

Downloading Democracy: Online News Consumption in the 2005 UK Election

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This paper examines the audience for online news in the 2005 UK General Election. In particular, it uses public opinion survey data and log file data from the BBC News Election website to assess: (1) the growth and patterns in online news consumption; (2) the ways in which website visitors' consume online news; (3) the potential links between online news consumption and political participation and voter turnout. The data indicates that although online news consumption is still a minority interest, it is growing rapidly but as part of a wider news diet. In terms of the online news audience, a minority of political interested and engaged citizens are using online sources to supplement and increase their political information. However, the majority of online news surfers tend to either use it on a one-off occasion or for irregular monitoring of the campaign. Whilst the Internet, therefore, may appear to be of limited value in terms of mobilising large sections of the electorate, it is likely to play an increasingly crucial role in maintaining and mobilising political activists. The results also highlight some of the peculiarities of the UK news and campaign environment, where the BBC is overwhelmingly the dominant online news source.

Introduction

A vigorous free press has always been considered a key element in a functioning democracy. But recent developments have raised new question on how well it is currently fulfilling that role. On the one hand, traditional news consumption has been falling in many liberal democracies for the past two decades and particularly since the 1980s. In the UK, the audience for television news bulletins has declined by 10% since 1994, with a 25% decline among young people. Total national newspaper readership has dropped by 25% over the last 40 years, with one-third fewer people regularly reading a national newspaper

now than twenty years ago (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002). Furthermore, during recent UK election campaigns a more short-term decline has been noted whereby newspaper and television news audiences have fallen still further in the latter stages of campaigns (Franklin, 1994; Norris et al, 1998).

Yet, with news consumption in decline, somewhat paradoxically, the media, both print and broadcast, have increasingly been blamed for a host of problems with democratic politics including: debasing political discourse, increasing public cynicism, reducing social capital, focusing on scandal and entertainment and ultimately eroding voters' trust, interest and political efficacy (Franklin, 1994; McLachlan and Golding, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002; Lloyd, 2004). However, evidence for this so called 'media malaise' has been challenged by a variety of studies (Newton 1999; McNair, 2000; Couldry et al 2006). Norris (2000) argues that far from turning people away from politics, people who consume news are more likely to engage and discuss politics, hence creating a virtuous circle whereby news consumption reinforces political engagement and interest. More recently, the Power Commission (2006), set up to examine the underlying causes for democratic disconnection amongst the UK public, rejected the idea that the media are to blame. Power argued that negative coverage of politics in the media was a 'symptom rather than a cause of disengagement'.

The arrival of a 'post-modern' communication environment (Norris, 2000) with the increasing prominence of new media technologies, such as the Internet, has added a new layer of complexity to these debates. Whilst the new media has been seen by some as a very different environment that has the potential to enrich the democratic process, others simply see new media as exacerbating the problems created by traditional media (Scott, 2005). To help frame the role of new media technologies in such debates, this paper

focuses on its impact from a user perspective. Outside the US, there has been relatively little academic research on either the audience for online news or the online behaviour of news consumers. We seek to fill this gap by examining public opinion survey data and BBC News website log files during the 2005 UK election campaign. In particular, we assess the way in which online news compares to the overall political news audience and map possible changes in news consumption behaviour along with its potential wider impact in terms of democratic engagement.

News consumption online: New era – old problems?

Although new media technologies have been seen as potentially disruptive to the traditional media practices, the Internet especially has been lauded as offering solutions to problems of democratic engagement by democratizing the news media and providing an unmediated, open, news-rich environment, with control increasingly passing to the consumer (Toffler, 1995, Negroponte, 1995, Dyson, 1999, Morris, 2001). So far, much of the empirical evidence on the role of technologies has centred on three areas: substitution effects of new media on old media, changing media consumption habits, and the consequences these may have for democratic participation.

Migration, substitution and disintermediation

Even though, historically, new media have seldom just replaced established ones (Norris, 2000; Starr, 2004), the initial, speculative work on the impact of new media suggested that citizens would substitute traditional media habits by going online, resulting in the collapse of traditional newspaper and TV audiences (Norris, 2000; Tumber, 2001). A closely related idea was that of *disintermediation*, whereby voters seeking information on political issues would eschew gatekeepers such as journalists and directly access information produced by politicians and pressure groups; they would look towards alternative media sources such as

Indymedia websites and blogs; or even become news producers themselves (Gunter, 2003, Sambrook, 2005).

Early empirical data from the US's Pew Centre underlined the increasing popularity of online news sources and their importance during presidential election campaigns. Over half of American Internet users claimed they went online to get news or information about the 2004 elections, up from around a third in the 2000 campaign. Data also indicated that the Internet was overtaking radio as a source of news information (Raine et al, 2004). Whilst most existing studies of online news are based on the more volatile US media market, there has been no shortage of recent reports proclaiming the breakdown of the traditional UK media market also.¹ Reversing his initial Internet scepticism, Rupert Murdoch, who owns of a sizeable proportion of British media through News International, recently experienced a Damascene conversion and invested heavily in the integration of old and new media (Roberts, 2006). After a slower start, the UK (and Northern Europe more generally), has recently seen a rapid expansion of online news. The 2005 Oxford Internet Survey [OxIS], for example, reported that 61% of UK users had turned to the net for news. (Dutton et al, 2007).

Despite the growth of online news consumption, there is still dispute about levels of threat and change. While few doubt that the traditional media is under increasing pressure through competition from online sources, research studies have questioned the idea of 'mass migration' (Ahlers, 2006). Although the threat to newspapers' advertising revenue from other sites like Craig's List remains real, some newspapers (such as *the Guardian* in Britain) have actually improved their profile and increased circulation by producing online editions. Some surveys indicate a growing substitution effect amongst younger generations, who are opting out of television and press news coverage (Nguyen, 2003). OxIS suggests

that a sizeable minority (one in five UK users) claimed they read online newspapers or news services that they did not read in print, whilst they also watched substantially less television (Dutton et al, 2005: 32).

The destination of people's move online is also mixed. On the supply side, there has been a rapid expansion of alternative news sites, notably blogging and citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2003). The 2004 US presidential race stimulated blogging, which itself became a news story, closely monitored by traditional journalists (Cornfield, 2004). Similarly, candidates' campaign websites reportedly drew sizeable audiences. While 9% of Internet users visited blog sites, 27% went directly to the candidate sites during the campaign (Raine et al, 2005). Even in the US, however, where the blogosphere is perhaps best developed, Hindman (2006) has suggested that a very small number of news blogs dominate the online world.

In the UK the limited evidence suggests a relatively conservative picture, reflecting differences in the media and political campaign environment. When the public migrate to online news sources, they tend to visit the websites of mainstream press and broadcast media organizations with the BBC having a dominant position in audience terms. Despite the growth in Britain of the blogosphere (Stanyer, 2005) and of politicians' websites (Lusoli et al, 2006), thus far going direct to party, politician sites or blog sites tends to be very much the minority preserve of political activists (Lusoli et al, 2006; Jackson, 2005).

Changing behaviour – more interaction and more information?

Two features of web-based activity, information searching and interactivity, have led to suggestions that news consumers might develop new patterns of behaviour online. The vast information storage capacity of the net means that issues can theoretically be covered in greater depth and also allows for a larger number of stories. Additionally, hypertext links

within websites may lead audiences to a more diverse and networked pattern of news consumption. Secondly, it has been argued that the interactive elements of new media could allow consumers more control over their news sources, allowing them to comment on news, discuss news stories with others readers and journalists and produce their own content (Gunter, 2003).

Research on online news consumers has suggested a more mixed picture (Eveland et al, 2004). There is limited evidence that voters will explore in depth even where more content is available (Schoenbach et al, 2005). Moreover, although the media is blamed for concentrating on process or horserace aspects of elections at the expense of issues and context, the public consistently overestimates their demand for news and issue-focused current affairs (Tewkesbury, 2003). Indeed, Iyengar and colleagues' (2004) experiments suggest that the public are drawn, in fact, primarily to horserace and strategy reports. Similarly, in terms of people's ability to absorb stories and news content, research points towards the superficial nature of online news consumption. The majority of studies comparing online newspapers with their print counterparts indicate that people have less recall of online stories and also scan stories more superficially, dipping in and out and spending less time actually reading content (Eveland et al, 2004; Tewkesbury and Althaus, 2003); although some studies have found a more neutral effect (D'Haenens et al, 2004).

The networked nature of online news has also been questioned. There is some evidence, especially from the US, that news websites link to fewer external sites as they build up their own archives, thus walling off content from the wider web community (Tremayne, 2005; Haas, 2005). Equally, with regard to interactivity, the promise seems to outweigh the current reality. Surveys of a number of European online newspapers and US news websites indicate low levels of interactive opportunities (Van der Wurff, 2005). Moreover, journalists

rarely interact with readers despite acknowledging the possibilities (Sullivan, 2005; Scott, 2005). However, recently, news websites in the UK have attached more importance to user contributions, partly prompted by viewer responses to a series of disasters (the 2004 tsunami, Hurricane Katrina), terrorist attacks (London transport system) and accidents. Interactivity has recently been embraced by leading UK news websites, with *the Guardian* introducing its own user blog, Talk is Free, and the BBC is adding more user-generated content and promoting further video content from users.

Increasing choice, increasing participation divides?

Much debate has focused around the potential consequences of the changes outlined in the preceding sections. Notably, how increased political news information and public choice of media content could affect electoral mobilization, voter turnout and wider citizen participation. In short, the arrival of the new media has revived the longstanding debate on media effects.

Initial hopes were raised by the belief that increased availability of political information could prompt greater engagement because of the well-established relationship between news consumption, increasing political knowledge and propensity to vote (Bimber, 2001). Moreover, the networked nature of websites might lead people to read a wider and deeper range of news sources.. Others, however, speculated that increasing choice would simply lead people to avoid or ignore politics altogether and opt for entertainment – a trend that had been noticeable with the proliferation of television channels. Sunstein's (2001) adoption of Negroponte's (1995) concept of the 'Daily Me', rather than the Daily News, encapsulates some of these fears, suggesting that personalization would fragment the news. He warns that increasingly people might narrowly opt to visit websites or receive information from like-minded individuals with similar interests, leading to an

impoverishment of democratic debate, which would lack the shared common experience of news

Others have suggested that increasing media choice may further reduce hard news and accelerate the ‘dumbing down’ or ‘tabloidisation’ process. In a withering critique of the optimistic impact of new media, Scott (2005) argues that the rise of online media has contributed to the acceleration and intensification of pre-existing trends towards segmentation of news and reduction of content. In short, the increasingly competitive environment is leading to an impoverished rather than enriched democratic environment. Scott is not alone in his fears; Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) have also argued that in a world of choice, low barriers to entry and widely differing political views, the news media will naturally tend to become more polarised.

Actual empirical evidence on Internet news effects again suggests a more mixed picture. Tolbert and McNeal (2003), analyzing data from the 1996 and 2000 US presidential elections, detected a mobilizing effect amongst those who consume online election news after controlling for social class, partisanship, attitudes and traditional media use. Similarly in the UK, Gibson et al (2005) detected a small mobilisation effect amongst young people. Overall, however, the majority of studies suggest a reinforcement effect whereby the most politically engaged are also online news consumers (Bimber, 2001). Yet, as Prior (2005) points out, the impact of online news and increased media choice is more nuanced. He argues that the new media has a contradictory effect, both mobilizing people and allowing others to avoid politics altogether, resulting in increasing gaps in political knowledge and potentially increasing differential turnouts. Increasingly, he suggests, people’s media habits determine the political effects of new media.

However, others argue that even those who just scan the news online quickly gain important benefits. According to Graber (2004), following Schudson, we should replace the 20th century idea of the informed citizen with the idea of a ‘monitorial citizen’ who in the information-rich, time-poor 21st century, “surveys the political scene carefully enough to detect major threats to themselves and their communities” before getting involved more deeply. She points to the highly selective behaviour of audiences, for instance becoming much more interested in foreign news after 9/11, as an example of this phenomenon.

Research questions and methodology

In light of these debates regarding online news consumption, our research focused on three sets of questions, in the context of the 2005 UK election:

- The extent of migration to online sources of news – how large is the online news audience? What are the patterns of usage? What online sources do they use? Can we detect any substitution or disintermediation effects? How do patterns of consumption online compare to the traditional media?
- Patterns of behaviour online – what stories do people gravitate towards online – issue based or horse race? How do they consume online news – is it a skimming/scanning approach or are voters using the net as an in-depth news source?
- The impact of online news consumption on turnout and participation – what is the profile of online news users – are they political news junkies or does online news attract new audiences? Can we detect any mobilization effect or is online news consumption reinforcing existing information and participation gaps?

Based on the existing literature, we were interested in testing the following hypotheses:

- Online news users are more politically engaged than the public at large
- Online news users have more sources of news than the public at large

- The main source of online election news is the mainstream news media
- A majority of online news viewers skim most stories, do not visit every day, and are mainly interested in stories about the political 'horserace' i.e. who is ahead
- A smaller number view news online more intensely and more frequently, and are more interested in in-depth information and issues
- This latter group of intense users plays a key role in persuading others how to vote

Methods

The empirical evidence for this paper is based on two sources. First, a MORI telephone survey (N=1067) commissioned by the BBC and conducted immediately after the General Election (fieldwork dates: 6-16 May 2005). The questionnaire looked at behaviours and attitudes regarding news coverage of the election, including both online and offline sources. Second, the analysis of traffic patterns to the BBC News website during the General Election campaign, 4 April – 6 May 2005. These figures were derived from the BBC's own weblog server files, which tracks daily and weekly *unique visitors* to the site and the number of page impressions (*page views*) each story received. A unique visitor is defined as a computer address which accesses the site; a page impression is one computer opening one page of content on the website. The BBC News website contains over 300 stories per day, and during the General Election a special self-contained sub-section was created for all election content, including news, features, and special content such as a map of Great Britain showing all the constituencies which could be accessed in detail by clicking through. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/ukfs_news/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/default.stm

The server logs can also distinguish between visitors from the UK and from abroad. The vast bulk of unique visitors to the election site were from the UK, but for the news site as a whole, 25-30% of visits are from non-UK computers.

Election news survey evidence: destinations, audience, motives and effects

During the 2005 election campaign, around 27% of the UK population reported that they had at some point used the internet to retrieve electoral news online. This represents about 40% of all Internet users. This is a sizeable increase since the 2001 election campaign, when just 11% of the population went online to view election news, using a similar measure. (Coleman, 2001). Among the factors that explain the rapid increase in online news use are the increased number of UK households online, the rapid spread of high-speed broadband connections, and the growing intensity of use among more experienced users.

Nevertheless, the Internet is still some way behind television, newspapers and radio as a primary news source, with only 5% of the population rating it as their main source of news – with television by far the most popular first choice destination. On the other hand, however, more people used the net than watched some of the UK's main TV and radio channels, including Channel 4 News, Sky News or BBC Radio 4. Even young people who use the internet more intensively still judge television to be their main news source.

In terms of the overall destinations of web users, the BBC News website dominates the online news world to the extent that it accounts for 78% of all the Internet news viewers, about one in five of the total election news audience (see table 1). The BBC far outstrips its nearest rivals: only about 9% of the public, or 25% of Internet election news viewers, visited a newspaper websites, with nearly half of these going to the Guardian's website. On the margins of BBC success, one important novelty is the rise of sites such as Yahoo, Google News or MSN, which have little of their own content, but aggregate news content

from other providers like Reuters or the Press Association. About one in ten people, or 33% of Internet users got some news from these sources. Such sites are still developing rapidly and are likely to increase in popularity over time, as they are particularly popular with younger people.

Our survey finds little evidence of disintermediation. There is little to suggest that the UK public is bypassing sites run by the mass media and going directly to sites run by politicians. Just 3.5% of the public claiming to have visited a party website during in the campaign. Such sites remain the preserve of party supporters and activists, whilst blog sites barely registered with the electorate as a whole with only a 0.5% audience. Overall, the data support online concentration rather than fragmentation. Indeed, the BBC is more dominant online than it is offline. With the exception of the sites like Yahoo, the online world looks rather familiar, with the British electorate remaining faithful to traditional media outlets.

[Table 1 about here].

Looking at the substitution hypothesis, we find little evidence in support of the idea that internet users are abandoning the traditional media. People who use the Internet for election news also more likely to use multiple news sources, with a strong correlation between Internet use and the use of other media: radio ($\phi = .20^{***}$), terrestrial television ($\phi = .08^{**}$) and interactive television ($\phi = 0.06^*$). Furthermore, those who rate the Internet highest as an election source also valued TV and newspapers more highly than the average citizen who did not use the net. Consequently, even for Internet enthusiasts, the online world is not replacing the offline: quite the contrary, it is correlated to higher levels of other media use. In short, Internet users tend to be media all-rounders.²

Motives

The survey also explored motives for accessing online news sources. Most respondents reported that they went online to get the latest news about the campaign (70%), followed by information about party policies and local candidate information (59% & 49% respectively). About half of election website users said they checked election results online. Information about the campaign itself, the horse race aspects, such as opinion polls, were deemed less important reasons to go online. Interactivity, in contrast, was a minority interest. Just over 10% of respondents said they visited election websites to ask questions and debate issues.

Within this overall trend, there were some important distinctions between more intense users, who went to more than one news website during the campaign, and those who just visited a single website, either the BBC site alone, or other websites alone (Table 2). Overall, users of the BBC site were looking for the broadest range of content, specifically information related directly to the election. There was also a slight preference for election results and local information via the BBC website. Clearly, some visitors called into the BBC news website only to check the results. On the other hand, the more intense users who wanted to get more in-depth information on party policies or wanted to ask questions and express views tended to look at multiple sites. We investigate further whether these figures reflect two different patterns of internet use by using the log server files later on.

[Table 2 about here]

Online audience profiles

As well as mapping the online destinations of news consumers, the survey allowed us to profile their demographic characteristics, thus providing evidence of how far, if at all, online sources attract a different type of audience for election news.

In general terms, the online news audience reflects well established patterns. It is more likely to be male, younger, professionals from B and C1 grades, as well as relatively affluent and highly educated citizens (see table 3). In relation to political activity, they are generally more interested and more engaged in politics and they are much more likely to have made their political opinions known. Hence, they are more likely to be election persuaders or opinion formers. Age is perhaps the most important factor in predicting whether people look at election news online, with 40% of 18-34 year-olds relying on the net for electoral information, compared to just 10% of those aged 55+. Interestingly, the same does not occur in relation to other media, all of which show little relation to age. Additionally, there is a specific student group who are twice as likely to use the Internet for election news as the average citizen. It may well be that students' ease of access to the net through educational establishments, as well as home access, provides a stimulus; on the other hand, however, students are also more likely to have used television for election news than any other group.

[Table 3 about here]

Given the online dominance of the BBC, we sought to distinguish between those who used the BBC site only (column 1 in table 2) compared to those who used a wider range of sites (other columns) – are there any differences or segmentation in the online audience? BBC news online users were more often from a higher social grade than the online audience generally (A, B and C1 vis-à-vis B, C1 and C2). They were also more likely to reside in the South-East of England (including London).

Effects – reinforcement, mobilization and voting

When we turn to political indicators of media consumption, the relationships between Internet use and political attitudes and behaviour are intriguing (table 4). First, general interest in politics strongly predicts Internet election news consumption but not television or radio use. Those who are very interested in politics are twice as likely to have used the Internet as those who are not interested. A weaker correlation also exists between Internet use and interest in the issues facing the country.

[Table 4 about here]

Secondly, Internet use is associated with a range of measures of civic-political activism, such as writing a letter to an MP, standing as an officer in a club, or urging others to vote. Any step up the scale of civic-political activism (0-9)³ produces a 3.5% increase in Internet use. In other words, politically interested activists are more likely to use the Internet as an election source, while the same is not evident for other media.

Thirdly, in terms of self-reported effects, Internet users were more likely to say that as a result of viewing election coverage they were ‘...interested in finding out about issues facing the UK’, more likely to ‘talk about current news to family and friends’ and to ‘keep well-informed about issues I care about.’ There were no significant differences between media use regarding two other measures of effects, namely ‘making up my mind on controversial issues’ and ‘taking more of an interest in current affairs.’ This confirms the picture of the Internet user as a persuader who talks to others about their views, but is selective in choosing to keep informed about ‘issues I care about’ rather than news in general.

One key measure of political mobilization is obviously voting; here the picture is more complex. We found a general relationship between media use and propensity to vote, as those who use any media for election information are more likely to vote than those who

do not (see table 5). However, for young people (age 18-25), using the Internet has a significant correlation with voting. Young adults who have used the Internet are 26% more likely to have voted than their age peers who did not go online for electoral information. This is particularly striking as overall turnout among young people continued to decline in the 2005 UK election (Electoral Commission, 2005).

[Tables 5 & 6 about here]

Election news log file evidence: Patterns of online activity and behaviour

In order to get a better understanding of online news consumption we analyzed BBC News website log files for the period of the campaign (April 6 – May 6). We were interested in seeing how actual behaviour online compared with the survey evidence, based on self-reported usage figures and self-reported motivations. Also, log files provide an indication of the popularity of types of stories and the way in which voters accessed them.

Previous unpublished internal BBC research suggests that general pattern of online news consumption is very different from the typical newspaper reader or TV news viewer. Data from early 2005 indicated that two-thirds of BBC News online viewers were clicking from work; that the average site visit for the BBC news website as a whole was just 10 minutes; the mean number of pages opened was 4.4, including the front page, and only 40% checked the news every day.

The traffic to the BBC News election site shows the following patterns:

- Overall site traffic built up slowly, then spiked sharply on election day and results day, with five times more unique visitors in the last day of the campaign

- As the traffic gradually increased over the four weeks of the campaign, a declining proportion of stories viewed were straight news stories, while more people were viewing background features, interactive content, and video
- In terms of news stories, reports about the ‘horserace’ dominated, compared to stories about issues or about personalities
- When traffic spiked on the day after the election, by far the biggest single use of the site was searching for individual constituency election results
- Fewer people viewed the election site than the survey evidence would predict, suggesting that many people who reported using the web for election news may have been ‘skimming’ and only looking at the headlines on the front page

Overall traffic patterns to the election website

A large number of BBC News viewers looked at election news – far more than normally viewed the politics pages of the website. 3.8m unique visitors looked at the Election 2005 special section during April, while 4.7m visited in May when the nation voted. This is more than double the normal audience for the politics pages, which averaged 1.7m unique monthly visitors during January to March 2005. These figures also mean that between 38% (April) and 45% (May) of the BBC’s UK Internet audience looked at election news at some point during the campaign. The increase was even greater in terms of the number of individual pages of election news viewed, with 25m page impressions in April and about 37m in May, compared to a monthly average for the politics site of 6m in the previous three months. However, as a proportion of all pages viewed on the large news site, this represented just 7.8% in April and 10.5% in May, compared to 2% for the politics site.

[Table 7 about here]

Comparing these monthly figures to the daily viewing figures shows just how infrequently viewers looked at the site, with relatively few going every day. Interest somewhat declined

in the middle of the campaign, before the controversy over the leaked Iraq war memo from the Attorney General reinvigorated that issue (see table 7).⁴ On an average day, around 550,000 people looked at election news online. But this represented only 10% of site users and an even smaller number (5%) of page views. The contrast between these two sets of figures suggest that a group of “regular viewers” of election news online checked developments several times a week; equating to around one in three of those who viewed election news occasionally (3m), and accounting for a higher percentage of page views.

Election results day traffic spike

However, there was a dramatic change on the day of the election and especially on the day after, when the full results became known. On election-day (5th May), the number of users of the election site tripled to 1.5m people, a third of the total audience, who looked at 8 million pages (and an additional 8m viewed the results on the news ticker). These figures were big enough to push the total news audience up to 4.3m. Even more dramatic were the figures for 6th May. The number of people viewing election news doubled again to 3m. Four out of five UK surfers who visited the site that day went to election news and half of all the page views on the BBC news site – 25m out of 50m - were for election news. Hence, on results day, usage of election news increased tenfold compared to the campaign. Both the size of the audience and the total number of page views set new BBC records for the volume of site traffic. The number of election stories viewed by each user also increased dramatically, from 2.2 pages per person at the beginning of the campaign, to 9.3 pages per person on results day.

Reported usage v. actual usage

It is clear from these results that survey respondents substantially over-reported their use of the web for internet news. According to survey data, some 22% of the adult population,

or 8m people visited the site at least once during the campaign. But traffic figures found only between 3.8m and 4.6m unique visitors per month. The traffic figures may understate visitors because they cannot tell if several people accessed the site from the same computer, for example if several members of a household looked at results on their home computer, or several work colleagues used the same computer. But the most likely explanation for this discrepancy is that substantial numbers in the survey who reported using the BBC site only skimmed at the headlines on the front page, and never clicked on any election stories. Especially in the last week, and on the election results day, when the front page was devoted almost entirely to the election, people would have received a substantial amount of election news in that way. Since, according to traffic logs, more than 5.8m visitors looked at the front page on election results day, that would reduce the amount of over-reporting from 50% to 25% (6m vs. 8m). It is also possible that some people who viewed the site earlier did not look at the results of the election on the day itself, perhaps because they did not have access to a computer that day.

Types of stories and in-depth features accessed during the campaign

On the day when the election was announced, around 600,000 viewers accessed election news. On the first day, as in the rest of the campaign, the pattern of stories was hardly interpretive, with straight news dominating. But it was not only news stories that were accessed during the campaign. There was a steady growth in traffic to a large group of unique in-depth features which gave detailed information on where the parties stood on the political issues, how they were doing in the polls, what the key target seats were for each party, who was standing in each constituency and the ‘swingometer’, that allowed people to estimate how swings in the voting percentage would translate into seat gains or losses for the parties.

[Table 8 about here]

These interactive features received a large number of page impressions, with 3.3m people looked at the seat calculator, 2.8m at the poll-tracker, 1.7m at the issues guide, and 1.6m at the swingometer (table 8). Notably, rising numbers of people looked at these features as the campaign progressed, particularly those relating to the ‘horse-race’. There was substantial interest in the issues guide but this was spread more evenly over the campaign.. It is noteworthy that interest in expressing an opinion peaked in the last but one week of the campaign, when the leaked Iraq war memo sparked controversy.

What sort of information did election news users want on election day?

Those accessing the site on results day were looking for different sorts of information than those who were regular users of the election site during the campaign. On results day, there was strong interest in local candidates and local results, the future of party leaders, and which seats had been won and lost.

[Table 9 about here]

The number of page views for top stories was strongly influenced by their placement on the top of the election home page or the front page. But for the site as a whole, nine of the top ten most-viewed stories were accessed on 6th May, ranging from the lead story – “Blair secures historic third term” – viewed 729,000 times – to the 10th most popular story about the “shock win for Galloway in London” (table 9).

However, news stories overall only made up 30% of total page views on that day. The variety of means of viewing results – including the flash map, the scorecard and the constituency guide – accounts for more than half the total page views. And news about results in the nations and regions, which had separate sites, accounted for some 15% of total page views. It is also striking that an unusually high number of page visits – 7m, more than a quarter of all election news – were just to the front page of the election site, where

viewers could see all the main results and headlines at a glance. And 8m people accessed a ‘news ticker’, a special downloaded application that gave them news updates on their computer screen while they were able to work on other programmes.

This suggests that on election-day viewers were looking primarily for ‘horse-race’ information about winners and losers, including those in their local constituencies, rather than for any further in-depth analysis. The top analysis piece – ‘Muted victory for Blair’ – was the 11th most popular news story that day, while a look at the issues facing the next Blair government – ‘What’s in the PM’s In-Tray’ – received only 85,000 page views.

These revealed preferences also do not always correspond to the expressed motivations in the survey evidence for using the internet for election news, as finding out election results was only the 4th most popular reason cited for going online. Traffic figures suggest that the horse-race was more important to people than they admitted in the survey, and finding out about the key issues facing the country somewhat less important.

Discussion and conclusions

Online news has grown rapidly in importance over the past few years and there is now a sizeable minority of the UK population who access web news sources. However, those who consume online news do so as part of a wider media diet, not as their main meal. The net is a means of supplementing and augmenting newsgathering rather than replacing traditional news sources, even for young people. Fears of cyberbalkanisation, the Daily Me or fragmentation and polarization at this stage seem somewhat unlikely, in the UK, not least because Internet news users tend to be media all-rounders.

Yet, the diversity of the Internet conceals a sharp concentration in terms of sources. Indeed, in some respects the UK online news sphere resembles the pre-multi channel television era with a dominant BBC. Whilst the position of BBC News website may face challenges in the coming years, so far its popularity has been anchored in its trusted status and the scale and sophistication of its online election operation which dwarfs other UK news sources. In this respect, the UK online media environment may appear to be unusual. However, the greater degree of concentration in online than offline world of politics also applies in the US, and seems to be a fundamental law of the web, the ‘winner take-all’ phenomenon that applies to scalable networks across a variety of content provision across the board, with the top 10 sites getting 90% of the traffic (Hindman, 2005). But even the US, the internet news world is far more diverse than the internet media landscape in the UK, with greater competition from local television and local newspaper sources. This is probably a reflection of the different media system in the US, with a higher degree of fragmentation and lower degree of trust.

However, our data also hints at increased segmentation and it may become problematic to talk of an online audience as though it represented one homogeneous group. Currently, at its simplest, we can identify two broad types of audience for online news. There are the active minority who use the net for in-depth coverage and information seeking these are likely to be political activists and so-called “influentials” for whom the net adds to their already extensive political knowledge (Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, 2004). The bulk of the election news audience, however, could be seen as something akin to Schudson’s monitorial citizens (1998) who are skimming and scanning the news landscape and occasionally dipping in when they see something of interest. One could see this as leading to dumbing-down and increasing knowledge gaps by needing to cater for short attention spans, through focus on headlines and summaries. Alternatively, one might

equally argue that online sources provide a quicker, more convenient, more efficient means of allowing people to assess the complex news environment and gain a better perspective of the overall picture. It should also be remembered that this audience is using the net to supplement other sources of news on television, radio, and newspapers. Clearly, here more longitudinal and comparative media research is required to assess the way people use and understand online news stories compared to other media.

Perhaps more fundamentally, both the survey and the log file data raise questions about the influence of online information and news sources in campaigning. At one level, it is possible to argue that the new media may be of limited use as campaign tool. This is because, online sources by their nature tend to attract people who already politically interested and engaged but are less useful for reaching relatively disengaged or uninterested. But also, (as log files illustrate), a substantial part of that audience visits news sites infrequently and often when the campaign is over to access the results. However, measuring the impact of net by simply looking at the crude numbers visiting sites or direct effects on voter mobilization may well misunderstand the role of the net and could underplay its importance. The potential of net (in elections) may be in a more indirect route. The value of online sources is as means of stimulating, engaging and intensifying campaign activities amongst activists producing better-informed and motivated influentials who then seek to mobilize others, perhaps through traditional face-to-face contact or email. This pattern is certainly more pronounced in the US, where the necessity of building a campaign team from scratch, particularly during the primary campaigns, has meant a more intensive use of the internet to recruit, motivate, and raise money from activists.

A further area for research is the different way that young people, and perhaps especially students, are using the Internet, in a more interactive way as a two-way communication

tool. It is to this group we must look if we are to understand how interactivity may develop. It is also clear that their media habits – both online and offline – are already different from other generations, with a greater use of 24-hr and continuous news as well as the Internet.

Of course this is not to say that the Internet alone can overcome more deep-rooted problems of political engagement such as lack of efficacy and trust in the UK political system, particularly among young people. However, it is clear that for the new generation, the Internet is going to become an increasingly important source of their political news and information. So the portrayal of news online could be crucial in shaping their understanding and engagement. In terms of Pippa Norris's virtuous circle (2000), it is likely that the effects of viewing news online on reinforcing civic engagement are likely to be stronger for younger rather than older viewers

Over the long-term, the trends in news use that are identified by this study are likely to become more powerful, with more people getting news online, driven by lower computer prices, greater broadband use, more web experience and increased education. Both the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet as a news source are likely to become more important in the future. What use we make of this technology may well shape the nature of citizenship in the 21st century.

Notes

¹ For results of a recent Google survey see: 'Britain Turns Off and Logs On', *Guardian Unlimited*, 8 March 2006, <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1726018,00.html>

² Results from cluster analysis of media consumption, not reposted here for reasons of space, strongly supports this argument. Such results are available from the authors on request.

³ The scale ($\alpha = .62$, 9 items, $\mu = 1.8$, $SD = 1.6$) comprises the following activities: presenting views to a local councillor or MP, writing a letter to an editor, urging someone outside my family to vote, urging someone to get in touch with a local councillor or MP, making a speech before an organised group, standing for public

office, taking an active part in a political campaign, helping on fund raising drives, voting in the last general election.

⁴ On 27 April 2005 part of a government memo on the legality of the Iraq war was leaked to Channel 4 News. The document appeared to suggest that the Attorney General had doubts about the legality of invading Iraq without a second UN resolution before the invasion. The full memo was published by the government the next day following intense media interest.

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Table 1. Website destinations

Websites used for election news	N	%
BBC news	209	20.2
Guardian.co.uk	42	4.0
Google news	41	3.9
Any political parties' site	36	3.5
MSN news	34	3.3
Yahoo news	29	2.8
Channel4.com	21	2.0
Other newspaper's site	24	2.3
Sky.com	23	2.2
CNN.com	20	1.9
ITV.com	18	1.7
Times online	17	1.7
Electoral Commission's aboutmyvote.co.uk	13	1.2
Telegraph.co.uk	10	.9
Any blog or weblogs	5	.5
Any other site	34	3.2
None	767	74

Source: UK: BBC/MORI Citizenship Survey, fieldwork 6-16 May
N = 1067

Table 2. Reported reasons to visit specific election websites

	BBC news only	BBC news + one other website	Other site(s) only	Total
To get the latest news on the election campaign	62	78	65	70
To get information on political parties' policies	38	79	46	60
To get information on local area or local candidates	46	58	32	49
To find out the election results	57	48	33	47
To find out the latest opinion polls	33	32	29	32
To find out historical information	22	35	18	28
To get information about the voting process	9	16	8	12
To express views or ask a question	3	16	11	11

Source: UK: BBC/MORI Citizenship Survey, fieldwork 6-16 May

Figures reported are percentages of users reporting a reason as important. N = 277.

Results marked in bold are significantly different from other categories [$p < .05$].

Table 3. Demographics of Internet election news audience

	Internet Users	All Population
AGE		
Younger (18-34)	41%	28%
Middle-aged (35-54)	36%	35%
Older (55+)	13%	34%
INCOME*		
Lower (less than 15,500)	25%	40%
Middle (15,500-30,000)	25%	25%
Higher (30,000+)	50%	35%
EDUCATION		
Higher (A Level/College)	58%	36%
Lower	42%	64%
SOCIAL CLASS		
Middle class (ABC1)	70%	54%
Working class (C2DE)	30%	46%

Source: UK: BBC/MORI Citizenship Survey, fieldwork 6-16 May

Table 4. Interest in news coverage

	Political Activists*	Internet Users	All
Interest in news about politics (general)	82	88**	68
Interest in news about the election	74	69	61
Interest in news about issues facing UK	61	53	42

Source: BBC/MORI Citizenship Survey, May 2005;

How interested would you say you are in news about...?

% saying very or fairly interested (% saying very interested only for question on 'issues facing the country')

* Five or more activities on the scale of socio-political activism, see note 2.

**Statistically significant at $p=0.05$

Table 5. Voting behavior of youth using the Internet

			Used any websites for the election		
			No	Yes	Total
Age: 18-24	Voting	Yes	51 %	77 %	62 %
		No	49 %	23 %	38 %
	Total	100.0%	100 %	100 %	
Other ages	Voting	Yes	82 %	85 %	82 %
		No	18 %	15 %	18 %
	Total	100.0%	100 %	100 %	
Correlations		Measure	Sig.		
Age: 18-24	N = 113	Phi = -.255	.007		
Other ages	N = 921	Phi = -.038	.248		

Source: UK: BBC/MORI Citizenship Survey, fieldwork 6-16 May
 Figures represent vote turnout at the election.

Table 6. Voting behaviour of interested respondents who used the Internet

		Used any websites for the election		
		No	Yes	Total
Interest in politics	Very interested	77 %	89 %	82 %
	Fairly interested	78 %	74 %	77 %
	Not very interested	70 %	50 %	69 %
	Not at all interested	30 %	39 %	31 %
Interest in news and information about the recent general election	Very interested	79 %	77 %	78 %
	Fairly interested	79%	79 %	79 %
	Not very interested	68%	63 %	67 %
	Not at all interested	38%	79%	44 %

Source: UK: BBC/MORI Citizenship Survey, fieldwork 6-16

Figures represent vote turnout at the election.

Figures in bold indicate that difference is significant at $p < .05$.

Table 7. Weekly Election Traffic: BBC News Website

Week of	4-9 April*	10-16 April	17-23 April	24-30 April	1-7 May
Page views	3,873,357	6,877,246	6,370,806	7,768,220	32,662,355
% of UK news online audience	5.07%	9.6%	8.4%	10.1%	33.3%
Unique visitors	816,000	1,252,596	1,084,746	1,271,302	3,058,543
% of UK news online audience	20.6%	33.5%	28.3%	33.4%	63.0%

Source: BBC server logs. All figures are for UK only, including unique visitors.

*Election was called on 5 April. Election site went live 6 April at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/default.stm

Table 8. BBC election website traffic figures: in-depth features
 (Most popular election website features excluding results)

Week of	5-9 APRIL	10-16 APRIL	17-23 APRIL	24-30 APRIL	1-5 MAY
Seat Calculator	162,000	563,000	672,000	744,000	1,143,000
Poll Tracker	326,000	372,000	417,000	715,000	1,033,000
Issues	200,000	287,000	272,000	420,000	554,000
Swing	316,000	275,000	197,000	306,000	557,000
Constituency profiles	63,000	179,000	171,000	205,000	620,000
Election Basics	195,000	205,000	172,000	213,000	344,000
Comment	103,000	239,000	212,000	308,000	256,000
News (%)	47%	51%	45%	43%	38%

Source BBC News server logs,
 Page impressions weekly 5 April – 5 May 2005;

Table 9. Most popular stories, election results day

Story	UK Audience	Total Audience
ELECTION FLASH MAP	2,286,000	2,286,000
SCORECARD	835,000	835,000
BLAIR: I WILL LISTEN & LEARN**	491,000	729,000
BLAIR WINS 3 RD TERM*	566,000	668,000
HOWARD QUILTS	539,000	567,000
LABOUR TARGET SEAT	539,000	557,000
AT-A-GLANCE	332,000	386,000
EXIT POLL STORY	305,000	337,000
LIB DEMS DEFIANT	318,000	328,000
GALLOWAY FEATURE	274,000	294,000

Source: BBC News server files. 6 May 2005. Excludes ticker (17,566,000 downloads)

NB total election 2005 users: 3,049,000; total election page views: 45,875,000; total site users: 4,875,000; total site page views: 85,095,000; UK site users: 3,805,000; total UK page views : 74,032,000.

*overnight lead story **afternoon lead story