City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Singer, J. (2003). Campaign contributions: Online newspaper coverage of election 2000. Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 80(1), pp. 39-56. doi: 10.1177/107769900308000104

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/3466/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900308000104

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to City Research Online policy.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@citystgeorges.ac.uk

Copyright information
The final and definitive version of this manuscript has been published in:
Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly © 2003;
all rights reserved, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Abstract available at: http://jmq.sagepub.com/content/80/1/39.short
DOI: 10.1177/107769900308000104

Please cite as:
Singer, J. B. (2003). Campaign Contributions: Online newspaper coverage of Election 2000. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80 (1), 39-56.

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS:
Online Newspaper Coverage of Election 2000

Jane B. Singer

Abstract: Through their Web sites, newspapers may contribute to political campaign coverage in new ways. This survey of online editors of leading U.S. newspaper sites indicates that editors gave primary emphasis to the medium's ability to provide Election 2000 information faster and in more detail. Though options for enhancing political discourse were appreciated, both interactivity and multimedia presentations were less widely cited among key goals and perceived successes. These findings suggest that journalists are "normalizing"w the Internet as a way to further traditional roles and goals.

Coverage of political campaigns, elections and outcomes is a staple of American newspaper journalism. An underlying, generally unquestioned assumption in journalistic circles is that one of the key jobs of the press is to help inform the electorate well enough to enable wise choices for self-government.[1] Indeed, the media claim special rights and privileges, from blanket First Amendment protection to special postal rates, based on their unique status as the "fourth branch" of government.[2] Surveys of journalists' self-perceptions repeatedly unearth themes of public service and a commitment to making democracy work, typically through disseminating and interpreting what is seen as important information.[3] Whether journalists actually do what they see themselves as doing, and whether what they do actually enhances the democratic process, always have been open to question. Nonetheless, the belief that their role is exemplified

by their handling of political information has remained unshakeable, and political coverage is a component of the newspaper product to which journalists have ascribed primary importance.[4]

This exploratory study investigates how the transition to a media environment in which the "newspaper" now comes in two permutations -- the traditional print product and an online counterpart -- is affecting what editors see as their role in covering campaigns and elections. With more than 3,200 U.S. newspapers, including more than 1,200 dailies,[5] now offering Web sites, journalists' self-perception as a cornerstone of democracy is open to fresh interpretation. Citizens no longer need their newspaper -- or any other traditional media outlet -- to inform themselves about candidates and campaign issues. In 2000, more than 5,000 Web sites about U.S. politics were available, according to the specialty search engine politicalinformation.com. At the same time, the Web gives print journalists an opportunity both to extend their coverage of government -- something they describe as a key benefit of online resources[6] -- and to venture into new areas such as audio/video content or interactive political forums. In fact, citizens using the Web to obtain political news in 2000 seemed to rely most heavily on the sites provided by familiar media outlets such as CNN or *The New York Times*.[7]

The Web, then, offers both citizens and journalists new choices related to information, discourse and decision-making. This study uses journalists' constructions of their own news-work activities to explore the options pursued by online editors at leading newspapers around the country in covering the 2000 campaign and election.

Online Political News and Its Providers

In the United States, use of the Web as a source of news in general and political news in particular continues to soar. Although precise numbers vary, one online ratings service estimates

168 million Americans have Internet access, putting online penetration at about 60 percent.[8] Americans also are spending more time online -- an estimated 117 billion total minutes in July 2001, up 30 percent from a year earlier.[9] The Internet has been the only news medium other than radio to steadily gain regular users in recent years. Among younger audiences, almost 45 percent now use the 'Net regularly, a greater percentage than regularly read any form of print media and rapidly approaching the numbers who regularly watch TV news.[10] They apparently are coming to trust the online medium as a news source, as well. Flanigan and Metzger[11] found that while audience members rate newspapers as the most credible of media, they do not see the Internet as significantly less credible than other media forms, including magazines, radio and television.

When it comes to online political news, there is conflicting evidence. A 1998 study of college students[12] indicated their attention to and recall of political articles in the Web version of *The New York Times* were less than in the printed paper. But by the 2000 election, the Internet seemed to have become more firmly entrenched as a source of political news among the general population. A Pew Research Center study found that nearly one in five Americans went online for election news in 2000, up from 4 percent who did so in 1996. Among those already online, fully one-third got election news from the 'Net, most of them citing convenience as the main attraction. Moreover, they relied on information they found online; 43 percent of online political news users said it affected their voting decisions. And as mentioned above, their most common sources for political information were the sites of major news outlets, including newspapers.[13]

The theories of relative constancy and functional equivalence of the media suggest that older media forms will be displaced by ones that more cheaply or conveniently meet users' needs.[14] Yet mounting evidence indicates that people who use the Internet for news also are likely to be newspaper readers. Stempel et al.[15] found that Internet users were more likely than

non-users to regularly read a newspaper and listen to radio news. Another study that specifically explored whether use of online media was displacing use of older formats also found that the Web supplements rather than replaces traditional news media. While the Web may compete with the entertainment functions of television, its use as a source of news seems to be positively related to reading print newspapers.[16] A small-scale study in Austin, Texas, similarly found a large overlap between readers of print and online papers, particularly local ones.[17] More anecdotal evidence can be found in the trade press. In general, it supports the view that, as one observer put it, new media can "preserve and extend the best aspects of the print culture while augmenting it with their various technological advantages."[18]

This is a key implication of the usage findings for those in online newsrooms affiliated with print newspapers. People will come to the newspaper's site -- but many will already be familiar with what is in the print paper, and they will expect to find more online than mere shovelware (print stories "shoveled" directly onto the Web). Not only do people use the Internet specifically to get information,[19] but they seem far more likely to go online to learn more about stories first seen in traditional media than to use the Web as a substitute for those media.[20] Online, then, they seem apt to be looking for additional or supplemental content such as breaking news, background stories, multimedia components, searchable databases or opportunities to talk about a news story or event.[21] In short, they may want what one online news expert calls "more functional, imaginative news," sites that distinguish themselves by a wealth of detail and, increasingly, interactive components.[22]

The new medium therefore could be a good fit for journalists, whose self-perception as people who perform a public service through the transmission and interpretation of information[23] seems well-entrenched across time[24] and even across cultures.[25] Longitudinal studies by both

Garrison[26] and Middleberg and Ross[27] show that traditional journalists are increasingly seeking and using online resources to enhance the information they convey to the public. Preliminary work into the sociology of online news work indicates the self-perception extends seamlessly into the new medium. For example, Brill[28] found that people working in online newsrooms rate the ability to make news judgments as among their most important skills, and Singer[29] found that print journalists considering the effects of online delivery on their roles saw the provision and interpretation of high-quality information as crucial.

Indeed, the Web may serve as a way to counter criticisms of traditional media coverage of campaigns and elections as superficial and focused on sensationalistic or "horse-race" aspects of politics. The key attributes of the medium make it suitable for addressing these concerns. To borrow from a list created by Millison,[30] the Web allows online journalism to be:

* "Real-time" or immediate, offering an ideal medium for breaking news.[31]

* "Shifted time," which Millison suggests accommodates archives but also can be seen more broadly. The lack of online time or space constraints allows unlimited background and reference materials to be made available, accessible at users' convenience.

* Multimedia, meaning it can include not just text and graphics but (at the current level of technological capability and general accessibility) audio and at least limited video content.

* Interactive in a variety of ways that all give the user greater control over information content and flow, through mechanisms ranging from e-mail to discussion forums to personalizable information-retrieval tools.[32]

This interactive nature of the online medium, in particular, has generated considerable excitement among political communication theorists. Some envision the Web as a tool for creating or recreating the much-discussed but perpetually elusive "public sphere" seen by John

Dewey, Jurgen Habermas and others as vital to the proper functioning of true democracy. The potential rise of an "electronic republic"[33] forces the predominantly one-way flow of traditional mass media such as newspapers to give way to a two-way flow that enables audience members to actively participate in the communication process. It thus has the potential to drastically alter the relative importance of traditional media in the formation of political sensibilities. "At the very least," says one political researcher, "the Net appears likely to decrease the influence of established media organizations over formation of the political agenda."[34]

But such Internet-enabled populism has remained primarily in the realm of theory, not reality. While online users seem to enjoy quick, unscientific polls, participation in political chat groups holds far less interest.[35] Studies of the 1996 and 1998 elections have shown that for their part, candidates not only fail to encourage interaction with potential voters,[36] they tend to actively avoid it, fearing lost control over their message and lost ability to fudge about specific proposals.[37] They are more apt to use the Web for enhanced self-promotion than enhanced accountability.[38] And while a few larger media sites, such as *washingtonpost.com*, now actively promote chat and discussion areas,[39] most papers were holding back well into the late 1990s.[40]

Nonetheless, there is evidence of a growing sense among journalists that their roles do include providing a way for people to express their views.[41] One of the goals of this study was to examine how online editors perceived options for political interaction and what use they were making of them. Overall, it sought to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: What did online editors see as their roles and goals in covering political campaigns and elections through newspaper-affiliated Web sites in 2000?

RQ2: What types of content did they identify as most deserving of pride in relation to those goals?

RQ3: What lessons from their experience in 2000 might they apply to future online political coverage?

Methodology

This study uses a descriptive survey, one that attempts to document and describe current conditions or attitudes.[42] The researcher chose a purposive sampling method, appropriate in studies that seek cases that are especially informative.[43] The goal was to gather input about their 2000 political campaign and election coverage from online editors at sites tied to major newspapers in each of the 50 states. These are the papers most likely to have brand name recognition for every voter in the relevant state, therefore serving as probable sources of state and national political content if users turn to an online newspaper for such content at all.

The Web site of the Audit Bureau of Circulations (www.accessabc.com) was used to determine which papers to include in the survey; this site was chosen as authoritative because it provides the original data used to ascertain newspaper circulation. Based on these ABC figures, the researcher selected the biggest paper in each state for inclusion. In addition, all papers with a daily circulation over 250,000 -- the largest category used by the Newspaper Association of America -- were included; such major "metros" typically enjoy name recognition throughout their states and often circulate statewide. For some states, only the state's largest paper qualified for inclusion. For other states, multiple newspapers qualified because of their sizes; California, for example, has six papers with circulations over 250,000.

Altogether, 80 newspapers were included in this study, ranging in circulation size from 33,000 (small, but the largest in its sparsely populated state) to well over 1 million.

Once the newspapers were identified, each paper's Web site was accessed to determine the name and contact information of an appropriate editorial staffer, someone with responsibility for the site's political news content. This was no easy task. While a majority of newspaper Web sites do provide staff lists, many do not -- and those that do are inconsistent in how staffers are identified and how much (if any) contact info is provided. Eventually, however, a list of editorial contacts and their e-mail addresses was compiled, with specific names whenever possible and generic e-mail addresses (such as "editor@newspaper.com") when not.

An e-mail survey was used to reach the targeted respondents. The week before the Nov. 7 election, the researcher sent an introductory e-mail letter to editors at each of the 80 newspapers, explaining the purpose of her study, promising confidentiality, and offering to share her findings with all participants. The survey then was sent electronically to the same editors on Nov. 9 and 10, 2000. It consisted of 10 questions, some with multiple parts. Most of the questions concerned coverage of the overall campaign, with a few questions specifically related to Election Night. Question construction was informed by results of the researcher's earlier studies of online newspapers' coverage of the 2000 Iowa caucus, which served as a pre-test for the present study.

Because this was an exploratory study seeking both subjective viewpoints and concrete details, both closed-ended and open-ended questions were used. The closed-ended questions sought data relating to such items as the presence or absence of political discussion forums or the amount of staff resources available for political coverage. The open-ended ones sought more rich interpretive feedback from editors to directly address the research questions, involving their goals for the political segments of their sites, the content areas they were most proud of, and the lessons they will take away in planning for future campaign coverage. This combination of

question types offers the ability to probe meaning, important in a study such as this one which seeks to understand not just what was included on these Web sites but why.

Although it took as many as five e-mailings over the course of four months and, in some cases, multiple follow-up phone calls, a total of 57 online editors eventually completed the survey, for a response rate of just over 71 percent. This rate is much higher than the mean response rate for e-mail surveys, which hovers just above 30 percent.[44] Responses were received from papers in 41 of the 50 states (82 percent), both large and small.

A coding sheet was developed for the closed-ended questions, and responses were entered into SPSS to facilitate analysis. Because the data from the closed-ended questions were nominal (or, on questions related to staff size, ordinal) in nature, descriptive statistics were the most relevant. With the open-ended questions, the goal of the data analysis was to identify major themes in editors' conceptualizations of their content decisions and journalistic roles in an online environment. To help with this assessment, a short summary of the editor's comments in response to each open-ended question was created. This process was not intended to be a substitute for detailed analysis of the qualitative data; rather, it allowed for quick and convenient identification of major concepts, based on the key attributes of online media described above. The summaries were used as a guide for categorizing responses and as a reference back to the actual text from the editors, which fleshed out nuances in those responses.

Findings

The number of major newspapers offering sections of their sites dedicated specifically to election coverage increased dramatically from 1996 to 2000. Thirteen of the papers included in this study (22.8 percent) did not even have a Web site in 1996, according to their current editors.

Of those that were online in 1996, 27 offered an election section that year, their editors said; another four editors said they did not know whether an election section was available. In 2000, not only were all the newspapers included in this study online (offering either stand-alone sites or community/portal sites typically co-produced with other information providers), but 53 of the 57 (93 percent) devoted a separate section of their site to election coverage. Thus, about twice as many leading newspapers offered separate online election sections in 2000 as did so in 1996.

This study found that goals related to informing the public dominated what editors of those online election sections wanted to accomplish in 2000, as well as what they were most proud of having accomplished after the campaign was over. The findings indicate that while the goal itself is a traditional one for journalists, journalists are finding ways to take advantage of the Web's unique attributes in meeting it. This section also looks at how online editors handled Election Night, concluding with a summary of what they would like to do differently in 2004.

RQ1: ***Election 2000 goals.*** Editors asked to describe their primary goal for their online coverage of the 2000 election offered varied and commonly multi-faceted responses. However, their ideas fall into rough categories. Two types of closely related, information-oriented goals -- providing information and bolstering the newspaper's and/or Web site's reputation, primarily through that information service -- were mentioned by a sizable majority of the editors. A different sort of goal -- creating or strengthening the democratic community, notably by stimulating public discussion of political issues -- was much less frequently cited.

The Web is an ideal medium for journalists who believe getting information to the public quickly is their key role[45] -- and, at least among respondents here, many apparently do. A goal directly related to informing users was mentioned by 45 of the 49 editors (91.8 percent) who offered at least one goal. Of those, 19 referred specifically to the Web's ability to provide timely

news, especially on Election Night, which loomed large in editors' minds as they retrospectively considered overall campaign coverage goals. Representative goals included "to present results of major races fast" and to provide "complete election returns throughout the evening, updated within minutes of changes in voter returns."

In addition to timeliness, the Web offers an unlimited news hole. With no time or space restrictions on content, information can be offered in significant depth and detail. The editor who referred to the site's goal as to "keep people abreast of over 400 local elections" recognized this, as did the one who emphasized provision of a "comprehensive collection of resources."

A handful of editors with information-oriented goals defined those goals specifically in terms of the value of information for voters facing a ballot decision. The goal was to "give voters the ability to understand the choice they were about to make," said one; "provide news useful to readers wanting to make a decision," explained another.

Notably, these editors saw the Web site as extending the franchise of the print newspaper rather than standing apart from it. The goal was to "provide an online resource that combined the best elements of the newspaper coverage with supplementary material online to broaden the information available to readers," one editor said. Some saw the Web site as finally enabling them to beat television, something they could never do in print. "We were trying to beat the TV stations at their game, and we succeeded with better live coverage. We also scooped them on the biggest local race," said one proud online editor.

In performing these public service roles by complementing the print product, these editors saw themselves as fulfilling another function, as well: making the Web site itself successful. One editor started by saying his goal was "helping citizens make better choices," then added, "and by making material available all the time (instead of just one day like the print

election guide), to drive online viewership." Another simply listed two goals: "To keep visitors to (us) informed. To draw traffic." Some reversed the priorities, such as the editor who wanted to "generate traffic, grow brand identify and provide a public service by providing detailed and useful information."

Only four editors offered goals not directly related to providing information or building a viable online business, but rather to stimulating political discourse among a community of online users. One sought to "create a local community for discussion of a national issue." Another sought to "empower our community to interact more directly with candidates and officials and to provide the foundation for an electronic town hall." Two others emphasized the desire to engage readers in what one called "lively discussions" about the election.

RQ2: Election 2000 accomplishments and sources of pride. Whatever their goals, the editors were nearly unanimous in declaring that they had been met. Of the 48 respondents answering this question, only one admitted failure to meet his goals, citing the "overwhelming number of races" and expressing regret that it was not easier for users to find key information on the site. Forty-three gave an unequivocal "yes" to the question of whether they had met their goals for the site. Four said they met some goals but not others, such as the editor cited above who did build an archive of newspaper articles but was prevented by "time constraints and technical problems" from offering as much original online material as he had hoped.

Many evaluated their success in terms of usage, citing heavy traffic, especially but not exclusively on Election Night. The overwhelming majority of these editors reported that usage of their election site as a whole either exceeded (18 editors, 31.6 percent) or met (31 editors, 54.4 percent) their expectations, even given the amount of work the section required. "Online traffic soared, so someone must have found it valuable," one editor explained.

For many, though, the focus was again on Election Night, rather than on coverage during the course of the campaign. On Election Night, 43 of the editors (75.4 percent) reported seeing a usage spike; only one said he did not. (Another eight said they did not yet know whether usage had jumped, and three said the information was confidential; two did not answer the question.) In particular, they expressed satisfaction over the speed with which they were able to update the results. "We were posting results as fast as the TV and CNN," declared one editor in judging the election section a success. "Readers could find out the results of local races seven to eight hours earlier than if they had waited for the newspaper to arrive on their doorstep," said another.

Respondents also were asked whether their election sites contained content unique to the Web and, if so, to briefly describe as many as three online-only content areas they were most proud of. Forty-five editors (78.9 percent) said they provided at least some unique election content. (Another three who said they did not provide such content answered subsequent questions in a way that indicated they actually did.) Admittedly, most of the content came from print; 38 (66.7 percent) said at least three-quarters of their online election content also ran in the paper, while only four (7 percent) said more than half their online content was original. (One other editor said a majority of the political sections contained "substantial" Web-only content.) Their descriptions of unique aspects that were special to them reveal what these editors are learning the Web can do that the newspaper cannot. Table 1 provides an overview of editors' responses to this question.

***** TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE *****

Among the 44 editors who described at least one online-only content area that they were most proud of, the Web's two key information-related attributes -- the ability to offer depth and detail, and the ability to provide frequent updates -- were both highly appreciated. A total of 95

content areas were cited by editors, of which 38 (40 percent) were features that provided information too extensive to offer in print (or, if offered, too expensive to publish and distribute more than once). These included ballot guides; detailed candidate profiles, bios and/or questionnaire responses; and other "news you can use" features such as precinct finders, archived poll results or a section that "tracked campaign contributions to presidential candidates right down to the local town level." In general, editors who cited online features in this general category saw their site as providing what one described as a "one-stop shopping section for voters by pulling in analysis and detailed reporting from as many different sources as possible."

Twenty-nine of the 95 content areas (30.5 percent) cited by editors in response to this question were ones that took advantage of the Web's ability to provide breaking news, obviously a particularly important attribute as returns came in on Election Night. The key components seemed to be the ability both to compete with television and to enhance the service provided by the affiliated newspaper. "We wrote Web-only stories throughout the evening to keep up with the horse race so we would be totally competitive with television and not have to wait for the (newspaper's) next deadline," said one editor. A few sites went well beyond simply updating returns. Among the most extensive online efforts were reported by this editor: "We covered Election Night live via Web radio and a chat room, had cell phone reporters at all the major headquarters, a pol science professor as an analyst, and interviewed candidates, campaign managers, and leading political figures as the news broke. We did better than the networks by immediately questioning the Florida result as soon as it was announced."

Although only a few editors described facilitating discussion as their primary goal, chats and discussion forums were cited 14 times (14.7 percent of the total 95 responses) as they considered content areas they were most proud of (in addition to the editor cited in the previous

paragraph who mentioned both "chats" and "Web radio" in connection with Election Night updates). Again, the key advantage seemed to be offering something that could not be offered in print. Chats with candidates "added a previously non-existent dimension to the voter-candidate relationship," said one editor. Others appreciated being able to provide an opportunity for fresh voices to be heard, such as the editor who said "some of the best content" came from readers talking about political news in her site's forums. Although several described these forums as lively and active, one editor suggested they had made a concrete contribution to democracy: "Discourse on our education issues forum, for example, has been cited during legislative debate on school reform measures." More information about these discussion areas is provided below.

A somewhat different aspect of interactivity involves users' ability to personalize information, something that is possible but more cumbersome in print. An example offered by editors here is a "candidate match" feature, cited by four editors, which lets users identify candidates whose views come closest to their own on various issues.

One other category of content received honorable mention from these editors: multimedia material, primarily audio and/or video of the candidates. Ten of the 95 content areas mentioned (10.5 percent) involved solely this type of content, which is obviously not possible in print. (However, only one editor listed multimedia content as a top source of pride, while eight of the 14 editors mentioning chats and discussion forums listed such interactive components first.) Again, multimedia content was seen primarily as supplementing print coverage. For example, one editor described video interviews of the candidates as a way for voters to "assess their credibility and sincerity."

These editors, then, zeroed in on four core attributes of the Web as a news medium in describing how they used it in covering this major event: its ability to offer timeliness, depth,

interactivity (including personalizable content) and multimedia formats. Timeliness related mainly to Election Night, discussed further in the next section. However, it may be valuable to say a bit more about interactivity, given its central role in scholarly considerations of the value or potential of the Internet as a tool for political discourse and, through it, citizen empowerment.

Thirty-eight of the 57 editors (66.7 percent) said their sites contained or linked directly to opportunities for users to engage in political discourse. Of those, the great majority allowed freewheeling conversation; only three editors (7.9 percent of those offering forums) said user messages were screened before they were posted. But this does not mean editors took a "hands-off" approach; on the contrary, 23 editors (60.5 percent of those offering forums) said they took action to stimulate online discussion. Their actions ranged from linking from relevant stories to promoting discussion boards in print to seeding the boards with provocative questions. Several editors said they used moderators effectively.

Although 32 of the editors (84.2 percent of those offering political discussion opportunities) said usage of their boards or chat areas met (17 editors) or exceeded (15 editors) their expectations, they were more hesitant to characterize the boards as successful. While 15 editors (39.5 percent) said they were a success, an equal number gave them uneven results or even characterized them as less than successful.

Some who were happy with their boards liked them for reasons that would warm the hearts of political theorists. "It gives a soapbox to people who would not otherwise have one. Despite excesses and lunacies of some posters, boards remain a powerful populist tool," one editor said. "I am not used to seeing people actively engaged in discussing politics, but they did, extensively," said another. Others had criteria for success that hit closer to their own homes. "We received tens of thousands of page views in our political forums on some days," declared another

editor who judged them a success. And some saw discussion opportunities as a win-win-win offering. "Traffic was dramatic, the dialogue was unconventional in political terms, and the candidates enjoyed the experience," said an editor of his site's candidate chats.

Those who were less happy tended to focus on the quality of the conversation (low) or the diversity of participants (also low). "The people who truly cared participated, but there was no great groundswell of interest from the general populace," said one editor. "The forums were more useful for entertainment value than educational value," said another. "Most political discussions seem to attract the same kind of ranters you hear on talk radio," said a third. Many online editors, then, were less than fully satisfied with their sites' success as a venue for meaningful political discourse, at least this time around. "I considered them a success," a fourth editor explained, "but not a roaring one."

Election Night 2000. Election Night was a clear focal point for these editors in considering their online campaign coverage as a whole. Fifty-four of the 57 editors (94.7 percent) said they provided election returns. Of the three who did not, one instead linked to state and local government sites that were providing updates; another said his site is always updated with newspaper content at 9 a.m., without exception; and a third offered no explanation.

Most, however, were busy indeed on Election Night. Thirty-seven of the editors (68.5 percent of those who posted results) said they updated results at least every 15 minutes for some or all of the races they covered, and 10 of those said updates were provided "continuously." Most worked around the clock, with 43 editors saying staff stayed until at least 4 the next morning. Some counted 40 straight hours or more on election coverage, and a handful declared they still had not stopped: "Li'l delay in Florida, don't you know?" Online information dissemination can both gratify journalists with its immediacy and exhaust them with its constancy.

Obviously, wire services such as the Associated Press were a key source of updates, with 38 editors (70.4 percent of the 54 providing election returns) specifically mentioning the wires in response to a question asking how they obtained their information on Election Night. Twenty-nine editors (53.7 percent) cited government offices such as local registrars or the secretary of state. Although the question did not ask them to specify whether these results were automated, several editors mentioned an electronic feed (either from the AP or government offices or both), and others relied on government Web sites to update their own. The newspaper's reporters also supplied local information that appeared online ahead of the print edition; 24 editors (44.4 percent of those providing updates) cited the print newsroom as a source for the Web site.

Eight editors (14.8 percent of those providing Election Night results) specified that they relied on their own Web staffs or resources put in place to feed information to the site as quickly as possible. Perhaps the most ambitious arrangements were made by the editor who described this Election Night operation: "We contacted all 560 town clerks in (the state) last May and again over the summer to find out how best to get results, then hired high school students to take results over phone/fax and deliver forms to our news clerks, who typed them into a Filemaker database our online news producer built over the summer. The database fed print, online and TV simultaneously."

All of this Election Night content takes staff to produce it, of course. A few papers threw everyone they had at Election Night coverage -- such as the editor at a large-circulation paper who reported "darn near everybody, including a number of people from the business side" helped keep the site current. But more than half of the 57 respondents (32, or 56.1 percent) had four staffers or fewer on Election Night. Sixteen (28.1 percent) had five to 10 Election Night staffers, and only five sites (8.8 percent) had more than 10. (Four editors did not answer this question.)[46]

RQ3: Plans for Election 2004. Was it worth all the effort? As discussed above, most of the editors said usage of their election sites met or exceeded their expectations, though some still expressed dissatisfaction. "Our expectations were not terribly high," said one. "An election section is one of those things you feel that you have to have, and that it should be innovative and informative, but you realize that, unless you are CNN or ABC, the section is not going to generate much traffic." Others were unsure whether the demand for information justified the work required to supply it. "We devoted an incredible amount of time to this section," an editor said. "In retrospect, we questioned if we (should) have focused as many resources on a product used by our readers for such a relatively short amount of time."

Others viewed the experience with a great deal more enthusiasm. "Election Night was a great night to be in the news biz -- and a watershed for (our site). We were able to keep on top of a flood of numbers and stories and keep our pages fresh and up to date," said one editor. "Better still, people were paying attention. We had record traffic, including more than a hundred thousand page views between 3 and 4 in the morning!" Another felt the Web has "revolutionary implications for election coverage. Our expectations, on usage and popularity, have been exceeded with every foray into this area."

But there is always room for improvement. Editors were asked what they hoped to do differently in 2004, based on their experience this time around and given the certainty that the medium will continue to change. Of the 57 editors responding to this survey, 43 (75.4 percent) took a crack at crystal ball-gazing (not counting the one who daydreamed simply about "more food, more flasks"), and most had multiple items on their wish list.

Many editors hope to take even better advantage of the two online attributes they saw as most important: timeliness and depth. Again, Election Night was a common focal point, with 26

editors (69 percent of those offering ideas) hoping for better ways to gather and present election returns in 2004. Eight editors yearned for automated feeds, and several wanted to build a database to display results. Others wanted to go beyond results, for instance by having "more candidates online for chats during counting."

Better voting guides, offered earlier to accommodate early-voting initiatives and provide information at what one editor called "an even more granular community level," were also popular wish list items. "We need at least basic stories on all races by the time early voting starts," including detailed candidate questionnaires in "very local races, such as school board, because there is relatively little coverage of them," one editor said. Some saw opportunities to combine detailed information with multimedia applications or a personalizable interface, such as the editor who envisioned interactive district maps "so as you roll over it, you'll get a district description and list of candidates."

Half a dozen editors cited enhanced audio/video applications, typically along with a variety of other things they hoped to offer in 2004. Only one specifically mentioned going not just beyond text and still pictures but beyond the Web itself. He anticipated an infrastructure in place that would provide information to other platforms, such as hand-held devices. "We've devoted a fair amount of resources to developing non-Web applications and services over the past year, " he said, "but our election coverage was very Web-centric."

Only a handful of editors mentioned enhanced opportunities for citizens to engage in political discourse. But those who did were eloquent about its benefits. In the words of one especially ardent supporter of this aspect of the medium's potential in the political realm:

> Four years is forever in this business. But the basic principles should remain: This medium is about the empowerment of our community, to facilitate interaction with interesting or meaningful people, to house `forums' in which users can exchange ideas and information, to focus on the local angles, to give people a voice. …During the next

> election season, technology and connectivity will allow us to push much further into giving our users direct interaction with politicians and policymakers, richer live chat and electronic town hall experiences. My newspaper bias as a former op-ed editor is that the liveliest page of any newspaper is (or should be) the letters to the editor page. This is the place the readers have a voice, have a stake in the `community' that a good newspaper nurtures. Newspapers have always been the bridge between newsmakers and readers. With interactive Internet applications, we have a way to enhance that role and make that bridge a two-way thoroughfare. This is good for the newspaper, good for the online service and good for the users. We're muddling through the continuing chaos of an election in which roughly half the voting public is going to feel disenfranchised by the system, no matter what the outcome. This is a good time to be in the `enfranchisement' business.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored what online editors see as their roles and goals in covering politics, the types of content they identify as central to that role, and the lessons they hope to apply in the future as both the Web and their experience with it continue to mature. It found that as journalists move into this new medium, information-oriented functions remain key components of their self-perceptions, particularly in the political context of furthering democracy. Journalists do not see a fundamental change in this role as they move online; while the content itself may be evolving in new directions, their concepts of their own role in providing that content are not.

Indeed, their role as information disseminators seems, at least in the eyes of these editors, to be particularly well-suited to a medium that facilitates both depth of content and speed of delivery -- and, if their early guesses hold up as to what 2004 will bring, that will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. Interestingly, not one of these editors mentioned unique online content that could be classified as fitting an "adversarial" role.[47] If the press continues to be accused of being an attack dog rather than watch dog, it will not be because of online-only political journalism, at least as reflected in sites affiliated with the mainstream newspapers included here. While all of these sites did include content contained in the newspaper, the

material that was original to the Web was designed primarily to provide more and faster information, not to challenge either the political candidates or the political process.

On the other hand, the dominance of Election Night updates in these editors' reflections about their campaign coverage as a whole may indicate too much emphasis on speed over what could be classified as true public-service political journalism. This survey alone cannot answer the question of why editors were perhaps inordinately proud of being able to provide the same results that were readily available to every American with a television set -- particularly on an Election Night that clearly demonstrated the dangers of emphasizing speed over certainty.

Perhaps it is a remnant of the adrenaline rush that comes from being able to compete and "win" in a new arena. Perhaps it offers ammunition to use in conversations with owners and publishers wondering when their Web sites are finally going to start justifying the money being spent on them. References to user traffic on Election Night could be acknowledgement of an appreciative public, but they also could suggest that such ammunition is important. Previous studies and trade press reports indicate the business pressures on online editors are significant,[48] and the economic downturn, dot-com cutbacks and general trend toward media consolidation surely are not making them less so. Whatever the reasons, these findings would seem to indicate that the timeliness of the medium is a key attribute for online editors -- despite the inherent risks of the speed that one observer has described as a "fabulous drug" for news organizations.[49]

But editors also gave considerable weight to roles that address criticisms of media coverage of politics as superficial and cynical. Editors expressed pride over content areas that offered breadth, depth and utility not easily available in print. The sites studied here were all affiliated with leading newspapers, and newspaper journalists have traditionally prided themselves on offering depth that their local broadcast competitors cannot. Again, this

exploratory survey is only a starting point for digging deeper into why these editors emphasized what they did, both on their sites and in their discussions of those sites. But their goal seemed to be in line with what Gans calls the "journalistic theory of democracy," which suggests (not necessarily correctly) that more information equals better-equipped citizens and therefore better and more participatory democracy.[50] And their attempts at meeting that goal get at some of what he suggests is crucial, including both deeper and more "user-friendly" coverage of politics.

These information-related goals and achievements can be seen as depictions of good newspaper journalism -- which can perhaps be done better on the Web, at least in the eyes of these online editors. Good journalism involves getting information to people quickly, journalists maintain, and good newspaper journalism involves providing the background and context that enables people to make sense of the information. One online editor said as much in supplementary comments at the end of his survey. "These surveys focus too much on whether online newspaper sites had content `not available in print.' What I see every day is that people want the online newspaper to just BE THE NEWSPAPER!" he said. "My industry has spent billions of marketing dollars and millions of production hours trying to come up with the `killer app' for online newspapers when the answer was really right in front of us. So I really believe that the future of online newspapers will be determined not by the number of Web-only gadgets, but by how effectively companies like mine strengthen the newspaper brand and identity online."

But while the newspaper's strengths and its reputation can indeed be replicated and extended online, the medium also can do some things that print simply cannot do. Public journalism initiatives notwithstanding, the newspaper cannot be a truly two-way medium; nor can the "dead tree edition" offer the ability to hear a candidate's hesitation in responding to a questionnaire or see how well the candidate makes eye contact with an interviewer. While these

editors tended to give content areas taking advantage of such unique online capabilities less prominence in reflections on their campaign sites as a whole, some did see the potential.

Of the two, interactive features offer the more interesting possibilities for significantly enhancing the democratic process -- and, should they so choose, the media's role in that process. By the early 1990s, a small but significant number of journalists believed it was extremely important to "give ordinary people a chance to express their views on public affairs."[31] That is difficult, costly and potentially problematic to do in print, relatively simple, cheap and desirable to do online. The newspaper is a zero-sum medium: Space is limited, and the portion of the news hole taken up by one story means another gets bumped. The Web, with its unlimited capacity for all sorts of content and all sorts of information providers to co-exist, offers papers ways to encourage public participation in civic discourse without jeopardizing their role as trustworthy, relatively impartial sources and sense-makers of information.

There is an opportunity here, then, for newspapers to both strengthen and extend in new directions their "brand identity" in the democratic realm. Indeed, it may be vital for them to do so as their traditional information-provider role is challenged by the presence of thousands of viable competing Web sites on any given topic, including politics. Online, core functions related to engagement as well as impartiality can be both distinct and complementary in ways that they cannot in a finite, discrete and severely limited media space. True, the discourse will not always be high-minded -- sometimes, it will not even be particularly civil. And true, the number of people who participate may remain relatively small. But, as several of the editors responding to this survey pointed out, the potential for increased democratic empowerment is enormous.

Journalists who see their role as crucial to the proper functioning of democracy have an opportunity to expand that role in a meaningful way. Providing credible information is

tremendously important, and will become even more so as the sheer volume of online "content" continues to grow exponentially and people increasingly turn to a name they know for help in sorting out and making sense of it all.[52] But an informed citizenry is only one step toward an engaged and active citizenry. The online medium offers journalists the opportunity to play a central role in facilitating not just one but both.

TABLE 1

Key Attributes of Online-Only Content Areas That Editors Cited as Sources of Pride

	Depth and detail (voter guides, links, archives, candidate bios …)	**Updated news / election results**	**Chats and discussion forums**	**Multimedia features, especially audio/video**	**Candidate "match" feature**	**Total editor responses**
Cited first	15	16	8	1	4	44
Cited second	11	9 [a]	4	7	-	31
Cited third	12	4	2	2	-	20
Total times feature cited [b]	38	29	14	10	4	95

[a] Includes one editor who cited Web radio and chat features as part of his "live" Election Night coverage.

[b] Some of the 44 editors who offered at least one response to this cited as many as three different online-only areas in the same general category.

NOTES

1. Herbert J. Gans, "What Can Journalists Actually Do for American Democracy?" *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3 (fall 1998): 6-12. See also Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 17-20.

2. Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 205.

3. David H. Weaver, D. H., and G. Cleveland Wilhoit*, American Journalists in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 133-140.

4. See, for example, its emphasis by gatekeepers, as described in David Manning White, "The `Gate Keeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News," *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (winter 1950): 383-390; Glen L. Bleske, "Ms. Gates Takes Over: An Updated Version of a 1949 Case Study," in *Social Meanings of News*, ed. D. Berkowitz (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1991), 72-80.

5. "Online media directory," *Editor & Publisher.com*, 22 August 2001, <http://emedia1.mediainfo.com/emedia>. The lists available on this site contain some duplicate entries; in addition, some college and specialty newspapers are included in the list of dailies. The actual number of U.S. general-interest U.S. dailies online is between 1,200 and 1,300.

6. Bruce Garrison*, "*Journalists' Perceptions of Online Information-Gathering Problems," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77 (autumn 2000): 500-514.

7. "Internet Election News Audience Seeks Convenience, Familiar Names," The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 3 December 2000, <http://www.people-press.org/online00rpt.htm, http://www.people-press.org/online00mor.htm>. The Pew study suggested an additional cause for optimism for traditional media sites as Internet use achieves mainstream status: Internet users with more experience -- those online for three or more years -- visited the sites of major news organizations at higher rates than did "newbies." For some as-yet-unexplored reason, self-described liberals appeared more likely to go to the Web for political information than conservatives; 43 percent of liberals said they checked the Web for political news at least once a week during the 2000 campaign, compared with 33 percent of conservatives. See Eve Gerber, "Divided We Watch," *Brill's Content*, February 2001, 110-111.

8. "Internet Penetration Reaches 60 Percent in the U.S., According to Nielsen//Net Ratings; More Than 168 Million People Have Internet Access," Nielsen//NetRatings, 14 February 2001, <http://www.netratings.com>.

9. "Jupiter Media Metrix Announces U.S. Top 50 Web and Digital Media Properties for July 2001," Media Metrix, 13 August 2001, <http://www.jmm.com/xp/jmm/press/pressreleaselist.xml >.

10. Guido H. Stempel III, Thomas Hargrove, and Joseph P. Bernt, "Relation of Growth of Use of the Internet to Changes in Media Use from 1995 to 1999," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77 (spring 2000): 71-79.

11. Andrew J. Flanagin and Miriam J. Metzger, "Perceptions of Internet Information Credibility," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77(autumn 2000): 515-540.

12. David Tewksbury and Scott L. Althaus, "Differences in Knowledge Acquisition Among Readers of the Paper and Online Versions of a National Newspaper," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77 (autumn 2000): 457-479.

13. "Internet Election News Audience," Pew Research Center.

14. Maxwell E. McCombs, "Mass media in the marketplace," *Journalism Monographs* 24 (1972).

15. Stempel, Hargrove and Bernt, "Relation of Growth of Use of the Internet."

16. Scott L. Althaus and David Tewksbury, "Patterns of Internet and Traditional News Media Use in a Networked Community," *Political Communication*, 17 (January 2000): 21-45.

17. Hsiang Iris Chyi and Dominic Lasorsa, "Access, Use and Preferences for Online Newspapers," *Newspaper Research Journal* 20 (fall 1999): 2-13.

18. Robert S. Boynton, "New media may be old media's savior," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2000, <http://www.cjr.org/year/00/2/boynton.asp>.

19. Andrew J. Flanagin and Miriam J. Metzger, "Internet Use in the Contemporary Media Environment," *Human Communication Research*, 27 (January 2000): 153-181.

20. "The Internet News Audience Goes Ordinary," The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 14 January 1999, <http://www.people-press.org/tech98sum.htm>.

21. Jeff South, "Web Staffs Urge the Print Side To Think Ahead," *Online Journalism Review,* 11 June 1999, <http://ojr.usc.edu>.

22. Alison Schafer, "2000 Fizzled as THE Internet Election," *Online Journalism Review*, 1 February 2001, <http://ojr.usc.edu>.

23. John W.C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman, *The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).

24. See Weaver and Wilhoit, *American Journalists in the 1990s*; David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Johnston, Slawski and Bowman, *News People*.

25. Examples include John Henningham, "Characteristics and Attitudes of Australian Journalists," *Electronic Journal of Communication/La Revue Electronique de Communication*, 3 (December 1993), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/v3n393.htm>; Wei Wu, David Weaver, and Owen V. Johnson, "Professional Roles of Russian and U.S. Journalists: A Comparative Study," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly,* 73 (autumn 1996): 534-548.

26. Garrison, "Journalists' Perceptions."

27. Don Middleberg and Steve Ross, "The Seventh Annual Middleberg/Ross Survey of Media in the Wired World," www.middleberg.com (April 2001), <http://www.middleberg.com/toolsforsuccess/fulloverview.cfm>.

28. Ann M. Brill, "Way New Journalism: How the Pioneers Are Doing," *Electronic Journal of Communication/La Revue Electronique de Communication*, 7 (1997), <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/v7n297.htm>.

29. Jane B. Singer, "Still Guarding the Gate? The Newspaper Journalist's Role in an Online World," *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 3 (spring 1997): 72-89.

30. Doug Millison, "Online Journalism FAQ," The Online Journalist (1999), <http://www.online-journalist.com/faq.html>.

31. This ability to accommodate immediacy carries risks that trouble many journalists and observers; see Dave Kansas and Todd Gitlin, "What's the Rush?" *Media Studies Journal* 13 (spring/summer 1999): 72-76; Jim Benning, "The Lesson of Emulex," *Online Journalism Review*, 8 September 2000, <http://ojr.usc.edu>. In particular, it makes online journalism prone to mistakes. As TV coverage of the 2000 presidential race demonstrated, an emphasis on being first (or at least not being last) over being right is risky for any journalism that operates in real-time. Still, the ability to offer breaking news online is, at least potentially, an advantage over the print product, one this study indicates is clearly perceived by online journalists.

32. J. D. Lasica, "The Promise of the Daily Me," *Online Journalism Review*, 2 August 2001, <http://ojr.usc.edu>.

33. Lawrence K. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (New York: Viking, 1995), 1-7.

34. Bruce Bimber, "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community and Accelerated Pluralism," *Polity*, XXXI (1998): 133-160. <http://www.polsci.ucsb.edu/faculty/bimber/research/transformation.html>.

35. "Internet Election News Audience," Pew Research Center.

36. Richard Davis, *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 90-92, 109-114.

37. Jennifer Stromer-Galley, "On-line Interaction and Why Candidates Avoid It," *Journal of Communication*, 50 (autumn 2000): 111-132.

38. Diana Owen, Richard Davis, and Vincent James Strickler, "Congress and the Internet," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 4 (1999): 10-29.

39. Mark Stencel, "Multimedia Coverage of the Interactive Kind," *Nieman Reports* 54 (summer 2000): 45-47.

40. Tanjev Schultz, "Interaction Options in Online Journalism: A Content Analysis of 100 U.S. Newspapers," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 5 (September 1999), <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol5/issue1/schultz.html>; James W. Tankard Jr. and Hyun Ban, "Online Newspapers: Living Up to Their Potential?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of AEJMC, Baltimore, 1998).

41. Weaver and Wilhoit, *American Journalists in the 1990s*, 146-147.

42. Joseph R. Wimmer and Roger D. Dominick, *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2000), 161.

43. W. Lawrence Neuman, *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), 203-204.

44. Kim Sheehan, "E-mail Survey Response Rates: A Review," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 6 (January 2001), <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol6/issue2/sheehan.html>.

45. Weaver and Wilhoit, *American Journalists in the 1990s*, 135-136.

46. Editors also were asked about the size of their staffs -- full-time, part-time and shared with print -- in an attempt to determine how they allocated available resources in covering the election. However, the question did not specify whether "staff" meant total online staff or only editorial staff, and responses indicated that editors interpreted the question in various ways. So the findings related to staffing were less useful than the researcher had hoped. Still, a couple of interesting patterns were discernible. One is that Web staffs remain small in comparison with print; 35 editors (61.4 percent) reported full-time staffs of 10 people or fewer -- and this survey covered leading newspapers in each state. Another is that while a few years ago, online and print staffs overlapped considerably -- see Jane B. Singer, Martha P. Tharp, and Amon Haruta, "Online Staffers: Superstars or Second-Class Citizens?" *Newspaper Research Journal* 20 (summer 1999*):*29-47 -- typically with copy editors and/or graphic designers doing double duty, that situation has become rarer. Only seven editors (12.3 percent) said they shared any staff with print, and three of those shared just a single person.

47. Weaver and Wilhoit, *American Journalists in the 1990s*,139-140.

48. Singer, Tharp and Haruta, "Online Journalists"; Tracy McNamara, "Defining the Blurry Line Between Commerce and Content," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2000, <http://www.cjr.org/year/00/2/mcnamara2.asp>.

49. Kansas and Gitlin, "What's the Rush?" 76.

50. Gans, "What Can Journalists Actually Do?" 10.

51. Weaver and Wilhoit, *American Journalists in the 1990s*, 140.

52. Schudson, *The Power of News*, 1-2; Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism*, 23-25.