Does Interactivity Serve the Public Interest?
The Role of Political Blogs in Deliberative Democracy

Kim Garris, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, USA
Jamie Guillory, Cornell University, USA
S. Shyam Sundar, Pennsylvania State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Political blogs are distinguished by their heightened interactivity, allowing users to participate directly in the political process. Does the interactivity afforded by political blogs really serve the public interest by contributing to deliberative democracy? A longitudinal between-subjects experiment was conducted during the week preceding an election to answer this question. Results suggest that there is a trade-off between information provided and interaction offered to blog users, which can impact their engagement in democratic discourse. Registered voters and unregistered users responded in opposite ways, with theoretical implications for the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the psychology of interactivity as well as practical implications for the use of interactivity in promoting deliberative democracy.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Deliberative Democracy, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), Interactivity, Political Blogs, Political Discourse, Public Interest

BACKGROUND

The Internet is becoming an important medium in American elections. In 2004, 75 million Americans used the Internet to engage in the political process (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005). Ever since the Internet began to be used for mass communication, it has been heralded as the “savior of democracy” (Dahlgren, 2005; Hagins, 1996; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Meraz, 2005), with researchers contending that the Internet can serve the public interest better than any of the traditional media (Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004). Users do not simply receive political information passively any more. The Internet’s interactive features offer users the opportunity to respond and actively engage in the democratic process (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). The promise that anyone can engage at any time makes the Internet the ideal stage for the practice of deliberative democracy. Even in the early
days of the World Wide Web, Hagins (1996) underscored the democratic potential of the Internet because of its ability to offer “public access to information as a fundamental American right along with freedom of expression and the open marketplace of ideas” (p. 91). Often called “cyber-democracy,” the interactivity offered by the Internet is the catalyst for citizens to exercise their “right of expression” and become vendors in the “open marketplace of ideas” in the political process (Dahlgren, 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Rosenberry, 2005; Jang, 2005).

Internet interactivity reached a new level of popularity and influence in politics in the 2004 presidential campaign in the form of Weblogs (Haas, 2005; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005; Meraz, 2005). Johnson and Kaye (2004) suggest that Howard Dean may have been helped by bloggers, and that political Weblogs are among the most popular among online readers. Weblogs (blogs, for short) differ from other websites in that they convey individuals’ ideas, usually in the first person, and are frequently updated and logged in reverse chronological order in a format that often encourages users to comment (Tremayne, 2007). While there has been some disagreement about specific features that must be present in blogs, one feature that distinguishes them from traditional forms of communication media, including the Internet in general, is the high level of interactivity and the consequent contribution of public content by everyday citizens participating in the political process (Haas, 2005; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005; Meraz, 2005).

The interactivity afforded by political blogs is unique and quite an improvement over political websites because users can freely and continually post their opinions and comments, as well as check on each other’s assertions, engage in debates, ask questions, and so on. But, do users appreciate this heightened level of interactivity and realize its enhanced potential for serving the public interest? To date, no research has explicitly investigated the psychological effects of interactivity in blogs. Most research that has studied interactivity effects on the Web (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Sundar & Kim, 2005) has been one-shot experiments where study participants explore a website in a laboratory setting and then respond to researchers’ questions. While these studies have contributed to our understanding of the psychological underpinnings of interactivity, they do not account for the longitudinal nature of interactivity, nor do they address the larger societal impact of interactivity. As Bucy (2004) points out, interactivity is too often studied for its impact on the individual user while ignoring its societal significance.

The essence of interactivity is best captured when the interaction is sustained and spread out over a period of time, and has a cumulative effect upon not only individual voters but the political process as a whole. Therefore, our investigation is aimed at assessing the effects of interactivity in political blogs over a few sessions, and is not based on a single interaction. In addition, the outcome variable is not simply a psychological sense of satisfaction felt by the individual user, but the medium’s ability to serve the public interest—a societal-level accumulation of individual actions. Specifically:

RQ1: Does the level of interactivity in political blogs progressively contribute to more positive perceptions of the medium’s role in serving the public interest?

The level of interactivity in political blogs is the independent variable, as is the time of assessment. The dependent variable is the perceived degree to which blogs serve the public interest. This paper will first explicate the concept of “public interest” (which is arguably a novel criterion variable in studies pertaining to Internet’s role in democracy) and discuss the role played by interactivity in enhancing perceptions of public interest, with a focus on how interactivity is defined (so that it can inform our independent variable). We will then describe the methods used to answer our research question, outline the results, and discuss their theoretical and practical implications.
A Methodology of Design for Virtual Environments
www.igi-global.com/chapter/methodology-design-virtual-environments/8260?camid=4v1a