



UC Berkeley School of Information

# Political Information in the Online World

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**Concepts of Information i218**  
**Geoff Nunberg**

**March 16, 2010**



# Agenda

Information in democratic societies

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century background

The Lippmann-Dewey debate

The rational voter

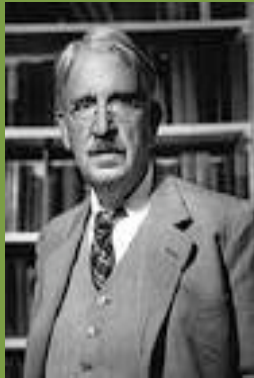
Political symbols now

Political information in the digital future?



## Public and private

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Signs and symbols, language, are the means of communication by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained. But conversation has a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech. ... Ideas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloquy... Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth. That and only that gives reality to public opinion." John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 1927

I.e., conversation as filter or interpretive device



# Public and private in the modern world

Political speech as popular entertainment/ Source of solidarity

In the electronic world: "eye" and "ear" merge.

Cf talk radio



# Claims about online political discourse

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## **The internet**

Broadens access to information

Broadens the opportunity to speak.

Increases the number of information sources, bypassing media "gatekeepers" or official censors.

Offers information about a wider range of topics, and more information and opinion on any given topic.

Provides more reliable ways of checking or interpreting information, and gives citizens more opportunity to verify information



# Claims about online political discourse

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## **The internet**

Restricts the exchange of information and opinion to a more closed, like-minded group (silo effect)

Exposes people to more information that is misleading, inaccurate, extreme, inflammatory, etc.;

Eliminates the guidance that the traditional media provided.

Widens the divisions between the informed and ill-informed sectors of the public.



# Winner take all... except

Why is porn an exception to winner-take-all?

## Distribution of User Volume Among Sites

	<u>% of Sites</u>	<u>% of traffic</u>
	<u>All Sites</u>	<u>Porn Sites</u>
.01	32.36	1.4
1	55.63	15.83
5	74.81	41.75
10	82.26	59.29
50	94.92	90.76

*source: Adamic & Huberman, 2000*



# Ruptured Discourses

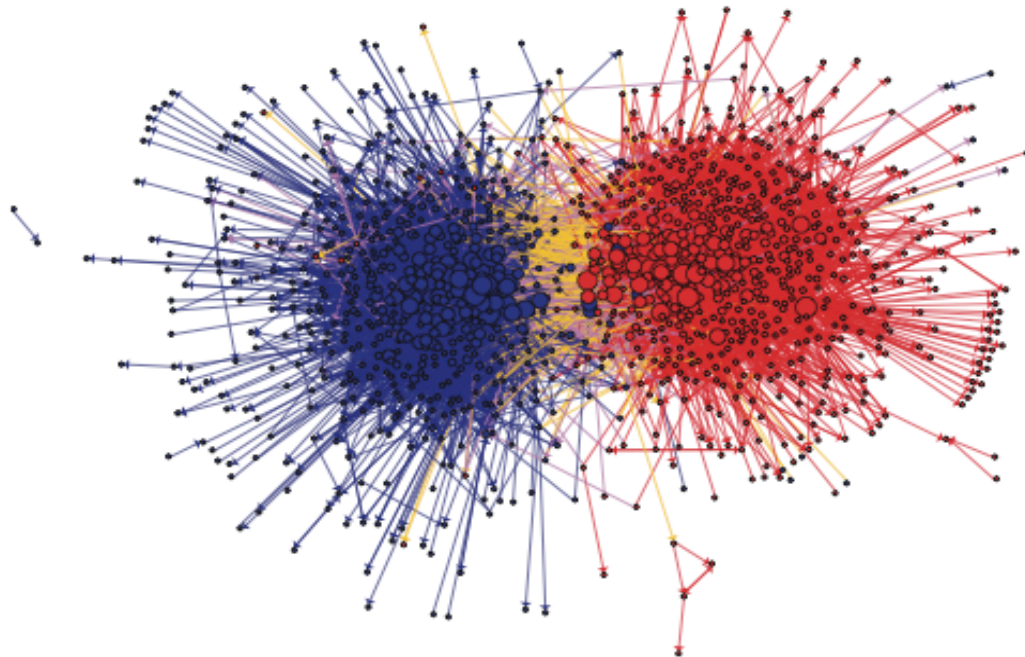


Figure 1: Community structure of political blogs (expanded set), shown using utilizing a GEM layout [11] in the GUESS[3] visualization and analysis tool. The colors reflect political orientation, red for conservative, and blue for liberal. Orange links go from liberal to conservative, and purple ones from conservative to liberal. The size of each blog reflects the number of other blogs that link to it.

Lada Adamic & Nathalie Glance, 2005, "Divided They Blog"





# Ruptured Discourses

**Table 3.2**  
**Links to Allies and Adversaries, 2006**

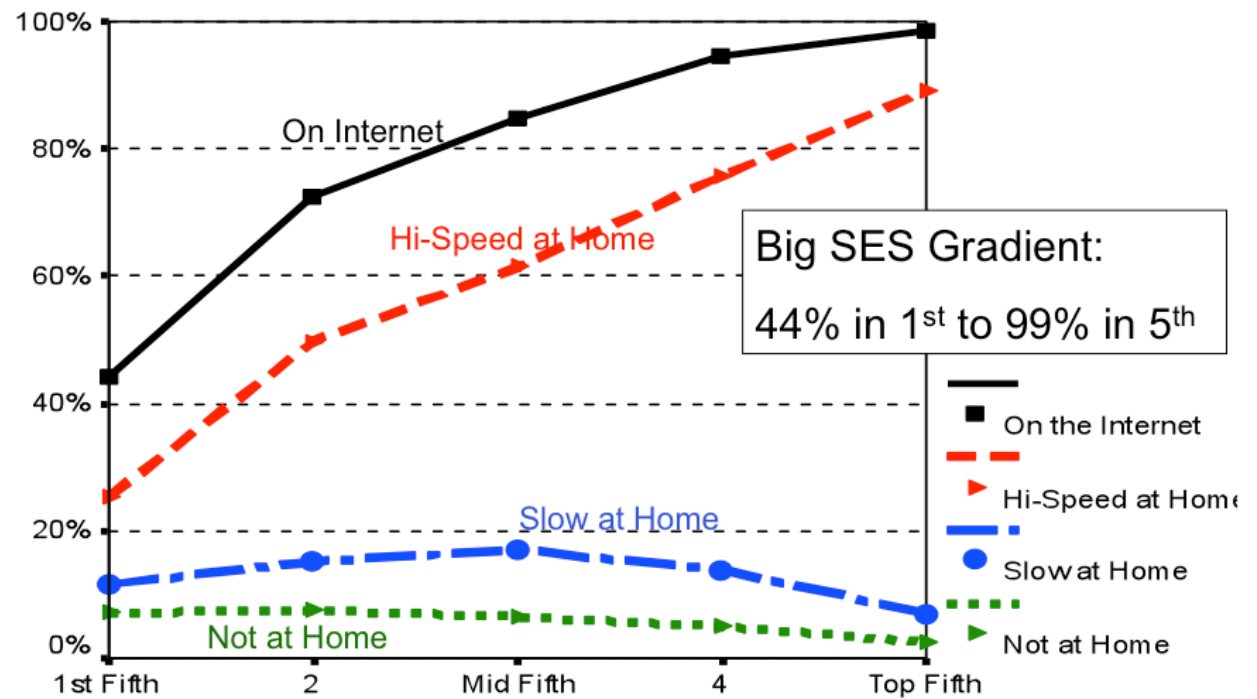
<i>Political orientation</i>	<i>Links to opposition</i>	<i>No links to opposition</i>	<i>Links to like-minded sites</i>	<i>No links to like-minded sites</i>	<i>Total sites</i>
Republican	3	7	7	3	10
Democrats	5	5	5	5	10
Conservative	3	13	16	0	14
Liberal	6	8	13	1	14
All	17	32	41	9	50

From Cass Sunstein, Republic.com 2.0



# Political Participation Online

Percent on Internet and by Connection Type  
by Socio-Economic Level

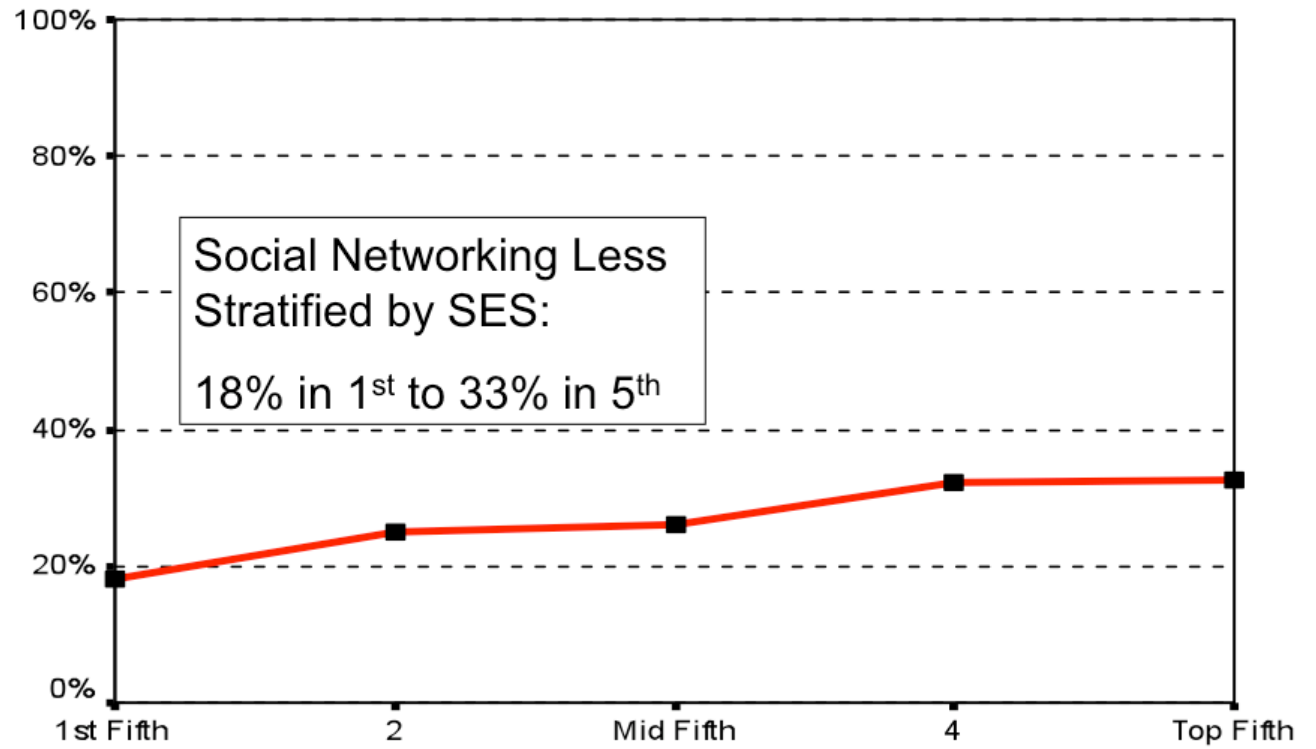


Courtesy of Henry Brady



# Political Participation Online

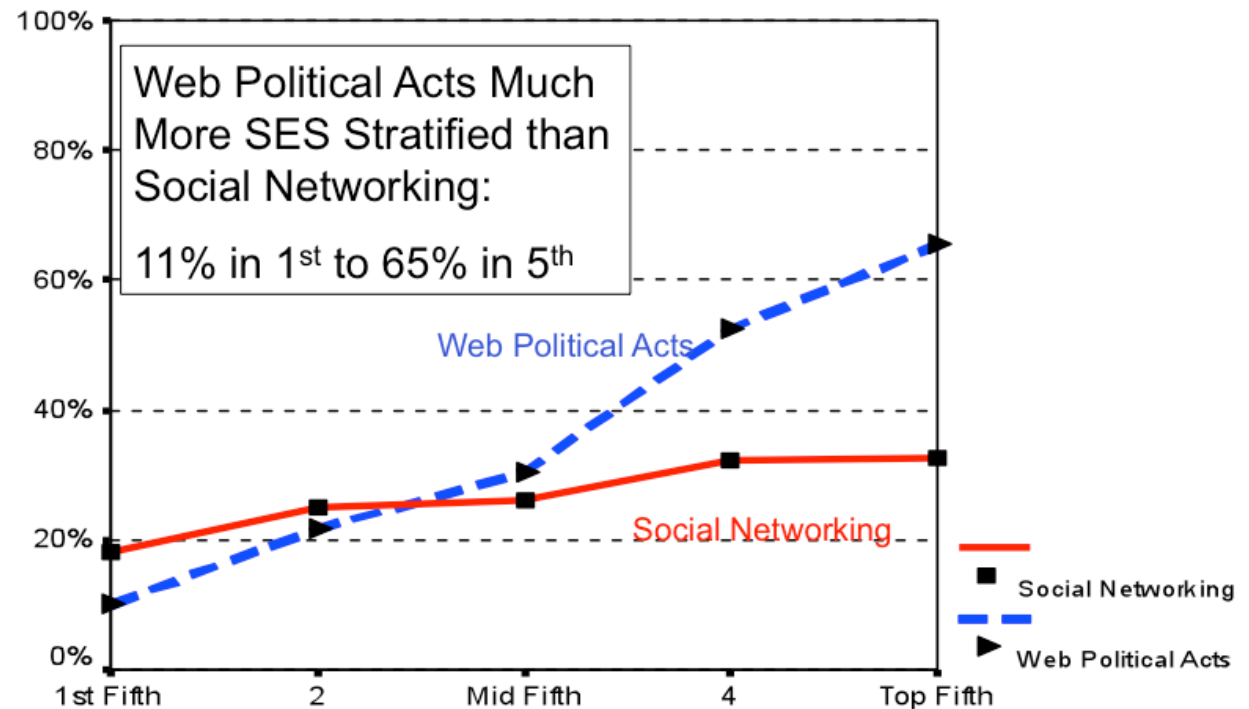
Percent Using Social Networking Sites  
by Socio-Economic Level





# Political Participation Online

Percent Web Political Acts and Social Networking  
by Socio-Economic Level





# **Polarization of Political Discourse**

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# Polarization of Political Discourse

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Polarization of political language on the Internet mirrors polarization of elite/activist views and the increasing importance of elective associations (geographical, occupational)



# Ruptured Discourses

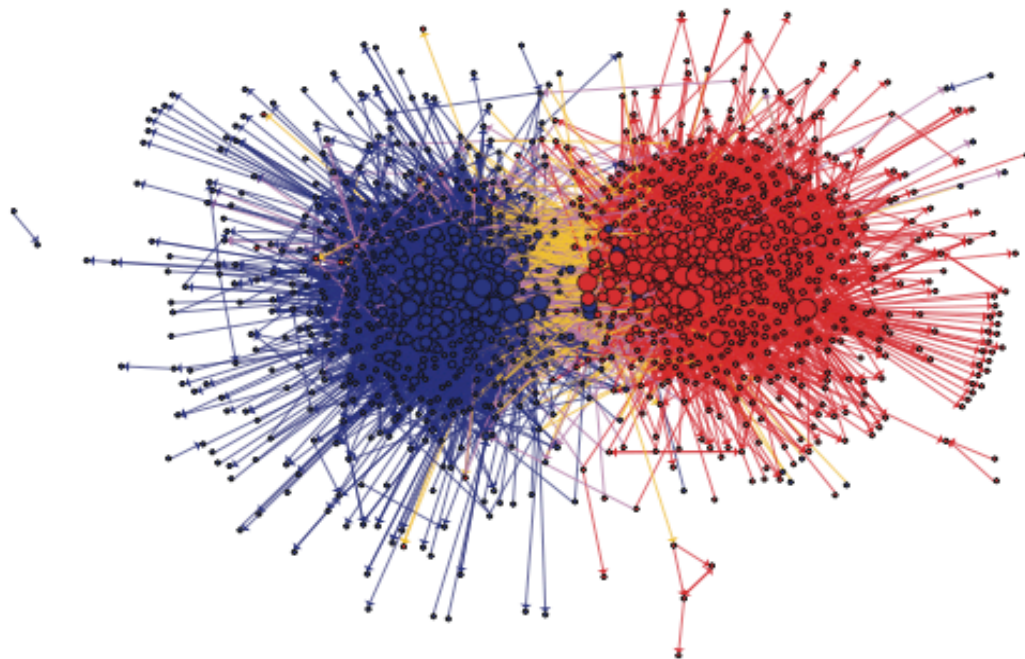


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Lada Adamic & Nathalie Glance, 2005, "Divided They Blog"



# But traffic is slightly less polarized

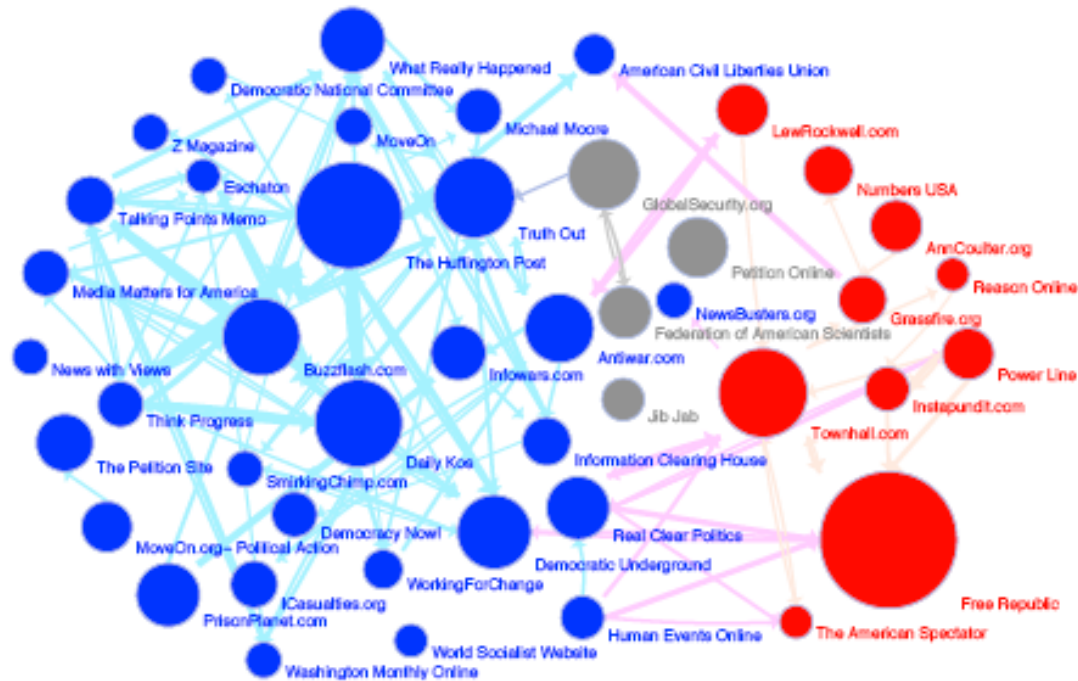


Figure 4.4: This figure maps traffic among the top 50 political Websites, as of May 2006. Liberal- or Democratic leaning sites are in blue; conservative- or Republican-leaning sites are in red. Self-declared neutral or nonpartisan sites are in gray.





## Distribution by age

Rank	Blog	18-34	35-44	45-54	55+
1.	DailyKos.com	34%	13%	29%	24%
2.	Instapundit	29%	22%	20%	29%
3.	Eschaton (Atrios)	26%	29%	31%	14%
4.	Michelle Malkin	19%	29%	19%	33%
5.	Crooks and liars	29%	16%	30%	26%
6.	Little Green Footballs	26%	22%	20%	32%
7.	Powerline	21%	16%	24%	40%
8.	RedState.org	29%	26%	26%	20%
9.	Wonkette	28%	19%	41%	12%
10.	Andrew Sullivan	31%	34%	12%	13%
11.	Kevin Drum	22%	24%	23%	30%
12.	Hugh Hewitt	31%	23%	25%	21%
	Average	27%	23%	25%	25%

Table 6.2: The table presents Hitwise data on the age of visitors to prominent political blogs, as of October 2005. Because of rounding, each row may not add up to exactly 100 percent. The central finding here is that blogger readership is not just limited to the young. On average, half of the readership to these blogs comes from those 45 and older.



## Distribution by sex

Rank	Blog	Male readership (%)
1.	<i>DailyKos.com</i>	47%
2.	Instapundit	59 %
3.	<i>Eschaton (Atrios)</i>	52%
4.	Michelle Malkin	57 %
5.	<i>Crooks and liars</i>	32%
6.	Little Green Footballs	89%
7.	Powerline	74%
8.	RedState.org	68%
9.	<i>Wonkette</i>	46%
10.	Andrew Sullivan	53%
11.	<i>Kevin Drum</i>	55%
12.	Hugh Hewitt	80%

Table 6.1: This table presents Hitwise data on the a gender of blog visitors for a set of top political Weblogs for October, 2005. Liberal bloggers are in italics. Though we would expect that conservative blogs would have higher male readership, the extent of the disparity is surprising.



# A Racist Hoax

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- THE FRANKLIN PROPHECY  
Recorded by Charles Coteworth Pinckney  
Delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787

"I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and impenetration. The menace, gentlemen, is the Jews.

"In whatever country Jews have settled in any great number; they have lowered its moral tone; depreciated its commercial integrity; have segregated themselves and have not been assimilated; have sneered at and tried to undermine the Christian religion upon which that nation is founded, by objecting to its restrictions; have built up a state within the state; and when opposed have tried to strangle that country to death financially, as in the case of Spain and Portugal.

"For over 1,700 years, the Jews have been bewailing their sad fate in that they have been exiled from their homeland, as they call Palestine. But gentlemen, did the world give it to them in fee simple, they would at once find some reason for not returning. Why? Because they are vampires, and vampires do not live on vampires. They cannot live only among themselves. They must subsist on Christians and other people not of their race. If you do not exclude them from these United States, in their Constitution, in less than 200 years they will have swarmed here in such great numbers that they will dominate and devour the land and change our form of government...



# Pervasiveness of Racist Speech

Google Web Images Groups News Froogle more »  
"benjamin franklin" jews menace Search Advanced Search Preferences

Web Results 1 - 100 of about 663 for "benjamin franklin" jews menace (0.93)

[Jew Watch - References - Gentile Observations of Jews - Benjamin ...](#)  
... Jews are Asiatics, are a **menace** to this country if permitted entrance, and should be excluded by this Constitutional Convention." - **Benjamin Franklin**, 1787, at ...  
[www.jewwatch.com/jew-references-gentile-benjamin-franklin.html](http://www.jewwatch.com/jew-references-gentile-benjamin-franklin.html) - 6k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Who Runs USA today? Palestinians won't get their independence ...](#)  
... Jews are Asiatics, are a **menace** to this country if permitted entrance, and should be excluded by this Constitutional Convention." **Benjamin Franklin**. ...  
[www.radioislam.net/islam/english/toread/franklin.htm](http://www.radioislam.net/islam/english/toread/franklin.htm) - 95k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[What Washington & Franklins said about Jews](#)  
... Jews are Asiatics, are a **menace** to this country if permitted entrance, and should be excluded by this Constitutional Convention." - **Benjamin Franklin**. ...  
[www.missionislam.com/nwo/usarulerslist.htm](http://www.missionislam.com/nwo/usarulerslist.htm) - 51k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Quotes from the Illuminate](#)  
... Rothschild family and brought to North America by **Benjamin Franklin** and Alexander ...  
"The real **menace** of our ... in the British War Cabinet, assured the **Jews** of the ...  
[www.missionislam.com/nwo/illuminati.htm](http://www.missionislam.com/nwo/illuminati.htm) - 66k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Fourwinds10.com - News - History > Zionism - What Would The ...](#)  
... Jews are Asiatics, are a **menace** to this country if permitted entrance, and should be excluded by this Constitutional Convention." **Benjamin Franklin**. ...  
[www.fourwinds10.com/.../C-zionism/2004/07C-04-23-04-what-would-founding-fathers-say-about-bombing-iraq.html](http://www.fourwinds10.com/.../C-zionism/2004/07C-04-23-04-what-would-founding-fathers-say-about-bombing-iraq.html) - 12k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[WHAT THEY SAID](#)  
... Jews are Asiatics, are a **menace** to this country if permitted entrance, and should be excluded by this Constitutional Convention." **Benjamin Franklin** RESPONSE (1 ...  
[www.geocities.com/Athens/Cyprus/8815/what\\_they\\_said.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Cyprus/8815/what_they_said.html) - 24k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[If Jews Are Really Persecuted - Why?](#)  
... published his diary in which he said: "Dr. **Benjamin Franklin**, a venerable ... "This greater **menace**, gentlemen, is the Jew! "In whatever country **Jews** have settled ...  
[www.scripuresforamerica.org/html2/jm0015.htm](http://www.scripuresforamerica.org/html2/jm0015.htm) - 22k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Satan's Kids! And the German Connection! - Part 2 of 4](#)  
... with an impression so deep that it is not effaced." From Albert Smythe's "WRITINGS OF **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**", New York ... **Jews** are Asiatics, are a **menace** to this ...  
[www.scripuresforamerica.org/html2/jm0100b.htm](http://www.scripuresforamerica.org/html2/jm0100b.htm) - 62k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)  
[ [More results from www.scripuresforamerica.org](#) ]

[Were America's founding fathers anti-Semites?](#)  
... **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**: I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious ... The **menace**, gentlemen, is the **Jews**. ...  
[adlusa.com/fathers.htm](http://adlusa.com/fathers.htm) - 5k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Why are Jews persecuted for their religion?](#)



## Racism on the Web

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“Prophecy” was probably concocted by William Dudley Pelley, American Nazi, in the early 1930’s. First appeared on Feb. 3, 1934 in *Liberation*, weekly journal published in Asheville, NC

“I cannot find a single original source that gives the slightest justification for believing that the Prophecy is anything more than a barefaced forgery. Not a word have I discovered in Franklin’s letters and papers expressing any such sentiments against the Jews as are ascribed to him by the Nazis — American and German.” Charles Beard, *NY Times*, March 10, 1937.



# **Polarization of Political Language**

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# Polarized Language

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Lexical Choice:

Policy-related:

*undocumented vs. illegal, estate tax vs death tax,  
personal accounts vs private accounts etc.*

*homosexual v. gay*



# Polarized Language

Lexical Choice:

Policy-related:

*undocumented vs. illegal, estate tax vs death tax,  
personal accounts vs private accounts etc.*

*homosexual v. gay*

Question: Do you favor or oppose \_\_\_ serving in the military?

	"Homosexuals"	"Gay Men & Lesbians"
Strongly Favor	34%	51%
Somewhat Favor	25%	19%
Somewhat Oppose	10%	7%
Strongly Oppose	19%	12%

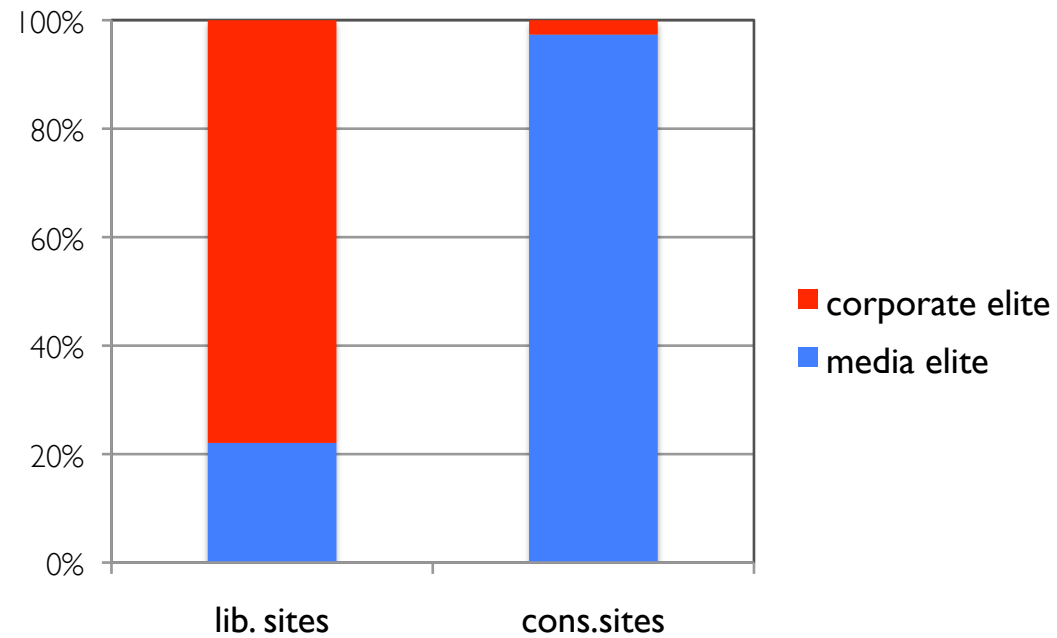




# Polarized Language

Lexical Choice:

Ideological: contested concepts



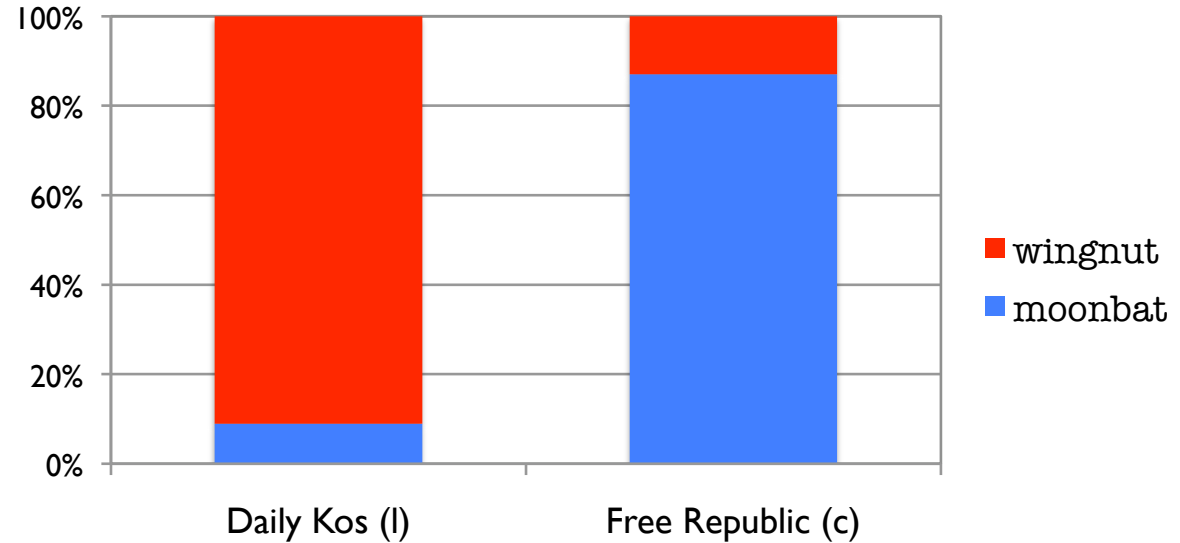


# Polarized Language

Lexical Choice:

"Stylistic":

cf frequency of political epithets





# Polarized Language

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Constructional (tonal) differences:

Ratio of "you liberals" to "you conservatives" in Google Groups: 3 to 1

Ratio of "we liberals" to "we conservatives" in Google Groups: 5 to 4

Rel. frequency of polysyndeton (repeated serial conjunctions) among conservative writers vs liberal writers\*: 5 to 1

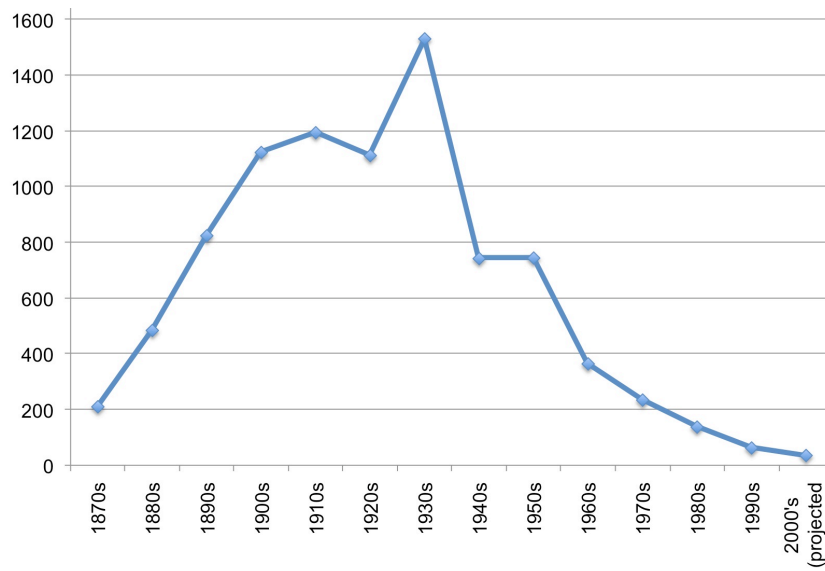
E.g... *love and commitment and sacrifice and a willingness to share responsibility and not walking away from one's children.*  
Wm. Bennett

.... *a place full of religious feeling and cultural energy and Bible study and garage bands and sports-love and mom-love and sophistication and normality.* Peggy Noonan

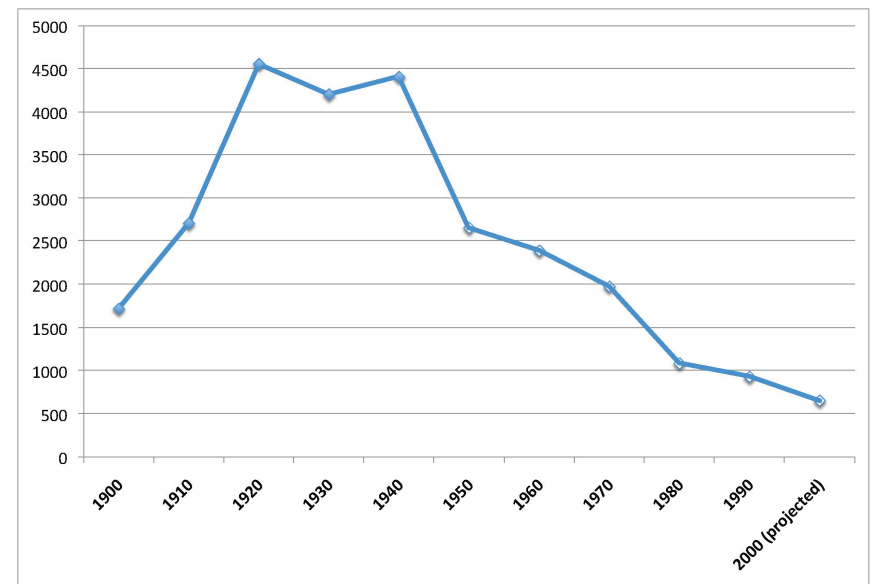
\*townhall.com & nationalreview.com vs thenation.com & prospect.org



# "Hearth Languages" of Right and Left



Frequency of *socialistic* in New York Times articles, by decade: 1870-2000



Frequency of *reactionary* in New York Times articles, by decade: 1870-2000



## A Presumption of Confederacy

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Contrast form of address of network broadcast...

"Up next, protecting yourself from Internet scams."

"What's Arnold really like? See for yourself."

... with talk radio

"And now that -- that -- my friends, is the point of this."

"You Dittoheads out there..."

"Some of you may say...:

Blog pronouns – ("what do you mean, 'we'??")



## The Rise(?) of Incivility

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So where did all the civility go?... I keep coming back to my long-standing hunch that it all began to go bad around 1965. That was the year that America, suddenly, became postmodern. Many venerable American traditions -- some wonderful, some horrible -- all vanished at the same time.

Stephen Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*



# The Rise(?) of Incivility

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## Technological explanations

What "flamers" have in common with the digit-wagging driver, with the talk-show callers, is not just their aerobic exercise of the "freedom of speech" - a freedom that leaves even this First Amendment junkie grimacing. They belong, rather, to the growing uncommunity of people who now act with the protection of anonymity. Ellen Goodman 1996

The guy is obviously an idiot, and I might write that down as a comment. Aha, there is the problem. Long ago it actually took effort to do that. Now you click "comment" and type your response before you even realize that you are the idiot for letting the review get to you. John Dvorak, 2007



# The Rise(?) of Incivility

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## Technological explanations

...because email is such a casual means of communication, it privileges those who prize informality. What happened to "Dear Sir", "Yours faithfully" and the bracing pleasures of a firm handshake? I ask. They died, you reply, but nobody bothered to tell you, granddad. Stuart Jeffries, *The Guardian*

...maybe banging out an e-mail is just so easy, compared with all the necessary elements of writing a letter, that the id can send out a half-dozen e-mails before the superego can stop it. Michael Kinsley





# The Rise(?) of Incivility

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Perception effects:

Misspellings of *accommodate*:

Nexis papers: 1.2%

.edu sites: 1.9%

.gov sites 11%

Google groups 62%

Is discourse really more uncivil, or is perception owing to increased participation, porosity of boundaries, etc.?



## The rise of "civility"

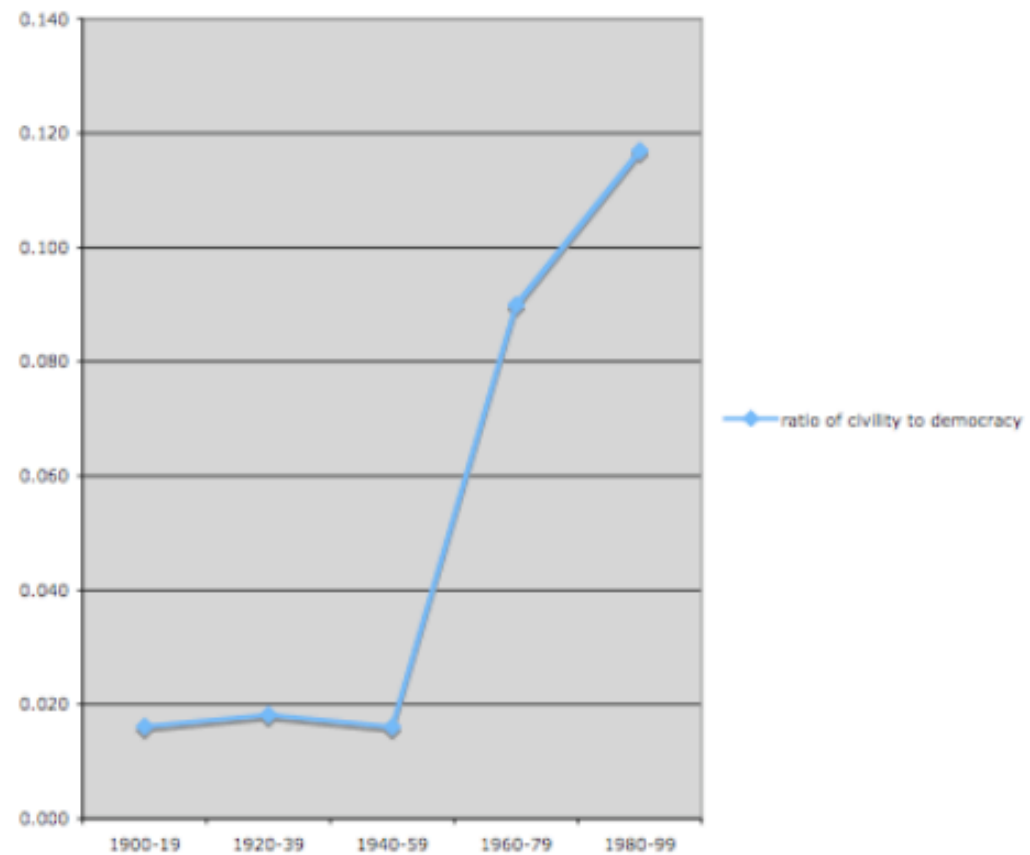
Frequency of *civility/incivility*:

	<u>NYT articles</u>	<u>NYT editorials</u>	<u>WSJ editorials</u>
1940s:	44	0	0
1950s:	59	0	0
1960s:	179	16	7
1970s:	473	25	26
1980s:	845	60	15
1990s:	1581	137	24



# The rise of "civility"

ratio of civility to democracy in JSTOR philosophy journals





## Discussion topics

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Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, Ch. 2 (Google Book)

Matthew Scott Hindman, *Voice, Equality, and the*

I

nternet (version of *The myth of Digital Democracy*) Ch 3 & 4