



# Is there a digital public sphere?

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**Concepts of Information I03**

**Geoff Nunberg**

**April 7, 2017**



## Defining "the Public"

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To say that a public exists is mainly to say that there is more or less open, self-organized communication among strangers... the idea of the public sphere [focuses] not simply on the general existence of public communication, but on its capacity to guide social life. Calhoun

Most generally put, the public sphere is the site and subject of liberal democratic practice. It is that space within which people deliberate over matters of common concern, matters that are contested and about which it seems necessary to reach a consensus. Dean...



## Defining "the Public"

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### **public, n.**

Am. Her: *The community or the people as a whole.* **2.** A group of people sharing a common interest: *the reading public.*

OED: The community as an aggregate, but not in its organized capacity

Ratio of occurrence in major newspapers:

<i>the American people/public</i>	4 to 1
<i>the Egyptian people/public</i>	80 to 1

Goog Scholar hits for *the nineteenth-century public*: 2240; *the medieval public* 285

The reading public vs. the stamp-collecting public



## Emergence of the Public

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"A tribunal has arisen independent of all powers and that all powers respect, that appreciates all talents, that appreciates all talents, that pronounces on all people of merit. And in an enlightened century, in a century in which *each citizen can speak to the entire nation by way of print*, ... men of letters are, amid the public dispersed, what the orators of Rome and Athens were in the middle of the public assembled."

Guillaume-Christien de Malesherbes 1775 (italics – GN)



# Features of the Public Sphere

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## General Access

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“Access is guaranteed to all citizens.” Habermas

"Lackeys, stable lads, odd-job men, gardeners and porters sit together and chatter about the news in the public prints... So they often think themselves better than the town mayor because they think they know a lot more than he does about every matter of state...." —Steiler, The Pleasure and Utility of Newspapers, 1695



## “No respect of persons”

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"Rank and privilege" in theory set aside, and discourse becomes ostensibly impersonal:

"...when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances." David Hume, 1757

Now being entered, there's no needing  
Of compliments or gentle breeding,  
For you may seat you any where,  
There's no respect of persons there.

*A Character of Coffee and Coffee-Houses*, 1661

Cf modern sport-talk radio...





## Discourse is “free”



Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, when the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions about matters of general interest. Habermas

There is an incredible degree of liberty in these places [coffeehouses] where not only the generals and ministers but even the emperor is torn to shreds" Visitor to Vienna, 1706

Men condemn, approve, revile, rail with bitter invectives both in speech and in writing without the authorities daring to intervene. The King himself is not secure from censure. Abbe Prévost, 1729, in London





## Discourse is “rational-critical”

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...a realm of private individuals, assembled into a public body who as as citizens transmit the needs of bourgeois society to the state, in order, ideally, to transform political into "rational" authority within the medium of this public sphere. The general interest, which was the measure of such a rationality, was then guaranteed... Habermas

“...it was political but not part of the state.” Calhoun

“rational-critical discourse” subject to common norms



## Reservations about the historical concept of the public sphere

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Access closed to certain groups (women, subalterns, etc.)

“Public-private” distinction itself gendered; implies male hegemony, replacing repression (Nancy Fraser);  
counterpublics

Discourse was not deliberative but antagonistic

Discourse was not efficacious in influencing state action  
("strong" and "weak" public spheres).



# The Internet as a Public Space

"internet as a public sphere"

About 533,000 results (0.40 seconds)

[The virtual sphere](#)  
nms.sagepub.com/content/4/1/9.abstract  
by Z. Papacharissi - 2002 - Cited by 356 - Related articles  
The virtual sphere. The **Internet as a public sphere**. Zizi Papacharissi. Temple University, Philadelphia, zpapacha[at]temple.edu ...

[IPDF Internet and the Public Sphere](#)  
ejournalst.com.au/v6n2/ubayasin622.pdf  
File Format: PDF/Adobe Acrobat - Quick View  
by K Ubayasin - Cited by 1 - Related articles  
Mar 14, 2007 - ... Jhon Michael. (2003). The **Internet as a public sphere**.  
Available: <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshhtml/media/internet4.htm> l. 1

[democ.htm](#)  
[www.hnet.ucl.edu/mposter/writings/democ.html](http://www.hnet.ucl.edu/mposter/writings/democ.html)  
The **Internet as a Public Sphere**? The issue of the public sphere is at the heart of a reconceptualization of democracy. Contemporary social relations seem to ...

[Habermas, the Internet and the Public Sphere - an essay by Jake ...](#)  
[jakeg.co.uk/essays/habermas](http://jakeg.co.uk/essays/habermas)  
The **Internet as a Public Sphere** - <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshhtml/media/internet4.html>. The Jürgen Habermas Web Resource (Michigan State ...

[The Internet As Public Sphere: Contesting Social Networks](#)  
[www.bgsu.edu/cconline/Dietel/internet.htm](http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/Dietel/internet.htm)  
... large, mainstream news source owned by Time Warner - which, as Habermas and others would surely note, is itself a threat to the **Internet as a public sphere**.

[Mechanisms of an Online Public Sphere: The Website Slashdot](#)  
[jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/poor.html](http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/poor.html)  
by N Poor - Cited by 69 - Related articles  
161-186). New York: State University of New York. Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: The **Internet as a public sphere**. *New Media & Society*, 4 (1), 9-27.

[The Internet as a public sphere: Blogging climate change in a ...](#)  
[uni-hamburg.academia.edu/.../The\\_Internet\\_as\\_a\\_public\\_sphere\\_Blo...](http://uni-hamburg.academia.edu/.../The_Internet_as_a_public_sphere_Blo...)  
New media technologies have brought massive changes in the whole arena of public communication patterns including journalistic works in recent years.

[The internet as a virtual public sphere - Forums online and the ...](#)  
[esoc.academia.edu/.../The\\_internet\\_as\\_a\\_virtual\\_public\\_sphere\\_-\\_Fo...](http://esoc.academia.edu/.../The_internet_as_a_virtual_public_sphere_-_Fo...)  
Papacharissi, Z. (2002). "The virtual sphere: The **Internet as a public sphere**". *New Media and Society*, 4, 1, p. 9-27. Poat, R. (2005). "The internet and political ...

[IPDF New Media & Society](#)

"The new electronic independence recreates the world in the image of a global village." Marshall McLuhan

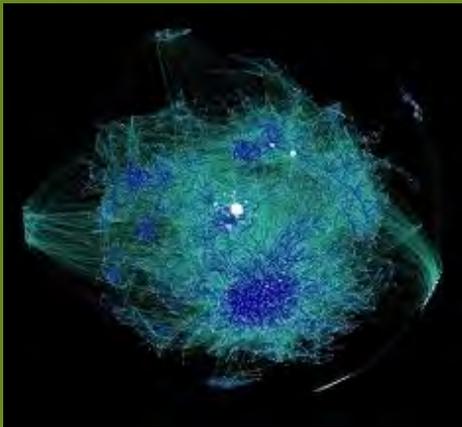
"The power of elites to determine what [is] news via a tightly controlled dissemination system [has been] shattered. The ability and authority to distribute text are now truly democratized" Hugh Hewitt

As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action. Clay Shirkey



## Is the Internet a "Community"?

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Visualization of the  
blogosphere

Cf. James F. Moore (Berkman Center), on "the global consciousness of the second superpower," March 2003:

The Internet and other interactive media continue to penetrate more and more deeply all world society... The collective power of texting, blogging, instant messaging, and email across millions of actors cannot be overestimated. Like a mind constituted of millions of inter-networked neurons, the social movement is capable of astonishingly rapid and sometimes subtle community consciousness and action...



# Claims about online political discourse, I

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## **The internet**

Broadens access to information

Democratizes 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, 2

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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.



## When the digital public sphere seems to work...

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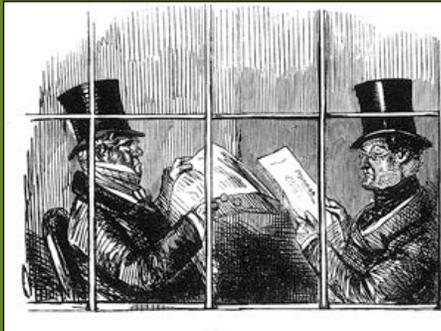
# Polarization of Political Discourse

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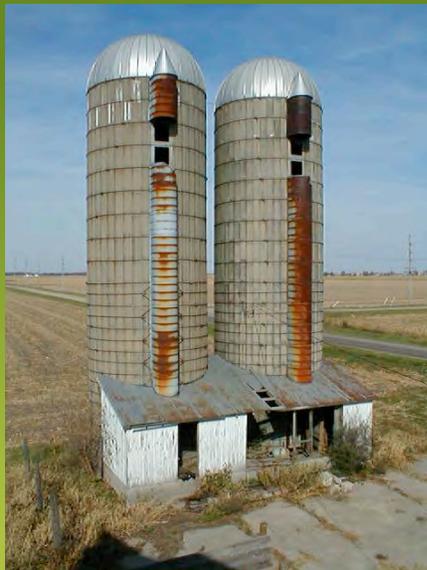


## Polarization and the "Siloing" of Political Discourse

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Online discourse facilitates "siloing" of political discourse...  
But siloing has independent offline roots





# Polarization and the "Siloing" of Political Discourse



Reds talk to reds, blues talk to blues

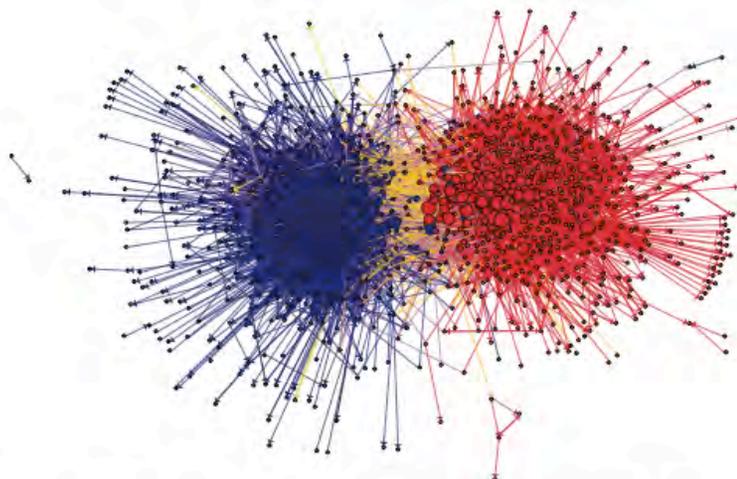


Figure 1: Community structure of political blogs (expanded set), shown using utilizing a GEM layout [11] in the GUESS[3] visualization and analysis tool. The colors reflect political orientation, red for conservative, and blue for liberal. Orange links go from liberal to conservative, and purple ones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

Polarization also evident in topic choice, etc.



## Ruptured Discourses

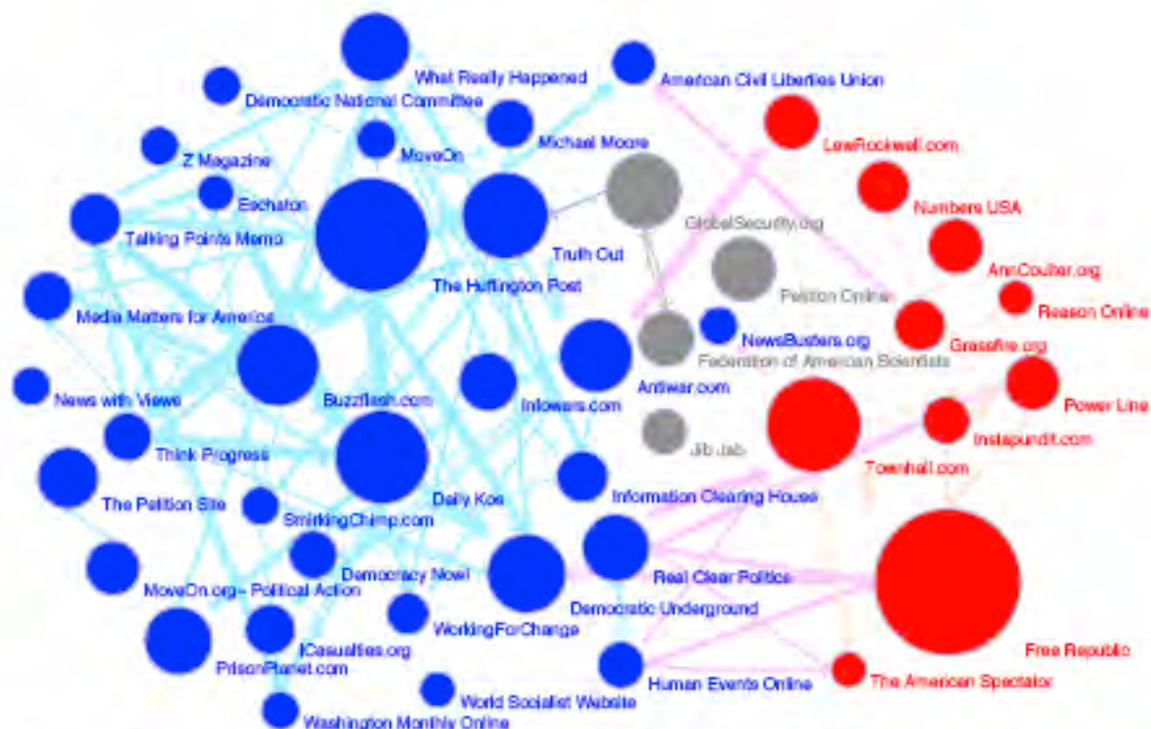


Figure 4.4: This figure maps traffic among the top 50 political Websites, as of May 2006. Liberal- or Democratic leaning sites are in blue; conservative- or Republican-leaning sites are in red. Self-declared neutral or nonpartisan sites are in gray.



## Polarization by gender?

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%

Also, polarization by “authority”: the winner-take-all effect



# Polarization is not symmetrical

Table 2. Mean Usage Patterns by Group

	Democrat	Rep-TP	Tea Party
tweets	551	723	901
tweets per day	2.66	2.97	5.21
retweets	40	52.3	82.6
replies	172.6	260.5	472.7
hashtags	196	404	753
hashtags per tweet	0.37	0.54	0.68

Table 1. Subgraph Density by Group

	Democrat	Rep-TP	Rep+TP	Tea Party
Density	0.007	0.032	0.025	0.020
In-degree	2.55	8.37	8.97	1.82

Density = actual edges/possible edges

Avishay Livne, Matthew P. Simmons, Eytan Adar, Lada A. Adamic, "The Party is Over Here: Structure and Content in the 2010 Election."



# Between private and public

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## Between private and public

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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....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.... That and only that gives reality to public opinion.  
Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*



## Between private and public

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"...private individuals, assembled into a public body..."

Habermas

Stages of publicity between private and public, a variety of actors...

# The variety of actors in the public sphere

Profile summary



**There's no such thing as a child prostitute**

STOP CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING NOW  
ProtectCAKids.org

TWEETS 1,113 FOLLOWING 978 FOLLOWERS 816

**H.E.A.T. Watch**  
@HEATWatch

H.E.A.T. Watch is an anti-human trafficking program of the Alameda County DA's Office. A follow or like is not an endorsement.

Alameda County, California - [heat-watch.org](http://heat-watch.org)

H.E.A.T. Watch @HEATWatch · 14m  
It is only ever the fault of the rapist, never the victim. #SAAM pic.twitter.com/6m3ctn1paY

H.E.A.T. Watch @HEATWatch · 2h  
1 in 5 women in college are the target of attempted or completed sexual assault. #SAAM #topicuesdays #fixourschools #makecollegesafe

H.E.A.T. Watch @HEATWatch · 4h  
Today's #TopicTuesdays is in honor of #SAAM: campus sexual assault. Do you know what TITLE IX is? bit.ly/1yPvxEp

H.E.A.T. Watch @HEATWatch · 20h  
We love Annelise Keating from How to Get Away with Murder



**There's no such thing as a child prostitute**

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TWEETS 1,113 FOLLOWING 978 FOLLOWERS 816 FAVORITES 720 LISTS 3

**H.E.A.T. Watch**  
@HEATWatch

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Alameda County, California | [heat-watch.org](http://heat-watch.org) | Joined November 2011

Zach Perron @zppAPD  
Lieutenant @PaloAltoPolice | Public Affairs Manager | Student @npsCHDS | Former Visiting Fellow @TheACP...

Tesla Motors @TeslaMotors  
Official account of Tesla Motors, maker of the Tesla Roadster, Model S, and the upcoming Model X...

City of San Francisco @sfgov  
City and County of San Francisco Official News (SFGov). For Service requests send a tweet to the City...

Edwin Lee @mzyordlee  
I am honored to serve as the 43rd Mayor of San Francisco - the Innovation Capital of the World!

CalSPAC @calspac  
Junior Leagues of California State Public Affairs Committee (SPAC). We advocate for 10,000...

TheWarOnRape @TheWarOnRape  
UK Organisation campaigning for change within rape culture and law and supporting fellow survivors of Sexual...

TWEETS 1,113 FOLLOWING 978 FOLLOWERS 816 FAVORITES 720 LISTS 3

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Jancockireng @Jancockireng  
Maaf saya sering nyampah, unfollow saya

SFPDCares @SFPDCares  
SFPDCARES, Officers trying to help the community, working one on one with citizens to make positive...

Beyond the Border @BorderNoMore  
This page is dedicated to raising awareness and ending the sexual exploitation of unaccompanied minors...

Nomi Network @nominetwork  
Hi! We create economic opportunities for survivors and women at risk of human trafficking. Won't you join us?

James Brown @jimbrownjourn  
Documentary maker, journalist and travel junkie currently exploring the world's biggest country...

Dr. Stephanie Lang @DrStephanieLang  
Specialist in abuse (domestic violence, sex abuse, etc.) & in happiness. Here I provide tips 4 joyful & mindful living...

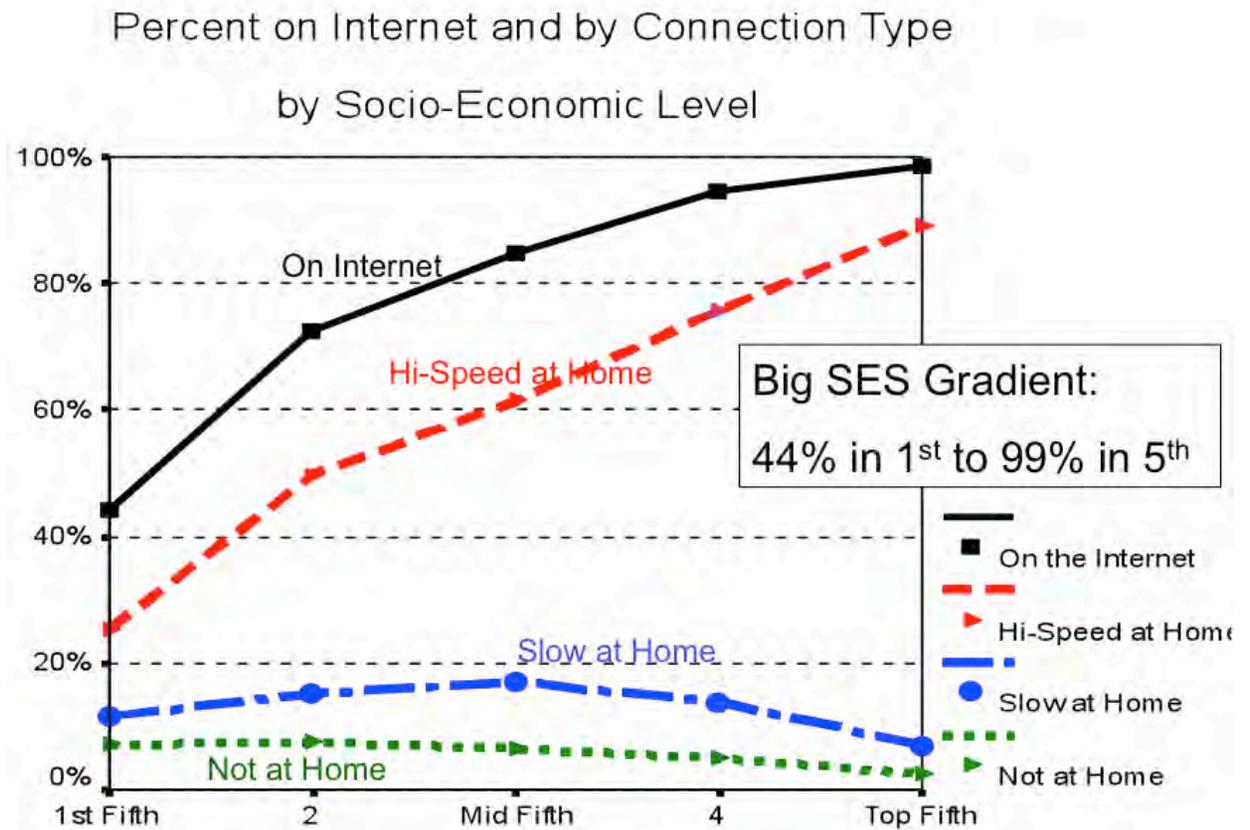


# Issues of Access

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# Political Participation Online

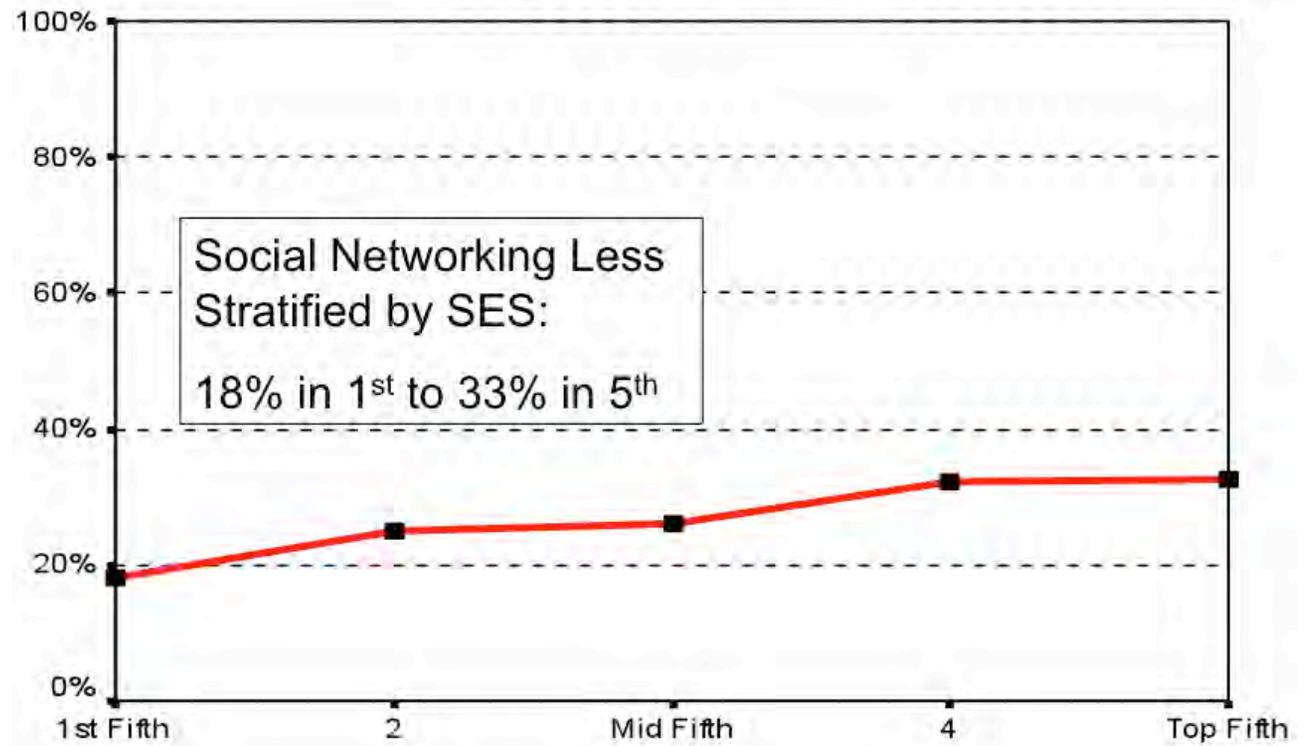


Courtesy of Henry Brady



# Political Participation Online

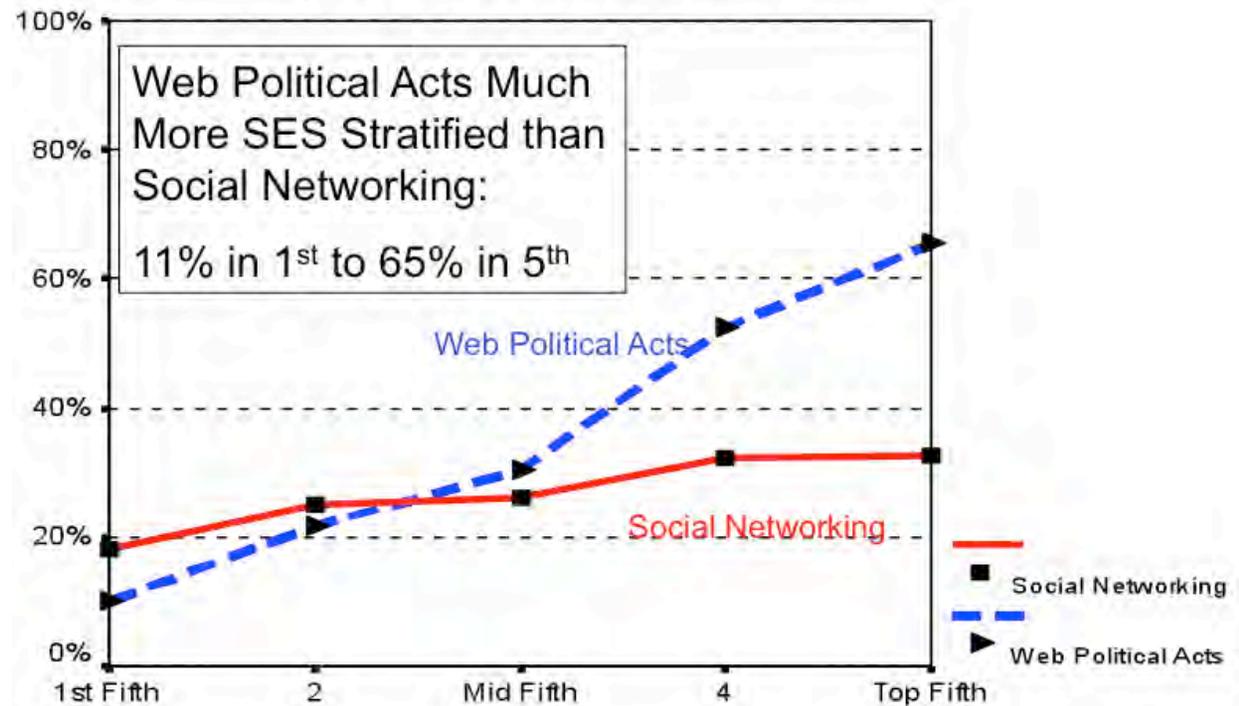
Percent Using Social Networking Sites  
by Socio-Economic Level





# Political Participation Online

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





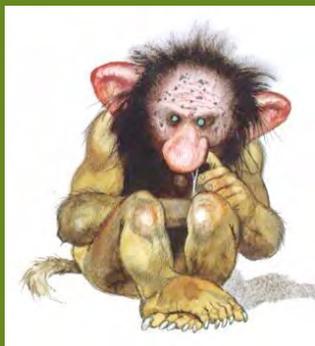
# Deliberation and civility

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## The New Bestiary: Flamers, Trolls, Sock Puppets

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New ways of acting out aggression... The "decline of civility"





## The Rise of Incivility

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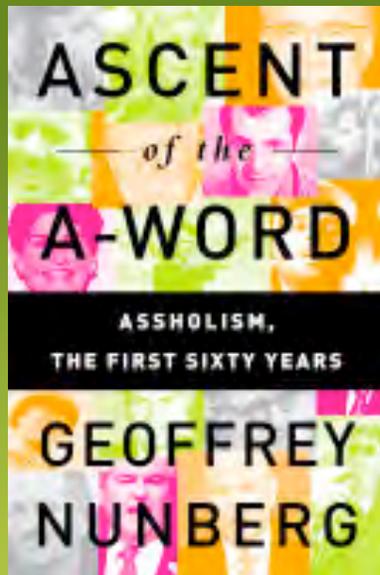
### Technological explanations

...because email is such a casual means of communication, it privileges those who prize informality. What happened to "Dear Sir", "Yours faithfully... 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

Flamers ... belong to the growing uncommunity of people who now act with the protection of anonymity. Ellen Goodman 1999

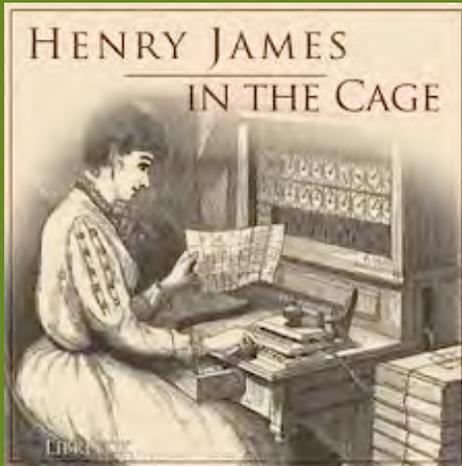
Or is everybody just snarkier these days?







## Technology always makes us ruder?



New ways of acting out aggression... The "decline of civility"

A history of technologically induced incivility:

nosy telegraphists

intrusive telephone calls, party line hogs...

*The serenading troubadour can now thrum his throbbing guitar before the transmitter undisturbed by apprehensions of shotguns and bulldogs (1884)*

Noisy transistor radios

**LIFE** EXCLUSIVE IN THE WHITE HOUSE NURSERY

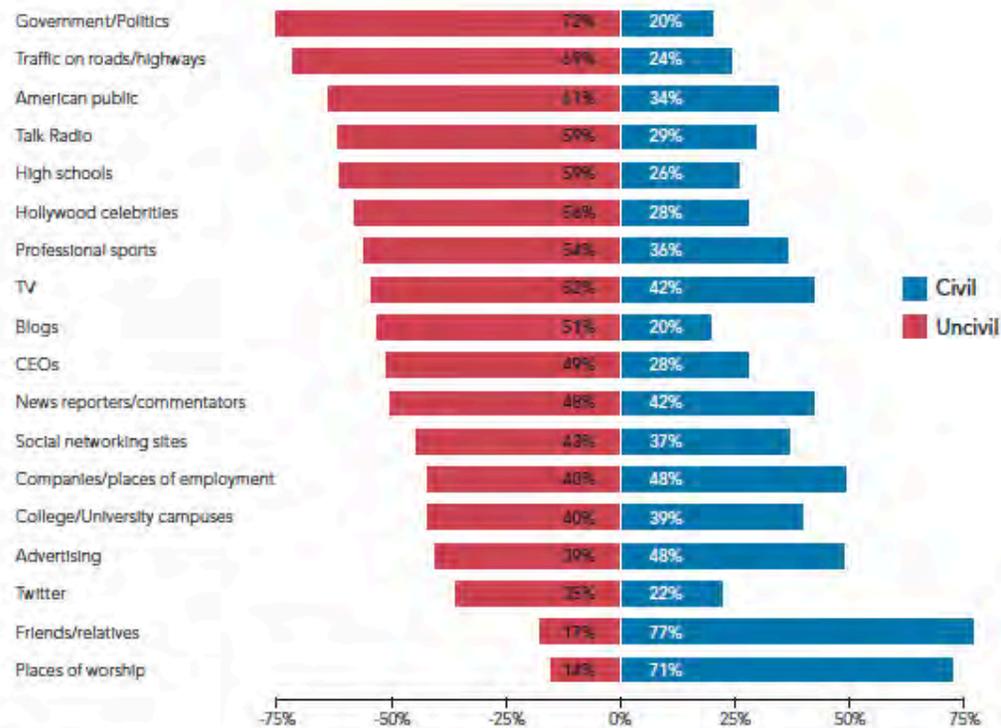
### Transistor Craze— There's No Escape

by DAVID E. SCHERMAN

On Oct. 15, 1960 Mrs. Sol Boro of 1109 36th St., Brooklyn, N.Y., a veterinarian's assistant, heard Elvis Presley singing *Heart Dog* over station WABC through a stethoscope while examining a large dog which had swallowed something. Mrs. Boro, adding that she has sung him in the back during the commercial. People inside things, often a pretty lonely place to be, continually reported how they were seduced by little electronic companions. Robert Eder of San Jose, Calif., for example, heard "wonderful music" inside a six-foot hollow bomb, World War II surplus, garbageman, someone as we discussed, differences didn't matter, and he waved approvingly. "Another heartening case is that of John Phillips, piano player in a rock 'n' roll band in a Washington night club. With no apparent effect on his performance, he plays all night with symphony music from WGMS piped in over his

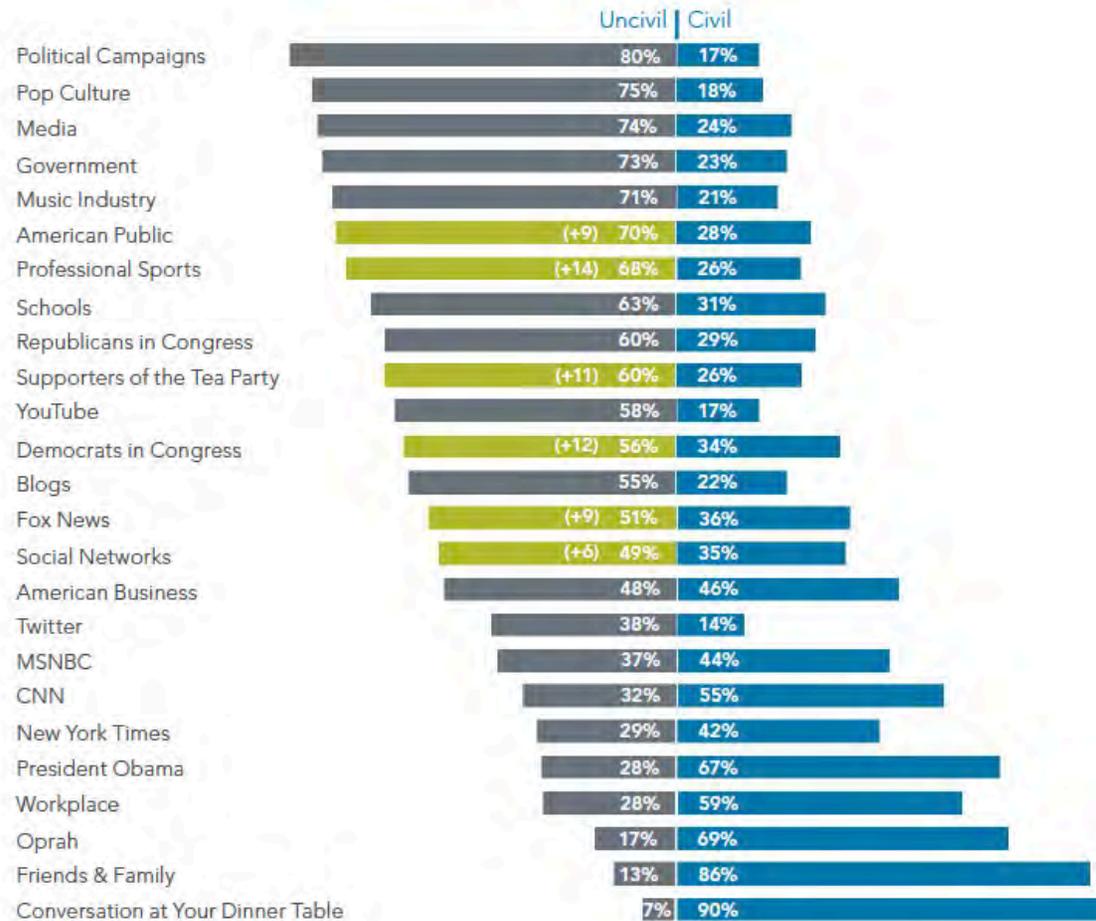


How would you describe the general tone and level of civility in each of the areas listed below?





### General Tone And Level Of Civility In...





## The Rise of Incivility

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### A New Phenomenon?

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*