Is the Internet Good for Democracy?

Supporting Questions

1. How has the Internet impacted the democratic process in the United States?
2. How has the Internet impacted democratic discourse in the United States?
3. What impact does the Internet have on global democracy?
## Is the Internet Good for Democracy?

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<th>D2.Civ.8.9-12. Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.</th>
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<td><strong>Staging the Question</strong></td>
<td>Read excerpts showing both the democratic ideal and negative impact of the Internet on democracy and consider why the ideal of increased access to information does not always reflect the reality.</td>
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### Supporting Question 1

- **Supporting Question:** How has the Internet impacted the democratic process in the United States?
- **Formative Performance Task:** Create a T-chart of the positive and negative impacts on the political process as a result of the public’s increased access to information.

### Supporting Question 2

- **Supporting Question:** How has the Internet impacted democratic discourse in the United States?
- **Formative Performance Task:** Add the positive and negative impacts of the Internet on political discussion and personal interactions to the T-chart.

### Supporting Question 3

- **Supporting Question:** What impact does the Internet have on global democracy?
- **Formative Performance Task:** Add the positive and negative impacts of the Internet’s global impact on democracy to the T-chart.

### Featured Sources

**Source A:** “Americans’ Internet Access 2000-2015”
**Source B:** “How the Internet Has Changed Politics”
**Source C:** Interview: Anne Mintz, “Misinformation Superhighway”

**Source A:** “How Social Media Is Reshaping News”
**Source B:** “How Social Media Is Ruining Politics”
**Source C:** “The Psychology of Online Comments”

**Source A:** Podcast: “Can the Internet Bring Democracy to China?”
**Source B:** Video: “Impact of Social Media on the Arab Spring”
**Source C:** “How Google Could Rig the 2016 Election”
**Source D:** “Views about Internet Turn Negative”

### Summative Performance Task

**ARGUMENT** Is the Internet Good for Democracy? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster, essay) that discusses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from contemporary sources while acknowledging competing views.

**EXTENSION** Students assess their own social media and Internet usage to develop and support a claim on how the Internet has impacted their own political interactions.

### Taking Informed Action

**UNDERSTAND** Investigate the usage of Twitter for all contending candidates in a recent election.
**ASSESS** Assess the impact Twitter has on modern elections.
**ACT** Invite a political campaign advisor to participate in an informed conversation regarding the role of Twitter in political campaigns.
Overview

Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an examination of modern day United States and global politics by investigating the Internet's role in either helping or hampering democratic processes. By investigating the compelling question, students consider the impact of increased access to information (and misinformation) on the political process, how it shapes political discourse on the individual and public level, its role in democratization of information on the global stage, as well as how students see these features impacting their own political interactions.

NOTE: This inquiry is expected to take three to four 60-minute class period. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources). Inquiries are not scripts, so teachers are encouraged to modify and adapt them to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question "Is the Internet good for democracy?" students work through a series of supporting questions, performance tasks, and sources in order to construct an argument with evidence and counter evidence from a variety of sources.

Staging the Compelling Question

This inquiry opens with a staging exercise that engages students with two contrasting sources, one representing the ideal of the internet (Wired, 1997), and the other representing the reality (Google Trends, 2015). After reading these excerpts showing positive and negative impacts of the Internet on democracy, students consider why the ideal of increased access to information does not always reflect the reality. Teachers can have students work in groups to develop a mix of questions in regards to the sources, using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) method. Using the QFT, developed by the Right Question Institute (RQI), teachers could have students generate a variety of questions centered on these articles.

The QFT begins with a question focus. For this initial exercise, teachers should use the following two provided sources. Once students are given the question focus, they move through three distinct but important steps in generating their own questions (see the student handout):

- Step one: Produce your own questions.
- Step two: Categorize your questions.
- Step three: Prioritize your questions.
In step one, students are placed in small groups and, using the question focus, produce as many questions as they can without stopping to judge or answer the questions. A recorder should be assigned to write down every question exactly as stated and change statements into questions.

In step two, students work together to categorize those questions by labeling them as “closed” or “open”. Close-ended questions can be answered with a yes or no and open-ended questions require a longer explanation. Students mark the questions with a C or an O. Teachers should then discuss the advantages and disadvantages of asking both types of questions focusing on the utility of each.

In step three, students prioritize the questions they have generated, choosing the three most important questions and providing explanations for why they chose those three.

At this point, teachers may want to introduce the compelling question for this inquiry and ask students to think about how their questions relate. For example, if students ask a question such as “What kind of information does the Internet allow us to access?” teachers might bridge the two questions. Teachers could talk about how the students will be reading a variety of sources, including newspaper articles, interviews, and firsthand accounts, stressing how important it will be for students to consider the credibility of the sources and the problem of biases. Additionally, teachers will want to look for questions raised by students that mirror the questions that frame this inquiry and then acknowledge any gaps. In the cases where the students’ questions help further the inquiry, teachers could construct another formative performance task(s) or augment the current tasks. In this way, students’ curiosity is woven intentionally into the teacher-designed instructional sequence, and students’ intellectual efforts are recognized as important contributions to the inquiry process.

Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question, “How has the Internet impacted the democratic process in the United States?” encourages students to build a foundational knowledge about the broad role of the Internet in politics today, focusing on the increase in access to political information in America. For the formative performance task, students complete the first of a three-section T-chart detailing the positive and negative impacts of the Internet on the political process as a result of the public’s increased access to information. The featured sources provide information related to the extent to which different demographic areas have access to the Internet, as well as contrasting perspectives on how the Internet has impacted American democracy. Featured Source A consists of charts and descriptions of Americans’ access to the internet from the Pew Research Center, including major demographic trends of the early 2000s. Featured Source B is an excerpt from a Huffington Post article that highlights specific ways the Internet has impacted political debate and campaigning. Featured Source C is the transcript of a PBS interview with journalism professor, Anne Mintz, concerning her book, Web of Deception, which discusses the role of the Internet in spreading disinformation.
Supporting Question 2

For the second supporting question, “How has the Internet impacted democratic discourse in the United States?” the students build upon the previous day’s learning and look into how political discussions have been impacted by the Internet. The formative performance task requires students add additional positive and negative impacts of the Internet on political discussions and personal interactions to their T-charts. The featured sources look specifically at how political discourse has changed the ways people relate to each other. Featured Source A, an article from Pew Research Center, describes the impact of social media on news reporting and consumption. Featured Source B is an article from Politico, discussing the negative impact of more democratized news consumption through social media. In Featured Source C, an article from The New Yorker, the authors discuss the ways in which anonymity in online commentary has impacted discourse in a negative way.

Supporting Question 3

For the third supporting question, “What impact does the Internet have on global democracy?” students build upon their foundation of knowledge surrounding the Internet and expand it to a global context. For the formative performance task, students add the information from their document assessment into their T-charts. Sources regarding Chinese democracy and the Arab Spring call students’ attention to the Internet’s ability to be a force of good, while European views on democracy push students to look at the darker side of global democracy. Featured Source A is a podcast from the Council on Foreign Relations, assessing how the Internet has had a democratizing effect, lessening repression in China. Featured Source B features Jared Cohen, Director of Google Ideas, discussing the role of social media in the Arab Spring protests. Featured Source C, an article from Politico written before the 2016 Presidential election, suggests that Google can control voter decisions. It discusses elections in both the United States and around the world. Featured Source D, an article from the New York Times, describes the discussions concerning balancing free speech and privacy as it relates to democracy, focusing on European countries.

Summative Performance Task

At this point, students have examined the impact of the Internet on politics, the direct impact of the Internet on political discussion in the United States, the global impact of the Internet on democracy, as well as applying that knowledge to their own lives. Students should be expected to demonstrate their breadth of understanding and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students construct an evidence-based argument responding to the prompt “Is the Internet good for democracy?” It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a Socratic-style seminar, detailed outline, poster, or essay.

Students’ arguments will likely vary, but could include any of the following:
• The Internet has had a positive impact on democracy, which can be seen in the increased access to a wider range of information, a strengthening of political dialogue through increased access to political discussions, and the Internet’s active role in the spread of democracy on a global scale.

• The Internet has hampered democracy, which is evident in the high levels of misinformation, a tendency for group-think and confirmation bias, and the control governments and institutions exert over the Internet.

• Although the Internet increases access to information for lower socio-economic classes and those in non-democratic parts of the world, the Internet actually hurts the democratic process due to misinformation and group think, which leads to less informed voters.

To extend students’ arguments, teachers may have them assess their own social media and Internet usage to develop and support a claim on how the Internet has impacted their own political interactions. Students use their developed T-charts and the information they’ve learned over the previous questions to analyze whether their previous assessments apply within their personal Internet interactions. Though students are using their own experiences as evidence, the information gathered from the previous supporting questions should contextualize their experiences, rather than be purely anecdotal.

Students have the opportunity to Take Informed Action by drawing on their investigation of the Internet's impact on democratic processes. To understand, students will investigate the usage of Twitter for all contending candidates in a recent election. Based on this investigation, students assess the impact of Twitter on modern political elections. They act by having an informed conversation with a campaign analyst or advisor who works specifically with social media. These individuals can be found working at the local, state, or national level of government.
Staging the Compelling Question

**Featured Source**

### Source A:

‘The ascending young citizens of the Digital Nation can, if they wish, construct a more civil society, a new politics based on rationalism, shared information, the pursuit of truth, and new kinds of community.’

Staging the Compelling Question

**Featured Source**

**Source B:** Screenshot of Google Trends Tweet via Twitter, August 21, 2015.

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**Google Trends**

*(@GoogleTrends)

Search interest in #DeezNuts has surpassed @HillaryClinton on Google

**SEARCH INTEREST IN DEEZ NUTS**

**SURPASSED SEARCH INTEREST IN HILLARY CLINTON**

in last 3 days

- Presidential Candidate Deez Nuts
- Hillary Clinton

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**RETTWEETS** | **FAVORITES**
--- | ---
473 | 287

12:56 PM - 21 Aug 2015
Supporting Question 1


The Pew Research Center’s unit studying the Internet and society began systematically measuring Internet adoption among Americans in 2000. Since then, Pew Research has conducted 97 national surveys of adults that have documented how the Internet has become an integral part of everyday life across diverse parts of society.

A new analysis of 15 years-worth of data highlights several key trends: For some groups, especially young adults, those with high levels of education, and those in more affluent households, Internet penetration is at full saturation levels. For other groups, such as older adults, those with less educational attainment, and those living in lower-income households, adoption has historically been lower but rising steadily, especially in recent years. At the same time, digital gaps still persist.

In this report, we cover some of the major demographic trends that lie beneath the topline adoption numbers and highlight:

- **Age differences:** Older adults have lagged behind younger adults in their adoption, but now a clear majority (58%) of senior citizens uses the Internet.
- **Class differences:** Those with college educations are more likely than those who do not have high school diplomas to use the Internet. Similarly, those who live in households earning more than $75,000 are more likely to be Internet users than those living in households earning less than $30,000. Still, the class-related gaps have shrunk dramatically in 15 years as the most pronounced growth has come among those in lower-income households and those with lower levels of educational attainment.
- **Racial and ethnic differences:** African-Americans and Hispanics have been somewhat less likely than whites or English-speaking Asian-Americans to be Internet users, but the gaps have narrowed. Today, 78% of blacks and 81% of Hispanics use the Internet, compared with 85% of whites and 97% of English-speaking Asian Americans.
- **Community differences:** Those who live in rural areas are less likely than those in the suburbs and urban areas to use the Internet. Still, 78% of rural residents are online.
Internet Usage by Age

The proportion of young adults ages 18-29 who use the Internet has always outpaced overall adoption levels among older groups. But while older adults still report lower levels of Internet use today, seniors have the greatest rate of change since 2000.

In 2000, 70% of young adults used the Internet and that figure has steadily grown to 96% today. At the other end of the spectrum, 14% of seniors used the Internet in 2000, while 58% do so today. Not until 2012 did more than half of all adults ages 65 and older report using the Internet.

Young Adults Are Most Likely to Use The Internet, but Seniors Show Faster Adoption Rates
Internet Usage by Education Attainment

Since the Pew Research Center began consistently measuring Internet penetration, educational attainment has been one of the strongest indicators of use. While a large majority of the well-educated has consistently been online, those without a college degree saw greater rates of adoption over the past 15 years and have notably lowered the access gap.

Adults with a college or graduate degree are the most likely to use the Internet, with almost all of these adults (95%) saying they are Internet users. This proportion has always been high – fifteen years ago, 78% of adults with at least a college degree used the Internet. But the situation in 2000 was much different for those with less education: in that year, only 19% of those without a high school diploma reported that they were Internet users. For those who have not completed high school, 66% now use the Internet, still below where college graduates were in 2000.

While Less-Educated Adults Are Catching Up, Their Internet Adoption Rates Are Still Below Those of College Graduates
Internet Usage by Household Income

Another marker of class differences – household income – is also a strong indicator of Internet usage. Adults living in households with an annual income of at least $75,000 a year are the most likely to use the Internet, with 97% of adults in this group currently reporting they are Internet users. Those living in households with an annual income under $30,000 a year are less likely to report Internet usage, with 74% of adults doing so now.

These trends have been consistent over time, although the more recent rise of smartphones has provided Internet access to lower-income people, sometimes with lower prices, sometimes with other attractive technology features. Indeed, a recent report released by Pew Research found that lower-income Americans are increasingly "smartphone-dependent" for Internet access.

Those In Higher-Income Households Are Most Likely To Use Internet
Internet Usage by Race/Ethnicity

Since 2000, English-speaking Asian-Americans have shown consistently higher rates of Internet usage compared to whites, blacks, and Hispanics. Fully 72% of English-speaking Asian-Americans said they were Internet users 15 years ago when Pew Research began to regularly measure Internet access. Whites and Hispanics would not cross this threshold until 2006, and blacks would reach this level in 2011. In 2014, fully 97% of English-speaking Asian-Americans reported being Internet users.

Among different racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans have seen the greatest growth rate between 2000 and today, though they are still less likely than whites and English-speaking Asian-Americans to be Internet users.

In December 2008, Pew Research began offering all surveys of the U.S. population in Spanish as well as English. This change ensured better coverage of the national population, including more recently arrived Hispanic immigrants. More recently arrived Hispanic immigrants are more likely to have limited English ability, have lower levels of income and formal education, and have less Internet experience than other Hispanics living in the U.S. Thus, we report two separate time trends for Hispanics: the first leading up to late 2008 when Pew Research Center surveys of the U.S. population were only available in English, and the second, from late 2008 onward, when all Pew Research national surveys were administered in both English and Spanish.

Furthermore, the trends presented here on Asian-Americans are limited to English speakers only. The respondents classified as Asian-American said in surveys that they were “Asian or Pacific Islander” when asked to identify their race. As Pew Research surveys are only offered in English and Spanish, the Asian-Americans who respond are English speakers or bilingual. Those who speak other Asian languages but are not comfortable speaking English are less likely to respond to these phone surveys. Pew Research Center does not usually report on Asian-American technology use in it reports as surveys do not typically contain enough Asian-American respondents to yield statistically reliable findings. Aggregating surveys, as is done here, does yield sufficient cases of English-speaking Asian-Americans to report the findings.

English-speaking Asian-Americans Are the Most Likely To Report Internet Usage

![Graph showing Internet usage by race/ethnicity from 2000 to 2014]

Among all American adults, the % who use the internet, by racial/ethnic group

- **Asian, English-speaking**
- **White, non-Hispanic**
- **Hispanic**
- **Black, non-Hispanic**
Internet Usage by Community Type

Adults who live in urban or suburban communities have shown consistently higher levels of Internet adoption, compared with rural residents. This gap has persisted even as Internet adoption has risen in all three types of communities.

In 2000, 56% of suburban residents, 53% of urban residents, and 42% of rural residents were Internet users. Today those figures stand at 85%, 85%, and 78% respectively. Rural communities tend to have a higher proportion of residents who are older, lower-income, and have lower levels of educational attainment – additional factors associated with lower levels of Internet adoption.

Rural Citizens Are Less Likely To Use Internet

Among all adults, the % who use the internet, by community type

![Chart showing Internet usage by community type](chart.png)
Internet Usage by Gender

Today, men and women are equally likely to be Internet users, a trend that has not wavered throughout the 15 years these surveys have been conducted. However, the earliest Pew Research surveys found that men were more likely than women to be Internet users. For instance, a 1995 survey found 9% of men and 4% of women had used a “modem to connect to any computer bulletin boards, information services such as CompuServe or Prodigy.”

By 2000, when Pew Research began tracking Internet use more consistently, 54% of men were Internet users, compared with half of women. This modest gap continued, gradually shrinking until 2008 when a statistically indistinguishable 74% of men and 73% of women identified as Internet users. Today, 85% of men and 84% of women report being Internet users.

Gender Parity Has Been the Norm In Internet Usage

![Graph showing the percentage of American adults using the internet, by gender from 2000 to 2014.](http://www.pewInternet.org/2015/06/26/americans-Internet-access-2000-2015/)

Supporting Question 1


The 2008 political campaign undoubtedly changed how politicians view the importance of the Internet. Some have said that without the Internet, President Barack Obama wouldn’t have been elected. Regardless of your view on that, there’s no denying that the Internet has changed the way we view, research and debate politics today.

In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of adult Internet users go online for data about government spending and activities. Think back 15 years ago -- that would have seemed otherworldly! Users are also utilizing social tools, with 31 percent using blogs, social networking sites, online video, email, and text alerts to keep informed about government activities.

Below are highlighted some important ways that the Internet has changed political debate and campaigning online, and how we process and consume that information.

**How we donate our time has changed.**

Volunteering has always been an important part of the political process, especially for politicians during campaigns. But with the use of the Internet, recruiting volunteers has changed tremendously. During the 2008 campaign, my.BarackObama.com garnered 1.5 million volunteer accounts. This website is still active today, and Romney has a similar resource for interested citizens.

Political activism has also changed with the birth of the Internet. Today, we can schedule meetings, rallies, and fundraisers on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, or even create a MeetUp group.

**Politicians can now reach out to constituents virtually.**

Door-to-door campaigning is a thing of the past. Today, Twitter and Facebook chats are being used to target constituents. The White House uses Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Reddit to connect with Americans. That’s a lot of social media. Obama, among many other politicians, has organized a Twitter town hall at the White House to answer questions from the public. The list goes on and on, but the number of Internet venues in which politicians can connect with us are many.

**Breaking news, analysis, and statistics are available 24/7.**

As we all know, the news cycle is entrenched in new information 24/7. This means the mainstream media discuss and share political information, news, and analysis at an incredibly fast pace. Citizens who want to keep up, can and do. The quantity and quality of our political debates are different because of the change in the news cycle and the Internet.
We can learn about candidates and issues with one click.

Fact-checking has become easier with the use of search engines. During debates, we can now Google, Bing, or Yahoo! search facts, statistics, and definitions. In 2008 Google research found that Google searches increased during political debates.

Using Yahoo! Labs, you can track political search engine trends too. Some of the top searches for the second week of October include "vp debate 2012," "Obama donor scandal," and "Mitt Romney debating himself." These searches are not only interesting, but point to changes in how we find political information.

We have more venues than ever to voice our opinions.

Political debate today has a much different meaning. Why? Because more people are speaking out and being heard. In the pre-Internet era, you had to write an opinion column in a newspaper or send a letter to the editor to have your opinion published. Otherwise, only your close friends, family, and coworkers heard your political rants. Today, anyone can create a blog, post a comment on a social networking site or at the end of many articles and blogs, or participate in a forum -- all with a much larger audience.

Online video changed how we view and digest debates.

Inexpensive webcams, audio software, and video-sharing websites like YouTube Self allow us to create self-produced video and upload it to large servers with ease. Politicians are using online video too -- for Q&A's, live streaming debates, and appearances. By July 2012, Obama's YouTube channel had over 200 million views. Think of how costly that time would have been on TV or radio!

These changes have only scratched the surface of what the Internet has provided for the political realm. Even as the current election season wraps up, we'll continue to hear of new Internet innovations and technologies, ones that were used to reach voters already as well as ones that are just emerging. . .

Supporting Question 1

**Featured Source**  

**NOW:** What prompted you to write a book about deception and misinformation on the Web? What do you hope readers take away from your book, "Web of Deception?"

**ANNE MINTZ:** My hope was that people searching the Internet would become more aware of the scams, hoaxes and hate sites and would apply critical thinking skills to evaluating the results of their searches.

**NOW:** The dissemination of misleading or deceptive information about political candidates is nothing new to U.S. politics. Do you think it is any worse today than it has been in the past?

**AM:** I don't think it's worse; I think it's easier. The implosion of George Allen’s campaign for the U.S. Senate from Virginia last year after he used the word "Macaca" showed us how easy it is to disseminate any information about a candidate—in that case he really said it. And, he was undone by cell phone technology, as well as the Internet. However, I can imagine a doctored video at some point in 2008 that would be hard to disprove. This would make it "worse than in the past" because technology lets tech-savvy people do it rather anonymously (or post it from outside the U.S.).

**NOW:** How has the Internet affected the spreading of political rumors or smear campaigns?

**AM:** In one way, it's easier, as I just said. However, it's also easier to publicly debunk such rumors and disseminate factually accurate counter-campaigns.

**NOW:** How do you evaluate the validity of a website? What are some of the criteria you use?

**AM:** I ask myself "Does this make sense?" Common sense is sometimes the best indicator of quality or lack there of. Check a WHOIS database to find out to whom a website is registered. Look further (on Google, perhaps) to find out more information about the organization or person to whom it's registered. If it isn't easy to confirm who claims ownership of the site, be suspicious. Is it well written or are there spelling and grammar errors? Is it clear on the web page when the information was published? Is it current? Look at [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org) to see older versions of the site. It's possible one can glean valuable information that way.

**NOW:** What sites do you recommend for getting the most reliable news and election coverage?

...  

**NOW:** What sites are good for fact-checking and debunking rumors (related to politics)?

**AM:** I think it's useful to know if a site is sponsored by someone (or an organization) that has given to a campaign. For that I go to [opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org) for federal campaigns (from The Center for Responsive Politics) and to [followthemoney.org](http://followthemoney.org) (National Institute on Money in State Politics) for state and local campaigns. I also recommend looking at the candidates' campaign websites. While they are going to be highly flattering of the candidate, they will likely also address negative rumors and debunk them.

**NOW:** Do you think people question information they read on the computer less than in the paper?

**AM:** In the past, I'd have immediately said "Yes, no question" but I'm rethinking that. I think people understand the
political leanings of their local papers and view information there with a corrective lens to neutralize the bias (if they wish to). They've now had years of experience with spam for lots of unwanted e-mails and have figured out that anyone can (and will) write just about anything. They will begin to do figure that out about Internet sites. I think they know that "On the Internet nobody knows you're a dog" (courtesy of The New Yorker).

...  

**NOW:** Do you think rumors on the Web can damage a candidate's chance of getting elected? What are counter measures candidates can take? How do you think the rumor mill affects how people decide to vote?

**AM:** This has more to do with bloggers than specific websites. Bloggers per se are not a problem. However, rumors on the Web don't get there without a source, and many rumors are put out there by bloggers. Bloggers are individuals with very loud megaphones, and there are millions of them. Some of those are writing about politics, and it's impossible to counter every statement by one of them. Of course, there have been stories debunked by bloggers as well, making them part of the solution at times. We need to evaluate the information from blogs the same way we evaluate all other statements by sources.

I'm not sure this was initially a Web rumor, but the Web sure spread it quickly enough without any financial cost to the accusers. The Swift Boat Veterans seem to have done a great deal of damage to John Kerry's presidential campaign. The common wisdom is that he didn't reply fast enough or vehemently enough to the charges. In comparison, the Hillary Clinton campaign doesn't let 24 hours go by without a reply to an attack. I would imagine that it goes the same for attacks by well-known bloggers. Because there have been members of Congress who have been taken down by true rumors on blogs they have to be taken seriously. (Rep. Mark Foley of Florida resigning from the US House of Representatives after inappropriate e-mails to interns were made public comes to mind) It follows that false rumors of that nature can also damage a person's employment and future chance of employment, including political candidates and elected officials. It will be interesting to see if any bloggers get sued for slander or libel (I'm not a lawyer), because of false statements they make on the Web. This is as yet untested.

...  

**NOW:** What is the danger of disinformation on the web during the 2008 Election?

**AM:** The danger of disinformation is always the same, in an election or in any other aspect of life, namely that people will make bad decisions based on bad information. And seeing the chance to profit by those bad decisions will motivate liars and cheats to lie and cheat all the more. The Internet has made it possible to disseminate it more quickly and cheaply, so I'm sure we'll start seeing more of it soon. I expect that bloggers and the mainstream media will be on top of this, given recent experiences.

**NOW:** What can you learn from checking out sites that do create and spread rumors? How or does it inform public discourse?

**AM:** I think when one goes to a site that has a rumor that is suspicious and one sees the other content on the site, it can bring perspective to the rumor itself. For example, there was recently a full page ad in the NYT during the negotiations between the UAW and General Motors. It was from an organization called unionfacts.org. Only when I went to that site did I see that the group running the ad was anti-union.

**NOW:** Do you think the rumor mill on the Web is changing the face of journalism—regarding the tension between "getting it right" and "getting it first?"

**AM:** I think it might take one egregious example followed by a whopping lawsuit in which the target of the rumor prevails. I don't have a specific scenario in mind, but it would certainly make "getting it first" less of a priority than "getting it right."
However, lawsuits take time and the elections are only 10 months away. It reminds me of the statement attributed to Abraham Lincoln (and also to P. T. Barnum!): "You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

The problem with web-based deception in an election year is the "time" factor. If you can fool enough of the people by Election Day, you could take an advantage. On the other hand, people don't like being fooled and some voters can have long memories and it's only 2 years to the next election.

Bloggers have taken over getting it first, and mainstream media have begun conceding that by integrating "good" blogging into their content and then focusing their own staffs on "getting it right."

By the way, that's another way of checking on sources, let the mainstream media pick your blog input.

NOW: Do you think the rumor mill is out of our control?

AM: The rumor mill has always been out of our control. What's definitely in our control is the ability to check out the details of the rumor and debunk it publicly. At some point, I think we'll want an Internet version of candidates stating, "I'm Chris Candidate and I approve what my supporters are doing to elect me."

NOW: How do you think rumors get started?

AM: Did you ever play "Telephone" as a child? Sometimes rumors get started quite unintentionally. People mishear what they are being told and repeat what they think they heard. The result can be as dangerous as intentional misinformation. Then there are the intentional rumors. Re-read "All the President's Men" and you'll see great examples of intentional rumors spread by graduates of law schools. And, we know that wasn't new to American politics in the early 1970s. In the early years of the U.S., Alexander Hamilton was the victim of rumors (apparently true) that he was having an affair, and was forced from public life. Intentional rumors are originated and spread by people intent on getting what they want no matter what the means.

If what the voters want is an honest election, it's their job to use the Web to keep it that way. For every ugly falsehood the Web can carry, there's a way to use the Web to find the truth.

The ever-growing digital native news world now boasts about 5,000 digital news sector jobs, according to our recent calculations, 3,000 of which are at 30 big digital-only news outlets. Many of these digital organizations emphasize the importance of social media in storytelling and engaging their audiences. As journalists gather for the annual Online News Association conference, here are answers to five questions about social media and the news.

1. **How do social media sites stack up on news?** When you take into account both the total reach of a site (the share of Americans who use it) and the proportion of users who get news on the site, Facebook is the obvious news powerhouse among the social media sites. Roughly two-thirds (64%) of U.S. adults use the site, and half of those users get news there — amounting to 30% of the general population.

   YouTube is the next biggest social news pathway — about half of Americans use the site, and a fifth of them get news there, which translates to 10% of the adult population and puts the site on par with Twitter. Twitter reaches 16% of Americans and half of those users say they get news there, or 8% of Americans. And although only 3% of the U.S. population use reddit, for those that do, getting news there is a major draw—62% have gotten news from the site.

2. **How do social media users participate in news?** Half of social network site users have shared news stories, images or videos, and nearly as many (46%) have discussed a news issue or event. In addition to sharing news on social media, a small number are also covering the news themselves, by posting photos or videos of news events. Pew Research found that in 2014, 14% of social media users posted their own photos of news events to a social media site.

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**Social Media as a Pathway to News: Facebook Leads the Way**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Site</th>
<th>Use site (U.S. adults)</th>
<th>Get news on site (U.S. adults)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vine</td>
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Note: The percent of U.S. adults who get news on Pinterest and Vine each amount to less than one percent.

Aug. 21-Sept. 2, 2013

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
networking site, while 12% had posted videos. This practice has played a role in a number of recent breaking news events, including the riots in Ferguson, Mo.

Percent of social networking site users who have...

- Shared or reposted news stories, images or videos: 50%
- Discussed a news issue or event: 46%
- Posted photos they took of a news event: 14%
- Posted videos they took of a news event: 12%


**3. How do social media users discover news?** Facebook is an important source of website referrals for many news outlets, but the users who arrive via Facebook spend far less time and consume far fewer pages than those who arrive directly. The same is true of users arriving by search. Our analysis of comScore data found visitors who go to a news media website directly spend roughly three times as long as those who wind up there through search or Facebook, and they view roughly five times as many pages per month. This higher level of engagement from direct visitors is evident whether a site’s traffic is driven by search or social sharing and it has big implications for news organizations who are experimenting with digital subscriptions while endeavoring to build a loyal audience.
### 4. What's the news experience like on Facebook?

Our study of news consumption on Facebook found Facebook users are experiencing a relatively diverse array of news stories on the site — roughly half of Facebook users regularly see six different topic areas. The most common news people see is entertainment news: 73% of Facebook users regularly see this kind of content on the site. Unlike Twitter, where a core function is the distribution of information as news breaks, Facebook is not yet a place many turn to for learning about breaking news. (Though the company may be trying to change that by tweaking its algorithm to make the posts appearing in newsfeed more timely.) Still, just 28% of Facebook news consumers ever use the site to keep up with a news event as it unfolds, less than half of those users would turn to Facebook first to follow breaking news.

### 5. How does social media impact the discussion of news events?

Our recent survey revealed social media doesn’t always facilitate conversation around the important issues of the day. In fact, we found people were less willing to discuss their opinions on the Snowden-NSA story on social media than they were in person. And Facebook and Twitter users were less likely to want to share their opinions in many face-to-face settings, especially if they felt their social audience disagreed with them.
If the topic of the government surveillance programs came up in these settings, how willing would you be to join in the conversation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Very willing</th>
<th>Somewhat willing</th>
<th>Somewhat unwilling</th>
<th>Very unwilling</th>
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<td>12</td>
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</tr>
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<td>At a restaurant with friends</td>
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<td>At a community meeting</td>
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</tr>
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<td>At work</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>On Twitter (based on Twitter users)</td>
<td>14</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Our political discourse is shrinking to fit our smartphone screens. The latest evidence came on Monday night, when Barack Obama turned himself into the country’s Instagrammer-in-Chief. While en route to Alaska to promote his climate agenda, the president took a photograph of a mountain range from a window on Air Force One and posted the shot on the popular picture-sharing network. “Hey everyone, it’s Barack,” the caption read. “I’ll be spending the next few days touring this beautiful state and meeting with Alaskans about what’s going on in their lives. Looking forward to sharing it with you.” The photo quickly racked up thousands of likes.

Ever since the so-called Facebook election of 2008, Obama has been a pacesetter in using social media to connect with the public. But he has nothing on this year’s field of candidates. Ted Cruz live-streams his appearances on Periscope. Marco Rubio broadcasts “Snapchat Stories” at stops along the trail. Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush spar over student debt on Twitter. Rand Paul and Lindsey Graham produce goofy YouTube videos. Even grumpy old Bernie Sanders has attracted nearly two million likers on Facebook, leading the New York Times to dub him “a king of social media.”

And then there’s Donald Trump. If Sanders is a king, Trump is a god. A natural-born troll, adept at issuing inflammatory bulletins at opportune moments, he’s the first candidate optimized for the Google News algorithm. In a typical tweet, sent out first thing Monday morning, he described Clinton aide Huma Abedin as “a major security risk” and “the wife of perv sleazebag Anthony Wiener.” Exuberantly impolitic, such messages attract Trump a vast web audience—four million followers on Twitter alone—while giving reporters and pundits fresh bait to feed on. What Trump understands is that the best way to dominate the online discussion is not to inform but to provoke.

Trump’s glow may fade—online celebrity has a fast-burning wick—but his ability to control the agenda this summer says a lot about the changing dynamics of political races. If traditional print and broadcast media required candidates to be nouns—stable, coherent figures—social media pushes them to verbs, engines of activity. Authority and respect don’t accumulate on social media; they have to be earned anew at each moment. You’re only as relevant as your last tweet.

The more established among this year’s candidates have been slow to learn this lesson. That’s particularly true of Clinton and Bush, the erstwhile shoo-ins. Their Twitter tiff was an exception to their generally anodyne presence on social media. They’ve played it safe, burnishing their images as reliable public servants while trying to avoid any misstep that might blow up into a TV controversy. Bush’s various social-media feeds come off as afterthoughts. They promote his appearances, offer kudos to his endorsers and provide links to his merchandise store. What they don’t do—at least until he launched a Twitter attack on Trump yesterday—is make news. Clinton’s postings have been equally bland. Her Facebook feed is a mirror image of her Twitter feed, and both aim to give followers a warm-and-fuzzy feeling about the candidate.

Clinton’s predicament is a particularly painful one. She’s spent years filing the burrs off her personality, only to find that rough edges are in. Back in June, her campaign issued an Official Hillary 2016 Playlist on Spotify. It was packed with upbeat, on-message tunes (“Brave,” “Fighters,” “Stronger,” “Believer”), but it sounded like an anachronism in a campaign that’s more punk than pop.

Twice before in the last hundred years a new medium has transformed elections. In the 1920s, radio disembodied candidates, reducing them to voices. It also made national campaigns far more intimate. Politicians, used to bellowing at fairgrounds and train depots, found themselves talking to families in their homes. The blustery
rhetoric that stirred big, partisan crowds came off as shrill and off-putting when piped into a living room or a kitchen. Gathered around their wireless sets, the public wanted an avuncular statesman, not a firebrand. With Franklin Roosevelt, master of the soothing fireside chat, the new medium found its ideal messenger.

In the 1960s, television gave candidates their bodies back, at least in two dimensions. With its jumpy cuts and pitiless close-ups, TV placed a stress on sound bites, good teeth and an easy manner. Image became everything, as the line between politician and celebrity blurred. John Kennedy was the first successful candidate of the TV era, but it was Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton who perfected the form. Born actors, they could project a down-home demeanor while also seeming bigger than life.

Today, with the public looking to smartphones for news and entertainment, we seem to be at the start of the third big technological makeover of modern electioneering. The presidential campaign is becoming just another social-media stream, its swift and shallow current intertwining with all the other streams that flow through people’s devices. This shift is changing the way politicians communicate with voters, altering the tone and content of political speech. But it’s doing more than that. It’s changing what the country wants and expects from its would-be leaders.

What’s important now is not so much image as personality. But, as the Trump phenomenon reveals, it’s only a particular kind of personality that works—one that’s big enough to grab the attention of the perpetually distracted but small enough to fit neatly into a thousand tiny media containers. It might best be described as a Snapchat personality. It bursts into focus at regular intervals without ever demanding steady concentration.

Social media favors the bitty over the meaty, the cutting over the considered. It also prizes emotionalism over reason. The more visceral the message, the more quickly it circulates and the longer it holds the darting public eye. In something of a return to the pre-radio days, the fiery populist now seems more desirable, more worthy of attention, than the cool wonk. It’s the crusty Bernie and the caustic Donald that get hearted and hash-tagged, friended and followed. Is it any wonder that “Feel the Bern” has become the rallying cry of the Sanders campaign?

Emotional appeals can be good for politics. They can spur civic involvement, even among the disenfranchised and disenchanted. And they can galvanize public attention, focusing it on injustices and abuses of power. An immediate emotional connection can, at best, deep into a sustained engagement with the political process. But there’s a dark side to social media’s emotionalism. Trump’s popularity took off only after he demonized Mexican immigrants, playing to the public’s frustrations and fears. That’s the demagogue’s oldest tactic, and it worked. The Trump campaign may have qualities of farce, but it also suggests that a Snapchat candidate, passionate yet hollow, could be a perfect vessel for a cult of personality.

The fact that experienced candidates like Clinton and Bush are having trouble fitting themselves into the new mold isn’t unusual. Whenever a new medium upends the game, veteran politicians flounder. They go on playing by the old medium’s rules. The people who listened to the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate on their radios were convinced Nixon had won. But the far larger television audience saw Kennedy as the clear victor. Nixon’s mistake was to assume that he was still in the radio age. He believed that the audience would concentrate on what he said and wouldn’t care much about how he looked. Oblivious to the camera’s gaze, he had no idea that the sweat on his upper lip would drown out his words.

A similar inertia is hobbling the establishment candidates today. They continue to follow the conventions of broadcast TV. They assume that television will establish the campaign’s talking points, package the race as a series of tidy stories and shape the way voters see the contestants. They may have teams of digital functionaries tending to their online messaging, but they still view social media as a complement to TV coverage, a means of reinforcing their messages and images, rather than as the campaign’s driving force.
News organizations, too, tend to be slow to adapt to the arrival of a new medium. Television, with its diurnal “news cycle,” gave a theatrical rhythm to campaigns. Each day was an act in a broader drama that arced from conflict to crisis to resolution. Campaigns were “narratives.” They had “story lines.” Social media is different. Its fragmented messages and conversations offer little in the way of plot. Its literary style is stream-of-consciousness, more William Burroughs than Jane Austen. But reporters and pundits, stuck in the TV era, keep trying to fit the bits and pieces on Twitter and Facebook into a linear tale. As a result, today’s campaign reports often seem out of sync with the public’s reaction to events.

Think of what happened in July when Trump kicked dirt on John McCain’s reputation. “He’s not a war hero,” Trump said in an Iowa speech. “I like people who weren’t captured.” In any prior campaign, such a criticism of an American veteran who had been tortured as a prisoner of war would have constituted a major “gaffe.” It would have immediately triggered a narrative of triad, penance and redemption. In this familiar plot, a trope of modern campaigns, the candidate is first pilloried, then required to make a heartfelt apology, and finally, after the sincerity of the apology is carefully weighed, granted absolution. At which point a new narrative begins.

That’s the way the news media played the Trump attack. In print and on TV, the putative gaffe received saturation coverage, with the aghast press dutifully reprimanding the wayward Donald. “Will Trump’s Smear of McCain Doom His Candidacy?” asked a Newsweek headline. But the narrative, to the media’s surprise, never advanced. Far from apologizing, Trump kept attacking. The tweets piled up, the public’s attention buzzed to newer things, and the story died before it even became a story. With social media, we seem to have entered a post-narrative world of campaigning. And that greatly circumscribes the power of traditional media in stage-managing races. Rather than narrating stories, anchors are reduced to reading tweets.

The Internet, we’ve often been told, is a force for “democratization,” and what we’ve seen so far with the coverage of the 2016 race seems to prove the point. It’s worth asking, though, what kind of democracy is being promoted. Early digital enthusiasts assumed that the web, by freeing the masses from TV news producers and other media gatekeepers, would engender a deeper national conversation. We the people would take control of the discussion. We’d go online to read position papers, seek out diverse viewpoints and engage in spirited policy debates. The body politic would get fit.

It was a pretty thought, but it reflected an idealized view both of human nature and of communication media. Even a decade ago, in the heady days of the blogosphere, there were signs that online media promoted a hyperactive mob mentality. People skimmed headlines and posts, seeking information that reinforced their biases and rejecting contrary perspectives. Information gathering was more tribalistic than pluralistic. As the authors of a 2009 study concluded, “blog authors tend to link to their ideological kindred and blog readers gravitate to blogs that reinforce their existing viewpoints.” The Internet inspired “participation,” but the participants ended up in “cloistered cocoons of cognitive consonance.”

That probably shouldn’t have been a surprise. The net reinforced the polarizing effect that broadcast media, particularly talk radio and cable news, had been having for many years. What is a surprise is that social media, for all the participation it inspires among users, is turning out to be more encompassing and controlling, more totalizing, than earlier media ever was. The social networks operated by companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google don’t just regulate the messages we receive. They regulate our responses. They shape, through the design of their apps and their information-filtering regimes, the forms of our discourse.

When we go on Facebook, we see a cascade of messages determined by the company’s News Feed algorithm, and we’re provided with a set of prescribed ways to react to each message. We can click a Like button; we can share the message with our friends; we can add a brief comment. With the messages we see on Twitter, we’re given buttons for replying, retweeting and favoriting, and any thought we express has to fit the service’s tight text limits. Google News gives us a series of headlines, emphasizing the latest stories to have received a cluster of coverage, and it
provides a row of buttons for sharing the headlines on Google Plus, Twitter and Facebook. All social networks impose these kinds of formal constraints, both on what we see and on how we respond. The restrictions have little to do with the public interest. They reflect the commercial interests of the companies operating the networks as well as the protocols of software programming.

Because it simplifies and speeds up communications, the formulaic quality of social media is well suited to the banter that takes place among friends. Clicking a heart symbol may be the perfect way to judge the worth of an Instagrammed selfie (or even a presidential snapshot). But when applied to political speech, the same constraints can be pernicious, inspiring superficiality rather than depth. Political discourse rarely benefits from templates and routines. It becomes most valuable when it involves careful deliberation, an attention to detail and subtle and open-ended critical thought—the kinds of things that social media tends to frustrate rather than promote.

Over the next year, as the presidential campaign careens toward its conclusion, all of us—the public, the press, and the candidates themselves—will get an education in how elections work in the age of social media. We may discover that the gates maintained by our new gatekeepers are narrower than ever.

Several weeks ago, on September 24th, Popular Science announced that it would banish comments from its website. The editors argued that Internet comments, particularly anonymous ones, undermine the integrity of science and lead to a culture of aggression and mockery that hinders substantive discourse. “Even a fractious minority wields enough power to skew a reader’s perception of a story,” wrote the online-content director Suzanne LaBarre, citing a recent study from the University of Wisconsin-Madison as evidence. While it’s tempting to blame the Internet, incendiary rhetoric has long been a mainstay of public discourse. Cicero, for one, openly called Mark Antony a “public prostitute,” concluding, “but let us say no more of your profligacy and debauchery.” What, then, has changed with the advent of online comments?

Anonymity, for one thing. According to a September Pew poll, a quarter of Internet users have posted comments anonymously. As the age of a user decreases, his reluctance to link a real name with an online remark increases; forty per cent of people in the eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-old demographic have posted anonymously. One of the most common critiques of online comments cites a disconnect between the commenter’s identity and what he is saying, a phenomenon that the psychologist John Suler memorably termed the “online disinhibition effect.” The theory is that the moment you shed your identity the usual constraints on your behavior go, too—or, to rearticulate the 1993 Peter Steiner cartoon, on the Internet, nobody knows you’re not a dog. When Arthur Santana, a communications professor at the University of Houston, analyzed nine hundred randomly chosen user comments on articles about immigration, half from newspapers that allowed anonymous postings, such as the Los Angeles Times and the Houston Chronicle, and half from ones that didn’t, including USA Today and the Wall Street Journal, he discovered that anonymity made a perceptible difference: a full fifty-three per cent of anonymous commenters were uncivil, as opposed to twenty-nine per cent of registered, non-anonymous commenters. Anonymity, Santana concluded, encouraged incivility.

On the other hand, anonymity has also been shown to encourage participation; by promoting a greater sense of community identity, users don’t have to worry about standing out individually. Anonymity can also boost a certain kind of creative thinking and lead to improvements in problem-solving. In a study that examined student learning, the psychologists Ina Blau and Avner Caspi found that, while face-to-face interactions tended to provide greater satisfaction, in anonymous settings participation and risk-taking flourished.

Anonymous forums can also be remarkably self-regulating: we tend to discount anonymous or pseudonymous comments to a much larger degree than commentary from other, more easily identifiable sources. In a 2012 study of anonymity in computer interactions, researchers found that, while anonymous comments were more likely to be contrarian and extreme than non-anonymous ones, they were also far less likely to change a subject’s opinion on an ethical issue, echoing earlier results from the University of Arizona. In fact, as the Stanford computer scientist Michael Bernstein found when he analyzed the /b/ board of 4chan, an online discussion forum that has been referred to as the Internet’s “rude, raunchy underbelly” and where over ninety per cent of posts are wholly anonymous, mechanisms spontaneously emerged to monitor user interactions and establish a commenter’s status as more or less influential—and credible.

Owing to the conflicting effects of anonymity, and in response to the changing nature of online publishing itself, Internet researchers have begun shifting their focus away from anonymity toward other aspects of the online
environment, such as tone and content. The University of Wisconsin-Madison study that Popular Science cited, for instance, was focussed on whether comments themselves, anonymous or otherwise, made people less civil. The authors found that the nastier the comments, the more polarized readers became about the contents of the article, a phenomenon they dubbed the “nasty effect.” But the nasty effect isn’t new, or unique to the Internet. Psychologists have long worried about the difference between face-to-face communication and more removed ways of talking—the letter, the telegraph, the phone. Without the traditional trappings of personal communication, like non-verbal cues, context, and tone, comments can become overly impersonal and cold.

But a ban on article comments may simply move them to a different venue, such as Twitter or Facebook—from a community centered around a single publication or idea to one without any discernible common identity. Such large group environments, in turn, often produce less than desirable effects, including a diffusion of responsibility: you feel less accountable for your own actions, and become more likely to engage in amoral behavior. In his classic work on the role of groups and media exposure in violence, the social cognitive psychologist Alfred Bandura found that, as personal responsibility becomes more diffused in a group, people tend to dehumanize others and become more aggressive toward them. At the same time, people become more likely to justify their actions in self-absolving ways. Multiple studies have also illustrated that when people don’t think they are going to be held immediately accountable for their words they are more likely to fall back on mental shortcuts in their thinking and writing, processing information less thoroughly. They become, as a result, more likely to resort to simplistic evaluations of complicated issues, as the psychologist Philip Tetlock has repeatedly found over several decades of research on accountability.

Removing comments also affects the reading experience itself: it may take away the motivation to engage with a topic more deeply, and to share it with a wider group of readers. In a phenomenon known as shared reality, our experience of something is affected by whether or not we will share it socially. Take away comments entirely, and you take away some of that shared reality, which is why we often want to share or comment in the first place. We want to believe that others will read and react to our ideas.

What the University of Wisconsin-Madison study may ultimately show isn’t the negative power of a comment in itself but, rather, the cumulative effect of a lot of positivity or negativity in one place, a conclusion that is far less revolutionary. One of the most important controls of our behavior is the established norms within any given community. For the most part, we act consistently with the space and the situation; a football game is different from a wedding, usually. The same phenomenon may come into play in different online forums, in which the tone of existing comments and the publication itself may set the pace for a majority of subsequent interactions. Anderson, Brossard, and their colleagues’ experiment lacks the crucial element of setting, since the researchers created fake comments on a fake post, where the tone was simply either civil or uncivil (“If you don’t see the benefits ... you’re an idiot”).

Would the results have been the same if the uncivil remarks were part of a string of comments on a New York Times article or a Gawker post, where comments can be promoted or demoted by other users? On Gawker, in the process of voting a comment up or down, users can set the tone of the comments, creating a surprisingly civil result. The readership, in other words, spots the dog at the other end of the keyboard, and puts him down.

As the psychologists Marco Yzer and Brian Southwell put it, "new communication technologies do not fundamentally alter the theoretical bounds of human interaction; such interaction continues to be governed by basic human tendencies." Whether online, on the phone, by telegraph, or in person, we are governed by the same basic principles. The medium may change, but people do not. The question instead is whether the outliers, the
trolls and the flamers, will hold outsized influence—and the answer seems to be that, even protected by the shade of anonymity, a dog will often make himself known with a stray, accidental bark. Then, hopefully, he will be treated accordingly.

Accessed from: http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-psychology-of-online-comments
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<td><strong>Source A:</strong> “Can the Internet Bring Democracy to China?” podcast, Council on Foreign Relations, May 18, 2009.</td>
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Supporting Question 3

**Featured Source**

**Source B:** Jared Cohen, “Impact of Technology on Arab Spring,” interview about technology’s role in the Arab Spring, FORA.tv, July 8, 2011.

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**Technology's Role In the Arab Spring Protests**

Accessed from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZwNb11n9zk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZwNb11n9zk)
Supporting Question 3

Featured Source  


America’s next president could be eased into office not just by TV ads or speeches, but by Google’s secret decisions, and no one—except for me and perhaps a few other obscure researchers—would know how this was accomplished.

Research I have been directing in recent years suggests that Google, Inc., has amassed far more power to control elections—indeed, to control a wide variety of opinions and beliefs—that any company in history has ever had. Google’s search algorithm can easily shift the voting preferences of undecided voters by 20 percent or more—up to 80 percent in some demographic groups—with virtually no one knowing they are being manipulated, according to experiments I conducted recently with Ronald E. Robertson.

Given that many elections are won by small margins, this gives Google the power, right now, to flip upwards of 25 percent of the national elections worldwide. In the United States, half of our presidential elections have been won by margins under 7.6 percent, and the 2012 election was won by a margin of only 3.9 percent—well within Google’s control.

There are at least three very real scenarios whereby Google—perhaps even without its leaders’ knowledge—could shape or even decide the election next year. Whether or not Google executives see it this way, the employees who constantly adjust the search giant’s algorithms are manipulating people every minute of every day. The adjustments they make increasingly influence our thinking—including, it turns out, our voting preferences.

What we call in our research the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME) turns out to be one of the largest behavioral effects ever discovered. Our comprehensive new study, just published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), includes the results of five experiments we conducted with more than 4,500 participants in two countries. Because SEME is virtually invisible as a form of social influence, because the effect is so large and because there are currently no specific regulations anywhere in the world that would prevent Google from using and abusing this technique, we believe SEME is a serious threat to the democratic system of government.

According to Google Trends, at this writing Donald Trump is currently trouncing all other candidates in search activity in 47 of 50 states. Could this activity push him higher in search rankings, and could higher rankings in turn bring him more support? Most definitely—depending, that is, on how Google employees choose to adjust numeric weightings in the search algorithm. Google acknowledges adjusting the algorithm 600 times a year, but the process is secret, so what effect Mr. Trump’s success will have on how he shows up in Google searches is presumably out of his hands.

***

Our new research leaves little doubt about whether Google has the ability to control voters. In laboratory and online experiments conducted in the United States, we were able to boost the proportion of people who favored any candidate by between 37 and 63 percent after just one search session. The impact of viewing biased rankings repeatedly over a period of weeks or months would undoubtedly be larger.

In our basic experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups in which search rankings favored either Candidate A, Candidate B or neither candidate. Participants were given brief descriptions of each candidate and then asked how much they liked and trusted each candidate and whom they would vote for. Then they were allowed up to 15 minutes to conduct online research on the candidates using a Google-like search engine we created called Kadoodle.
Each group had access to the same 30 search results—all real search results linking to real web pages from a past election. Only the ordering of the results differed in the three groups. People could click freely on any result or shift between any of five different results pages, just as one can on Google’s search engine.

When our participants were done searching, we asked them those questions again, and, voilà: On all measures, opinions shifted in the direction of the candidate who was favored in the rankings. Trust, liking and voting preferences all shifted predictably.

More alarmingly, we also demonstrated this shift with real voters during an actual electoral campaign—in an experiment conducted with more than 2,000 eligible, undecided voters throughout India during the 2014 Lok Sabha election there—the largest democratic election in history, with more than 800 million eligible voters and 480 million votes ultimately cast. Even here, with real voters who were highly familiar with the candidates and who were being bombarded with campaign rhetoric every day, we showed that search rankings could boost the proportion of people favoring any candidate by more than 20 percent—more than 60 percent in some demographic groups.

Given how powerful this effect is, it’s possible that Google decided the winner of the Indian election. Google’s own daily data on election-related search activity (subsequently removed from the Internet, but not before my colleagues and I downloaded the pages) showed that Narendra Modi, the ultimate winner, outscores his rivals in search activity by more than 25 percent for sixty-one consecutive days before the final votes were cast. That high volume of search activity could easily have been generated by higher search rankings for Modi.

Google’s official comment on SEME research is always the same: “Providing relevant answers has been the cornerstone of Google’s approach to search from the very beginning. It would undermine the people’s trust in our results and company if we were to change course.”

Could any comment be more meaningless? How does providing “relevant answers” to election-related questions rule out the possibility of favoring one candidate over another in search rankings? Google’s statement seems far short of a blanket denial that it ever puts its finger on the scales.
There are three credible scenarios under which Google could easily be flipping elections worldwide as you read this:

First, there is the Western Union Scenario: Google’s executives decide which candidate is best for us—and for the company, of course—and they fiddle with search rankings accordingly. There is precedent in the United States for this kind of backroom king-making. Rutherford B. Hayes, the 19th president of the United States, was put into office in part because of strong support by Western Union. In the late 1800s, Western Union had a monopoly on communications in America, and just before the election of 1876, the company did its best to assure that only positive news stories about Hayes appeared in newspapers nationwide. It also shared all the telegrams sent by his opponent’s campaign staff with Hayes’s staff. Perhaps the most effective way to wield political influence in today’s high-tech world is to donate money to a candidate and then to use technology to make sure he or she wins. The technology guarantees the win, and the donation guarantees allegiance, which Google has certainly tapped in recent years with the Obama administration.

Given Google’s strong ties to Democrats, there is reason to suspect that if Google or its employees intervene to favor their candidates, it will be to adjust the search algorithm to favor Hillary Clinton. In 2012, Google and its top executives donated more than $800,000 to Obama but only $37,000 to Romney. At least six top tech officials in the Obama administration, including Megan Smith, the country’s chief technology officer, are former Google employees. According to a recent report by the Wall Street Journal, since Obama took office, Google representatives have visited the White House ten times as frequently as representatives from comparable companies—one a week, on average.

Hillary Clinton clearly has Google’s support and is well aware of Google’s value in elections. In April of this year, she hired a top Google executive, Stephanie Hannon, to serve as her chief technology officer. I don’t have any reason to suspect Hannon would use her old connections to aid her candidate, but the fact that she—or any other individual with sufficient clout at Google—has the power to decide elections threatens to undermine the legitimacy of our electoral system, particularly in close elections. This is, in any case, the most implausible scenario. What company would risk the public outrage and corporate punishment that would follow from being caught manipulating an election?

Second, there is the Marius Milner Scenario: A rogue employee at Google who has sufficient password authority or hacking skills makes a few tweaks in the rankings (perhaps after receiving a text message from some old friend who now works on a campaign), and the deed is done. In 2010, when Google got caught sweeping up personal information from unprotected Wi-Fi networks in more than 30 countries using its Street View vehicles, the entire operation was blamed on one Google employee: software engineer Marius Milner. So they fired him, right? Nope. He’s still there, and on LinkedIn he currently identifies his profession as “hacker.” If, somehow, you have gotten the impression that at least a few of Google’s 37,000 employees are every bit as smart as Milner and possess a certain mischievousness—well, you are probably right, which is why the rogue employee scenario isn’t as far-fetched as it might seem.

And third—and this is the scariest possibility—there is the Algorithm Scenario: Under this scenario, all of Google’s employees are innocent little lambs, but the software is evil. Google’s search algorithm is pushing one candidate to the top of the rankings because of what the company coyly dismisses as “organic” search activity by users; it’s harmless, you see, because it’s all natural. Under this scenario, a computer program is picking our elected officials.

To put this another way, our research suggests that no matter how innocent or disinterested Google’s employees may be, Google’s search algorithm, propelled by user activity, has been determining the outcomes of close elections worldwide for years, with increasing impact every year because of increasing Internet penetration.

SEME is powerful precisely because Google is so good at what it does; its search results are generally superb. Having learned that fact over time, we have come to trust those results to a high degree. We have also learned that higher rankings mean better material, which is why 50 percent of our clicks go to the first two items, with more
than 90 percent of all clicks going to that precious first search page. Unfortunately, when it comes to elections, that extreme trust we have developed makes us vulnerable to manipulation.

In the final days of a campaign, fortunes are spent on media blitzes directed at a handful of counties where swing voters will determine the winners in the all-important swing states. What a waste of resources! The right person at Google could influence those key voters more than any stump speech could; there is no cheaper, more efficient or subterfuge way to turn swing voters than SEME. SEME also has one eerie advantage over billboards: when people are unaware of a source of influence, they believe they weren’t being influenced at all; they believe they made up their own minds.

Republicans, take note: A manipulation on Hillary Clinton’s behalf would be particularly easy for Google to carry out, because of all the demographic groups we have looked at so far, no group has been more vulnerable to SEME—in other words, so blindly trusting of search rankings—than moderate Republicans. In a national experiment we conducted in the United States, we were able to shift a whopping 80 percent of moderate Republicans in any direction we chose just by varying search rankings.

There are many ways to influence voters—more ways than ever these days, thanks to cable television, mobile devices and the Internet. Why be so afraid of Google’s search engine? If rankings are so influential, won’t all the candidates be using the latest SEO techniques to make sure they rank high?

SEO is competitive, as are billboards and TV commercials. No problem there. The problem is that for all practical purposes, there is just one search engine. More than 75 percent of online search in the United States is conducted on Google, and in most other countries that proportion is 90 percent. That means that if Google’s CEO, a rogue employee or even just the search algorithm itself favors one candidate, there is no way to counteract that influence. It would be as if Fox News were the only television channel in the country. As Internet penetration grows and more people get their information about candidates online, SEME will become an increasingly powerful form of influence, which means that the programmers and executives who control search engines will also become more powerful.

Worse still, our research shows that even when people do notice they are seeing biased search rankings, their voting preferences still shift in the desired directions—even more than the preferences of people who are oblivious to the bias. In our national study in the United States, 36 percent of people who were unaware of the rankings bias shifted toward the candidate we chose for them, but 45 percent of those who were aware of the bias also shifted. It’s as if the bias was serving as a form of social proof; the search engine clearly prefers one candidate, so that candidate must be the best. (Search results are supposed to be biased, after all; they’re supposed to show us what’s best, second best, and so on.)

Biased rankings are hard for individuals to detect, but what about regulators or election watchdogs? Unfortunately, SEME is easy to hide. The best way to wield this type of influence is to do what Google is becoming better at doing every day: send out customized search results. If search results favoring one candidate were sent only to vulnerable individuals, regulators and watchdogs would be especially hard pressed to find them.

For the record, by the way, our experiments meet the gold standards of research in the behavioral sciences: They are randomized (which means people are randomly assigned to different groups), controlled (which means they include groups in which interventions are either present or absent), counterbalanced (which means critical details, such as names, are presented to half the participants in one order and to half in the opposite order) and double-blind (which means that neither the subjects nor anyone who interacts with them has any idea what the hypotheses are or what groups people are assigned to). Our subject pools are diverse, matched as closely as possible to characteristics of a country’s electorate. Finally, our recent report in PNAS included four replications; in other words, we showed repeatedly—under different conditions and with different groups—that SEME is real.

Our newest research on SEME, conducted with nearly 4,000 people just before the national elections in the UK this past spring, is looking at ways we might be able to protect people from the manipulation. We found the monster; now we’re trying to figure out how to kill it. What we have learned so far is that the only way to protect people
from biased search rankings is to break the trust Google has worked so hard to build. When we deliberately mix rankings up, or when we display various kinds of alerts that identify bias, we can suppress SEME to some extent.

It’s hard to imagine Google ever degrading its product and undermining its credibility in such ways, however. To protect the free and fair election, that might leave only one option, as unpalatable as it might seem: government regulation.

FRANKFURT — Not long ago the Internet was seen as a clear-cut force for democracy, a way to disrupt state media monopolies and an enabler for citizen uprisings like the Arab Spring. But in the established democracies of Europe the mood has shifted. The Internet is increasingly seen as a threat to freedom and democracy, a way for governments and companies to spy on citizens or manipulate their behavior.

What people in places like China or Myanmar see as a venue for free speech has become, for many privacy-conscious Europeans, a potential tool of repression.

In a poll commissioned by the European Commission and published in June, 81 percent of respondents said they had only partial or no control over the information they provide online. Only about half trusted European institutions to protect their personal information, and only about a fifth of those surveyed said they trusted online businesses.

Growing European ambivalence about the online world, and the tension between free speech and privacy, has political consequences. It comes amid a debate about changes to European Union data protection rules, which are getting their first overhaul since 1995.

Some citizen groups are pushing for more privacy safeguards, which could lead to tougher restrictions on what kind of information companies can collect online and how they use it. Businesses fear the unexpectedly strong opposition could undercut attempts to harmonize regulations that govern the Internet, which they say is needed to make Europe more hospitable to digital start-ups.

“The Internet is positive for democracy,” said Maryant Fernández Pérez, an advocacy manager for European Digital Rights, a political action group based in Brussels. But, she added, “The negative part is that it creates threats to fundamental rights.” She said that proposed European Union rules did not do enough to protect personal privacy.

Qualms about privacy have not prevented Europeans from using the Internet. A survey last year for the European Commission found that 78 percent of respondents had gone online in the previous three months. In the United States, the comparable figure is 87 percent. In Denmark and some other Scandinavian countries, Internet usage is higher than in the United States. The European Union average was pulled down by poor member countries like Bulgaria and Romania, where only a little more than half of those surveyed had been online recently.

European views toward the Internet probably started turning negative in 2013 after Edward J. Snowden, a former contractor for the National Security Agency in the United States, disclosed documents that showed widespread surveillance of electronic communications.

In addition, the inspirational images of the Arab Spring, with activists using Facebook and Twitter to spread democracy in Egypt or Tunisia, have been overshadowed by sinister uses of the Internet by radical groups like ISIS, which posts videos of beheadings and other atrocities in Iraq and Syria.

“People are taking privacy more and more seriously and see it as more of a concern than a few years ago,” said Bart-Jan van Dijk, vice president at EuroISPA, an industry group that represents European Internet service providers.
He attributed the increased concern to not only the Snowden revelations but also to the growth of social media, and the degree to which people are sharing photos and other aspects of their lives online. "The mere fact that people share more and more personal information on the Internet made them more aware," he said.

As a result, attempts to rewrite European data protection rules — which are stricter than those in the United States — have run into more opposition than expected. While privacy is a big issue in the United States and other places where Internet usage is strong, Europeans may be especially sensitive. The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights guarantees that "everyone has the right to the protection of personal data concerning him or her."

In April, 66 advocacy groups from Europe and other regions wrote a letter to Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, accusing the commission of breaking a promise that the new standards would not be less stringent than the 1995 standards. In July, an aide to Mr. Juncker replied with assurances that the commission would honor its earlier commitments.

Business groups fear that citizen opposition will undermine attempts to unify European data protection rules. Fragmented national regulations make it more difficult for companies to operate in multiple countries and may be one of the reasons Europe has never been able to rival Silicon Valley in its ability to spawn digital start-ups or technology giants.

The European Commission estimates that harmonizing rules on data protection and eliminating red tape would save businesses 2.3 billion euros a year, or $2.6 billion.

European views of the Internet could turn positive again if citizens see it can be used as a tool to promote democracy.

In Finland, one of the most technology-savvy countries in the world, an online platform known as Open Ministry lets citizen groups propose legislation to Parliament. The platform takes advantage of a 2012 law that gives citizen proposals the same status as legislation introduced by a member of Parliament, provided backers have collected at least 50,000 signatures (which can be digital signatures) within six months.

“Normally citizens are complaining about everything,” said Joonas Pekkanen, a founder of Open Ministry. "Finally there is a way to not only complain but also do something. That is much more constructive.”

The Open Ministry played an important role in legislation that last year legalized same-sex marriage in Finland. Now Mr. Pekkanen is working on other ways of increasing citizen participation in government.

The relationship between democracy and the Internet is “a work in progress,” said Anthony Zacharzewski, director of The Democratic Society, an organization in Brighton, Britain, that is also working on ways to connect citizens and government digitally.

“There is a lot of suspicion of governments and a lot of suspicion of governments using the Internet,” he said.

People would see the Internet as a force for democracy, Mr. Zacharzewski said, if there were better ways for them to take part in decision-making. For that reason, he said, the platforms that connect citizens to government must be neutral and nonpartisan.

“Governments on their own can’t make this work. You need open institutions in that middle space who can hold the ring in a fair way,” Mr. Zacharzewski said. “The trust issue is huge.”