially, the arrival of blogs meant yet another variant of competition for mainstream news outlets because they represented one more type of venue with which newspapers and broadcast journalism were competing for audiences. More recently many journalistic outfits have worked to incorporate bloggers and their style of content (along with other forms of user-generated content) into their reporting practices and organizations. Some prominent examples are ESPN’s FiveThirtyEight, the Washington Post’s Monkey Cage, the New York Times’s The Upshot, and Vox’s The Mischief of Faction.

At the same time, many unaffiliated blogs remain popular, and some have wide reach. Journalists worry that bloggers unaffiliated with news organizations do not employ the same cautionary procedures for verifying and presenting information as journalists and that news audiences are losing the ability to distinguish between online news and online commentary. Richard Davis describes bloggers as participatory journalists, less detached than mainstream media. They may view themselves as journalists, commentators, activists, or all three.
Blogs alter the gatekeeping role of media and can cover things the mainstream press does not. Most blogs, however, are personal rather than news oriented, which opens the door for advocacy journalism and critical analysis. While some traditional journalists may be uncomfortable with this, there can be a symbiotic relationship between bloggers and journalists as they feed off each other for resources and leads. Like most journalists, bloggers have more in common with the political elite with than the general public, and many have backgrounds in journalism. Bloggers do often bypass mainstream media to leak stories, which challenges the mainstream media’s ability to control the agenda.72

One way blogs may have an impact on traditional media is through agenda setting. A common feature of blog commentary is criticism of the mainstream media; many bloggers report they see part of their role as government watchdog, indicating their dissatisfaction with mainstream media's ability or willingness to fulfill this role.73 But are bloggers successful in altering the agenda-setting power of the mainstream media? Evidence suggests that at times they are. An established body of research shows that blogs have some agenda-setting influence on the traditional media; the relationship is often reciprocal, where blogs influence the mainstream media agenda at times and traditional media coverage often drives blog content.74 The ability to influence the mainstream media agenda suggests the blogosphere has potential for political influence. Attention to an event or issue by bloggers can sometimes lead to more coverage from the mainstream media. This was the case in 1998 when on January 17 the Drudge Report claimed that Newsweek was sitting on a story about an alleged affair between twenty-two-year-old intern Monica Lewinsky and President Bill Clinton. By January 21, multiple news organizations had reported speculation about the affair, which sparked the explosion of the full public scandal.76

Yet the ability of blogs to shape the agenda varies across events and issues. Blog attention can sometimes even have a negative impact on mainstream media coverage if the blogs have already covered something extensively. Blogs' agenda-setting power is limited by a credibility gap between blogs and traditional news; unless the blogosphere becomes more professionalized, and there are indications that it is headed in that direction, that limitation may continue.77

Another way blogs exert political influence is through their effects on readers. Because they are often opinion driven, blogs may be more attractive sources for people seeking like-minded information, and they may find blog material more credible since it is in line with their political predispositions. Information viewed as coming from credible sources is known to be more persuasive. The presentation of commentary is often mixed with news sources, which may also be selected on a partisan basis in order to support the view expressed in the commentary. Research shows that the context in which blog content is embedded influences perceptions of information credibility.78

Some of these characteristics of blog material concern about online echo chambers, but the positive aspect of exposure to like-minded opinion is that it promotes higher levels of political engagement. What's more,
research also suggests that people do often encounter opposing commentary on blogs and that the emotions aroused from counter-attitudinal material can have both positive and negative effects. The emotions that can be aroused from exposure to counter-attitudinal opinion can lead to further avoidance and more selective exposure, changes in social identity, close-mindedness, and a higher likelihood of participating in politics.  

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS AND CAMPAIGNING

Electoral campaigns have been mightily influenced by advances in digital and social media. Campaign operations are investing significantly more resources in developing their digital presence and messaging strategies. One need not look further than the 2016 presidential campaign to see evidence of how digital has permeated the campaign strategy repertoire.

Campaign Websites and Blogs

Now thought of as a requirement, candidate websites first began to emerge in the mid-1990s. Since that time they’ve evolved a great deal, from essentially serving as online campaign brochures to being very interactive websites. Campaign websites of today collect as much information as they share and are constantly updated to reflect the fluidity of issues and events during the campaign. When information is shared with would-be supporters, it is not just through a biographical sketch or a list of issue positions, though incumbent candidates typically include more background information than challengers. Many sites allow space for candidates and campaign staff to engage in communication exchanges with potential voters. However, the open access, broad audience, and reproduction potential of website content limit its potential for nuanced messages. Risk-averse campaigns prefer to keep their websites free of potential exchanges that would alienate any potential voters or that could reflect badly on the campaign if reproduced and disseminated.

Campaign websites are also now widely viewed as essential for soliciting funds, recruiting volunteers, and developing communication networks with supporters. The campaign website revolution in fundraising was largely pioneered by Howard Dean’s 2004 primary campaign. The Dean campaign completely changed the way campaign fundraising was structured by demonstrating that fundraising did not have to rely on large, expensive fundraising events. Rather, with the Internet’s allowances for inexpensive channels of communication, smaller donations could be solicited from exponentially more donors. Candidate websites could be a place for supporters to donate money easily and cheaply.

The campaign fundraising model the Dean campaign used has served as a model in recent election cycles but has grown far more sophisticated with the pervasiveness of social media. For example, the homepage of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign website featured video and a “Donate” button at the top of the page as well as a “Chip in today” box with one-click buttons indicating smaller
monetary amounts. The page also provided several one-click buttons for following the campaign on social networking sites such as Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Many tabs on the website were aimed specifically at recruiting volunteers and increasing attendance at events, with labels such as “Learn,” “Call,” and “Act.”

Campaign blogs can also serve as effective strategic communication tools when used effectively. They provide the space and structure for constructing and sharing narratives around the candidate and campaign while also allowing for interactive features and two-way communications between campaigns and supporters. Candidates have taken variable approaches with campaign blogs, some campaigns have welcomed interactions with the public through comment features and other means of inviting feedback, while others have avoided these options fearing blowback for nonresponsiveness or potential corrosiveness, vitriol, or Internet trolls.83
Campaigns and Social Media

If the 2008 election cycle is largely identified with breakout use of social media in political campaigns, the 2016 cycle asserted its dominance. The 2006 midterms were a testing ground for some limited social media use, but it wasn’t until the 2008 cycle that campaigns fully embraced these technologies and developed sophisticated digital and social messaging strategies. When 2012 arrived, social media was a substantial part of any campaign strategy. By 2016, candidates at all levels invested heavily in their digital campaign strategies. In fact, one of the major lessons of the 2016 presidential contest is the need for “digital-first” campaign strategies.84 In the 2016 general election presidential contest, both candidates made heavy use of social media platforms.85

YouTube was embraced earlier than Facebook or Twitter; it had some usage by candidates in 2006 as an additional place to post political advertising or unflattering videos of the opponent. YouTube campaign material received a lot of attention from voters even in the 2006 cycle. However, in 2008 campaign activity on YouTube grew significantly. The campaigns for both presidential contenders posted political ads, videos, and personal statements on YouTube. Notable videos were also posted from people outside the campaigns; the best known was probably the “Yes We Can” video from entertainer will.i.am.86 Three political ads ranked among YouTube’s ten most-watched ads during the 2016 presidential elections, drawing several millions more views to political ads than campaigns of the past would have ever imagined. The Trump campaign’s digital-first strategy was evident in streaming too—his campaign led the pack in number of YouTube videos and views, followed by Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Ted Cruz.87

Since 2008 candidates have utilized Facebook heavily during elections. Campaigns create and maintain their own profile pages and provide opportunities for supporters to share materials with their own Facebook networks. Over time campaigns have become more sophisticated in their ability to tailor content to the interests of social network users. Barack Obama’s 2008 Facebook profile, for example, contained personal information more similar to what regular Facebook users post on their own profile pages. These strategies seem to have paid off; Obama had three times as many Facebook friends than Mitt Romney during the 2012 campaign.88 Facebook’s popularity as a political tool has only continued since 2008. The social networking site played a significant role in the 2016 election; Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the eventual major party nominees, friend “likes” totaled 12 million and 7.8 million, respectively.89 Both candidates invested heavily in social media strategies, but Trump is credited with the foresight to adopt a digital-first strategy by investing more heavily in digital advertising than televised political advertising.90 However, Hillary Clinton and her campaign were more active across all social media sites in terms of total volume relative to the Trump campaign, despite lopsided mainstream media coverage of their posted content.91
Twitter was also being used in a limited fashion in 2008, but its enormous growth in the last several years was evident in the 2016 campaigns. Twitter provides another opportunity to get a personalized view of political candidates, a feature many modern candidates work into their campaign communication strategies. Twitter allows a constant feed of information about how candidates are responding to events and issues in real time and allows the instantaneous sharing of information with ordinary voters, including press releases, official reports, or news stories.

Campaigns capitalized on the digital reach of Instagram and Snapchat, which have more recently gained popularity, especially among the young voter cohorts. Both are different in features and format from Facebook and Twitter. It is important to understand that candidates’ strategic use of each of these platforms is heavily dependent on both the composition of the user audiences and the functions and features afforded by the particular technology.
Mobile devices are also playing a more prominent role in campaign strategy. In 2010, congressional candidates were creating campaign apps—software applications that may be downloaded onto mobile devices and smartphones—to improve mobilization and ground-game efforts. The campaign world has several apps designed to help voters find their polling locations or to report problems at the polls; Google data suggests that mobile devices were heavily used by voters to search for voting information on Election Day. The explosive growth of mobile and social media since 2010 meant that by 2016, savvy candidates and campaigns were designing messages optimal for mobile consumption and sharing on social media platforms.

For all the strategic adaptation the expansion of social media use has prompted, evidence is still new on the question of whether social media changes the propensity to vote or vote choice. While use of social media and popularity on social media seem to be linked to general election performance, it appears that social media strategies are often used in tandem with traditional campaign strategies. However, social media's full impact remains to be seen. Given that social media use for news is now common for 62 percent of U.S. adults, current trends suggest we will continue to see growing influence of social media and digital campaign strategies in political elections.

**DIGITAL DEMOCRACY?**

People disappointed with the media's democratic performance have been optimistic that the choice and interactivity of the modern media environment would help level the playing field in terms of access and voice—citizens anywhere can access any outlet, and diversity of media is therefore at anyone's fingertips, regardless of the media market in which they reside.

However, much of the burgeoning research on the subject shows us why this optimism may be premature. Researchers have asked questions about whether the lower costs of the production and distribution of information afforded by digital media better enables less well-funded groups or individuals to compete with the better-funded and more institutionalized groups that have traditionally dominated the political process. The answer is mixed. In highly structured traditional venues such as presidential elections, more traditional entities with better funding are still able to retain an advantage. Scholars have also argued that these technological changes will not alter the power structure such that media dominance of campaigns erodes and parties regain power or that new political parties might emerge more easily. Still others point to a hybrid media environment, where the changing media environment is fluid and variable in the communication advantages it provides individuals, groups, and incumbent political players.

Matthew Hindman argues that the Web has limited ability to democratize because democracy is not just about voicing opinion but about being heard. His research shows the Web does a poor job of promoting egalitarian democracy or
leveling the playing field. Search algorithms are based on popularity and lack diversity, blogs are overwhelmingly run by educational and political elites, and the distracting chaos of the Web has not helped to raise opinions of marginalized groups. Political blog readership is also concentrated among elites. Moreover, not everything is as it seems on the Web. Powerful lobbyists, big business, and dominant political parties have all been accused of “astroturfing,” a deceptive campaign strategy that spreads information virally in an effort to disguise well-funded special interests as grassroots organizing. This type of deception is most common on blogs, chat forums, and comment threads. Although astroturfing occurs in a variety of social, political, and corporate causes, some claim the Tea Party movement as “the biggest Astroturf operation in history.” Political scientists Schlozman, Verba, and Brady also caution that media technologies often tend to heighten sociopolitical inequalities.

Comparative studies show that the impact of digital communication technologies on “raising the voices” of the politically disadvantaged is conditional on the political and institutional contexts already in place. Internet proliferation, for example, has the effect of increasing vote shares for small and fringe political parties, but only in more permissive party systems where the number of competitive parties is already quite high. In more restrictive party systems, where most power rests in the hands of a powerful few parties, digital technology has no effect on the electoral performance of small and fringe parties. The conditional nature of the findings may explain why several U.S.-based studies find little evidence of digital communication technologies’ ability to democratize and point to the need for research beyond the U.S. case.

**Mobilization and Political Organizing**

Optimism for digital democratization is more warranted for politics outside the traditional and institutionalized political contexts. Digital and social media have played a major part in many recent instances of political activism. A survey-based study of 2003 anti–Iraq War protesters demonstrates that mobilizers rely heavily on electronic media, websites, and listervs, finding that 48 percent of people involved with the Global Social Justice movement relied on digital or electronic sources for political information daily, while 73 percent of protestors reported relying on electronic or digital media for routine political activities. As the Mubarak government was beginning to fail in Egypt in 2011, digital media allowed coordinated communication with people outside Egypt, and the government was concerned enough with the potential of digital media to shut down the Internet nationwide.

Modern communication technologies allow a speed of mobilization previously unheard of, and the networks of communication and mechanisms of delivery enable communication with people across a range of interest or involvement, allowing communicators to tap groups beyond tight-issue publics. This means that even fleeting interest in an issue or cause, or simply a social connection, can prompt individuals’ involvement in high levels of political participation such as protests, walkouts, or boycotts. According to political
communication scholars, these changes enabled by technology represent a drastic shift in how mobilization occurs. Essentially, the result is more fluid organizational forms that require less infrastructure, membership, and funding but that can nonetheless be very successful in mobilizing interest and action.105

Despite all the recent attention to social media, e-mail is still an enormously powerful organizational tool for online organizing, and advocacy groups are constantly honing their use of e-mail to become more efficient. Organizations such as MoveOn and Organizing for America communicate with huge memberships to advance political causes and mobilize support for issues.106

During the 2012 election cycle, President Obama’s campaign sent more than 1,700 variations of e-mails and raised over $600 million, primarily from fundraising messages.107 At the same time Johnson and Bimber find that the Internet is good for raising funds and short-term engagement but seems ill equipped to foster meaningful offline mobilization. Echoing several other studies,108 they note that online organizing today adopts a “postbureaucratic” form of diffused hierarchy and less centralized leadership, but they suggest this lack of infrastructure and hierarchy renders long-term mobilizing difficult.109

A debate over “Clicktivism” or “Slacktivism” has also occurred, focusing on whether the ease of sending political appeals and clicking to join, sign, volunteer, or donate removes the impassioned intensity and desire to act from political activism, diminishing its meaning and impact. Several examples of poorly coordinated e-petitions and petered-out mini-movements demonstrate that meaningful organizing and action still require a significant amount of sophisticated forethought and planning. Still, most evidence suggests the impact of communication and information technologies has vast potential for mobilization and political organizing.

As technologies have evolved, so has research on their role in civic engagement and mobilization. Recent research investigating when online spaces and digital communications facilitate mobilization and when they do not reveals several conditioning factors. In her investigation of four online spaces, Jessica Beyer finds that the rules and structures governing these spaces influence the degree to which they foster mobilization. Features like anonymity, low levels of formal regulation, limited access to small-group interaction, and the cohesiveness of the group all have an impact on the likelihood of political action.110 Zizi Papacharissi argues that affect and emotion afforded through the narrative and network structure of social media are key to activating latent ties that foster digital mobilization.111 Chris Wells’s study of civic organizations’ attempts to engage youths identifies particular patterns of digital communications to be (in)effective among the digital youth culture, who have developed new norms of citizenship that embrace civic communications different than those used by most civic organizations. Young digital citizens prefer civic communication styles matching their preference for the self-expression and participatory experiences that populate their networks through diverse and sharable content. The success of civic organizations’ efforts to engage the youth will depend on whether they adopt new forms of civic communication.112
Though digital technologies provide low-cost opportunities and information tools for individuals with shared goals, there are constraints on digital mobilization. Nevertheless, they appear surmountable relative to the historical barriers to entry that constrained achieving collective goals, such as locating a core group with shared interests, coordinating actions, fundraising, and sharing materials. Evidence suggests that under certain conditions, these major obstacles are reduced by advances in communication technology. The digital and social media environment allows multiple opportunities for the routine exchange of ideas, interests, and connections. While these changes may have other implications less beneficial to civic life, it cannot be denied that these technologies lower many of the initial barriers for collective action and organization.

New forms of analytics are also shaping digital activism. Digital communication strategies are governed by different logics than traditional media, and civic organizations are still learning what strategies work well in the digital environment. Civic organizations with the know-how have developed sophisticated logics underlying the use of a new class of digital analytic tools. Ranging from online video platforms designed to go viral and automated tactical optimization systems, these tools allow for a strategy of what Dave Karpf refers to as “digital listening.” For civic groups and organizations with resources, staff, and skills, these digital tactics allow constant feedback on message effectiveness. Using analytics, civic organizations can constantly monitor and improve their

Sample of MoveOn.org call-to-action email.

Source: MoveOn.org.
success in attracting the attention and engagement of the mass public. This form of activism relies on three distinct features: a culture of digital message testing as a means to inform strategic decisions about ongoing tactics; reliance on data from social networking sites, email, and website traffic data; and analytic strategies using large amounts of data. These strategies undoubtedly provide insight into ways of improving engagement but also come with the potential to distract from the original civic aims of the organization and prioritize what is clickable over what is critical to the mission of the organization.

ENGAGEMENT, CITIZENSHIP, AND CIVIC LIFE

Optimism about the democratic effects of media technology also centers on the degree to which the nearly endless sources of political information and the increased interactivity will enhance political engagement and participation more generally. Researchers have asked questions about whether features of modern media increase more campaign contributions, stimulate higher voting rates, and raise the quality of democratic deliberation. In this area the optimists’ views are supported in that there does seem to be a positive relationship between access to the Internet and political engagement. Participation online has increased since 2008, and the political engagement of those involved in social networking sites often extends to offline behaviors. However, consistent with other evidence regarding the effects of modern media choice, the effects of the Internet on engagement seem to be conditioned on political interest, the choice of content, and political and structural contexts.

Political Polarization

If worries about echo chambers are overstated, then what about the relationship between today’s fragmented media environment and political polarization? This constitutes a tricky question. Although there is consensus about the fact that elites and political activists are relatively more polarized, evidence about whether the opinions of mainstream Americans are polarized is open to debate. Still, presidential approval data reveal a widening rift between partisans on both sides, and this rift is greater than at any time in our history. Many scholars attribute this trend to changes in our media landscape, chiefly increased media choice that allows for partisan selective exposure and niche partisan media. We know that partisan media are pervasive and that partisan selective exposure occurs across a host of media types. The argument is that as the media choices have become more fragmented, so have audiences.

Yet empirical evidence linking these specific changes in the media environment to widespread audience fragmentation and polarization is incomplete. Experimental data provides good evidence that polarization is possibly due to partisan media and selective exposure. Political scientist Matthew Levendusky finds that when individuals are exposed to pro-attitudinal (in agreement with prior beliefs) and counter-attitudinal (conflicts with prior
beliefs) media they become more polarized; these analyses are complemented by panel data from the 2008 election cycle demonstrating that these effects hold in the short term. Similarly, Natalie (Talia) Stroud utilized 2004 Annenberg panel data to show a relationship between selective exposure and mass patterns of polarization. Though excellent, this study illustrates the effects for only one election cycle and therefore does not answer the longer-term questions about whether widespread polarization has occurred in response to the expansion of media choice and selective exposure.120

While changes to the media landscape and increased selective exposure may coincide with mass polarization, additional factors could be generating growing polarization in American mass public opinion. One explanation is that elite polarization drives mass polarization. Declining levels of trust in the media also coincide with mass polarization. Jonathan Ladd argues this is because those who distrust the media rely on their own existing political predispositions to form opinions in lieu of new information supplied by the media. His research suggests a conditional relationship where media distrust is fueled by media polarization and distrust leads to mass polarization. Ladd’s argument suggests a different process than what is evidenced by demonstrations that partisan selective exposure can stimulate more extreme views at the individual level in the short term.121 Other experimental work addressing these questions accounts for the high level of entertainment offerings in today’s media environment and suggests that the impact of media fragmentation should be minimal due to the vast proportion of the public who take advantage of choice to avoid political news altogether. If mass polarization is growing, as many have suggested, its causes are more complex than occurring simply as a result of partisan media and partisan selective exposure. In short, claims of widespread, long-term polarization stemming from media fragmentation are not yet fully supported by existing data.122

Recent studies highlight some important elite-level effects emerging from changes to the media environment. The rise of partisan media has striking effects on elite political behavior. Kevin Arceneaux, Martin Johnson, René Lindstädt, and Ryan Vander Wielen examined whether the arrival of the Fox News network to congressional districts influenced members’ legislative voting behavior, and they identified more than just a simple “Fox effect” on legislative votes. Members representing Fox districts voted more conservatively relative to members representing non-Fox districts, but—as clear evidence of the strategic basis of these changes—Fox district members closer to reelection were those most likely to change their votes. The Fox effect held for Republicans and Democrats alike.123 Officeholders have a set of clear expectations about partisan news coverage. They make inferences about the effects of partisan coverage on constituents’ evaluations and adjust their behavior accordingly. These are important elite-level effects from the arrival
and proliferation of partisan news, which may have downstream consequences for the mass public.

Another trend in emerging research is an apparent relationship between changes to the media environment, partisan-ideological sorting, and negative partisan affect. Sorting is the degree to which individuals’ party and ideological identities have converged.\textsuperscript{124} Negative political affect describes the growing anger and dislike between supporters of the two major political parties. Where evidence for a causal influence of media fragmentation on mass political polarization has been difficult to pin down, several studies provide convincing evidence that changes to the media environment may be exacerbating sorting and political affect.\textsuperscript{125} Yphtach Lelkes and colleagues find that higher levels of news seeking afforded by access to high-speed Internet fosters negative political affect by increasing media choice—and more exposure to partisan news cues. Nicholas Davis and Johanna Dunaway find that cable and Internet proliferation operate in tandem with elite polarization to exacerbate sorting because high-choice media environments offer more exposure to explicit partisan cues about the distinctions between the two parties. They find this effect primarily among the politically interested. Sorting and affect are thought to be precursors for political polarization. These findings may suggest changing media play a role in stoking mass polarization. It could be that partisans in the public are simply more able to articulate social, emotional, and evaluative differences relative to complex differences in party issue positions; changes in sorting and affect may simply be easier to detect than changes in polarization.\textsuperscript{126}

\textbf{Discourse and Deliberation}

Fears about political affect and polarization aside, structurally the digital media environment certainly provides new channels through which individuals can share political information and opinions. If nothing else, these channels (e-mails, texts, instant messages, social media networks, online discussion groups) are tools that can potentially be used for democratic discourse and deliberation. Social media provide spaces for the open exchange of ideas and information. Social network sites certainly have the potential to provide opportunities to engage those who are politically less interested and to foster political knowledge through information exposure. In fact, some research already shows evidence of these trends, and their use is growing among all age cohorts.\textsuperscript{127}

Because social media networks are primarily social, they are often politically diverse even though some ideological clustering occurs.\textsuperscript{128} The exposure to diverse political information in a social network setting allows the opportunity for political discussion and the potential for engagement and political learning. In fact, when studying online discussion spaces, media scholars Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana C. Mutz find that the “potential for
deliberation occurs primarily in online groups where politics comes up only incidentally, but is not the central purpose of the discussion space.” Their findings suggest that the interaction of the social network and the occasional piece of political information is precisely the kind of situation likely to allow political deliberation and discussion. More recent research raises questions about whether ideologically diverse networks mean more exposure to cross-ideological information. Social network users are less likely to be exposed to cross-ideological content on social media and are less likely to engage with cross-ideological content. However, low levels of exposure do not prohibit meaningful deliberation when incidental exposure does occur.

Other research investigates whether social media networks should function similarly to the way face-to-face networks operate by fostering the exchange of information, trust, and social capital. Leticia Bode examines this contention and finds that intense engagement with one’s Facebook network encourages behaviors that stimulate political participation of all kinds. Other research shows that opinion leaders are highly engaged in social media networks and finds high levels of correlation between social network political engagement and offline political engagement. Research by Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini suggests that the positive effects of online deliberation are much weaker than the effects found for in-person deliberation. In short, social media behaviors may foster habits that encourage consideration of diverse viewpoints, the exchange of political information, and political participation, but more research is still needed for meaningful conclusions. Research in this area is difficult because social media platforms often become quickly outmoded. Friendster and MySpace faded fast; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat are hugely popular now, but they may not last. Researchers have to move quickly to keep pace with trends in digital and social media to truly understand their influence.

SUMMARY
To be sure, the changing media environment precipitated by digital and social media holds numerous implications for the intersection of media and politics. The changing media environment influences not only citizens, journalists, and political elites but also everyday behaviors and routines including news consumption, news-gathering processes, mobilization, and political campaigns. While research in this area is still emerging, scholars have identified a number of trends and effects worth noting. Expanding media choice is changing news consumption habits while increasing competitive pressures for media organizations. This expansion of choice also increases the ease with which people engage in selective exposure, by seeking out news sources in line with their political predispositions and the ease with which they can avoid news altogether by seeking entertainment programming over news. Upticks in social
media as sources for news mean that content selectivity is network dependent; the compilation of ideologies and political interest in online social networks will shape news exposure. Growing use of mobile devices for news may have implications for attention to news, engagement, and learning from news content. On the other hand, digital and social media hold promise for engendering new forms of civic engagement.

The new media environment also offers an abundance of opportunities impossible to imagine pre–Internet and pre–digital media. The blogosphere and social media provide avenues for journalists and politicians to circumvent traditional media in disseminating information. What is more, those without a professional background in journalism also have a voice through citizen journalism websites, blogs, and social networking platforms. News consumers can quickly become news creators in the interactive digital environment. Politicians can use social media to communicate directly with supporters, who can in turn, re-share the information with their networks.

While the changing media landscape threatens print media and network television, alternative avenues of information most often work in tandem with traditional media rather than altogether displacing them. Much of the content circulated on blogs and social media derives from mainstream news organizations, and those penning popular political blogs often have a journalism background. These new tools also enable a symbiotic relationship between news professionals and citizen journalists/bloggers, which may offset, somewhat, growing competitive pressures in an era of media abundance. Additionally, citizens and groups can mobilize with greater ease and speed through the Web, as it offers an accessible platform for the hierarchies of various social and political movements. Social media sites have also become a hotbed of public discourse and made accidental exposure to political news and opposing and diverse views possible. Even elected officials are seizing new media. The digital news environment has transformed the nature of campaigning for public office; no longer can candidates be timid about embracing new technology, as sites such as Facebook and Twitter have become election necessities and effective tools for both fundraising and mobilization. While the changing media landscape offers promise, it also poses problems—problems our society and democracy will continue grappling with for years to come.

The new media environment encompasses a mixed bag of effects—some arguably beneficial to democracy; some arguably harmful. Media choice not only creates an expanding knowledge gap between people preferring public affairs news and those preferring entertainment content, but also provides more opportunity for partisan selective exposure. This trend could prove troubling if selective exposure habits coincide with a more sorted, hostile, or polarized electorate. While digital and social media offer convenient forms of engagement, there is also reason to suspect such online participation is more
superficial—and a number of scholars caution that the Web has achieved little in fostering greater diversity in the news. Furthermore, the trends like the rise of citizen journalism and increasing use of social media for news raise new questions about information accuracy and misinformation in the changing media environment. What lasting effects does this digital world hold for democracy? While scholarship in this area is emerging, research to date raises more questions than it answers.

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NOTES


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