

Media Usage and Voter Choice in Providence County, Rhode Island

During the 2008 Presidential Election

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RHODE ISLAND MEDIA VOTER CHOICE

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I certify that I have read this manuscript and that, in my
judgment, it is fully adequate in scope and quality as a
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Abstract

Barack Obama was elected president in a campaign featuring rapidly expanding use of the Internet for political information. The literature notes a disparity in media use between generations of Americans. Younger voters utilized the Internet, while older voters preferred traditional media. The problem examined in this study was the lack of empirical information identifying these generational differences; why they existed; and how they might affect voting decisions. This qualitative study used deep questioning of 18 Rhode Island residents about their media usage and votes during the 2008 campaign. The respondents included six Democrats, six Republicans, and six independent voters from Providence County, Rhode Island who had a strong interest in the 2008 election and followed it closely in the media. The study was framed by the theory of media uses and gratifications, which posits that people have specific uses or reasons for choosing media and that they derive certain gratifications or benefits from those media choices. The literature also reflected that campaigns derived uses and gratifications from media choices as well. Generational differences in media uses were found. Voters over age 60 chose traditional media of newspapers, radio, and television and often avoided Internet news sources. Voters under age 31 were the complete opposite, using Internet media almost exclusively, with relatively little use of traditional media. The middle age group, ranging from 31 to 60, used a hybrid of traditional and new media sources for political news. As Internet technology expands into politics, its impact is worthy of further study. It has implications for how political campaigns and candidates try to communicate with voters in differing generational categories.

Keywords: Internet, politics, communication, mass media, uses, and gratifications.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

Preface

I have been a professional journalist covering politics for more than thirty years, during which time I have reported on nine presidential campaigns and published a book about one of them. A great deal of my interest has always focused on how people got their information and news about politics and on how campaigns communicated with the public. The changes in mass media during my lifetime, and especially during my career, have been dramatic. I have witnessed the birth of satellite broadcasting, cable news networks, cellular phone technology, and the Internet. I have also seen the sharp decline of newspapers and radio as sources of news. These changes have had a profound impact on how I do my job as a journalist, and they have also had a profound effect on how political campaigns communicate with the voting public. This study was intended to shed some light on the impact of all these changes.

Background

According to Gordon-Murnane (2007), the election of 2008 would come to be known as the “first Internet election.” This phenomenon was reflected in three ways: The Internet and its technologies played significant roles for candidates and campaigns; the Internet had an impact on how the mainstream media reported the election; and the Internet affected how voters and citizens consumed news. People used the Internet extensively to gain and share information about the presidential campaign. The campaigns themselves also used the Internet and various social media to communicate messages to voters.

The focus of this qualitative study was to examine news-media and Internet usage of three distinct age groups in Providence County, Rhode Island. The three generations were defined as voters from the ages of 18 through 30; voters from the ages of 31 through 60; and voters 61 and older. This study aimed to find out the extent and nature of differences among the three generationally distinct groups of people in their use of media to obtain political information.

The Internet has been in widely growing public use since 1997. Since then, political candidates have been experimenting with its use in communicating to potential supporters. In 2007, Walsh (2007) reported that while the Internet had the potential to reach and influence millions, no candidate had harnessed that potential to the point of winning an election.

Candidate Howard Dean made significant inroads in Internet communication use in 2004 (Hass, 2006), but he failed to win his party's nomination. In 2007, Gordon-Murnane predicted that the 2008 election would mark a major shift in the usage of Internet news and information. Mack (2004) noted that candidates were increasingly using the Internet to raise contributions and to attract voters to the polls.

Jamieson (2009) found that in the 2008 election the Obama campaign had put a major emphasis on coordinating both fundraising and volunteer recruitment online. Jamieson cited a campaign manager who said, "We put a premium on just getting information out there using our massive Internet advertising program and having field people focus on building a crowd in front of an early voting location" (p. 44). The intention of this was to maximize the crowd size through Internet communications, so that when mainstream media outlets, such as television and newspapers, came to take

videotape and photos, the crowd would be of an impressive size, indicating strong support for the candidate.

The advance of the Internet also caused an explosion of new technologies with which to gather news or exchange information, commonly referred to as *new media*. Kiyohara (2009) found a rapid increase in the number of people using text messages, social networks, instant messaging systems and email to obtain or share information about the 2008 presidential election. Kiyohara also found that the vast majority of these technologies were utilized by people age 30 and younger, while voters over age 60 still used more traditional forms of media, such as newspapers and television.

The interactive nature of new media also had appeal. Wallsten (2008) noted the existence of very few self-published *weblogs*, also known as *blogs*, in 2000. However, in 2007 he found more than 100 million blogs in existence. A survey by Johnson and Kaye (2004) showed that 87% of respondents said they were more knowledgeable about politics because of reading and interacting with blogs.

While new media was increasing in usage, traditional media usage was declining sharply, according to a study commissioned by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2000b). Rainie and Horrigan (2007) found that the percentage of people who identified television as their primary source of news declined from 85% in 1992 to 69% by the 2006 election. Rainie and Horrigan also noted a similar decline for newspapers; 57% of respondents in 1992 said newspapers were a primary source of news, while that number declined to 34% in 2006.

It is clear from these studies that a paradigm shift was occurring in the United States in terms of how news was gathered, reported and consumed. It also appeared that there were differences in media usage among distinct generations of voters.

Statement of the Problem

The problem that was examined in this study was the lack of empirical information identifying what generational differences existed in how members of distinct groups of people chose media to gain information about politics. In the 2008 election, to what extent was there a relationship between age, choice of media for news, political involvement, and political orientation? What appeared to be the reasons for the distinctions?

Relatively little empirical evidence exists in the literature to explain why there has been such a massive paradigm shift in news consumption in the United States.

Tewksbury (2003) noted that most of the studies done on news consumption focused on newspaper reading habits done through reader surveys, but research on Internet usage should be more accurate, because the stories people read can be tracked electronically.

Verser (2006) reported that candidates were able to make positive impressions on voters from images created on the candidates' websites. Wallsten (2008) completed a dissertation on the growing use of blogs and new media to try to influence voters, politicians, and journalists during elections.

Those research studies aside, most of the other reports were anecdotal in nature and appeared in the popular media. Some of the anecdotal evidence suggested that media use, in general, was generational, with young people aged 18 through 30 gravitating to Internet news sources, while voters over 30 continued to favor traditional information

sources of newspaper, television and radio (Jamieson, 2009). Kiyohara (2009) has found some empirical evidence to suggest a generational separation in media usage. For example, her study found that 85% of people ages 18 to 29 had sent or received text messages on their phones, whereas only 11% of people 65 and over used texting. Kiyohara further found that 75% of people ages 18 to 24 used social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to get news, whereas only 7% of people 65 and older reported using social networks.

Ultimately the reasons behind the shift in information exchange have not been fully explained. Miller (2009) said:

We need more qualitative studies. Despite the fact that I am a quantitative researcher, we really need more qualitative research to help us formally establish the ways that individuals are using the Internet as it relates to politics. The fact is that the Internet is still too new for us to really be able to quantitatively test much very well. We'd benefit from taking the time to actually let individuals speak for themselves, instead of letting a regression measure [sic] their supposed behavior for the time being.

To that end, this qualitative study sought to understand what generational differences existed among distinct groups of people in how they made certain media choices to obtain political information.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this explanatory study was to discover what generationally distinct groups of people did in terms of making different media choices to gain information in the 2008 presidential election.

As noted above, there were indications of generational differences: Older voters preferred newspapers, radio, and television while young voters preferred the Internet, social networking, and other so-called new media. This study sought to examine why the differences in media use occurred and what impact these differences had on the consumption of political information.

Research Questions

Among voters in the 2008 presidential election, from three generations of politically involved citizens in Providence County, Rhode Island, the study sought responses to two research questions:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

Approach

The methodological approach involved deep questioning of six people in each of three designated age-generational categories. The respondents were prompted to tell stories describing their media usage during the 2008 presidential election campaign. After being allowed to tell their stories freely, respondents were asked a variety of questions about their news usage, including what were the predominant sources of their information. Respondents were asked why they preferred certain media sources and what advantages they felt were inherent in getting news and information from their preferred sources. Respondents were also asked whether they chose not to use certain forms of

media. Respondents were also asked whether their media sources affected their voter choices for president and, if so, how.

In addition to their narratives, respondents were asked to complete a short survey to compile demographic information. The answers were compared by age group and other socioeconomic categories that may be relevant, such as gender, ethnicity, education level, political affiliation and income. The comparisons sought to categorize the reasons for media choices among varied demographic groups and why those differences occurred.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was its contribution to the currently limited body of knowledge concerning the changing sources of news and the impact of these changes on the voting public. This study aimed to expand that knowledge by seeking to define and explain certain generational differences in media usage among voters.

Aside from its academic contributions, this study has potential implications for campaign media strategies. If there are generational differences in how voters obtain political information, campaign managers can plan their media strategies accordingly. For example, newspaper advertisements could be targeted to voters over age 60, while cell phone text messages from the campaign might be designed for voters who are under the age of 30.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in what is known as the uses and gratifications theory in the field of mass communication. Blumler and Katz's (1974) uses and gratifications theory stated that media users play an active role in choosing and using their preferred media. People take an active part in the communication process and in their media use are

oriented to certain goals, such as how they will incorporate what they find into making decisions, including how they will vote. The theorists say that a media user seeks out a news source that best fulfills the needs of the user. Uses and gratifications theory assumes that the user has alternative choices to satisfy his or her needs. Gratifications are the benefits derived from the media choice. Gratifications can include obtaining information; supporting preexisting beliefs; being entertained; receiving inspiration; getting help with voting decisions; understanding key issues; and being able to engage in social discussions about the election.

Uses and gratifications theory has surmised that people have wide-ranging motivations and derive a variety of benefits from how and where they obtain their information. Some voters will seek only information about a candidate they already support, in order to further justify that support. Tewksbury et al. (2008) further defined this type of person as a *selector*, since they are looking only for very specific information. They defined the other type of news consumer as a *browser*, or a person who derived gratification by scanning lots of different information, instead of just looking for one particular candidate or topic. The implication is that a selector may only be open to stories which reflect his or her point of view whereas browsers may be open to reading a variety of information, even from points of view with which they disagree.

Uses and gratifications theory is grounded in Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* (Maslow, 1954) which states that people actively seek to satisfy a hierarchy of basic needs, from physiological needs to self-actualization; love and belonging is a central need. From the perspective of uses and gratification theory, people's media choices may be directly linked to their need for belonging through social interaction. Maslow (1943)

also states that people’s desire for knowledge is preconditioned by the “freedom to investigate and seek for information” (p. 384). People’s consumption of information and the acceptance of facts can help fulfill their need for self-actualization (West & Turner, 2010).

Assumptions

This study made the assumption that people who vote or are otherwise civically engaged made use of the media to gather news and information, which they then used in making their voting decisions. This study made the assumption that people can articulate how and why they make their media choices, and how those choices may have had an impact on their voting behavior.

Based on anecdotal information that people have shared with the researcher, this study made the assumption that some of the reasons given for making certain media choices included: being able to interact with the media in terms of selecting stories and making comments; finding a “voice” by those who formerly had felt voiceless in the political arena; being able to engage with others concerning news and issues; being able to gather information and gain knowledge; and having the opportunity to “play” with technology. The researcher states these assumptions and biases with the understanding that other possible media uses and gratifications exist and will be reported in the findings.

This study made the assumption that—as a county of 621,602 people, with a moderately diverse socioeconomic makeup (78% White; 7% Black; 13 % Latino; 2% Asian, according to the 2000 U.S. Census), and a diverse voter registration (43% Democrat, 10% Republican, 47% other)—Providence County, Rhode Island, was

sufficiently representative for examination. The study addressed this assumption, as well, in the data collection and analysis.

Limitations

This is a qualitative study; therefore, the results cannot be generalized. The study was also limited by the accuracy of the recollections of the voters, as the interviews were conducted approximately a year and a half after the 2008 election.

Delimitations

Delimitations of this study included the choice to interview only six people in each generational category, rather than a larger number. The intended sample was a group of 18 voters, selected from three specific generations in Providence County, Rhode Island. The study also had the delimitation of being concentrated to one location—Providence County, Rhode Island—rather than a broader geographic area. The study was further delimited because the sample only included people who voted in the 2008 election and who sought out political information from any form of media at least once per day. The study was delimited in that it sought to compare respondents' media habits by age group and party affiliation, and not by other demographic categories.

Definition of Key Terms

The *three distinct generations* were defined as voters from the ages of 18 through 30; voters from the age of 31 through 60; and voters 61 and older.

Voters were defined as people who cast ballots in the 2008 election.

News media was defined as information sources coming from television, radio, newspapers and magazines.

New media was defined as the Internet, blogs, social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as SMS (short message system) texting technology used on computers and cell phones (Kiyohara, 2009).

News was defined as journalistic material that was presented as current events from radio, television, magazines, newspapers and Internet.

Information was defined as material provided by non-media sources, such as candidates, campaigns, friends, emails, coworkers.

Uses were defined as the reasons, functions or motivations people use in their search for news and information; *gratifications* were defined as the benefits, outcomes and goals they hoped to obtain from their media uses (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Tewksbury et al., 2008).

Summary

The way people collect and use information is a critical area of study with regard to both new and traditional media. Identifying the choices voters made to gather news and information about politics and analyzing the reasons why they made those choices were among the goals of this study. While this study only focused on people in one county in the United States, it aimed to gain a better appreciation of how the American population obtained news and made civic decisions such as choices in the voting booth.

This study recognized there has been a significant paradigm shift in how people obtain and use information from the mass media. The technological and information revolution that resulted from the Internet has caused a dramatic societal shift away from traditional media outlets, such as newspapers and television.

The problem examined in this study was the lack of empirical information identifying why there were generational differences in how members of distinct groups of people choose media to gain information about politics.

The purpose of this explanatory study was to discover how and why generationally distinct groups of people made different media choices to gain information about contemporary politics.

There were two research questions:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

The methodological approach involved deep questioning of six people in each of the designated age-generational categories. The respondents were prompted to tell stories describing their media usage and interest in political information.

The significance of this study was its contribution to the currently limited body of research concerning the changing sources of news media information and their impact on the voting public. The study could also be significant for its practical contributions to planning the media strategies of political campaigns.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this review was to examine the existing literature as it pertained to the study of how and why voters use various forms of media to gather information about politics. In particular, this qualitative study aimed to examine how voters used that information to inform their own political decisions, especially during the 2008 presidential campaign.

The sources searched for this literature review included: ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest, PsycINFO, Communications Abstracts, Academic OneFile, ABI/INFORM, Lexis-Nexis Academic, PAIS, Sage Premiere and the Sociological Abstracts. The search concentrated on peer-reviewed journals from the past ten years, but also included some mass media articles relating to the topic, as well as books, dissertations and other germane citations. Items cited, which are older than ten years, are considered foundational research in the field of mass media and political communication. Key words and phrases used in the database searches included: political communication; Internet and politics; presidential elections and Internet; mass media and politics; media and elections; newspapers, television and political coverage; politics and blogs; politics and new media; and politics and news.

The problem examined in this study is the lack of empirical information identifying the generational differences in how members of distinct groups of people choose media to gain information about politics. There was relatively little empirical

evidence in the literature explaining why there has been such a massive paradigm shift in news consumption in the United States.

The research questions are:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

Traditionally, the mass media included newspapers, magazines, radio and television information sources. In the past ten to fifteen years, there has been a huge paradigm shift to broaden the definition of mass media to include the Internet, social networking sites, alternative information sources, blogs, cell phones and other so-called new media platforms.

As with traditional media outlets, various organizations began to use these new media venues to communicate with constituents or customers. In the world of politics, that meant a communications revolution in terms of how campaigns communicated with potential voters.

This explanatory study sought to discover how generationally distinct groups of people made different media choices to gain information about contemporary politics.

The review of the related literature is divided into four themes, the first being the history of media and political communication. It was important to examine the history of mass media and political communication to look at how their relationship has evolved over the years.

The second theme explored the uses and gratifications theory in the voter's media consumption. Much of the literature in communication studies is grounded in what is known as uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974). This theory states that individuals have specific reasons, wants and needs for choosing how they get information and that they seek to derive certain benefits in making those choices and obtaining the information they desire.

The third theme explored how uses and gratifications theory has been adopted by organizations, including political campaigns. It is clear from a historic point of view that certain organizations, including political campaigns, have created media campaigns and informational messages that are designed to target the uses and gratifications sought by consumers of news and information.

The fourth theme explored the significant technological changes that have occurred over the past 15 years in the delivery systems for news and information from the mass media and others. It was a goal of this study to document the historic development of these trends and to assess how both voters and political campaigns are interacting with traditional media and new media in terms of the uses and gratifications derived from them.

History of Media and Political Communication

For the purposes of this study, it was important to understand some of the history of mass media in the United States and how it has been involved in the dissemination and consumption of political information. The changes in information distribution because of technological advances have been profound throughout history (McLuhan, 1962).

McLuhan wrote that:

Technological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike. In our time the sudden shift from the mechanical technology of the wheel [printing press] to the technology of electronic circuitry [radio and television] represents one of the major shifts of all historical time. Printing from movable types created a quite unexpected new environment – it created the public (p. 1).

In the colonial days, debates in the town square and pamphleteering were the main methods of mass communication (Muhlmann, 2008). Noted pamphleteers—such as Thomas Paine, who wrote *Common Sense*—became known for distributing news, information and political positions through small pamphlets handed out to the townspeople.

Newspapers were the next mass medium to become influential in America. While they were initially expensive to produce and were read almost exclusively by the wealthy, that changed with the advent of more efficient printing presses and less expensive newsprint. By the late 1800s, “penny” newspapers flourished across America, with many American cities having more than one paper (Stephens, 2007). Many of the newspapers aligned themselves with the Democratic or Republican Parties and their candidates. They were highly politicized and biased, but widely read by all socioeconomic groups. Many stories were sensational in nature in what came to be known as “yellow journalism” (Stephens, 2007).

The next big media revolution came in the early 1920s with the introduction of radio broadcasting. Now people could have the news delivered to them electronically and instantaneously, even from places across oceans, such as Europe and Asia (Browne,

1999). Instead of waiting weeks for newspaper dispatches to reach the United States, radio broadcasts could be transmitted and delivered within minutes. From a political standpoint, radio became particularly influential because people could actually hear the voices of candidates or political office holders. President Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" on radio became very influential (Buhite & Levy, 1992).

By the 1940s, television had joined radio in the broadcast media, adding video to the audio element. With the advent of transatlantic communication cables and satellites, television news could eventually transmit images in real time from virtually any corner of the globe. Political campaigns and candidates began creating commercials to air on radio and television, touting their positions on issues (Gomery, 2008).

As newspapers, radio and television began to evolve through the first half of the twentieth century, so, too, did the notion of modern, professional journalism schools (Conboy, 2004). Reporters were taught to present more balanced news, without cheerleading for political candidates and causes as they had in the late 1800s during a period known for "yellow journalism." Even radio and television stations, which were licensed by the federal government, were mandated to provide a variety of political viewpoints and to make equal time available for candidates wanting to advertise differing political points of view (Rowan, 1984).

The next technological advance began in the late 1940s, but did not flourish until the early 1980s. Cable television was originally a method to bring television signals to people in rural areas, which were far outside the reach of standard television signals. By building large community antennas, broadcasters could receive distant television signals and distribute them to all homes via an electronic cable (Bittner, 1985). The advantage of

this was that the cable could carry many different signals or channels. By the 1980s specialized cable networks, such as CNN (Cable News Network), began to flourish. Now people could watch news from around the world twenty-four hours a day. Much of that news was political in nature (Gomery, 2008).

The most recent technological phenomenon in mass media came in the late 1990s, with the widespread availability of the Internet over computers (Hilliard & Keith, 2005). Now consumers could obtain news and information twenty-four hours a day, but they could also interact with it (Zelizer, 2009). People could respond to the news, post their own opinions, and even launch their own Internet websites on whatever topics or issues they chose (Quinn, 2005). Today much Internet content is highly political; and much of it is generated by the candidates and campaigns themselves, in addition to content generated by the news media.

Through all of the technological changes, the news media in America has had what is known as an *agenda-setting* function (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), meaning that whatever the media focuses on becomes what the public thinks is important. Consequently, that agenda is where the politicians focus a lot of their attention (Kiousis, 2002). Ku, Kaid, and Pfau (2003) found that since 1996 the Internet as a media source has had a growing influence on the exchange of political information and that “Internet networks can also influence public exposure to information, creating opportunities for individuals and groups to affiliate and participate in civic affairs and public life” (p. 528). In that respect, the Internet was also having an agenda-setting function in society in terms of shaping the discussions people have about news and information, including politics (Smith & Rainie, 2009; Kiyohara, 2009; Pew Center, 2000a; Pew Center, 2000b).

In her dissertation, Haas (2006) studied the concept of Internet citizenship and how new media could engage people in a democracy. She noted that “the press supported the romantic ideal of the engaged and highly active citizen, suggesting that supporters used the campaign's blog to interact with each other and with the campaign to ultimately function as a distributed campaign staff” (p. 2). Johnson and Kaye (2004) reported that the number of Internet blogs increased from approximately 30 thousand in 1998 to 3 million by the 2004 election.

Sweetser and Kaid (2008) studied what they described as “political information efficacy.” They defined the phrase as “the extent to which citizens are confident in their political knowledge and possess sufficient knowledge to engage with the political process, including voting” (p. 71). A study by Tedesco (2006) found that web interactivity enhanced the political information efficacy levels of young citizens, whether that effect was a call to volunteer, to contribute money, or ultimately to vote for a certain candidate. The large percentage of young voters who derived their news from new media sources and voted for Barack Obama in 2008 may be further evidence of that effect (Kiyohara, 2009). More recently the Internet and social media have played a critical role in mobilizing political movements such as the “Arab Spring,” which helped topple the Mubarak regime in Egypt, and in the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, which spread to dozens of cities across the United States (Chen, 2011). The ability to organize people and to mobilize for social or political change has been a common theme throughout history. Philosopher John Dewey (1946) described this as:

...a struggle between classes of individuals – between those who were enjoying the advantages that spring from the possession of power to which authoritative

right accrues, and individuals who found themselves excluded from the powers and enjoyments to which they felt themselves entitled (p. 96).

Van Gelder (2011) links the kind of societal discontent described by Dewey to the roots of the Arab Spring, which was fueled through social media communication and then became a basis and inspiration for Occupy Wall Street, where the word was spread extensively first through social networking and the Internet, not via traditional media.

There is no disputing the enormous paradigm shift in American mass media, which has broadened information choices, but has also eroded the audience of traditional television, radio and newspaper outlets. While traditional media saw its audience shrink, cable television and the Internet saw large growth in their audiences. According to the Pew Center for the People and the Press (2003), 14% of American adults had Internet access in 1995. That number increased to 65% by 2003. Only 2% of Americans reported reading news online at least three times a week in 1995. That number rose to 25% by 2002. Cable television, with news outlets such as CNN, Fox and MSNBC, also flourished in a similar fashion. In 1970 just 8% of American households had cable television, but that rose to 59% by 1990 (Sterling & Kittross, 2002). As people's media choices changed, so did their reading habits. By 2000, 30% of people who went online for news did so for political coverage (Pew Center, 2000b).

The study of political communication through various forms of media has been going on for decades and is known as the study of channel variables. In his research, McLuhan (1964) stated his theory that "the medium is the message." In other words, it is not just the actual words or message spoken but the method of communication that impacts the audience. McLuhan argued that some candidates performed well in certain

media but not in others. An example of this was the study of the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, when people who watched on television believed Kennedy had won, whereas those who listened via radio thought Nixon had won (McLuhan, 1964). With the advent of the Internet as a political communications tool in the late 1990s, these communication theories are being studied in a whole new context. Kaid (2003) noted the vast increase in Internet news in the 2000 presidential campaign and found evidence to suggest that Internet exposure resulted in higher evaluations of both George W. Bush and Al Gore, but noted the Internet had no effect on lessening political cynicism. Scheirman (2007) conducted a comparison between the 1976 and 2000 presidential elections, noting how the Internet and cable television—which had not even existed in 1976—had become the dominant sources of political information for journalists in 2000, but did not even exist in 1976. He also noted a substantial increase in public-opinion polling as a new source of information for news outlets between the 1976 and 2000 campaigns.

Researchers in the early days of the technology revolution predicted that new media outlets would enhance democracy, because they would reduce barriers between news consumers and the information they sought (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988). Kaye and Johnson (2003) noted the differences in how people used different forms of media and how that might affect what they derived from the experience, noting that “while individuals can passively allow television content to wash over them, online technologies such as e-mail, bulletin boards and chat rooms are interactive applications that require audience members to be active users” (p. 198).

The extent to which old or new media shape political outcomes has been the subject of much debate. Bartels (1993) found that, contrary to popular anecdotal beliefs,

the effects of media exposure during a presidential campaign are modest at best, because so many people already have strongly held beliefs about their candidates from the beginning of the race. Other studies indicated such factors as political party affiliation, family beliefs and socioeconomic status have far greater influence than media exposure on voting choices (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Patterson & McClure, 1976).

In summary, the examination of the history of media and political communication was relevant to this research study because it established the significance of the agenda-setting phenomenon in the media. It also confirmed the growing use of the Internet and new media communication methods as they relate to political discourse, especially those media which allow interactivity with the audience. This section also documented the technological paradigm shift in the communication of news and information and its impact on political communication.

Voter Uses and Gratifications

For the purposes of this study, it was important to have a framework based in social science research on how and why people made their media choices and how those choices may have influenced their interest in politics.

The uses and gratifications theory is considered a cornerstone of communications studies (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The central premise is that people make media decisions to pursue specific interests and to gain certain benefits through their media choices. According to Tewksbury et al. (2008), "Research in the uses and gratifications tradition assumes that people know their needs and interests and choose among media outlets and messages to satisfy them" (p. 258). Blumler and McQuail (1969) found that gratifications

sought by viewers watching political news broadcasts included voter guidance, information seeking, surveillance of the issues and the sheer excitement of the race itself.

Uses and gratifications theory has its roots in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). The ability to consume information about current events, to discuss them with others, and—more recently—to share and discuss them via social networking is reflective of what Maslow calls the “belongingness” need: “We still underplay the deep importance of the neighborhood, of one's territory, of one's clan, of one's own ‘kind,’ one's class, one's gang, one's familiar working colleagues” (pp. 43-44). Media uses and gratifications are also reflective of Maslow's “esteem” needs, which include the desire for “mastery and competence, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom” (p. 45).

When the media phenomena of the Internet age and its impact on politics were examined, similar results were found. Kaye and Johnson (2002) used the uses and gratifications theory to examine why people sought political information online and, much like Blumler and McQuail (1969), concluded that people were seeking information, issue guidance and surveillance, entertainment, and social interaction.

Tewksbury et al. (2008) classified people into two categories: browsers and selectors. The concepts of browsing and selecting were important to this study because they define different needs and goals of media consumption. Browsers tend to scan complete newspapers, looking for items that might interest them. Selectors, on the other hand, look only for specific topics and ignore all others. The study by Tewksbury et al. found a significant relationship between people's sense of duty to public affairs news and

news browsing. This was true for both newspapers and online news. Only about one-fifth of those questioned in the study described themselves as purely news selectors.

Atkin (1973) found that people sought and used information “to reduce uncertainty, a state typically thought to be uncomfortable for people” (p. 258). McCombs and Poindexter (1983) found that 93% of respondents believed that people had a duty to be informed about current events and news and that such a sense of civic duty was positively correlated with newspaper and television news consumption. Tewksbury (1999) found that how people viewed the news had an impact on what they got out of the experience. Those with political knowledge who had the goal of making an evaluation paid much greater attention to political news on television compared to those who passively watched television. Poindexter and McCombs (2001) concluded that people who scored high on a scale to measure civic duty were more likely to watch cable news and to look for political news on the Internet.

The Internet, which offers the viewer an even greater ability to be selective, is fertile ground for additional new media research. The Internet expansion has come at the same time that daily newspaper readership has declined substantially over the past three decades (McCombs & Poindexter, 2001). Haas (2006) put forth the notion of “Internet citizenship,” suggesting that the technology could enhance and expand participation in a democracy. Her study concluded that the Internet was an “appropriate fix” for democracy in three ways, noting that—in general—those behind the Internet technology were not interested in the pursuit of power; that the Internet gave voice and access to people who were previously political outsiders; and that the use of the Internet provided some sense

of participation or voice in the political arena that had not been accessible to most people in institutions such as the corporate world or military (Haas, 2006).

Wiese (2004) found that “the interplay of these elements within the genre produces a rhetoric of cyber-politics that hails individuals into an active place in the political sphere” (p. 1). This phenomenon was fostered by themes, contents and technical features on the candidates’ websites. People felt included in the political discussion, with the ability to interact.

Research by Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) indicated that online news formats allow readers to follow their own news interests, rather than to follow what has been prescribed by the structures of a newspaper or television newscast over which they have little selection.

While initially developed as a government project through the Pentagon, the Internet expanded into broad public use by the late 1990s. One of the attractive features was blogging, whereby the average person could create his or her own Internet content, distribute it, and have people comment on it (Wallsten, 2008).

Smith and Rainie (2009) found evidence to support the popularity of another way of commenting and sharing information electronically—texting via cell phone. Of Barack Obama’s supporters, 49% reported sharing text messages and emails about the campaign with others, compared to 38% of John McCain’s supporters. The study also found that 20% of Internet users posted political commentary during the 2008 campaign, whether it was on a blog, discussion board, social networking site or interactive website. Over half of those posts were from people under the age of 35. The interactive nature of the Internet was one of the most common uses and gratifications reported (Kiouisis & Dimitrova,

2006). Tewksbury (2006) found that people were more inclined to select particular bits of news that interested them and that the new online media and cable television afforded more opportunity to select political news than newspapers or broadcast television.

Another study by Tewksbury (2003) described how audience members had more control over the news they viewed on the Internet and that “online readers are particularly likely to pursue their own interests, and they are less likely to follow the cues of news editors and producers” (p. 69).

Tewksbury (2003) further found more precise ways of measuring online readership of certain articles by obtaining records from Nielsen/NetRatings that showed how many times those articles had been viewed. As for content, Tewksbury (2003) found that 64% of readers went online to get business news; 56%, international news; 51%, political news; 50%, sports news; and 48%, entertainment news. Other research found evidence that the interactivity and availability to search for additional information on the Internet actually stimulated even more information seeking (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Jacques & Ratzan, 1997).

The use of blogging exploded in the past decade. Wallsten (2008) reported that there were very few blogs in 2000, approximately four million blogs in 2003, and an estimated 100 million blogs by 2007. Sweetser and Kaid (2008) concluded that blogs can affect a person’s overall political outlook and that exposure to political messages in an interactive setting increased the reader’s desire to gain more knowledge before making political decisions. Findings by Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, and Wong (2007) supported this assertion. Of respondents on their survey of news readership, 92.4% showed a strong interest in the 2004 presidential campaign. When the researchers asked these people

about political-information seeking, 63.4% said they relied heavily on blogs, and 56.7% followed political websites. The respondents reported an average of 8.3 hours a week viewing political websites and 7.4 hours a week following blogs. Johnson and Kaye (2003) found that voters were more likely to become politically involved and to vote after using the Internet to seek political information, noting that “those respondents whose political involvement has increased as a result of using the web are most likely to rely on it for political information and are more likely to spend more time online for political purposes” (p. 21).

As for those who were using blogs and the Internet the most, Johnson and Kaye (2003) found changing demographics. The percentage of female respondents who took part in their political communication survey went from 24.5% in 1996, to 33% in 2000. By the 2004 election, the number of females who chose to respond to the political Internet use survey rose again to 37.4% (Johnson et al., 2007). While women were increasing their Internet usage, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2000b) still found that more men than women used the Internet to seek political information.

Other demographic trends were noted. Political Internet use by minority groups continued to lag in both elections and even declined from 1996 to 2000 (Johnson et al., 2007). Meanwhile, the average age of regular web users increased from 20.4 years in 1996 to 31.8 years for the 2000 election (Johnson & Kaye, 2003).

The issue of whether weblog use was influencing political behavior is also a focus of academic research. Johnson and Kaye (2004) found that 87.3% of respondents claimed they had become more knowledgeable about politics because of their blog usage.

Blogs are considered a nontraditional source of news, since most are produced outside the confines of professional journalism or mainstream media outlets. There is evidence they are attracting a more partisan audience. Smith and Rainie (2009) found that 33% of online political users sought information from websites which shared their own personal political viewpoints. That was an increase from 26% in 2004. In 2008, 44% of Democrats and 35% of Republicans reported that they mostly visited websites which reflected their own political viewpoints. There was a particularly sharp increase in the use of partisan websites and blogs by young Internet users. In the age group 18 through 24, 44% of respondents said they most often visited Internet sites that reflected their own political views. That was double the number who reported going to partisan websites in the 2004 campaign. To some extent, these findings were contradicted by a dissertation from Eunseong (2006), who found that whenever bloggers discussed national or international issues, such as the war in Iraq, they were most likely to get comments on their blogs from people who disagreed with the blogger's position. So while people may be drawn to blogs that reflect their own ideology, they appear more likely to leave comments if they disagree, rather than agree, with the blog's political viewpoint.

In summary, an examination of the voter uses and gratifications of political media communication was relevant to this research because it underscored the fact that voters have specific reasons and objectives for what they consume in the media. The literature also established that some people view being informed about politics as part of their civic duty. The literature further established that there has been a paradigm shift in how people and the media gather and consume information about politics. To that end, the research clearly demonstrates that the ability to interact with the media and to select content of

interest to the viewer are two of the most appealing aspects of new media communication. Part of this phenomenon is demonstrated by the vast increase in the number of weblogs, which average people can create to disseminate their own ideas or opinions. The literature also reflected that the paradigm shift to new media usage is a phenomenon particularly reflected in the media choices of Americans under age 30, though it is not exclusive to them.

Campaign Uses and Gratifications

For the purposes of this study, it was important to have a framework from social science research which described how and why campaigns disseminated political information for public consumption, either directly or through the mass media. The communication theory known as uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) was primarily grounded in studying the behaviors of individuals. However, it is increasingly evident that organizations and entities such as political campaigns are creating uses for and deriving gratifications from the way they craft and deliver their messages (Johnson & Kaye, 2000; Kiousis, McDevitt, & Wu, 2005; Verser & Wicks, 2006; Kiyohara, 2009).

Campaign uses are defined as how the campaigns intentionally shape their messages for traditional media, such as radio, television and newspapers, or for new media, such as their websites, emails, social networking sites—such as Facebook, text messaging, and any other electronic communication. Campaign gratifications are the benefits derived from or goals achieved by effective use of the chosen media. The benefits could come in the form of donations, volunteers, and votes.

Verser and Wicks (2006) concluded: “With the advent of the Internet, recent presidential campaigns have begun to recognize the potential of this medium in shaping images and managing impressions among voters” (p. 178). A survey by Rainie and Horrigan (2007) found that 20% of voters got news and information from websites created by and for the candidates, while 24% reported seeking information directly from issue-oriented websites.

Kiyohara (2009) reported that the Obama campaign was the first to use a customized mobile messaging platform known as Obama Mobile. Supporters were able to sign up for text messages on their phones in what is known as SMS (short message system) technology. While its uses were many, it was best known for delivering the announcement of Senator Joe Biden as Barack Obama’s vice-presidential running mate. The text messages were designed to transmit the information to voters before the traditional mainstream media were given the announcement.

Kiyohara (2009) further underscored the significance of all these technological developments by noting that 66% of people ages 18 to 29 voted for Obama. It should be noted that all of the new technologies used by the Obama campaign were available to all of the other candidates, but either went underutilized or unused at all. The effective use of new technology, such as YouTube videos and cell phone messages, was a contributing factor in Obama’s victory, especially among the younger voters who were more likely to use new media (Kiyohara, 2009; Curtis, 2009).

Because of the interactive nature of new media, people are able to directly communicate more with each other. Kiouisis, McDevitt, and Wu (2005) found that among

young people “primary group discussion was a likely prerequisite of engendering new habits of news media use” (p. 766).

The ability to directly shape the campaign message was seen as a major advantage of creating a candidate website, allowing a campaign to bypass the filtering or editing normally done by the mass media. Verser and Wicks (2006) noted that “websites offer candidates the opportunity to advance and clarify issues, manage or enhance their image, and identify differences between them and their opponents” (p. 178).

There is evidence that some viewers of campaign-originated websites are skeptical of their content. Johnson and Kaye (2000) found that level of education was negatively associated with the trust in online candidate information, finding that people with higher levels of education tended to believe that information from a candidate’s own website was biased in favor of that candidate.

Kiousis and Dimitrova (2006) hypothesized that people would find stories from traditional news sources on the Internet more credible than information provided on the same topic through public relations methods, such as press releases published online. The hypothesis was rejected in the experiment by Kiousis and Dimitrova (2006), as they found “no differences in perceived credibility between a story coming from a public relations or news source in an online environment. In short, public relations messages do not appear less effective than news messages, perhaps because of the ambiguous role of source on the web” (p. 179). Although candidate websites have more of a public relations function than news websites, such as CNN, it appears that candidates’ websites are viewed as credible as sources of online information from news outlets. More than anything, campaigns found that two of the biggest advantages of an active Internet

presence were to shape the overall campaign message and to raise campaign contributions. In a dissertation on Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, Haas (2006) found that "the campaign supported a less active conception of the Internet citizen by structuring its web presence to constitute its supporters as Internet-using consumers, giving supporters frequent and highly visible opportunities to read content and contribute money to the campaign" (p. 2).

Smith and Rainie (2009) found that 83% of Republicans were regular Internet users compared to 76% of Democrats. They found higher education and income levels amongst Republicans, and stated that those two socioeconomic characteristics are strong indicators of Internet use. However, the way in which the two parties successfully appealed to and communicated with their members differed a great deal. Of Democrats, 48% chose to receive email messages directly from Barack Obama's campaign, compared to 38% of Republicans receiving email from John McCain's campaign. Of Obama supporters, 17% signed up for cell phone text messages directly from the campaign, compared to 7% of McCain supporters.

The focus of content on presidential candidate websites has changed over time. Souley (2005) authored a dissertation on the differences in content of presidential candidate websites between the 2000 and 2004 elections. He found that the issues in online press releases changed from education and social security in 2000 to terrorism and the Iraq War by 2004, a shift obviously due to the September 11 attacks. On the other hand, Souley (2005) found that personal attacks between the candidates constituted a lot of content in online press releases, with 72% in 2002 and 80% in 2004 involving personal attacks. As much as the Internet has changed the focus of political content in online press

releases, it has done little to reduce personal attacks by the candidates. The medium may have changed, but not this message.

Verser and Wicks (2006) noted the importance of the concept of *impression management theory* in campaigns with the ability to coordinate the images within news releases, speeches, campaign commercials, media appearances and Internet content and personal appearances, so that voters received reinforced images and themes of the candidates. With the Internet, the images and messages can be changed and manipulated more often, as compared to more traditional campaign communications, such as television advertisements and direct mail campaigns. Verser and Wicks also found that during the 2000 presidential campaign the candidates had stark differences in how they used the Internet. Al Gore's campaign changed the photos on his website relatively often and updated them with each new campaign stop, showing Gore interacting with the crowds of voters. By comparison, the campaign of George W. Bush rarely changed his website photos, which often depicted him alone, or at a distance from voters. In all, the Gore website used 502 candidate photos, while the Bush website used only 67. The study does not state a conclusion as to which strategy was more effective. Given the closeness of the election, it is difficult to assess the impact the candidates' websites had on the voting, except to note that the content could be changed or managed to update the candidates' messages and images. In other words, the website is a medium that is highly available for manipulation.

The websites of political candidates also had an impact in the traditional news media. Ku et al. (2003) found that information posted at various times on Al Gore's website "showed a significant intermediate agenda-setting impact on national

newspapers” (p. 536) and at times “had a statistically significant impact on the television agenda” (p. 536) during the campaign. The result clearly showed that reporters in the mainstream media were reading candidate websites and that sometimes website content became the basis for news stories on television and in newspapers. In that sense, campaign websites sometimes had an agenda-setting function.

In summary, the campaigns and candidates themselves are finding uses and gratifications from their use of media, particularly their use of new media. Campaigns could use their own websites to clearly define their candidates and to issue positions without having to go through the filter of the traditional news media. They can directly communicate with voters about campaign themes and can also make appeals for financial donations and volunteer service (Curtis, 2009). Communications from the campaign are not limited to the Internet. Some campaigns effectively used short-message system (SMS) technology to communicate directly to cell phones via text and voice messages. This technology had particular appeal to voters under age 30, who commonly communicate and interact with each other via instant messaging, text messaging and other forms of new media. Many voters found the communications from the candidates themselves to be just as credible, or even more so, than the traditional media messages. The mainstream media also found candidate websites useful for information and interactivity, so much so that sometimes the campaign websites had an agenda-setting impact on stories that appeared in the mainstream, traditional media.

New Media versus Traditional Media Users

For the purposes of this study, it was important to have a framework from social science research that established and documented the paradigm shift in news and

information sources from traditional media to what is described as new media.

Smith and Rainie (2009) found clear distinctions among those who used traditional media sources, such as newspapers and television, and those who relied on so-called new media, which includes the Internet, social networking, texting and other modern forms of electronic communication. Smith and Rainie conducted their research as part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Among their findings, 26% of all adults reported getting most of their political news online, compared to 28% using newspapers. Television remained the dominant source, with 78% of people reporting it as their primary source of political information. The difference in media use differs among age groups. Smith and Rainie reported that 35% of people under age 50 got most of their political news online, compared to 25% from newspapers. If users had a high-speed broadband Internet connection, they were twice as likely to go online for news as compared to newspapers.

There are indications that the Internet is gaining in public acceptance and credibility as a legitimate source of news. Quinn (2005) found a rapid increase in the number of people using the Internet to obtain news, as well as a vast increase in the number of mainstream media outlets offering news on their companion websites. While Kiouisis (2002) found that the public was skeptical of all news media types, newspapers were rated the most credible, followed by the Internet and then television.

Use of the Internet for political news increased sharply from the previous study (Smith & Rainie, 2009). *Online political users* were defined as people who met three criteria: They went online for political and campaign news; they sent messages to others online about the campaign; and they shared information through electronic text messages,

instant messages, or social networks, such as Twitter. Smith and Rainie (2009) found that online political users increased to 46% of the adult population during the 2008 election, up from 37% who were online political users in the 2004 election (Rainie & Horrigan, 2007). The online political news audience doubled between the 2000 and 2008 elections, according to Smith and Rainie (2009).

Tewksbury (2006) found that there was a sharp increase in people seeking political news during key points in the 2000 presidential primary campaign. The Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday audience for cable news during the week of Super Tuesday increased by 23.6%. The number of people who sought political news online also increased by 71.6%. Not only did more people tune in to cable news or go online, but they also stayed longer. Tewksbury reported that the duration of cable news viewing increased by 9.6% on Super Tuesday night, and the number of hits on political Internet stories also rose 42%.

Other studies conducted by Rainie and Horrigan (2007) for the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed evidence of a paradigm shift in how Americans used media sources. Rainie and Horrigan (2007) found that the number of people who identified television as a primary source of election information declined from 82% in 1992, to 69% by 2006. The number who relied on newspapers in 1992 was at 57%, but that declined to 34% by the 2006 election. In 1996 3% of the electorate surveyed used the Internet as their primary source for election news. That number rose to 15% by the 2006 election. It should be noted for comparison that 1996 was a presidential election year, but that 2006 was not. Still, traditional media use declined, while new media use increased during this time period. This could be a function of people's strong interest in

Congressional and gubernatorial elections, regardless of whether a race for president was on the ballot. The increase in new media usage might also be a function of people wanting to sample the new and expanding technology. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2011), 55% of adults age 18 through 49 cite the Internet as their primary source of news, compared to just 26% of people 50 and older.

A cross-pollination of media sources is also occurring, and it is not all bad news for traditional media outlets. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2011) reported that CNN.com was the most popular online source of political news in 2000; in that regard, it is a successful extension of the CNN brand from cable news. Regan (2003) noted that many traditional journalists began writing blogs and that many mainstream news outlets began to include weblogs as part of their online news coverage. The audience is responding. For example, *The Christian Science Monitor* reports that the daily update blog on its website is now the fifth most read item on its home page (Regan, 2003). Wallsten (2008) found that bloggers were becoming opinion leaders in the world of politics and were having an impact on the agenda-setting role that was traditionally the domain of mainstream journalists and the politicians. This was reflected by the increasing number of times that well-known blogs, such as *The Daily Kos*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Drudge Report*, were quoted or referenced by stories in the mainstream media. A survey by Johnson and Kaye (2004) showed that 87% of respondents said they were more knowledgeable about politics because of reading and interacting with blogs.

Verser and Wicks (2006) concluded that the Internet stimulates political interest and prompts people to seek more information about politics. Kaid (2002) found that:

Those who were exposed to the Internet and had the opportunity to seek other information as part of their exposure were significantly more likely to want to see more political ads, watch more news about the candidates, talk to friends about the candidates or issues, read the newspapers about the candidates, and want to vote in the next election (p.32).

There are many people who use both traditional media and the more modern forms of new media. Whillock (1997) saw new media, such as the Internet, as a supplemental source of information to the traditional media of newspapers and television, not just for dissemination of information, but also to retrieve information through Internet search capabilities. Tewksbury et al. (2008) found a significant relationship between people's interest in public affairs and newspaper browsing. They also concluded that because newspapers and Internet news sites offer a large range of content, the selectivity and surveillance aspects were similar between newspaper and Internet readership. Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) found that using the Web as a news source was positively related to newspaper reading, but did not have a similar relationship with watching news on television. However, it should be noted that many television stations and networks did not have active or advanced websites in 2000, so this should be an area for additional research.

In a different study, Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) conducted experiments to see whether there were any differences in reader impressions or usage based on reading the paper version of *The New York Times* compared to reading the same content in the online version of the newspaper. They concluded that readers of the paper version of the *Times*

saw a broader scope of public affairs content and were more likely to be news browsers, compared to those who read the paper online, who were more likely to be news selectors. According to a previous study by Tewksbury and Althaus (2000), this difference may be due to the browsing aspect of a newspaper in which readers must pass through many pages of information looking for content, compared the Internet, where readers can click directly on links that take them to stories of interest, bypassing much of the other online content. This supports the research of Tewksbury et al. (2008), which found that news consumers were either browsers, which means they survey a wide variety of items in newspapers or online, or they are selectors who choose only items of personal interest.

Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) and Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) also found that readers of *The New York Times* paper version had more interest in international news than did their online reading counterparts. They also found the newspaper and online groups differed in their perception of the problems facing the United States. It is important to note that measuring the audience members and their preferences is far more accurate with new media than with old media (Tewksbury, 2006). This is because of the ability to count specific page clicks on websites and their content. According to Tewksbury (2006), “Television audience measurement can track the size and composition of program audiences, but it can say little about the news topics or stories that attract viewer attention. Internet audience measures taken at the level shown here can be much more precise in their assessment of audience attention to specific topics” (p. 327). In other words, researchers can estimate the number of people who saw a news story on television, whereas Internet researchers have the technology to tell you the exact number of readers.

The impact of the Internet on the news media, voting public and politics must continue to be researched and evaluated, because the technology keeps changing rapidly. For example, social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook and Digg, which played such a prominent role in the 2008 presidential campaign, were not even in existence during the 2004 election. With this in mind, Ku et al. (2003) concluded that “as computer networks are expected to grow dramatically, electronic forms of communication will close the gap between citizens and politicians, and encourage the development of more informed citizens” (p. 544).

In summary, there was clearly a paradigm shift in how people gather news and information among all age groups, but particularly for people under age 50. The phenomenon is ongoing, with a rapid increase in the number of people seeking online political information in the 2008 election, when compared to the election in 2004. While new media usage has exploded, so too has additional new media technology, with venues such as Facebook, Twitter and Friendfeed, all being used to communicate political information. Traditional media still have a role, and in fact 69% of people still report getting most of their political information from television; but, traditional media are also rapidly adopting new media technology. For example, CNN.com, the online companion to CNN television, was the most popular website for online political news in 2000. The impact of the interactivity of new media is also significant. There has been a vast increase in the number of bloggers and a significant increase in their being cited and quoted in political stories by the mainstream media.

Summary

The literature shows that the mass media played an important role in how news and information about politics has been disseminated over the years. The media have a role in shaping the political agenda. The reading and viewing public also plays a role in this flow of information, in that it has certain uses for and gratifications from what it consumes in the media.

The contemporary literature shows a clear paradigm shift in terms of how American voters get political news and information during an election year. Numerous studies show that people under age 30 are more receptive to information from new media sources, such as texts, emails, Internet searches, websites and social networks. Traditional media, such as newspaper and television, are more widely used by people who are older, although even people above age 60 are showing some degree of Internet and new media usage.

The literature also demonstrates that the technology is not just having an impact on mass media. Political campaigns and organizations are also crafting messages and information to be distributed directly through the new technology and, in many cases, to bypass the traditional news media.

Because this information revolution is ongoing and continues to change in content and technology, more studies are needed. To that end, the problem examined in this study was the lack of empirical information identifying why there were generational differences in how members of distinct groups of people chose media to gain information about politics.

The purpose of this explanatory study was to discover how generationally distinct groups of people made different media choices to gain information about contemporary politics.

The literature review was relevant to this present study to the extent that it offered a framework for interpreting the two research questions posed to a sample of voters in Providence County, Rhode Island:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

This was a qualitative study that examined the media usage by a carefully selected group of voters in Providence County, Rhode Island, to determine how their news and information-seeking choices informed their interest in politics and voting choices.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to discover how and why generationally distinct groups of people made different media choices to gain information about contemporary politics.

There are two research questions:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

The approach involved deep questioning of six people in each of the three designated age-generational categories. The 18 respondents were prompted to describe their media usage during the campaign and election in a narrative, storytelling fashion.

Epistemological Assumptions

The epistemological approach represented by this study is constructivism. Crotty (1998) said that meanings are constructed by people as they engage with the world they are trying to interpret and that human beings are trying to make sense of their world through their historic and social perspectives. Anderson (1997) said that "humans, as experiencing subjects of the world, construct and interpret reality" (p. 23). This study of

how and why individuals used various forms of media to obtain news and information about politics was designed and conducted from a constructivist point of view.

Crotty (1998) said constructivism lends itself well to inductive inquiry because open-ended questions allow the respondents to give detailed answers about the meanings they construct through their social interaction, and that “qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally” (p. 8). This study intended to explore how people engaged in and made sense of the electoral process through their social interaction with the media, political campaigns, friends, family members, coworkers and others.

This was predominately a phenomenological study because it was an attempt to understand the real-life experiences of the participants and “in this process, the researcher brackets or sets aside his or her own experiences in order to understand those of the participants in the study” (Neiswaidomy, 1993).

This study made the assumption that people who were civically involved and voted made use of the media to gather and discuss news and information, which they used to help make their voting decisions and make meaning of the political process. The study assumed that people were able to articulate how and why they made media choices, and how those choices may have had an impact on their civic engagement, including their voting behavior.

A qualitative methodology, such as storytelling, better allowed respondents to provide their own rich, thick, open-ended input on media usage and voting behavior, rather than to respond to questions framed by the researcher. This was described by von Glaserfeld (1984): “All communication and all understanding are a matter of interpretive

construction on the part of the experiencing subject” (p. 19). The researcher then categorized meanings expressed by the respondents, by identifying themes and patterns in the uses and gratifications they described in their media usage.

Research Design

The sample was chosen from a computerized list of registered voters in the State of Rhode Island, obtained from the Rhode Island Board of Elections in the Office of the Secretary of State. This list was further narrowed to an equal number of registered Republicans, Democrats and independent voters who resided in Providence County and voted in the 2008 presidential election.

The interview strategy was to question respondents in this study in depth about their media and Internet usage for political purposes in the 2008 presidential campaign. The questions consisted of open-ended probes about their media usage and why they chose the news outlets they did, and respondents were guided to tell stories about their media usage as it related to politics. In addition to that, respondents were asked to identify specific Internet websites they used as information sources during the 2008 campaign. The researcher made field notes and observations of that process.

Respondents in this study were asked reasons they used the Internet during the campaign and what type of information they sought. Results were coded by uses and gratifications categories as described by voters (Blumler and Katz, 1974).

Various other methodologies have been used to track media consumption patterns. Bogart (1989) focused on people self-reporting what they read in newspapers or watched on television. Adam, Quinn, and Edmunds (2007) used a system of eye-tracking to observe what people were watching or reading. Other researchers conducted survey

research, with respondents filling out questionnaires online, self-reporting their media choices and reasons for them (Tewksbury, 2003; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). Haas (2006) gauged voter interest in politics by observing what types of topics they selected and chose to read on websites.

For the purposes of this study, respondents self-reported their media choices and reasons for them.

Sample Selection

The sample for this study was a purposefully selected group of voters from Providence County, Rhode Island, who voted in the November 2008 presidential election. Eighteen voters were interviewed, six each in the following age groups: ages 18 through 30; ages 31 through 60; and ages 61 and older. The sample consisted of an equal number of Democrats, Republicans and independents. All of the sample members were people who self-identified as frequent mass media users with strong political interests. The researcher also gathered basic demographic data from the sample members in addition to age and party affiliation, including gender and level of formal education completed.

The rationale for focusing on generational and party differences in media usage was rooted in the existing literature. Kiyohara (2009) found clear age and generational differences in how people gathered political information. Smith and Rainie (2009) found differences in media usage for political information when compared by party affiliation. Race, gender, income and other demographic information as it relates to media usage may be worthy of study in further research, but was not be analyzed for the purposes of this study.

Haas (2006) employed Warner's definition of people who give *mere attention* to political issues and candidates as *publics*, whereas people who showed greater interest in politics, candidates and issues were categorized and measured as *groups* or *constituencies*. With the assistance of three political parties in Rhode Island, this researcher used these definitions in sample selection to identify respondents who belonged to groups or constituencies, so that they could be interviewed for the study. Respondents were asked to identify their political party registration. Potential sample members who were ranked as having mere attention to political matters were not selected for the study.

The sample members were selected after consultation with leaders of the Republican, Democratic, and Moderate Party organizations in Providence County. The Moderate Party is an organized group of independent voters. These organizations were consulted as a means of finding voters in each party and desired age group who were also frequent mass media users and who voted in the 2008 presidential election. Kuzel (1992) and Patton (1990) described this as "snowball" or "chain" sampling. The researcher "identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). In all cases, respondents had to meet the minimum criteria to participate in the study; and all final selections were at the sole discretion of the researcher.

In addition, using computerized voter registration information from the Office of the Rhode Island Secretary of State, the researcher verified an initial pool of thirty registered voters from each party who voted in the 2008 election. Officials from the three respective parties were also asked to verify the party membership of everyone pre-

selected in each of the three age-based, generational categories. The researcher mailed a questionnaire and consent form to each person with a stamped self-addressed return envelope, as specified in the approved IRB (Institutional Review Board) application. Based on the returns, the researcher selected the six people to be interviewed in each of the generational categories. When the initial mailing did not yield enough respondents, the process was repeated until the 18 respondents were identified. In cases where more than six people in any of the categories were qualified, a random sample of six was drawn from the total sample. Final sample selection of the respondents was determined solely by the researcher.

The criteria for being selected were those that met the previously stated qualifications to be described as constituents. The questions and requisite responses were:

- Are you a legal resident of Providence County, Rhode Island? (Must be “Yes.”)
- Did you vote in the 2008 presidential election? (Must be “Yes.”)

How would you describe your political news consumption during the 2008 presidential campaign: Several Times a Day; Daily; Every Few Days; Weekly; or Infrequently? (Must be “Several Times a Day” or “Daily.”)

- Do you actively discuss politics with family, friends and neighbors? (Must be “Yes.”)
- Please assess your interest in the 2008 presidential campaign: Very Interested; Somewhat Interested; Average Interest; Mild Interest; No Interest (Must be “Very Interested” or “Somewhat Interested”).

Data Collection Strategy

The data collection involved interviews with 18 purposefully selected sample members. The data collection type consisted of face-to-face, in-person interviews. The interviews consisted of allowing the respondents to tell very open-ended, first-person stories about their media usage and their interest in contemporary politics. The researcher then asked a list of semistructured and open-ended follow-up questions to probe more specifically about media choices and political interest. The interviews were recorded on audiotape and on a digital audio device to ensure accuracy, and the responses were transcribed for coding. The researcher also made handwritten notes during the interview to record any supplemental information and observations. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended the use of researcher notes in addition to the interview transcript because “transcriptions often erase the context along with some crucial nonverbal data. What you ‘see’ in a transcription is inescapably selective” (p. 56).

The respondents were interviewed in depth about their use, or lack of use, of all major media types, to include newspapers, magazines, television, radio, Internet and other forms of electronic communication commonly referred to as new media. Respondents were asked to reflect on their media choices and on why and how they access or seek certain forms of information. Each interview began with an open-ended preamble from the researcher which stated:

This interview is for a study on how people used various media to obtain political information about the 2008 presidential election. Keep in mind there are no right or wrong answers. I would ask that you be as honest and detailed as possible. With this in mind, as you reflect back on the 2008 presidential race,

please tell me in detail how you obtained information about the candidates and the election?

The interview process was very flexible and spontaneous. I let the respondents guide me through their media usage by allowing them to recollect and reflect on what news they consumed and why. My follow-up questions were based on what they told me.

The follow-up questions included, in no particular order:

1. How did you get information about news and current events, including politics?
2. Describe your favorite sources of news and your least favorite.
3. Describe why you chose the news sources that you selected. What made them attractive to you?
4. How much information or news did you receive directly from the candidates and their websites, versus from traditional media outlets?
5. Describe your Internet usage in seeking news and information about the election.
6. Are there any types of media outlets you avoided and, if so, why?
7. Describe what types of news and information you received from so-called social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter.
8. Describe what you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional mainstream media: newspaper, radio, and television.
9. Describe what you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of the so-called new media, including the Internet and social networking.
10. How do you feel your media usage shaped your impressions of your preferred candidate in the 2008 presidential election?
11. Did you actively seek out information about your candidate and about the competitor; and, if so, how did you do that?
12. Describe whether and how you used any online Internet chat room, discussion board or other interactive type media to express your opinion or ask a question?
13. Did you have a preferred television outlet for political news; and, if so, describe why you preferred this channel and to what extent you sought other options?

14. For whom did you vote in the 2008 presidential election and please explain why you made that choice?

The questions were designed to be open-ended to let the respondent provide as much rich and thick detail as he or she desired.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interviews were transcribed, and any distinct patterns of media behavior that emerged were noted (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The answers from each of the respondents were examined to see if there were similar categories or patterns of behavior which were unique and noticeable. Differing patterns of media usage were categorized. The analysis utilized “descriptive codes” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57) to identify the media sources used: TEL = Television; RAD = Radio; INT = Internet; NWS = Newspapers; MAG = Magazine; BLG = Blogs; PDA = Cell Phone or Personal Digital Assistant.

Once media sources were separated into the various genres of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, Internet and PDA/cell phone, the preferences were classified by the reasons why respondents chose their preferred media: immediacy, depth, timeliness, interactivity, visual appeal, political affinity and other reasons stated by the respondents. Additional pattern codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were employed so that answers could be grouped and clustered. This allowed for comparisons of media types or uses, and preference gratifications, as Blumler and Katz described (1974), within the three specified age groupings. The pattern codes to cluster uses and gratifications included: INR = Interactivity; VCE = Voice; FUN = Fun or Play; TCH = Technology; NWS = News; POL = Political; SOC = Social Interaction; NFO = Information; SUP = Support of

Beliefs; CRT = Criticism; AFM = Affirmation of Candidate; PRT = Participation; PIR = Peer Interaction; BEL = Belonging or Membership; KNW = Knowledge.

Other categories emerged during the interviews. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) advised researchers to be open to other categories emerging and that “in order to grasp the meanings of a person’s behavior, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person’s point of view” (p. 14). Miles and Huberman (1994) urged flexibility and open-mindedness in coding, as “codes will change and develop as field experience continues. Researchers with start lists know that codes will change; there is more going on out there than our initial frames have dreamed of” (p. 61). Emerging categories were coded: Emerging = EMG. The emerging codes were then reclassified if they were mentioned often enough to warrant a separate category. In the media source category, two new categories were added: SOC = Social Media; and PER = Seeing a Candidate in Person. Additional codes also emerged for uses and gratifications from choice: IMM = Immediacy; BAV = Bias Avoidance; BIA = Bias Attraction; RES = Researchability; SEL = Selection or Choice; CON = Convenience; HAB = Habit or Ritual; ATC = Technology Aversion; TRS = Trust; and ORG = Organization.

Data were coded according to common categories of uses mentioned above, including information seeking, candidate reinforcement, social discourse, keeping current, civic engagement, technology usage, participatory politics and any other categories which emerged in the interviews. Data were coded for common forms of gratifications listed above, such as knowledge, social connectedness, interactivity with media, fulfillment of civic duty, and entertainment. Once the data were coded, they were

grouped into clusters based on similar responses (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

These four clusters that included similar uses and gratifications were given the following designations: *News Content*; *Social Interaction*; *Technology Use*; and *Bias Perception*. News Content included the pattern codes: NEW = News; POL = Politics; NFO = Information; and KNW = Knowledge. Social Interaction included the pattern codes: SOC = Socializing; VCE = Giving Voice; FUN = Fun; SUP = Support; AFM = Affirmation of Candidate; PRT = Participation; CRT = Criticism; ORG = Organizational; and HBT = Habitual Behavior. Technology Use included the pattern codes: IMM = Immediacy; SEL = Selection; RES = Researchability; CON = Convenience; INR = Interactive; TCH = Technology Friendly; and ATC = Technology Avoidance. Bias Perception included the pattern codes: BIA = Bias Attraction; and BAV = Bias Avoidance.

Cross-case analysis was used to compare the respondents in the study. While this was not a quantitative study and the results were not generalizable, certain demographic data were gathered, including age, political party affiliation, gender, and education level. The demographic information was compared with the coding of media choices and with uses and gratifications to see whether any distinct patterns or clusters emerged.

Trustworthiness and Transferability

Since this was a qualitative study, the results were not generalizable. However, efforts were made to assess the trustworthiness and transferability of the information.

Three techniques were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the data.

First, member checking was used to determine the accuracy of the qualitative information. Respondents were sent transcripts of their interviews, so that they could evaluate them for accuracy and submit any changes, clarifications or additions. Only three respondents requested changes to their transcripts.

Second, the findings were presented in rich, thick detail so that themes could be identified and fleshed out for readers and for more detailed comparison to the answers and behaviors of other respondents.

Third, a peer debriefing by an outside observer was also employed to verify the accuracy of the summarized data. This outside observer was used to look at the data to assess whether the observer's analysis was consistent with the researcher's observations.

Based on anecdotal information that people have shared with the researcher, this study made the assumption that some of the reasons given for making certain media choices would include interactivity of the consumer; the media's ability to give voice to those who feel voiceless; the benefit of social engagement with other people on news and issues; the ability to gather information and gain knowledge; and the aspect of "playing" with technology.

The researcher stated these assumptions and potential biases with the understanding that other possible media uses and gratifications could emerge from the open-ended questioning of respondents and from their rich, thick and detailed responses. Those answers and any additional reasons and patterns that emerged were reported in the findings.

Creswell (2009) described the importance of the researcher's not allowing his preconceived categories to shape the respondents' answers and of his allowing "emerging

categories and theoretical sampling of different groups to maximize the similarities and the differences of information” (p. 13). Miles and Huberman (1994) also described the importance of allowing data to percolate up from the respondents, instead of fulfilling the preconceived expectations of the researcher, saying:

The challenge is to be explicitly mindful of the purposes of your study and the conceptual lenses you are training on it—while allowing yourself to be open to and reeducated by things you didn’t know about or expect to find (p. 56).

Summary

This was a qualitative study that examined the media usage by a carefully selected group of voters in Providence County, Rhode Island to determine how their news- and information-seeking choices informed their interest in politics.

The methodological approach involved deep questioning of six people in each of the three designated age-generational categories. The 18 respondents were prompted to describe their media usage during the 2008 presidential campaign and election in a narrative, storytelling fashion.

Interviews were transcribed, and any distinct patterns of media behavior that emerged were noted (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were coded according to common categories of uses, such as information seeking, candidate support, social discourse, keeping current, civic engagement and participatory politics. Data were coded for common forms of gratifications, such as knowledge, social connectedness, interactivity with media, fulfillment of civic duty and entertainment. Any uses and gratifications different from this list that were identified were coded as “emerging.”

Once the data were collected and coded, cross-case analysis was used to compare the respondents in the study. Demographic data were gathered, including age, political party affiliation, gender, and educational level. The demographic information was compared with the coding of media choices, as well as with uses and gratifications to see if any distinct patterns or clusters emerged along distinct generational lines or by party affiliation.

The 18 interviews for this qualitative study were conducted between June 4, 2010, and February 10, 2011. The results are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Data

Introduction

The purpose of this explanatory study was to discover what generationally distinct groups of people did in terms of making different media choices to gain information in the 2008 presidential election. The problem that was examined in this study was the lack of empirical information identifying what generational differences existed in how members of distinct groups of people chose media to gain information about politics.

The approach involved deep questioning of six people in each of the three designated age-generational categories. The 18 respondents were prompted to describe their media usage during the campaign and election in a narrative, storytelling fashion. This was a qualitative study.

Organization of Data Analysis

Among voters in the 2008 presidential election, from three generations of politically involved citizens in Providence County, Rhode Island, the study sought responses to two research questions:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

The respondents were interviewed in depth about their use, or lack of use, of all major media types, to include newspapers, magazines, television, radio, Internet and other forms of electronic communication commonly referred to as new media.

Respondents were asked to reflect on their media choices and why and how they accessed or sought certain forms of information. Responses were coded for the various uses and gratifications respondents noted for their media use. Those responses were then grouped into clusters, so that media usage among the various generational groups could be compared. These four clusters that included similar uses and gratifications were: News Content; Social Interaction; Technology Use; and Bias Perception. News Content included the pattern codes: NEW = News; POL = Politics; NFO = Information; and KNW = Knowledge. Social Interaction included the pattern codes: SOC = Socializing; VCE = Giving Voice; FUN = Fun; SUP = Support; AFM = Affirmation of Candidate; PRT = Participation; CRT = Criticism; ORG = Organizational; and HBT = Habitual Behavior. Technology Use included the pattern codes: IMM = Immediacy; SEL = Selection; RES = Researchability; CON = Convenience; INR = Interactive; TCH = Technology Friendly; and, ATC = Technology Avoidance. Bias Perception included the pattern codes: BIA = Bias Attraction; and BAV = Bias Avoidance. Cross-case analysis was used to compare the respondents in the study.

Presentation of Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents

Interviews were conducted with 18 voters. The group included six Republicans, six Democrats, and six independents. Nine of the respondents were male, and nine were female. Six of the interviewees were ages 18 through 30; six were ages 31 through 60; and six were ages 61 or older. The racial makeup of the respondents included 13 Caucasians; four African-Americans; and one Hispanic. The highest level of education attained by the 18 respondents included three high school diplomas; four associates' degrees; three bachelors' degrees; seven masters' degrees; and one doctoral degree.

All of the respondents voted in the 2008 presidential campaign and described themselves as “somewhat interested” or “very interested” in the election, following news of the campaign in the media “daily” or “several times a day.”

Data Analysis

Research question one.

RQ1: What factors influenced voter’s choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

The difference in media use among the voters was generational, with respondents in the oldest group relying predominantly on the traditional mainstream media of newspapers, radio and television. Of the six people age 61 and older, three used television as their primary news source; two used radio as their primary news source; and one chose newspapers. For their secondary news sources, five chose newspaper, radio or television; and only one chose the Internet as the preferred secondary news source.

By contrast, the youngest group of voters, the 18-through-30 age group, had very different media habits. All six respondents ages 18 through 30 used the Internet as their primary source of political news and information about the presidential campaign of 2008. As their secondary sources, four named television, one named newspapers, and one named radio. The youngest people in the study were the most likely to embrace the Internet, social networking and technology. Charles, a 28-year-old Republican, liked the immediacy of the Internet:

If it’s something you’re following, for example the ’08 elections, you’re probably going to be able to get what you're interested in, whether it's current poll numbers or information on a particular race amongst, you know, dozens of high-profile

paces across country. You're really going to be able to get that right away as opposed to on the TV news, for example, cable news, for example.

Ellen, a 23-year-old Democrat, also said she relied primarily on Internet news sources to get information directly from the campaign she supported:

I definitely signed on for the Obama campaign emails and got a lot of information that way, although there were so many emails and there continue to be so many of them, that no one can read them all. I think video was really important in 2008, because whenever David Plouffe [the campaign manager] or candidate-Senator Barack Obama would make a direct-to-camera [Internet video], people would watch that, and people would tune in for that. That, in addition to all the celebrity videos that came out for Barack Obama, made that a really big part of 2008, because it became a pop-culture thing. It sort of superseded news, the fact that you were sort of getting information about this candidate and this campaign, but it was part of pop culture.

Warren, a 22-year-old independent, liked the ability to share and discuss political stories with others:

Well, for me, the thing I'm thinking about most is Facebook. Most my friends are political junkies, too. So if they see a story, they'll throw it up on their Facebook. I mean you might read that. If you see a story you like, you'll throw it up on your Facebook. Really, you can get a different gauge because each person basically has their own political slant or says the kind of political story that they like. So if I'm just scrolling through Facebook updates and I see a status update, it might be that I'll read it. There's a couple of news outlets—I subscribe to their feeds—so if

there is a breaking news story they report, I'll follow that. But that's basically it.

The respondents who were in the middle age group ranging from 31 through 60 were still inclined to use the traditional mainstream media, but they were also more receptive to the technology and information provided by the Internet. Four people in this group used newspapers, radio, or television as their primary sources of political news in 2008, but two people in the group got most of their news from the Internet. Three other people in this middle age group also named the Internet as their preferred secondary source of political news.

In trying to assess what factors influenced a voter's choice for obtaining news and information, the researcher asked each respondent to explain why they had selected their preferred media sources.

News content. The first area explored was News Content and its associated codes: NWS = News; POL = Politics; NFO = Information; and KNW = Knowledge. People in the youngest age group mentioned words or phrases that corresponded to the codes for political news and knowledge 39 times; the middle group of respondents mentioned words or phrases that corresponded to the codes for political news and knowledge 68 times; and those in the oldest voter group mentioned words or phrases that corresponded to the codes for politics, knowledge, information or news 36 times. There was some degree of difference among the three groups when it came to being motivated to find political news during the 2008 presidential campaign; but no matter how they got their news, voters in each age group simply wanted information about the campaign:

Ashley, a 26-year-old independent, described her prolific Internet use:

I used the Internet an awful lot back in 2008, probably a little bit less than I do

now, but not by much. I [used] Facebook three or four times a day. I'm [was] an addict then, talking to my friends about politics via those social networking sites. It happened a lot. I would also get e-blasts from friends who were sending out alerts and news about the candidates they were supporting. So I was getting those daily, and the blogs weekly, and [using] the Internet for general searches.

Things—especially while I was at work—if it was work related, and caught my eye, so maybe [I spent] an hour or so a day on the news, kind of reading through stories about politics and what was going on every day.

Ruth, a 54-year-old Republican, extensively sought information on the election, even going so far as to volunteer on competing campaigns:

No, I want to watch both candidates. I mean like I watched both conventions. You know I went out there and volunteered for the McCain [campaign], and I worked on the Obama [campaign]. I did the fundraisers for both candidates. You know, I tried to be balanced in the sense that I want to know what both parties have to offer, not just as a candidate, but overall—on both sides of it.

Karen, a 66-year-old Democrat, was among those who sought out a wide variety of news:

On a weekday, I get up in the morning at five o'clock. I turn on the local news. I watch that for about a half hour, get in the shower, come out and watch it a little bit more. Then *The Today Show* comes on, and I get the headlines there. I'm off to work; I listen to the radio on the way.

The 18 respondents in the study all mentioned that their media use had developed certain habitual behavior, rituals, or patterns as notated by the codes: HAB = Habit; and

RIT = Ritual.

Social interaction. The second area explored was the Social Interaction of media usage, through which people had the ability to research, select, share and participate in discussions on political news stories during the presidential campaign of 2008. The codes were: SOC = Socializing; VCE = Giving Voice; FUN = Fun; SUP = Support; AFM = Affirmation of Candidate or Beliefs; PRT = Participation; PIR = Peer Interaction; BEL = Belonging; CRT = Criticisms; ORG = Organizational.

People in the youngest age group mentioned words or phrases that corresponded to the codes for things such as socializing, peer interaction, belonging and belief support 170 times; the middle age group mentioned those words or phrases 119 times; but the oldest voters mentioned them just 65 times. Specifically, words or phrases that corresponded to the codes for socializing (SOC) and peer interaction (PIR) were mentioned by the youngest age group 72 times; by the middle age group, 45 times; and by the oldest age group, just 20 times. The youngest respondents spoke about why these media attributes were important to them. Jim, a 21-year-old Democrat, said:

My buddy Brendan is—I'm a Democrat—my buddy Brendan is a Republican, and he would get on these email lists and send these emails: “Oh, look at what Obama is doing now. Look at this guy!” because all my friends and I were Obama supporters, and he was going for McCain. So, a lot of this information would be from these emails and, of course, I wanted to disprove them... posting a question on my Facebook status. You know, “Hey! Here’s an article I found. What do you guys think about it?” and just let the [Facebook] comments build from it and see what people think.

Diane, a 23-year-old Republican, bemoaned the fact that her party did not leverage the socialization and peer interaction attributes of the Internet as well as the Democrats did:

McCain came across as everything a Republican is expected to be—a rich White man; and I think that was pretty obnoxious; and I mean he didn't use the social media at all. So you have Obama, who is all over social media and having people put out these pictures and making him look like this inspiring thing... I mean that is a way to mobilize young people. I was just so anti-Obama because I didn't know anything about him. I am conservative in nature, and I knew he was the most liberal senator.

Ashley, a 26-year-old independent voter, also found the peer interaction of social media useful:

Most of my news came from friends on Facebook. And it was helpful because, you know I have a master's degree, so I have a lot of politically savvy colleagues from school and we would share and exchange stuff that way. We would debate back and forth about a story. Somebody would post a news story that came up in their local paper or they saw in *The New York Times*, and they would post it. And then we would all be having a debate or a discussion right there online.

While the Internet and social media allowed a lot of peer interaction during the presidential campaign of 2008, not all of the communication was positive. Ellen, a 23-year-old Democrat, said:

Some of my friends from high school who [sic] I was barely friends with, just my high school classmates really, who I was friends with on Facebook—the evening

of election night, that was it. I had to cut many people out of my [friend list].... I didn't want to see racist slurs on my Facebook wall posted by my high school colleagues. It just made you rethink, "Who are these people?" You know, I just can't believe that. I mean it was a little bit scary, because everyday Americans, that I knew to be everyday people from my everyday town, had such incredibly vociferous negative feelings for an African-American president.

The study respondents in the 31-through-60 age group also found the social interaction aspects of the Internet useful for political discussion. Darlene, a 46-year-old Republican, said:

It's very, very important because it keeps constituents who are on there knowing [about political events]. And then they'll talk to somebody else, and they'll talk their neighbor into going, "Hey this one [official] is going to be there tonight; do you want to go?" And do you want to go to this meeting?" And it works, and I think it is extremely important; and I'm trying to figure out what we did before Facebook. I don't know what we did before Facebook, or before we could text or before cell phones.

Some of the people in the 61-and-older age group did not like the social aspects of new media. Karen, a 66-year-old Democrat, said:

Well, like I said, I'm old. I really find it a real pain in the ass, to be quite honest, to do the blogs and all of that. Since they had me on [email] lists, yes, I get stuff from some of the candidates, and I'm still getting the Obama releases every day. And do I read them? Really, no, because it's just baloney. I don't because I don't want anything to do with them. I think it's an invasion of my privacy, and I don't

have any intention of sharing. I don't like sharing personal stuff!

Technology use. The third area studied was the influence of Technology Use upon media choices, with the codes: IMM = Immediacy; SEL = Story Selection; RES = Researchability; CON = Convenience; INR = Interactivity; TCH = Attraction to Technology; ATC = Avoidance of Technology. The results were quite stark. People in the youngest group, ages 18 through 30, mentioned the positive aspects of technology 217 times; the middle group, ages 31 through 60, mentioned it 119 times; and the oldest group, age 61 and older, mentioned technology as a positive attribute just 49 times. In fact, respondents in the oldest age group specifically mentioned avoiding technology in their political news selection 26 times. No voters in either of the younger age groups reported avoiding technology in their political news gathering.

Within the Technology Use category, responses were coded for the words or phrases describing: CON = Convenience; and IMM = Immediacy. The respondents in the 18 through 30 age group mentioned these attributes 79 times; the respondents in the middle age group mentioned words or phrases corresponding to the codes 46 times; and those in the 61-and-older age group mentioned them just 14 times.

The ability to get news and information in a convenient and immediate fashion was important to the youngest voters. Charles, a 28-year-old Republican, said:

Well, it's quick and it's constantly updated. It's portable. I mean, if you work somewhere around a computer, it's always there. You can check it several times a day, and it's always fresh. I think part of it is habit. I've just gotten used to that habit, rather than having a newspaper delivered every morning. Very few people in my generation read a print newspaper regularly, very few. It's just how we

grew up. If you're a college kid and you get up in morning, you're not going to go buy a newspaper when you can roll out of bed and fire up your computer. If you are into consuming news, you can get it all in a few minutes. And that's that. It's one less step.

Diane, a 23-year-old Republican, had a similar view:

I do prefer getting my news online because I can just click on whatever I want, Google whatever story I want, and find out more information conveniently. So I think that the convenience factor for the Internet is there. The convenience factor that the Internet is now on your cell phone that is with you 24/7—like I check my iPhone for news 24/7. And if I don't have my iPhone with me, I feel lost in the world; I feel so unconnected that it is scary.

Ashley, a 26-year-old independent, also saw convenience and immediacy as important attributes in her choice of news sources online:

Generally, the plusses of that was [sic] that they were happening in a timely manner. They were things I could be looking at when I was in the middle of the day—you know—when I had a quick, five-minute downtime. So, they weren't always stagnant; they were always getting updated. For me, I chose the sources that I did, basically, if they were easy to access, if they were things that were timely and could be condensed down in my regular, day-to-day very hectic schedule. They had to be things that I could grab on the go.

Respondents in the middle category, from age 31 through 60, also often mentioned convenience and immediacy as important attributes. Jerry a 59-year-old independent voter, said:

If I'm looking for the most immediate news, I'm probably going to go to the Internet. [Researcher: Why?] Well the Internet, because it's easy access, you know. If I click on a certain candidate, for example, I can get a lot of different viewpoints at once. If I have a newspaper, I may be getting only one particular story on the individual.

Sarah, a 54-year-old Democrat, who had originally backed Hillary Clinton, said the constant availability of information on the Internet helped her quickly transition to being an Obama supporter:

All of the sudden, I remember it was like being on a conveyor belt. You were just taken along, because the emails and the blogs and everything was just Obama, Obama. And I am not just being critical. I just remember back when I said, "Okay, Hillary didn't win and you still stay a Democrat," and just being fascinated. Oh, my God! I just kept watching these young kids. It was just 24/7, 24/7. So even during that particular Democratic campaign, as a Democrat back then, I saw the difference between the Hillary team and the Obama campaign and how the Obama people just kept their people hooked. So I found that fascinating.

Respondents in the oldest group, ages 61 and older, were the least receptive to political news and information from the Internet. Some indicated their news consumption patterns were steeped in ritual or habit. Daniel, a 61-year-old Republican, said of newspapers:

You know, there is just something about holding up a piece of paper, reading it the way you want, rather than just have it scroll on a screen. I guess I'm dating myself by saying that, but I like feeling something [in my hands].

Mary, a 70-year-old independent, said of newspapers:

I guess, being 70 years old, I have a propensity for enjoying things that are not online. I love—one of the great joys of my life—is being able to sit down and, with a second cup of coffee, read the paper. I love reading it thoroughly.

Walter, a 61-year-old Democrat, explained his preference for television:

I get to feel like I know them [the candidates] better. And like when you're watching somebody on TV, right, and you get to see them, you know you could kind of pick up if they were telling the truth or not.

Aside from their attraction to traditional media forms, the respondents who were age 61 and older also expressed some aversion to new technology on the Internet, particularly in the area of social networking. In coding the interviews, the researcher found that people in the 61-and-older age group mentioned “Avoiding Technology,” or words for code ATC, 26 times. No respondent in the 18-through-30 or the 31-through-60 age groups ever mentioned avoiding technology. Karen, a 66-year-old Democrat, said:

My least favorite way of getting anything is by Internet. [Researcher: Why is that?] I'm old and that's probably what it is. I just don't like it. I don't like this Facebook crap. And I think it is an invasion of privacy. I don't like that. I am not a blogger, so I didn't get it that way. I detest computers.

There was also a concern about the accuracy of information presented on the Internet, and that concern extended across political party lines. Jack, a 63-year-old Democrat, said:

We have a lot of relatives who were saying Obama was a Muslim and he wasn't really born in United States and shouldn't be president—all kinds of things.

Emails get forwarded to us of from various blogs and things, and I would see relatives, or I would reply to them and say, “This is crazy! This is not true.” You know, go to Factcheck.com or, whatever it is, that kind of thing.

Norm, a 63-year-old Republican, shared a similar concern:

I think that the negative side of it is its inaccuracies. Some of the things that are put out there—“in the blogosphere,” I think is the new term—are erroneous, or slanted, or in many cases are venomous, and I don’t appreciate that. That’s probably another reason why I don’t go into those blogospheres, because I don’t know what is true.

Despite their reluctance concerning the technology, accuracy, and privacy of the Internet, five of the six respondents who were age 61 or older said they had started to use the Internet, in at least some limited capacity, to get information about the 2008 presidential campaign. All six cited the ability to research items of interest, especially information they initially received from traditional media outlets. Jack, a 63-year-old Democrat, said:

I wanted a complete program, not just the few talking points you see on television. So, for example, the Internet, their websites, you could always get-- whether it's the environment, or education, or military spending, or healthcare-- just about anything you wanted to know about a candidate, you could find on their website. Then, if you wanted, you could go to Wikipedia or could go anyplace and read blogs about these people and hear what other people had to say.

Mary, a 70-year-old independent, said traditional media consumption would sometimes prompt her to go to the computer, adding, “And then certainly if I am really

interested in a particular topic, I can go on in terms of my own research.” Norm, a 63-year-old Republican, also found the Internet useful, even though he still preferred traditional media:

If I have some specific questions that I haven't yet heard answered through the news media, I may look up that individual's website and dig a little deeper. But for the most part, I think the coverage from the national [traditional media] level especially, has been more than adequate.

While respondents in the age group 61 and older showed some growing interest in and use of the Internet they did not embrace social networking. All six respondents said they did not use social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, at all. Despite that, they did recognize the appeal social networking had to younger people and its usefulness as a campaign tool. In fact, they recognized the significance of it in Barack Obama's victory. Jack, the 63-year-old Democrat, said:

I think it was the key to Obama winning. I think getting the young people, getting their vote... But that really facilitated it. It's a game changer in terms of political organization. You know, I used to be in a union and from the grassroots stuff, and I saw my dad walk the neighborhood shaking hands and all of that stuff. That's all old-school. Nowadays, you still have to do that, but now you have to have the website; you to have the Twitter if you want to engage the younger people. I think Obama proved that you can raise a lot of money on the Internet. You can reach out and touch massive amounts of people for small amounts of money and raise a tremendous number of dollars. And also, especially, the generational thing. The younger people, they can organize a rally. They can get the thing together in less

than 24 hours.

Even Republicans were impressed by how the Obama campaign used social media to mobilize voters. Daniel, the 61-year-old Republican, said, “They definitely bypass the mainstream media to get the word out to the people that they think are their supporters.” Mary, a 70-year-old independent, saw young people’s attraction to social media as a way of connecting: “Certainly any community gives us some sense of belonging; I mean we long to find some affirmation among other people.”

Within the Technology Use category, responses were coded for the words or phrases describing: SEL = Selection; and RES = Researchability. The respondents in the 18-through-30 age group mentioned these attributes 82 times; the respondents in the middle group, age 31 through 60, mentioned words or phrases that corresponded to the codes 80 times; and those in the 61-and-older age group mentioned them just 24 times.

Respondents in the youngest age group expressed a satisfaction that they could search and choose their own news sources and stories. Jim, a 21-year-old Democrat, said that was a tremendous help in trying to assess the candidate’s stand on issues:

Some of it was random navigation. Just kind of type in a topic, like healthcare, and see what pops up. I know that when the healthcare bill [came out], researching the actual healthcare bill itself, when it was being pushed to get passed, I would go directly to it. I actually went to the direct bill—that thousand page document—and downloaded it onto my computer. And then when certain topics would be brought up, I’d hit Ctrl+F so I could find exactly what it is that somebody was talking about, and I could read for myself the bill right in front of

me. Well, you can say all you want, but what the bill says is what the rule is.

Yeah, that was really important to me.

Diane, a 23-year-old Republican, said the ability to select and research stories meant she could avoid things that were not of interest to her:

I like to read the news and that's it. I don't, like, care that someone saved a litter of kittens. So, I like the selection—how easy it is online. You click on the story you want to read, and there it is, quickly at your fingertips! You don't have to flip through pages to find what you are interested in.

Ashley, a 26-year-old independent, who ultimately voted for Barack Obama, said the researchability helped her make her decision:

Going in, I knew a lot about John McCain because I had done some research on him during his Senatorial run and during his first run in the previous election cycle—or no—two cycles back. So I knew a lot about him. I felt like I knew enough about where he was, and I was surprised to see how much he was changing over the course of the election. And so for me, I kind of quickly had to start discerning how to manage what I thought I knew about the candidates.

The study respondents in the middle group, ages 31 through 60, also mentioned positive aspects about selection and researchability, collectively mentioning those terms or phrases 80 times. Darlene, a 46-year-old Republican, used the Internet extensively to do her own searches on candidates:

I “Googled.” I “YouTubed.” I found out a lot about each one. Like I was telling you earlier, I learned about Sarah Palin and where she went to church; where John McCain went to church; when Barack Obama went to church. I found out that

Sarah Palin was a jogger. I found that on Google, and about her children, and how she beat the large oil companies down in Alaska and found all of the corruption. Then I Googled John McCain and his [website] came up and he had like a zillion pages. So I had to pick and choose which ones that I read; and I did the same with Barack Obama. I am almost like my own investigative reporter.

C.J., a 39-year-old independent, also believed her ability to do her own research was advantageous, but noted disadvantages, too:

Yeah, so the strength of that, I think, is that there is probably nothing I can't go find. If I decide to do that, I can go find out and find different opinions, and so I think that's the great strength of it. I can do it on my timetable. I can do it sitting on my couch. Weaknesses? There's just so many things out there, and—again—I don't know how you figure out what is factual, never mind what is true. They [her children] had constantly been coming home and telling me [about Internet reports on Barack Obama], "He's a Muslim" and "He doesn't salute the flag." And I said, "You have to go and figure out what you believe and what is true." You can't just [believe Internet rumors]. I tried to let them be their own people, have their own political point of view. I try to push a little bit and, you know, encourage them to evaluate all the statements.

Sarah, a 54-year-old Democrat, also liked the ability to search the Internet:

From a news point of view, there is so much out there. I could discover a new news blog every day. It's just—it can be overload—and sometimes I think I can see why people don't read it or don't use it; but, by the same token, I think it's fascinating for me to be in Rhode Island and be able to go back to my hometown

[in Texas] and find out what's going on because my family is still over there.

People in the oldest category, age 61 and older, mentioned researchability and story selection only 24 times, but some saw what they perceived to be positive attributes of Internet news and information. Norm, a 63-year-old Republican, who predominantly uses traditional media, did see value in the Internet:

Well, I think the strength of the Internet is the fact that the information that's available is endless. From what I understand so far—I am limited in my experience—but it seems that you can get information on just about any topic, any person, any issue, at any time. And, like I said before, I think that if it's accurate, it's a good thing.

Karen, a 66-year-old Democrat, also used traditional media most of the time, although the Internet became increasingly useful to her in the 2008 presidential campaign:

Oh, I think it's obvious that it served the Obama administration, or campaign, very, very well. I think it owes a big debt to the Internet, and I think that's how they got so many people interested and the ability to contact them. It's not my thing, but I will go on and read something if I don't know what they are talking about—if I hear a news article, and I don't know what they are talking about, I will look it up [on the Internet].

Walter, a 61-year-old independent, says he did not use the Internet at all for information during the 2008 presidential election:

Most people my age are not into the Internet. Oh no! I just never grew up using it. It didn't come out until I was up a level in work. Back in my day, there was no

computer. There was no technology like that.

But Walter said that by late 2010 his daughter had taught him how to use the Internet. He said, “Yes, as a matter of fact. The last [issue]—well, it wasn’t political—but the last snow storm, I knew everything that was going on, by the computer.”

Bias perception. While this study anticipated the uses and gratifications of News Content, Social Interaction, and Technology Use, other categories were allowed to emerge from the data. Numerous respondents talked about being attracted to news that reflected their political viewpoints, and avoiding news that they felt was biased against their viewpoints. Two new categories emerged: BIA = Bias Attraction; and BAV = Bias Avoidance. Those categories were put in the cluster designated *Bias Perception*.

Respondents in the study mentioned phrases relating to bias attraction 21 times and bias avoidance 44 times. Those responses were fairly equal in their distribution across the age groups, with the most differences based on political party affiliation. Daniel, a 61-year-old Republican, preferred Fox News Channel as his primary source of political news:

It seems that the righteous news seems to be on Fox. It just seems that way because, you know, you have less argumentative backbiting, or slant or however you want to call it. You have less of it on that channel, so that most of everything that they might say negative against the administration, or against somebody else, seems to be backed up by facts.

Darlene, a 46-year-old Republican, had a similar perspective:

I find that MSNBC is awful; CNN, tolerable once in a blue moon; and Fox News is great. I will no longer watch Katie Couric. Absolutely not. And I hope she leaves. Well, she is destroying CBS News anyways, so maybe she should stay. I

will not watch Brian Williams at all, whatsoever. Even if I'm changing channels, I will just keep changing if I see his face. I think they're very biased. They're liberals—100% liberal. What Katie Couric did to Sarah Palin was absolutely disgusting. It's almost like they are trying to bag her. Any way, shape, or form, they were trying to bag her and make her look stupid.

Ruth, a 54-year-old Republican, felt the perceived media bias was strongly in favor of Democrats over Republicans:

I think the media portrayed President Obama as “The Great Hope.” It was like the “Golden Boy.” You only saw the positive side—you know, the family unit with the wife and two kids and so on. And Vice President Biden with his family, so it was always that plush side of it. And when you saw [the reporting on] the McCain-Palin [ticket], you know you would see, they portrayed it as, John McCain's last hope of getting into the White House, and Sarah Palin as the bimbo who didn't have a clue. You know you would see that, especially more in the evening and late-night media.... I don't think they gave her the opportunity to show her intellect and to show her full strength in her issues, and neither did they actually do that for Senator McCain at the same time.

Respondents in the study who were Democrats had equally strong feelings, but against Fox News Channel. Ellen, a 23-year-old Democrat, described her media preferences:

I'm not a big consumer of Fox News or conservative media. I know a lot of folks who in 2008 wanted to get both sides of the issue, and I was completely obsessed with the Democratic side only. And I really didn't consider any media coming

from the right. Like, I can decide who I am following on Twitter, and in the '08 campaign it was every liberal to moderate outlet in the world [laughs]. And it did not include Fox News because that's just not what I wanted to follow, and not where I wanted to get my news. So that made it real easy and—choice—I think social media can be defined by the amount of choice you have.

Johnny, a 54-year-old Democrat, also had a strong aversion to what he perceived to be a conservatively biased media outlet:

On TV I avoided Fox News. I feel like they are very right wing. And it's not because—there are some things I don't agree with the left-wingers all the time—but I'm a Democrat. I'm a lifelong Democrat, but I don't necessarily agree with everything the Democrats say. However, I don't want to look at a news organization where everything is—they're telling one side of the story, and they're representing themselves as a news organization.

Jim, a 21-year-old Democrat, believed that the media was biased in favor of his preferred presidential candidate:

I think people don't understand how strong the media is—really with anything—but I mean if you really want to bring it right to a campaign or something, if the media doesn't like you, you are not going to win. I mean hands-down. I definitely, definitely feel that if they don't like you, you are not going to win. And the media liked Obama, and he was everywhere. He was on every different type of media outlet and he was liked by the majority of them, at least. It just helped get his message out.

Other voters in this study indicated a willingness to sample a variety of political

viewpoints in the 2008 presidential campaign. C.J., a 39-year-old independent, said:

During the presidential [campaign], well, my day usually started by watching *Morning Joe*, the MSNBC program; but I'd go back and forth when Fox hadn't gone completely nutty, because I know some of the people that work on Fox. It's always interesting—the perspective. The same story is reported, but it always comes across in different ways. CNN I had a lot of trouble watching, even though I thought they had better information.

A number of voters did not like the perceived bias they found in any news outlet.

Karen, a 66-year-old Democrat, said:

I like some news programs on television; and actually, the Fox News and the screaming liberals on MSNBC, I don't. I find them aggravating because they have such an agenda that they've lost all credibility. I think Fox News—and I have a friend that is an ultraconservative, and when I go to his place, he'll have it on; and I'll say, "Now you're watching Nazi News," and he laughs. But I have to tell you, the MSNBC stuff is just as outrageous with some of those people. And so, with that in mind, I find that moderate, middle-of-the-road people who do their job without too much of a slant, to be beneficial.

Diane, a 23-year-old Republican, also perceived ideological bias from both ends of the political spectrum, but chose to watch both:

That was my enjoyment; my entertainment. I was just interested in seeing what the different commentators were saying—what the different sides were saying. If you watch MSNBC, you know you are getting liberal news; and if you watch Fox, you know you are getting conservative news. So it is interesting to see both slants.

Overall, 16 of the 18 respondents in this study felt that media bias was a concern, and they adjusted their news consumption either to get viewpoints with which they agreed or to avoid viewpoints with which they disagreed.

Research question two.

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

Media usage may have had relatively little effect on the ultimate voting decisions. Only four of the 18 people in the survey said "Yes" when asked if they felt their voting choice was shaped or influenced by how the media covered the campaign.

Party affiliation appears to have been a stronger indicator. All six Democrats in the study voted for their party's nominee, Barack Obama. Five of six Republicans voted for their party's nominee, John McCain, with one Republican voting for Obama. Five of the six independent respondents in the study voted for Barack Obama, and one cast a write-in ballot for Hillary Clinton. Jack, a 63-year-old lifelong Democrat, said his party affiliation was a stronger influence, and he was not influenced by the media coverage.

I got to say [sic], in all honesty, not an awful lot [of media influence], other than I was predisposed to vote for the Democrats. Sure, I voted a straight Democratic ticket—and to be honest with you—unless there was something so damning about a specific candidate that came out through any media, or that I became aware of, that's what I would have done. Usually I would not vote for the Republican.

Diane, a 23 year-old Republican, expressed a similar sentiment toward the opposing party:

I do not think if I had met Barack Obama that it would have changed my mind on

him. I really don't, because I knew what he stood for, and it just isn't in line with what I stand for.

Independent voters said they were more inclined to be influenced by media coverage because they lacked a formal party affiliation. Jerry, a 59-year-old independent, said:

Yeah, I may vote Democratic in one election, and I may vote Republican in the other. It really has to do with the individual, not the party. I voted for Obama ultimately. I looked at the ticket. I looked at him, and for all my issues that were closest to me—you know, having to do with health care, and so on. I think the thing I was most concerned about is we're in a world that had so much hostility. You know, we had Afghanistan; we had Iraq. And for me, the sense of national security [was critical]; somebody [a president] who maybe wouldn't get us involved in yet another conflict somewhere, but maybe we'd be able use diplomacy.

Still, some voters in the survey admitted that how the media covered the race helped to shape their opinions of the candidates and ultimately how they voted. Those who admitted being influenced by the media coverage in the general election said they had either been undecided or uncommitted voters well into the election, or previously had supported other candidates who were eliminated in the primaries. Johnnie, a 54-year-old Democrat, said:

I voted for Barack Obama. I voted for Barack Obama. I'm a traditional Democrat. I traditionally vote Democratic. I didn't want to vote for him because I didn't know him, but I changed my mind after I got more information about him and

liked what I saw, and Obama made a connection with me. Like I said, he was very smooth on television; and after I got the backstory on him, the back information about him—he worked on the grassroots level to help poor people—and I really started believing what I was seeing on television about him.

Walter, a 61-year-old independent, says his voting choice was heavily influenced by the media coverage: “I think about 95% of it. [Researcher: Why?] Just the way they act on TV. I don't remember exactly why. You know, I don't remember why; but I remember it was TV, watching him [Obama] on TV.” Jerry, a 59-year-old independent, said he was still undecided at the time of the fall presidential debates, but the media coverage of those events ultimately influenced his vote:

I mean, I liked John McCain. I always felt he was kind of an independent thinker in his party; but, as those two candidates got presented side-by-side, it became clearer and clearer to me, at the time, that Obama just had more energy, more resilience, or whatever. And then the clincher for me was when McCain picked Sarah Palin. I saw her on TV and said, “This woman does not have a lot.” To me, she didn't bring much to the table. God forbid McCain goes and gets hit by the proverbial bus; and she's president. We're in some trouble.

While traditional media usage in general did not appear to influence how most people in this study voted for president in 2008, it did appear that some of the respondents relied on newer, nontraditional types of media. By 2008 most candidates, political parties, interest groups and media outlets had established Internet websites to communicate and interact with the public. People could search those websites for information and sign up for email messages or text messages directly from campaigns.

In this study, 10 of the 18 respondents chose to receive email, texts or other direct communications from campaigns. This choice, as with other Internet use, appeared to differ by generation. Four of six voters age 18 through 30, signed up for email; four of six voters, age 31 through 60, signed up for campaign emails; but only one of six respondents age 61 or older chose to do so. Some respondents, such as Mary, a 70-year-old independent, chose to get more involved in campaigns because of email communication:

I then became enthusiastic about it, enough to make donations online and things like this, and also to participate in the Rhode Island primary. I remember it was a very icy March, and I went door to door for one of the candidates as a result [of a campaign website request for help]. I probably might not have done that had I not had any direct contact with the campaign, and it did come to me via email.

Ellen, a 23-year-old Democrat who volunteered on Barack Obama's campaign, found email and Internet messages very useful from an organizational communication standpoint:

The one thing it's really good at is linking people to their nearest event, so I actually attended, in reality, a house party for Barack Obama in Washington with a bunch of strangers that I didn't know at all, but because it was posted online, sort of an open call for people who wanted to learn more about the campaign and how to get involved.

Jim, a 21-year-old Democrat and first-time voter, found the direct communication from a campaign very useful:

It was important for me to do. Barack Obama emailed me like two to three times a

week, I want to say, when you signed up for his e-mail lists. I was definitely tied in with that. That was probably as direct and as close as I could get to the campaign—at least at the time—because it was just the start of me getting into politics. It’s as close of a direct link to the candidate as I could think of. I mean here’s an email from—not from him personally—but from his campaign staff; and people that are telling me his policies, his plans, and what he wants to do. Others, including C.J., a 39-year-old independent voter, wanted to be among the first to know about Barack Obama’s choice for vice president:

I thought that was really an interesting thing that Obama did, and the only reason I signed up for his website to get the email blast is because I am a huge Joe Biden fan; and I heard that it might be him [for vice president]. And so, if you signed up, you got the text message early. The emails that came from Joe Biden asking me for another five dollars? He got the five dollars. I was so excited! So, probably the email, direct contact from the candidates that I got, was just limited to that. It was the first time in my life that I ever had any money, so they got a little of my money, but only after they picked Biden as vice president. And I have not unsubscribed, so I am on whatever list, so I still get them [emails].

While 10 of the 18 respondents in this study did sign up for direct campaign emails, the others did not. Some expressed skepticism about direct messages from campaigns. Ashley, a 26-year-old independent, said

It tends to be one-sided, and you know it’s what they want you to see and read, so it’s not necessarily the type of information I was looking for. I was looking more for actions behind the words.

Warren, a 22-year-old independent and a first-time voter, said he was skeptical of self-generated news from any campaign:

I didn't trust their website more or less because it's their propaganda. I wouldn't more or less trust their website because it's going to be basically "This is me. This is why you should vote for me," instead of basically weighing all the options.

Johnnie, a 54-year-old Democrat, was also dubious of a campaign's self-generated Internet news:

I never go to a political candidate's websites for some reason. [Researcher: Why?]

I think the reason is, if you're writing about yourself, for the most part it's all good. I mean you're not going to be—you're not going to put any negative out there for us, but I want to hear that.

Overall, when the interviews were coded, people in the youngest category, age 18 through 30, mentioned campaign news or information generated from the candidate in a positive light 13 times; those in the middle group, ages 31 through 60, in a positive light 10 times; and the oldest group, age 61 and over, also mentioned self-generated campaign news in a positive light 10 times.

Summary

The purpose of this explanatory study was to discover why generationally distinct groups of people made different media choices to gain information in the 2008 presidential election. The problem that was examined in this study was the lack of empirical information identifying what generational differences existed in how members of distinct groups of people chose media to gain information about politics.

There were indications in the review of the literature that generational differences existed: older voters preferred newspapers, radio, and television, while young voters preferred the Internet, social networking, and other new media. This study sought to examine why the differences in media use occurred and what impact that had on the consumption of political information. This study found that indeed there were generational differences in news consumption by a select group of voters in Rhode Island. Those differences were based on the various uses and gratifications derived from media use. They included the ease of consumption of news; the convenience and habitual use of various media options; the familiarity, or lack of familiarity, with modern information technology; and a desire to read or to avoid reading news and information that was not compatible with a respondent's own political ideology.

The data collected in this study confirmed the existence of generational differences in how people of three distinct groups of voters in Providence County, Rhode Island, consumed and used media to gain information about the 2008 presidential campaign. The findings, conclusions, and implications of the data will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

Introduction

This chapter summarizes the study and its findings, conclusions and implications for the fields of media use and political communication. It also assesses the future research possibilities in these fields of study.

Summary of the Study

The problem that was examined in this study was the lack of empirical information identifying what generational differences existed in how members of distinct groups of people chose media to gain information about politics.

The purpose of this explanatory study was to discover what generationally distinct groups of people did in terms of making different media choices to gain information in the 2008 presidential election.

The review of the related literature was divided into four categories. The first theme focused on the history of media and political communication. It was important to examine the history of mass media and political communication and how they have evolved over the years.

The second theme explored the theory of uses and gratifications and how media choices were made. Much of the literature in communication studies is grounded in what is known as uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The theory posits that individuals have specific reasons, wants and needs for choosing how they get information, and that they seek to derive certain benefits in making their choices and in obtaining the information they desire.

The third theme explored how uses and gratifications theory has been adopted by organizations, including political campaigns. It is clear from a historical point of view that certain organizations, including political campaigns, have adopted media campaign strategies and informational messages designed to target the uses and gratifications sought by consumers of news and information.

The fourth theme explored the significant technological changes in the delivery systems for news and information, notably the new media, that have occurred over the past 15 years. It was a goal of this study to document the historical development of these trends and to assess how both voters and political campaign managers are interacting with traditional media and new media in terms of the uses and gratifications derived from them.

The literature review was relevant to this present study in that it offered a framework for interpreting the two research questions posed to a sample of voters in Providence County, Rhode Island:

There two research questions were:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

The methodological approach involved deep questioning of six people in each of the designated age-generational categories. The respondents were prompted to tell stories describing their media usage and interest in political information during the 2008 presidential campaign.

The significance of this study was its contribution to the currently limited body of research concerning the changing sources of news and the impact of those changes on the voting public. The study also could be significant for its practical contributions to planning the media strategies of political campaigns.

Findings

Generational differences. This study made numerous findings. The use of media for obtaining news, especially news about politics during the 2008 presidential campaign, varied widely by age group. All six of the youngest voters, age 18 through 30, preferred the new media sources of the Internet, social networking and text messages. All six respondents in the oldest group, voters age 61 and older, preferred traditional media of television, newspapers and radio. The middle group, age 31 through 60, used a combination of traditional and new media.

News content. Respondents in all age groups indicated that they followed the 2008 presidential election closely and that obtaining news about the campaign and election was among their primary uses and gratifications from the media. The first use and gratification from media that was studied was News Content. People in the youngest age group mentioned words or phrases corresponding to the codes for political news and knowledge 39 times; the middle age group of respondents mentioned codes for political news and knowledge 68 times; and those in the oldest voter group mentioned the codes for politics, knowledge, information or news 36 times. There was some difference among the three groups when it came to being motivated to find political news during the 2008 presidential campaign. No matter how they got their news, voters in each age group simply wanted information about the campaign.

Social interaction. The opportunity for Social Interaction in media consumption was next among the uses and gratifications examined in this study. People in the youngest age group mentioned words or phrases corresponding to codes for things such as socializing, peer interaction, belonging and belief support 170 times; the middle age group mentioned those words or phrases 119 times; but the oldest voters mentioned them just 65 times. Specifically, the codes for socializing and peer interaction were mentioned by the youngest age group 72 times; by the middle age group 45 times; and by the oldest age group just 20 times.

Technology use. The third area studied was the influence of Technology Use upon media choices. People in the youngest group, age 18 through 30, mentioned the positive aspects of technology 217 times; the middle group, age 31 through 60, mentioned technology usage in positive terms 119 times; and the oldest group, age 61 and older, mentioned technology as a positive attribute just 49 times. In fact, respondents in the oldest age group specifically mentioned avoiding technology in their political news selection 26 times. No voters in either of the younger age groups reported avoiding technology in their political news gathering.

Within the Technology Use category, responses were coded for the words or phrases describing convenience and immediacy. The respondents in the 18-through-30 age group mentioned these attributes 79 times; the respondents in the middle age group mentioned the words or phrases corresponding to the codes 46 times; and those in the 61-and-older age group mentioned them just 14 times.

Also within the Technology Use category, responses were coded for the words or phrases describing selection and researchability. The respondents in the 18-through-30

age group mentioned these attributes 82 times; the respondents in the middle group, age 31 through 60, mentioned terms corresponding to the codes 80 times; and those in the 61-and-older age group, mentioned them just 24 times.

Bias perception. The findings also indicated that media choice for some voters was affected by their perception of bias in some media outlets. Numerous respondents talked about being attracted to news that reflected their own political viewpoints or about avoiding news that they felt was biased against their viewpoints. Two new categories emerged: bias attraction and bias avoidance. Respondents in the study mentioned phrases relating to bias attraction 21 times and bias avoidance 44 times. Those responses were evenly distributed across the age groups, with the most differences based on political party affiliation.

The influence of media use upon the respondents' voting choices was also studied. Party affiliation, and not media usage, appeared to be a stronger predictor of voting choice. Media usage may have had relatively little effect in the ultimate voting decisions. Only four of the 18 people in the survey said "Yes" when asked whether they felt their voting choices were shaped or influenced by how the media covered the campaign. All six Democrats in the study voted for their party's nominee, Barack Obama. Five of six Republicans voted for their party's nominee, John McCain, with one Republican voting for Obama. Of the six independent respondents in the survey, five voted for Barack Obama, and one cast a write-in ballot for Hillary Clinton.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the data gathered to answer the first research question:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

Generational differences. The choice of media sources was heavily influenced by generational experience. All the respondents in the study demonstrated a strong interest in the presidential election of 2008 and actively sought out information about the candidates and the campaign. The big difference was in where they obtained their information. The oldest voters chose traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, radio and television, and used very little new media. By contrast, the youngest voters in the study were heavy consumers of new media, but relied little on the traditional media. Viewers in the middle age group were still heavy users of traditional media, but they also began to supplement that with a lot of new media consumption. In fact, many people in the middle age group reported looking for more information on a story they had seen on television by conducting an Internet search on the subject of the story.

All of the 18 voters interviewed in this study indicated that they were creatures of habit when it came to their media usage. Rituals, such as the oldest voters walking down the sidewalk to get the newspaper upon waking or the youngest voters sleeping with an Internet-connected iPhone at their bedside, were common. "This is what I grew up with" was a statement made by those in each generational category. Their media consumption had become a matter of routine or habit.

News content. The uses and gratification category News Content warrants further examination. The youngest voters mentioned words or phrases corresponding to the

codes 39 times, and the oldest voters mentioned them 36 times. However, the middle group, ages 31 to 60, mentioned such words and phrases 68 times—at nearly double the frequency of the other age groups. This may be due to their cross-pollination of media use between both old and new media. All six of the respondents in the middle age group reported that when they read a newspaper story or saw a television story of interest, they often did a follow-up search on the Internet for more information.

This researcher also falls into this middle age group and engages in what I call media multitasking, which involves looking at news on my laptop computer while watching television news. This concept of media multitasking or media cross-pollination is an area worthy of further study.

The common denominator in all groups was the thirst for political information. The differences lay in their sources for that information. The oldest voters acknowledged that their choices of media were based on what they had done most of their lives: They picked up a newspaper or turned on the television or radio. Their media choices were very much the result of habit. The same was true for the youngest voters. Voters in the age group 18 through 30 predominantly used the Internet to get their news because that is what they had done most of their lives. As with the oldest voters, their media choices were very much habits formed during the course of their lives. They chose the media sources with which they were most familiar. Voters in the middle group, age 31 through 60, also relied heavily on traditional media, but were more adaptive and accepting of new media. This may be due to the fact that these voters were all still in the workforce, where desktop computers with readily accessible information had increasingly become part of their careers and lives. All six respondents in the youngest age category and all six

respondents in the middle age category were still employed full time and had ready access to computers, while only one of the six respondents in the oldest category was still employed. Without a need for a computer, because of the lack of training, or due to resistance to technology, the oldest voters showed little interest in Internet news.

Social interaction. While respondents in this study were habit-driven in making their media choices, other factors also influenced them. All of the youngest voters expressed a strong interest in social interaction and in the ability to share and comment on political stories with friends through such Internet-based websites as Facebook and Twitter. None of the oldest voters expressed any interest in such social interaction. Some voters in the middle age category described adoption of media that had a social interaction component because of their employment or their wish to interact with their children who used the technology. Their use of new media for political information was increasing, but had not reached the degree to which the youngest voters were using it.

The uses and gratifications category of Social Interaction is worthy of further study. The phenomenon of people in the youngest age groups wanting to share and comment on political news and information to the extent that they do is fascinating. People in the oldest category, age 61 and older, showed no such interest in the social aspects of new media. They appeared satisfied to get political news from traditional outlets, such as television and newspapers, without feeling the need to share it with others. However, they probably discussed political issues with their peers and family in a face-to-face setting, often characterized in the workplace as “water-cooler talk.” Perhaps the Internet—including the social networks with their ability to facilitate political

discussion—has become the modern equivalent of the water cooler talk for younger voters.

As a representative member of the middle age group, this researcher, working in television, radio and print media, often integrated the use of blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to build a broader audience and to reach all age groups via their preferred media. In so doing, I honed my new media skills, while making my work more relevant and accessible in the contemporary media marketplace.

Technology use. Another influence on voter media choice was the appeal of technology. Voters in the youngest category liked the fact that they could get news on their computers or cell phones any time they wished. They showed little interest in a newspaper that was delivered each morning or in a routine 6 p.m. television newscast. They did not want to wait for the news, nor did they want to consume information they felt might be stale or outdated. Voters in the oldest category expressed a high comfort level with traditional media that they had used all their lives. They spoke of rituals, such as reading the newspaper with a cup of coffee each morning, or watching the nightly news with their favorite local anchors and reporters.

Within the uses and gratifications category of Technology Use, the ability to select or to research a story further was more important to the youngest voters. Respondents in the two categories ranging in age from 18 through 60 mentioned the ability to select stories based on their own interests and the ability to conduct further Internet research on a story 162 times. Voters age 61 and older mentioned selection and researchability only 24 times. It should be noted that the Internet allows consumers to

select and research stories, whereas in the traditional media of radio, television, and newspapers, the stories are selected by the news outlets.

As someone who received little or no computer training himself, this researcher confesses that I often resisted changing technology. I was often fearful of learning new technology, concerned that I would not be able to understand it or to use it properly. In fact, many news employees in my generation, ages 31 to 60, have resisted the convergence of computers with our more familiar journalism practices and the transition from videotape to digital video formats. As a consequence, many of these people lost their jobs. While I resisted the new technology at first, I quickly learned that it was an “adapt or die” situation for my career. I now fully embrace the technology of computers, the Internet and social media because learning them has enabled me to remain gainfully employed as a political journalist.

Bias perception. A voter’s perception of media bias was also an influencing factor on media choices. In 21 instances respondents mentioned being attracted to media sources that they felt were compatible with their own political views. In 44 instances, respondents said they avoided particular media outlets because they perceived the political coverage was biased.

The second research question was:

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter’s media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

Four of the 18 participants in this study felt that their media usage had an influence on which candidate they chose.

Regardless of what media people chose, another factor proved to be a greater influence on their voting choice. Party affiliation was a stronger predictor of voter preference. All six Democrats in this study chose their party nominee, Senator Barack Obama. Five of six Republicans in this study chose their party nominee, Senator John McCain. While five of the six independent voters in this study chose Senator Obama, they stated reasons based on such issues as war and health care, and not issues related to the influence of their media choice. Four of the six independent voters also reported struggling with their voting decisions and having to make choices between two candidates they felt were capable of being president.

With party affiliation having proved to be such a strong influence, it is important to note that political parties are being more technologically savvy in terms of how they communicate to potential voters. Virtually all political races of any prominence now have candidate websites, email blasts and automatic text messages to communicate with potential voters. Ten of the 18 respondents in this survey signed up to receive these electronic communications from their parties or candidates. While most of them admitted the information was slanted to benefit their particular party or candidate, they also recognized that such electronic communication could be an effective tool to raise money, to organize volunteers and to push get-out-the-vote efforts.

Overall, party affiliations and previously held opinions about the candidates' positions on the issues were stronger indicators of voter choice than media usage among the voters in this study during the 2008 presidential campaign.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for political communication and

strategies for connecting with and attracting voters. They suggest the need for candidates and campaigns to develop multimedia platforms to reach voters in all generations.

Because younger people gravitate towards using the Internet, social media, online videos and PDAs (personal digital assistants), media campaigns to target them should plan for Facebook and Twitter applications, email blasts, with direct appeals for financial contributions and volunteers.

By contrast, respondents in the age group 61 and older relied primarily on traditional media of newspapers, radio and television. Therefore, campaign advertisements in all three media may be necessary to reach the oldest voters. As noted, there is growing Internet and social media use among this age group, though certainly not to the degree as among younger voters. It could be beneficial for a campaign to create website and Facebook pages to explain a candidate's position on issues of strong interest to older voters, such as Social Security, Medicare and Veterans Administration benefits. While people in this age group may still gravitate predominantly to traditional media, their gradual adoption of new media sources should not be ignored.

Voters in the middle group, age 31 through 60, showed inclinations to use a broader mix of both old and new media outlets. Campaigns targeting them should include a mix of both old and new media.

The role of party affiliation needs to be taken into account when planning media strategies, both on the Internet and in the traditional venues of newspaper, radio, and television. Because there is a strong relationship between party affiliation and voter preference, candidate- and party-affiliated websites should target voters who are inclined to vote their party line. Election voter turnouts are historically low. According to Gallup

(2008), only 56.8% of registered voters cast ballots in the presidential election.

Obviously, the Democratic and Republican parties missed the opportunity to turn out more of their members. Political campaign operatives often talk about “shoring up their base,” meaning getting the most committed Democrats and Republicans to the polls.

Website pages, emails blasts and social media campaigns can be designed to communicate with members of a political party with messages appealing to voter issue preferences and emphasizing the importance of voting for the party’s candidates and ballot issues.

The growing number of voters with no formal party preference, who declare themselves as independents, should also be an area of focus. The average of the 2011 Gallup Polls indicates that 28.3% of registered voters are Republicans; 31.6% are Democrats; and the largest group, 37 %, consists of independents. Media messages, whether in traditional media or in new media, need to be geared towards the interests of independent voters. Targeting media messages to only the party’s membership is not a strategy that can net an overall majority of voters.

This study also has implications for the field of Educational Leadership, in which this researcher is seeking the doctoral degree. Education is an issue and institution that is subject to the influences of politics and elected officeholders. An educational leader, such as a school superintendent or school board member, could be put in charge of mobilizing a political campaign in favor of a bond issue, for example, or an effort to allow charter schools, or some other educational ballot initiatives. The techniques and media strategies described in this study could be useful to the educational community in communicating with different demographic groups in the voting public.

There are possibly also implications for use in teaching students critical thinking about political issues. This use would warrant very careful study and design to assure that no political bias would be conveyed by instructional staff.

Future Research

Voter behavior and media use are two areas of extensive academic study. They are also phenomena that are in constant flux. Voter behavior changes with the changing demographics of the country over time. Media usage, as has been demonstrated, changes over time, as well.

For example, this study examined the use of social networking tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, in the 2008 presidential election. These two technologies did not even exist in 2000 and, therefore, were not factors in political communication during that election. As new technologies emerge, their use and implications in the world of politics will evolve. On the other end of the spectrum, the oldest voters who use the more traditional media of newspapers, television and radio will eventually die. Because younger voters do not use those media forms to any great extent, some of those media forms may die as well. The United States has already seen numerous newspapers and radio stations go out of business, as demographics and the economy have changed. Future research should focus on media uses and gratifications and how they may change, or not, as the technology of news and information delivery changes.

While this study focused on generational differences in media usage, the researcher also gathered information on the educational levels, party affiliations and genders of the respondents. Further research could focus on whether there were any significant differences in media usage based on those demographic categories.

The results of this study identified an emerging category which the researcher named Bias Attraction/Bias Aversion. Future research could focus on whether people in various demographic categories, such as age, gender, party affiliation and educational level, exhibit comparatively different levels of Bias Attraction/Bias Avoidance.

A study identified in the review of the literature (Kioussis, 2002) found that a majority of the people surveyed now view the Internet as more credible than television as a source of news, but find the Internet less credible than newspapers. Future research could document the public's shifting levels of trust as the media industry continues to change.

Another possible area for future research would be to examine the voters who participated in this study again after the 2012 presidential campaign to find out what, if any, changes occurred in their media habits and consumption between the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns.

This study documented the paradigm shift in the media industry over the past decades. Future research could examine the implications that paradigm shift might have for delivering the news in an era of shrinking budgets and fewer newsroom resources. Future research could also look at news consumption and could continue examining the differing uses and gratifications for each generational group. The fact that younger people currently are more attracted to the social engagement aspects of news consumption, while older consumers are more driven by the content of information, suggests a need for continuing analysis. A future study could address how people's uses and gratifications from news consumption may evolve and change as they get older.

This study also noted the use of Internet and social media as tools used to shape political campaigns, to communicate with the public, and to organize political action. While that aspect of the study was framed by the 2008 presidential election, future research could do comparative analysis of how the Internet and social media were used in other recent political movements, such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street.

Reflections of the Researcher

This study marked my first venture into qualitative research. My master's thesis was a quantitative study, and most of the political polling information I dealt with as a reporter and political analyst was quantitative in nature. Much of my focus in covering politics centered on quantitative measures indicating which candidate was ahead and by what margin, or in rating which issues were most important to least important among voters. Much of my analysis of voter media usage in obtaining information about politics centered on industry measures such as Nielsen ratings which tell us approximately how many viewers watch the television news channels at given times.

I chose to approach this study from a qualitative standpoint because I was more interested in voters telling me stories about *why* they consumed political news in the ways they did, rather than just telling me *what* they watched or read. A qualitative approach gave us a richer context to explain why people exhibited certain behaviors, including why they made their media choices. I wanted them to explain how they constructed meaning through their consumption of political information in both the old and new media.

Through my first-person coverage of the entire 2008 presidential campaign, I noticed a sea change in how people were consuming news about politics. Indeed, I witnessed a paradigm shift in how people communicated and received information about

the campaign. Most of that change was technological in nature, but some of it was also very personal. Technologies such as cell phones and the Internet allowed people to access information any time they wanted, but they also allowed people to share and comment on information with each other. Instead of the flow of media information being mostly in one direction—from media source to consumer—people could now interact and communicate back to the media outlet or with friends, family, coworkers and other voters. Media consumption was not just information gathering anymore; it was becoming a form of social interaction and political engagement.

On a personal level as a voter and on a professional level as a political reporter, I also found myself engaging in these new communication endeavors, as I tried to make my own meaning out of the political process. I readily consumed information from places such as Facebook and YouTube, just as easily as I did from traditional media outlets, such as CNN or *The New York Times*.

Summary

The purpose of this explanatory study was to discover why generationally distinct groups of people made different media choices to gain information in the 2008 presidential election.

The review of the literature indicated that generational differences existed, i.e. that older voters preferred newspapers, radio and television, while young voters preferred the Internet, social networking and other new media. This study sought to examine why the differences in media use occurred, what impact that had on the consumption of political information, and how the voters used that information.

Among voters in the 2008 presidential election, from three generations of politically involved citizens in Providence County, Rhode Island, the study sought responses to two research questions:

RQ1: What factors influenced voter's choice of media sources for obtaining news and information?

RQ2: To what extent, and how, did a voter's media usage habits influence his or her interest and choice making in the 2008 presidential election?

The study found that there were generational differences in news consumption during the 2008 presidential campaign. All three age groups in the study were motivated toward finding out news and information about the candidates, campaigns and issues in 2008. However, the study found that the youngest voters, age 18 through 30, relied mostly on the Internet for gathering news about the election. These respondents reported that the uses and gratifications they gained from accessing the Internet for news centered on social interaction and the use of technology. Social interaction allowed them to share news stories with friends and to comment about the topics. The technology of the Internet allowed them to select the stories in which they were interested and also allowed them to conduct more research on the candidates and issues.

The oldest voters in the study, age 61 and over, relied predominantly on the traditional media of radio, television and newspapers. They expressed satisfaction that the content provided by these media forms was adequate to keep them informed about the election and issues. While they recognized the ability to select and to research stories on the Internet, they did not do so to any significant degree. Voters in the oldest age group

expressed a high aversion to technology that is needed to use the Internet and social networking.

Respondents in the middle group, age 31 through 60, appeared to be people in transition so far as their media use was concerned. While most still relied on traditional media, all were transitioning to greater use of Internet and cell phone technology to gain more and timelier information about news and politics. Their news consumption can best be described as a hybrid of traditional and new media.

Voters in all age groups of this study expressed a concern about perceived political bias in the news. Respondents in all age groups in this study recognized the impact of new media as a powerful organizing tool in the 2008 presidential campaign, even though some of them did not utilize new media.

The results of this study have implications for how people consume information about politics; how journalists cover political campaigns; and how political campaign operatives try to communicate with both the press and the public.

Future research should focus on how the media industry and technology continue to change and what effect that has on politics. As noted, certain technologies, such as social media, did not exist in the 2004 presidential campaign, but emerged as influential factors by the 2008 presidential campaign. Future research needs to focus on the impact of any new technological changes.

The results of this study clearly indicated differences in how generationally distinct groups of people gathered news and information about politics, and what uses and gratifications they derived from their news consumption. Those differences need to

be taken into account by professionals in the news media, by political campaign operatives, by academic researchers and by the voters themselves.

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Appendix A

Letter to Potential Study Respondents

Mark Curtis
Ed.D. Student at St. Mary's College of California
136 Spring Street
East Greenwich, RI 02818
(510) 393-9903 – Cell
Mcc1@stmarys-ca.edu

April 2, 2010

Dear Voter:

I am inviting you to participate in a study about media use and political information. I am a student at St. Mary's College of California, who lives and works in Rhode Island, and am hoping you can assist me.

I am conducting a study of people who are interested in politics and participate by voting. I received your name culling from voter registration rolls and speaking with officials from the political parties. This study is part of my doctoral dissertation, and is not affiliated with my work as a news reporter for WLNE-TV ABC-6, nor will it be broadcast or disseminated in the media.

I will be interviewing voters about where they get their political information in the media, whether it is newspapers, TV, the Internet, or other choices. Please answer the following pre-screening questions, and return the survey and consent form in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope.

All replies will be confidential and you will be contacted if selected. Please circle ONE:

1) Are you a legal resident of Providence County, Rhode Island? (YES -- NO).

2) Did you vote in the 2008 presidential election? (YES -- NO).

3) How would you describe your political news consumption? (Circle ONE):

Several Times a Day -- Daily -- Every Few Days -- Weekly -- Infrequent.

4) Do you actively discuss politics with family, friends and neighbors? (YES – NO).

5) Please assess your interest in the 2008 presidential campaign (Circle ONE):

Very Interested— Somewhat Interested -- Average Interest -- Mild Interest -- No Interest.

Thank you for your time and please call if you have questions!

Mark Curtis

(510) 393-9903 or mcc1@stmarys-ca.edu

Appendix B

Study Participation Consent Form

Mark Curtis
 Ed.D. Student at St. Mary's College of California
 136 Spring Street
 East Greenwich, RI 02818
 (510) 393-9903 – Cell
mcc1@stmarys-ca.edu

Consent Form:

Dear Study Participant:

Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for a study to help me complete my doctoral dissertation at St. Mary's College of California.

I will **not** be using your name in the study. All of your answers and information will be in the strictest of confidence. You will be assigned an anonymous participant code such as: **1-D-a** so that your answers can be compared to others.

Please complete the following demographic information so that I can do some comparisons by groups or categories:

Gender: Male _____; Female _____.

Age: _____.

Political Party (Circle ONE): Democrat -- Republican -- Independent.

Highest Level of Education Completed (Circle ONE):

High School/GED -- Associates -- Bachelors – Masters – Doctorate/M.D./J.D.

By signing this letter, you consent to be interviewed for this study. Please know that you should feel under no pressure or duress to answer all questions in the interview. It is your right to decline any answer, or to end the interview if you wish:

If you have any concerns you may contact me directly at (510) 393-9903 or mcc1@stmarys-ca.edu or the Research Advisor, Dr. Dean Elias, (925) 631-4519 or delias@stmarys-ca.edu.

I, _____, consent to be interviewed for the doctoral project of Mark Curtis, a student at St. Mary's College of California. I understand my identity and answers will be kept strictly confidential.

I also consent to allowing an audio recording of the interview to take place. The recording is only to ensure an accurate transcript of the interview and it will **not** be made

public. The audio tape is to be destroyed once the interview has been accurately transcribed:

Signature: _____ Date: _____