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The Impact of the New Media

W. Russell Neuman

Everybody has a hypothesis about the impact of the new media. According to recent reports the new media have variously initiated or reinforced trends that have

- Weakened political party systems
- Offered a new platform for hate speech
- Stimulated a new capacity for grassroots democracy
- Permitted the third world to leapfrog painful stages of industrialization into an information economy
- Robbed children of their childhood and everybody of their sense of place
- Sped up the process of government responses to international crises precluding appropriate deliberation
- Isolated family members from each other
- Permanently stabilized the business cycle
- Exacerbated gaps between information haves and have-nots
- Limited the capacity of authoritarian regimes to control the flow of information within and outside of their realm

Readers will recognize many of these as preowned hypotheses, most not particularly low mileage at that. Much of the evidence of such effects is derived from the selective accumulation of anecdotes.¹ Systematic empirical research struggles for methodologies capable of distinguishing the causal impact of new technologies from other historical trends and cycles. Further, the most radical new technologies such as the Internet are still at early stages of diffusion, challenging the analyst to distinguish the characteristics of early adopters and of early implementations from the underlying character of the technology.

I would argue that the academic community should acknowledge and encourage the journalistic battle of anecdotes. Although the question of whether the Internet will turn us into a nation of porno addicts or political know-nothings might seem less than optimally framed for designing research, it reflects the characteristic style of popular journalism and general public concern. Scholars might encourage such popular speculation but should, in my view, aspire to something more substantial. I believe that empirically sound and theoretically grounded research on the impact of new technologies will require us to reconnect these popular hypotheses with our theoretical roots in the social sciences. (Abramson et al. 1988; Bimber 1998c; Castells 1996, 1997, 1998; Habermas 1989).

My background as a sociologist may be evident in the pages ahead. The discipline of sociology has its roots in the turn of the century struggle to understand the impact of the industrial revolution and urbanization on social structure, social cohesion, and politics. Seminal theory and new methodologies for studying social behavior still in active use grew out of that struggle. My hope is that communications research will find equivalent success and a convergent and accumulative research paradigm as we struggle a century later with the transition from an industrial to an information society. I am unapologetically trying to hold out the early stages of sociological theorizing as a model for a more theoretically and historically grounded theory of communications effects organized around the notion of an information society/communications revolution.

Early sociological theorists developed the key analytic concepts of class, status, and power and demonstrated historical and quantitative methods for studying their interaction. They developed models for studying charismatic leadership and the routinization of large bureaucratic structures characteristic of the industrial-age public and private sectors. They pioneered research on the interaction of surviving cultural values and the new political fault lines of industrial capitalism. If we can find inspiration in the inventiveness and breadth of this work in a sister field 100 years ago, we might more effectively sketch out promising directions for theory and methods in the study of political communications at the next century mark. If the goal is theoretical accumulation and refinement, we need the overarching concepts to link and systematically compare what would otherwise be a miscellaneous and incomparable collection of hypotheses and findings. My vote for a theoretical starting point would be a modest area of sociological inquiry

that flourished most notably in the 1940s and 50s known as mass society theory. (Neuman 1991a, 1991b, 1996).

THE IDEA OF MASS SOCIETY

A mass society is characterized by homogeneity of the mass population and the weakness of interpersonal and group life. Riesman's (1950) phrase, the lonely crowd, captures the essence of the concept. Various essays in the literature emphasize different factors but the loss of a sense of community and political belonging remains a central theme. The theory posits that since the turn of the century the rapid urbanization and industrialization of Europe and the United States has resulted in:

1. The decline of family life – the nuclear family replaces the extended family; family members spend less time together; children attend large, centralized, anomic school systems; working mothers may be absent; television watching replaces family conversation.
2. The alienating workplace – mobility from job to job and isolating work conditions in large organizations make both the workplace and work associates less important to the individual.
3. The decline of local community – dispersed suburban areas are separated from central, integrating cultural institutions of the city give residents little sense of community.
4. The weakening of religious ties – although the majority of people may identify themselves as religiously affiliated, such affiliation is nominal and participation is irregular or nonexistent.
5. The weakening of ethnic ties – over time ethnic communities blur into a massified urban landscape.
6. The decline of participation in voluntary associations – the lack of group life further weakens the individual's sense of identity and connectedness (Fromm 1941; Riesman 1950; Kornhauser 1959; Bell 1962; Giner 1976; Beniger 1987).

The historical argument asserts that just as these social forces reach a stage of crisis, the evolving mass media technologies including radio and television become available to provide a new nationally centered identity for the isolated and rootless individual who seeks a sense of belonging. Hannah Arendt, exploring the origins of totalitarianism, characterizes the process as follows:

The masses grew out of fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships. Coming from the class-ridden society of the nation-state, whose cracks had been cemented with nationalist sentiment, it is only natural that these masses, in the first helplessness of their new experience, have tended toward an especially violent nationalism, to which mass leaders have yielded against their own instincts and purposes for purely demagogic reasons (Arendt 1951, pp. 310–311).

Kornhauser (1959) follows this line of argument, tracing the Nazi's mobilization of alienated and restive youth groups in Germany in the 1920s. These young Germans had abandoned their traditional religious ties and community ties and substituted a sense of direction and belonging derived from Hitler's charismatic leadership. An intensive propaganda campaign in 1924 helped to coordinate a number of diverse groups into the Greater German Youth Movement. The character of these propaganda appeals focused on remote and abstract political symbols rather than the more specific and concrete political issues of day-to-day political life. These media symbols represented a pseudoauthority in that they were concocted, manipulative, and designed to sway masses; were shallow in content; impinged directly on individuals through the media rather than being filtered through the community or educational system; and encouraged a compulsive, irrational form of loyalty and attachment (Kornhauser 1968).

The rapid breakdown of traditional norms of behavior may suddenly provide more freedom than the individual is psychologically prepared to handle (Fromm 1941; Riesman 1950). These anomic individuals may find comfort in the pseudo-authority and pseudocommunity of the mass media. But these cultural dynamics lead to political instability because such individuals are easily mobilized by authoritarian and demagogic appeals. This cluster of concerns stimulated a large corpus of social science research on persuasion, attitude change, mass psychology, and political communications (Hovland et al. 1953; McGuire 1969). Michael Robinson developed a theory of how the growing dependence of the mass population on television for political news fosters the growth of political malaise, and he demonstrated the con-

nection in a series of empirical studies (1976). Others found evidence that isolated individuals were more easily persuaded and prone to extreme political views (Kornhauser 1959). The historical fact of Hitler's rise to power in Weimar Germany and a special concern about the fragility of democratic institutions serves as the intellectual backdrop. A haunting question is under what conditions might it happen again (Hamilton 1972)?

Although critics such as Daniel Bell have characterized the concept of mass society as a rather slippery and odd mixture of moral philosophy and systematic social analysis, he describes it, nonetheless, as one of the most influential social theories of the mid-twentieth century (Bell 1962, p. 21). Indeed, it traces its legacy directly to the founding studies of the field of sociology on the maintenance of social integration in times of change conducted at the turn of the century by such luminaries as Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies, and Comte.

CONNECTING THE NEW MEDIA PARADIGM TO MASS SOCIETY THEORY

Few have explicitly tied these ideas to the hoopla over the new media, but it may have occurred to some readers that indeed there is a familiar ring to the theme of social cohesion. The Web, some would argue, will fragment and polarize society, rob us of our political commons (the currently shared space of newspaper and broadcast journalism), and isolate us from each other. Pseudo/virtual community replaces real community. If each of us reads our electronically filtered "Daily Me" we reinforce our own beliefs and opinions and know less about our neighbors' beliefs and concerns.

Bob Putnam has developed a small industry in analyzing the decline of social capital, and currently he seems to place most of the blame for America's apparent cynical withdrawal from politics on the growth of television in our lives. Wait until he discovers the Internet. In my view the social capital argument is very closely allied with the mass society notion, and what started as a catchy soundbite on bowling will evolve into a serious and broad inquiry into the interaction between a society's media infrastructure and its political infrastructure. (Jackman and Miller 1998; Norris 1996; Putnam 1995; Bennett 1998).

Others who have drawn attention to the fragmentation issue include Oscar Gandy, Jr., and Joseph Turow, who have independently explored the (hopefully) unintended consequences of commercially

targeted advertising on public identity and the health of the public sphere (Gandy, Jr. Chapter 7; Turow 1997).

If we start with the popular conceptions of political fragmentation, polarization, and cynicism, can we move toward a more tightly framed hypothesis and perhaps even an empirical test? I would like to focus on four interrelated concepts that strike me as especially promising tools for the integration of research and analysis in this field. They deal broadly with the character of the public sphere, the distribution of political information, beliefs, preferences, and behavior.

- The first concept is *social cohesion*. The rules of law, order, authority, and public acceptance of social norms are traditionally conservative concepts. But increasingly, analysts have come to accept social cohesion not as an ideological or xenophobic ideal, but a legitimate and practical concern for managing the democratic process in large industrial and developing societies (Gamson 1968).
- *Fragmentation* represents a counterpoint to social cohesion and refers to the horizontal distribution of beliefs and preferences within a society, that is, the polarization or differentiation among different regions or ethnic or ideological communities. Measurement in this case would focus on dispersion rather than central tendency.
- Likewise, *stratification* refers to the “vertical” differences between elites and masses in political information and other political resources, a phenomenon perhaps best captured by a measure of inequality such as a Gini coefficient or descriptive statistics that would illustrate differences in opinions and beliefs (if any) among different strata.
- Finally, *polarization* refers not just to the distribution of opinions and beliefs but to the psychological intensity and willingness to act out on the basis of perceived social and attitudinal differences.

In this chapter I will focus primarily on the central concepts of fragmentation and stratification as they offer the most immediate promise for empirical analysis. Fragmentation captures a variety of normative and analytic concerns about the character of the public sphere. For a given political unit or region, the analyst attempts to measure the ratio of shared to unshared beliefs and values. Any static parameter is not

necessarily informative, but trends could be very revealing, as could comparative analysis. It is an assessment of ideological and political tension across the class, ethnic, religious, or geographic faultlines of a given community. Research methods can focus on informal speech, formal public statements, news and entertainment content, public opinion, and the linkages among them. Analysis can focus on the extent to which cleavages are crosscutting and diffused or polarizing. The relevant subgroups vary from one area of the world to another. In the United States, for example, the highly differentiated reactions of white and black Americans to the O. J. Simpson trial verdict demonstrated a dramatic rift of understanding and belief between two important social groups despite the fact that both groups had been relying largely on the same media coverage.

The concept of stratification is similar to fragmentation as it is also a distributional concept. But stratification emphasizes a vertical dimension of resources, information, and political activity that will be evident within each issue public or affinity group. Thus, typically fragmentation refers to differences between significant social groupings and stratification, to differences within them. We might find that two groups were equivalently differentiated from each other or from some common cultural value (fragmentation), but that the beliefs within one group were internally homogeneous (including leaders and followers) while beliefs within the other were not (stratification).

These overarching theoretical concepts span more concrete hypotheses about political attitudes and behavior, and they allow for the possible grouping and integration of diverse speculations like those listed in the first paragraph of this chapter. Like equivalent concepts in the disciplines of law and economics, they have normative relevance without the complex value-laden language of common parlance. These are also collective-level concepts (akin to Durkheim’s conception of social facts), not individual-level phenomena like political opinions or political behavior.

Many of the classic empirical studies of public opinion and political behavior focused on the paradox of low levels of political awareness and on the need for a balance between mass political engagement and political stability (one thinks of the work of Key, Lipset, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Converse, and Verba, among others.) These concerns are still important and often evident in the evolving literature on new media, but the intellectual linkages are not always clear.

Lib-Con Self ID (US - NES - 1992)

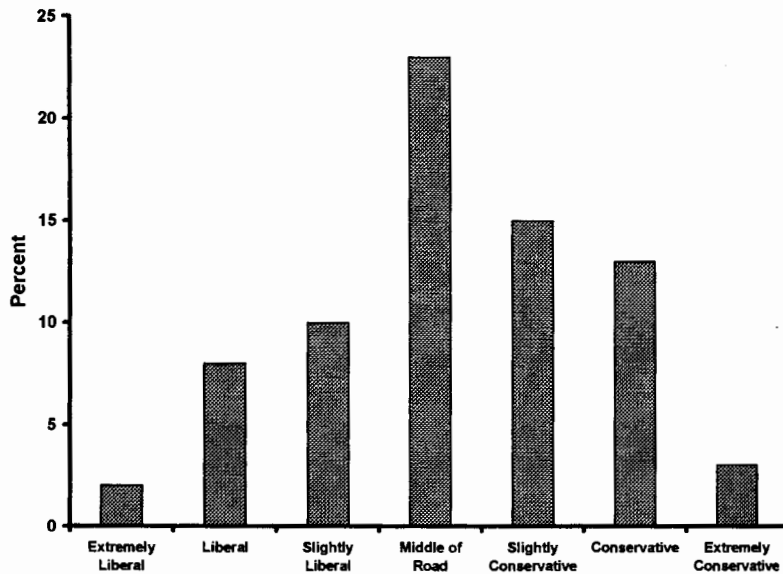


Figure 14.1. Characteristic normal distribution of public opinion. Source: *National Election Study, 1992*.

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

How might we connect the legitimate public excitement and concern about the Internet with a reenergized and theoretically regrounded approach to public opinion research? Return to our roots, I say. Let's start with V. O. Key's fundamental and now neglected *Public Opinion and American Democracy*.

Key starts with chapters that typify different types of opinion distributions. Consensus of opinion is characterized by the characteristic normal curve (Figure 14.1). The weight of opinion may be reflected in the hump of the curve centering on a position to the left or the right of a given seven-point scale. But the tails, that is, the extreme or minority positions, are occupied by fewer and fewer citizens the further one moves from the center, that is, the community norm.

A much rarer but theoretically important distribution is the bimodal distribution, with large numbers of citizens at the extremes with rela-

Lib-Con Party Affiliations: Workers in France 1950s

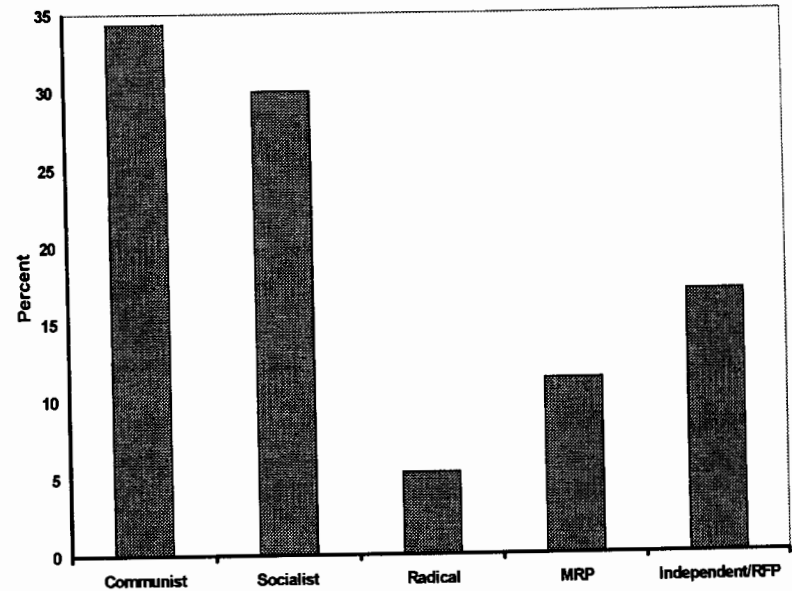


Figure 14.2. Bimodal politics, France in the 1950s. Source: Lipset, 1960.

tively few in the moderate middle (Figure 14.2). This would represent the fragmentation and polarization of opinion. These are simple univariate statistical properties of opinion distributions easily captured by a cross-tabular array or an indicator of dispersion such as a standard deviation or kurtosis coefficient.

Assessing opinion stratification, however, requires a bivariate analysis, assessing the difference in opinion distributions among social, economic, or demographic groups of theoretical relevance. Thus, if we find that poor versus wealthy, or black versus white citizens, are attracted to opposite ends of a policy debate, we confront a bimodal distribution of special significance (Figure 14.3).

While these concepts and the illustrative data might appear to be relatively straightforward, making a causal connection to the changing media environment provides a methodological challenge requiring a sophisticated response.

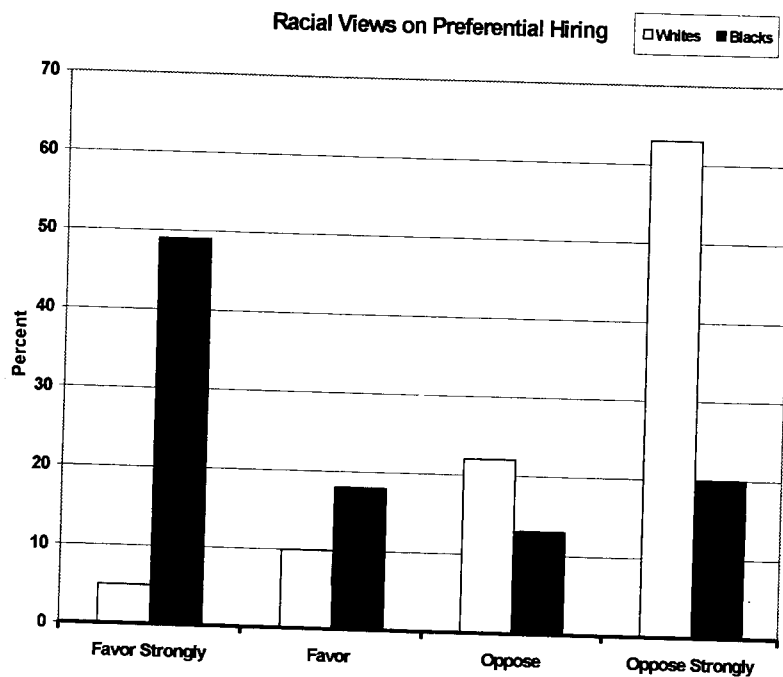


Figure 14.3. Polarized views of racially based hiring preferences (stratification). Source: Kinder and Sanders, 1996 (NES 1986).

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The Internet is a moving target. Seven issues demonstrate the diffusion of communications technology and the impact on public opinion and political behavior.

1. *The Diffusion of Technology.* Is evidence of a particular Internet behavior a result of the nature of early adopters or is it fundamental to the character of the technology? Will the Web look like network television as soon as the average Web user looks like the average television viewer? Paths of diffusion generate unique path dependencies in technical architectures and social definitions of technology. Will these qualities evaporate as diffusion reaches mass levels? We must draw on the rich data and experience in studying the diffusion of print and electronic media. This may

prove useful in assessing the digital divide – the correlation of social inequities with new media adoption (Rogers 1995).

2. *The Hawthorne Effect.* We know people behave in predictably different ways when they know they are being watched and assessed. When a researcher with a clipboard and a lab coat is looking over your shoulder, you might find yourself studying candidate policy positions with unusual attentiveness. It is not a new problem; it is just an especially important one here, not just because of social desirability biases, but because those biases are systematically correlated with other variables of interest such as social class.
3. *Heisenberg Effects.* If we find out something about the Web and publish our findings, it may and, perhaps, it should influence behavior and strategy. But it makes the accumulation of evidence and attribution of causation a delicate task.
4. *Assessing Complex Phenomena.* This is a case of the blind men and the elephant again. Field research and case studies can demonstrate interesting examples of use and misuse. But it is hard to estimate the distributions of these behaviors and their relative effects. We need to bridge the gaps between studies, encourage the accumulation of comparable findings, and, if possible, come to a scientific consensus.
5. *Assessing Communication Channel Effects.* Bill McGuire (1985) has reviewed the accumulated literature on how the medium interacts with the message. Clear-cut conclusions are surprisingly elusive. One might characterize the typical finding as taking the form that certain content under certain conditions is marginally more effectively communicated through a particular medium. We might expect that 'Internet-Effects' will have similar character. We would be wise to review and build carefully on the best work in this research tradition.
6. *Stalking the Big Effect.* McGuire (1986) is also famous for his contributions to the big effects – minimal effects debate. Will the Internet have big effects? Some have argued that this is an unfruitful and distracting bit of scholarly dramaturgy that should be avoided. Given a stylized utopian–dystopian continuum, perhaps it cannot be avoided. But serious science can adopt a strategic response to the fact that spin doctors await the chance to have at our findings. It is good that they are even interested.
7. *Technical Obfuscation.* The Internet is a complicated bit of technology, a network of networks, an incredible patchwork of systems. Some engineers persist in believing that their protocols

are simply optimized engineering and that they need not be assessed for their potential social, economic, and political consequences. Leave the engineering to us, they argue. We dare not. Serious analysis of the impact of the Net requires serious study of the technical architecture of the net.

A METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

One key in untangling the effect of the Internet from the impact of other changing behaviors, values, public events, and economic conditions is the careful analysis of time series data. Edward Tufte (1974) noted that a lot of things change over time, and it is possible to demonstrate a near perfect correlation between nonsensical variables. He illustrated his point with data on the number of radios in use in Great Britain and the corresponding number of individuals committed to mental institutions. I believe the over-time correlation from the 1920s through the 1940s was $R = 0.97$.

But ultimately to resolve causal linkages the analysis will depend on our ability to triangulate data from very different research traditions. Most research on this issue thus far has depended uniquely on time series or cross-sectional data. We show the time series growth of television viewing or Internet use and correspondingly increased political cynicism or declining participation. (See Bennett 1998 for a review.) Or we examine the cross-sectional differences of poor and wealthy citizens online and conclude that there is a "digital divide" of political consequence (Cooper and Kimmelman 1999; NTIA 1999).

The appropriate methodological strategy requires that we combine the two traditions and examine diffusion over time among significant social strata. Furthermore, we need to incorporate and calibrate with sound experimental research. For example, one frequently noted explanation of the relatively slow adoption of Web technology among African Americans is the statement among black spokespersons to the effect that "there is nothing there for us, black culture is not well represented on the Net." The digital character of the Web makes it a prime candidate for machine-based content analysis. What are the growth trends of black-oriented content? How are such trends related to adoption rates among black citizens of different ages? If diffusion rates among African Americans remain low, can experimental and depth interview research reveal to what extent technophobia, economic costs, and other attitudinal factors might be relevant?

SELECTIVE ATTENTION AS A KEY INTERVENING MECHANISM

One central causal mechanism of the suspected "Internet effect" is a polarization resulting from increased selective attention to different (and potentially ideologically extreme) news sources. Will political conservatives move from just supplementing their newspaper and television news consumption with a little *National Review* and Rush Limbaugh to an outright abandonment of traditional news media? Will the anti-UN crowd succeed in completely filtering out any international news from their laptops? Will amateur and ideological journalism flourish at the expense of the mainstream media?

Some years ago, Sears and Freedman (1971) provided some surprising experimental evidence that self-interested selective attention may not be as prevalent as originally presumed. Individuals often want to take a look at the evidence on the other side and, furthermore, want to have some familiarity with what is popular and what others are watching. Research thus far on Web behavior reveals diverse personal interests but a surprising balance among specialized and 'mainstream' sites among new and experienced users (Neuman et al. 1996).

WHAT IF THE WEB RAISED LEVELS OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE: AN EARLY EMPIRICAL TEST

Web users do not use news sources on the Web to replace regular media exposure but rather to supplement it. Measures vary, but news may represent about 5 percent of typical non-work-related Web use, and not all of it political news (Kiesler et al. 1997; Neuman, O'Donnell and Schneider 1996; Pew Center 1996, 1998, 1999).

But what if the Web meets its promise and lowers the transaction costs of keeping the citizenry informed about those issues in politics it cares about? If the public were better informed, would politics be demonstrably different? Would the concerns of mobilization, polarization, and fragmentation of mass society and social capital theory prove to be manifest?

My strategy here is to try to tie the question of potential impacts of the new media to an interesting new set of research projects in the field of political behavior and communications, focusing on the impact of increased information on political opinion and behavior. Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) recent book anchors this field of inquiry with a

comprehensive overview of the literature and a theoretically grounded compilation and analysis of the key findings. Drawing on (and in the spirit of) their work, a fresh set of inquiries has tried to estimate what public opinion would look like if the public were somehow better informed or if public opinion were assessed as part of a deliberative process (Alvarez 1997; Bartels 1996; Fishkin 1991; Fishkin and Luskin 1998; Price and Neijens 1998a, b; Zaller 1991).

The idea is straightforward. Rather than tackle the difficult question of community and identity implied by the mass society frame, let us address a question of which the accumulated political opinion and behavior data archives permit a direct empirical test. The Internet and the Web give the user a lot more control over the flow of information. Rather than a passive recipient of the EyeWitness News of the hour, cybercitizens may at their leisure find out as much as they might desire about the topics that engage them. There are adversarial sites of various stripes; mainstream political organizations; lobbying interests; and searchable electronic repositories of news, legislative debate, and independent policy analysis (Browning 1996; Hill and Hughes 1998). If the Web, as predicted, decreases the transaction costs of being a better-informed citizen (Downs 1957), do the accumulated findings of the literature of political behavior lead us to expect a significant change in mass political behavior? That represents a big “if,” of course, but if proven true, my reading of the literature and my fresh analysis of the 1996 National Election Study lead me to the following conclusion. There will be effects on opinion fragmentation and stratification. They will be modest in size. They will be complex in character. It turns out not to be a simple matter of an identifiable “knowledge effect.” It depends on the issue at hand. The plot thickens.

AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE KNOWLEDGE EFFECT

My initial question focuses on what kinds of opinion distributions are characteristic of the better versus less well informed citizens. I thought such a basic question would be amply addressed in the literature but was surprised to find it only partially addressed. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), for example, have a full chapter entitled “The Consequences of Political Knowledge and Ignorance.” They follow the Converse tradition, demonstrating the impact of knowledge on the stability and coherence of attitude structure and developing an interesting argument about the impact of knowledge on self interest. But there is sur-

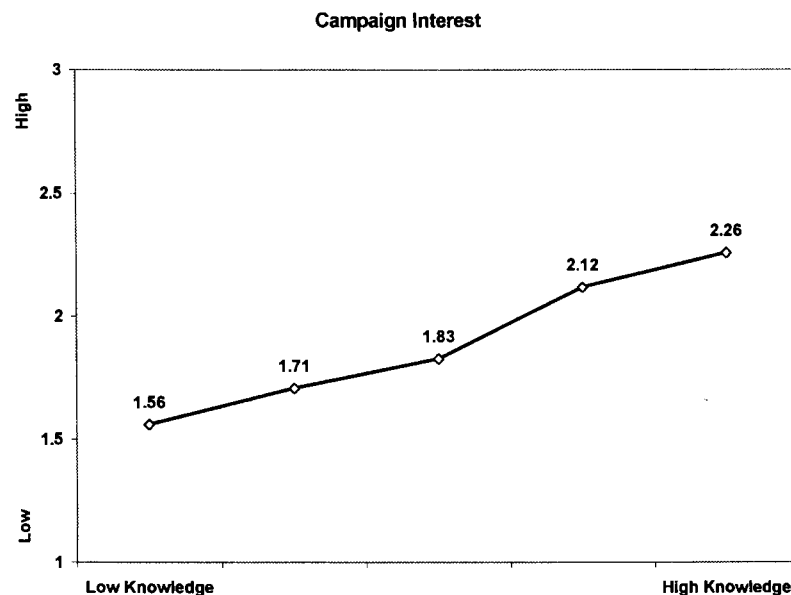


Figure 14.4. Campaign interest by level of political knowledge. Source: *National Election Study, 1996.*

prisingly little descriptive information in their chapter about whether being more informed leads to fragmentation or stratification. Bartels (1996) and Althaus (1998) imply that the differences are significant, but they use complex equations that mysteriously adjust for knowledge effects, so it is frustratingly difficult to get an intuitive sense of how the equations are derived from real behavior. So I turned to the empirical motherlode – in this case, the 1996 National Election Survey – and arrayed the opinion distributions on most of the traditional political issue items by five levels of political knowledge (a cumulative index of respondent knowledge of political figures and events.) I first reviewed the means on a measure of campaign interest by the knowledge index to make sure the oft-cited correlation between knowledge and interest was in evidence, and indeed it was. Figure 14.4 demonstrates that the mean difference between low and high knowledge respondents is almost a full point on a three-point scale.

But an examination of the relationship of knowledge with actual opinion positions on central political controversies of the election pro-

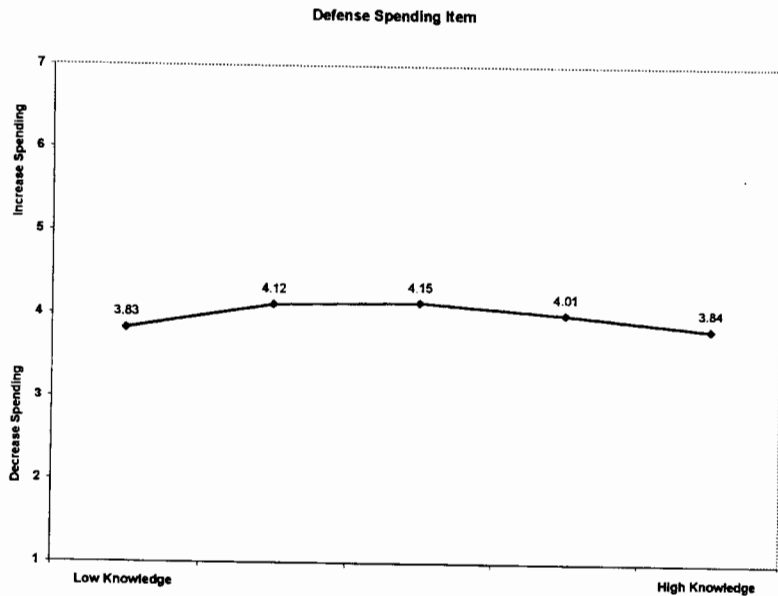


Figure 14.5. Sample issue item by level of political knowledge. Source: National Election Study, 1996.

duces a much more complex picture. It may be a case of the half-empty versus the half-full glass, but my impression is one of surprise at how so few of the issues continue to be associated with a consistent difference of mean opinion position. Figure 14.5 and Table 14.1 review the group means for the different knowledge levels for a sampling of the classic NES issue items. There are two general tendencies evident. When there is a difference, the more knowledgeable seem to be more conservative in the traditional sense of relying more on private enterprise than government for the provision of services. And when there is a difference, the more knowledgeable are more enlightened about the modern norms of gender equality. But the general rule is relatively small differences or no difference at all. This is especially notable on self-interest items. The more knowledgeable, of course, are generally better off, are more likely to have attended college, and expect their kids to attend college. On strictly self-interest grounds, we might expect more pronounced differences here. But they are not in evidence.

Table 14.1. Various issue items by level of political knowledge

Knowledge index	Gov't guarantee job	Gov't help blacks	Foodstamp spending	Welfare spending	Help homeless	Border security	Jobs vs. environment	Gender equality
1	4.02	4.87	2.41	2.29	1.68	1.65	3.64	2.57
2	4.50	5.01	2.46	2.29	1.61	1.60	3.47	2.31
3	4.60	5.02	2.38	2.26	1.89	1.51	3.54	2.33
4	4.81	4.83	2.41	2.25	2.02	1.65	3.40	2.01
5	4.89	4.70	2.33	2.26	1.95	1.74	3.38	1.94

Source: National Election Study, 1996.

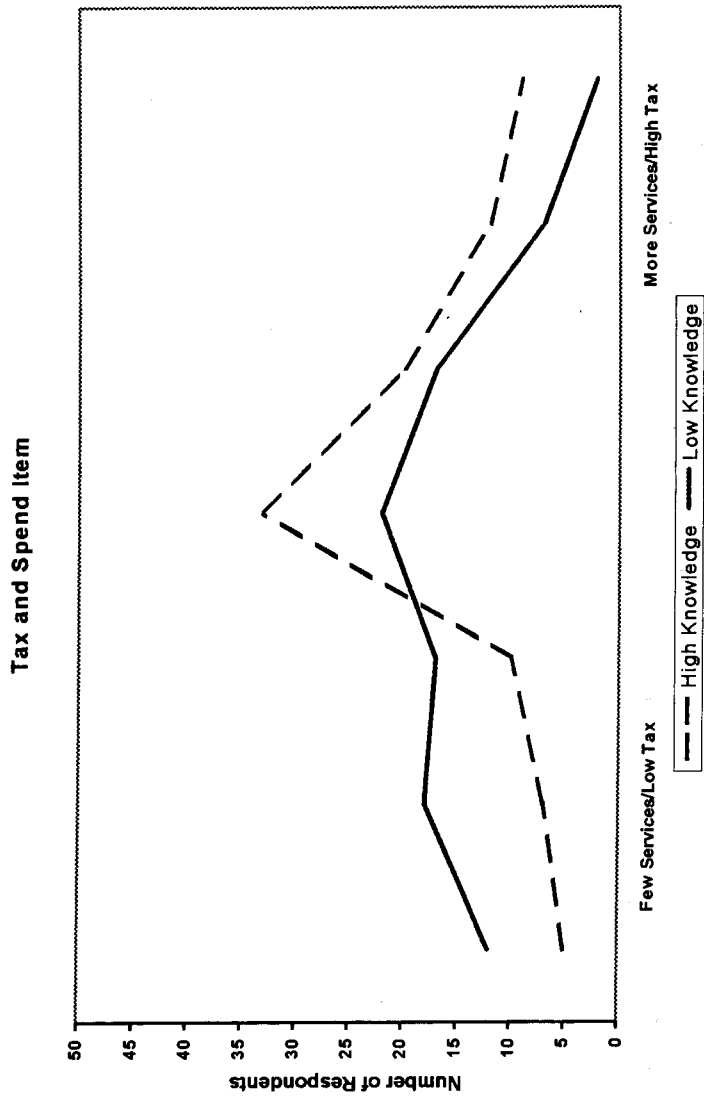


Figure 14.6. Illustrative policy item: opinion distribution for different knowledge levels. Source: *National Election Study, 1996*.

I reran the analysis to examine the dispersion of opinion as measured by standard deviations across the policy items and found they were almost identical across all knowledge levels. The less well informed did tend a bit to cluster around the scale midpoints, as illustrated in Figure 14.6. But such patterns were not strong and consistent. Further work will control for additional intervening variables, such as income, profession, and race, to look more closely to see if the already small knowledge effects are further reduced by appropriate controls.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

These preliminary analyses put us in the company of Davis and Owen (1998) and Bimber (1998a, b, c), who found that the reduced transaction costs of getting political information of interest may be associated with increased participation and attentiveness but are not likely to be associated with large-scale differences in the level of polarization or stratification of political opinion and belief.

The political activists in the Web community have just completed a successful promotion of civic awareness and Web use under the rubric of Web, White, and Blue. There is an entrepreneurial young man traveling the country in a bus filled with Internet terminals and wireless connections, encouraging the unconnected to experiment with the new tools to connect citizens with government. He calls it the *E the People Bus*. (He is traveling the country also to raise money to support his enterprise.) Their impact may well be positive, but in the larger order of things, relatively small.

There may be significant social realignments and social movements that will bring new issues to the fore and reorganize traditional political allegiances. The new groups may use the new media to get their message out. It is likely the journalists and concerned members of the establishment will hyperventilate a bit about electronic politics. But the issues will turn out to matter more than the media of communication.

NOTE

1. The academic literature is still an odd brew of systematic and anecdotal analysis. See, for example, Browning (1996), Davis and Owen (1998), Graber (1997), Grossman (1995), Hill and Hughes (1998), Jones (1995), Kamarck and Nye (1999), Kiesler (1997), Strate et al. (1996), and Sussman (1997). See Neuman et al. (1999) for a review.

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PART 4

Mediated Campaigns