UC Berkeley School of Information

Is there a digital public sphere?

Concepts of Information 103

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Defining "the Public"

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"

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

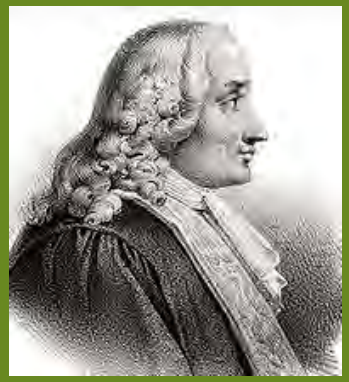
Ratio of occurrence in major newspapers:

the American people/public	4 to 1
the Egyptian people/public	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



"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-Chrétien de Malesherbes 1775 (italics – GN)

Features of the Public Sphere

General Access

"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”

"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 emnity 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 a 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"

…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

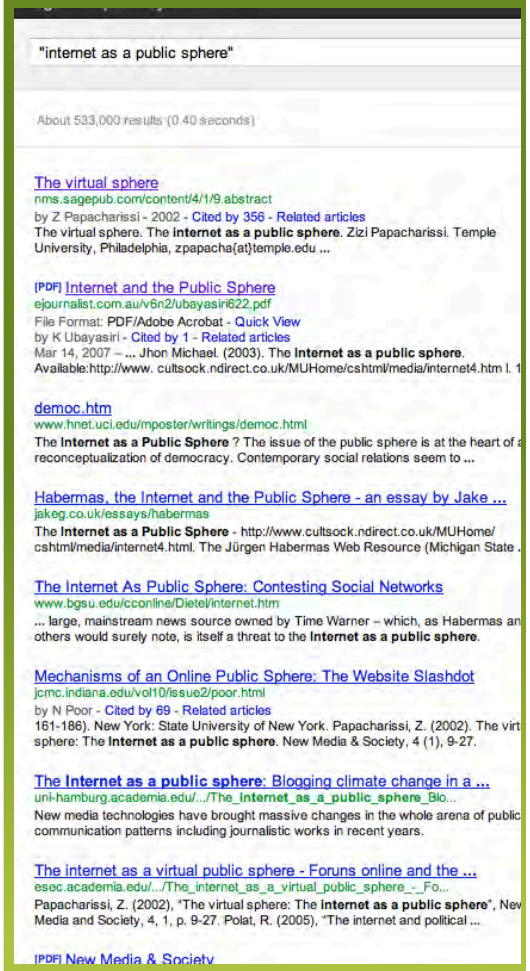
Access closed to certain groups (women, subalterns, etc.)

“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

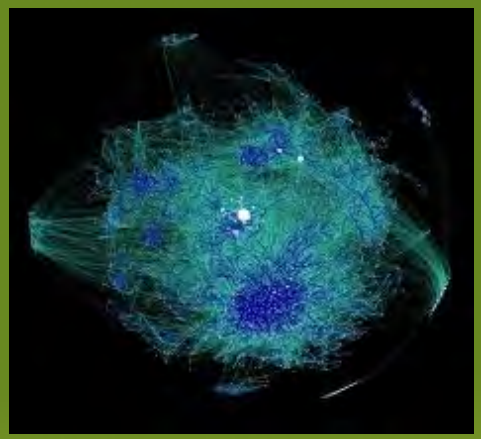


"The new electronic independence recreates the world in the image of a global village." Marshall McLuhan

"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"?



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, 1

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

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…

Polarization of Political Discourse

Polarization and the "Siloing" of Political Discourse

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

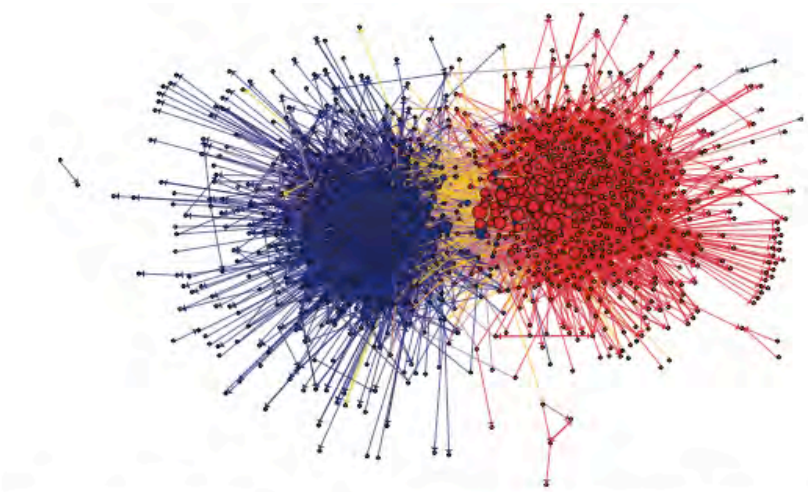


Figure 1: Community structure of political blogs (expanded set), shown using utilizing a GEM layout [11] in the GUESS[3] visualization and analysis tool. The colors reflect political orientation, red for conservative, and blue for liberal. Orange links go from liberal to conservative, and purple ones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

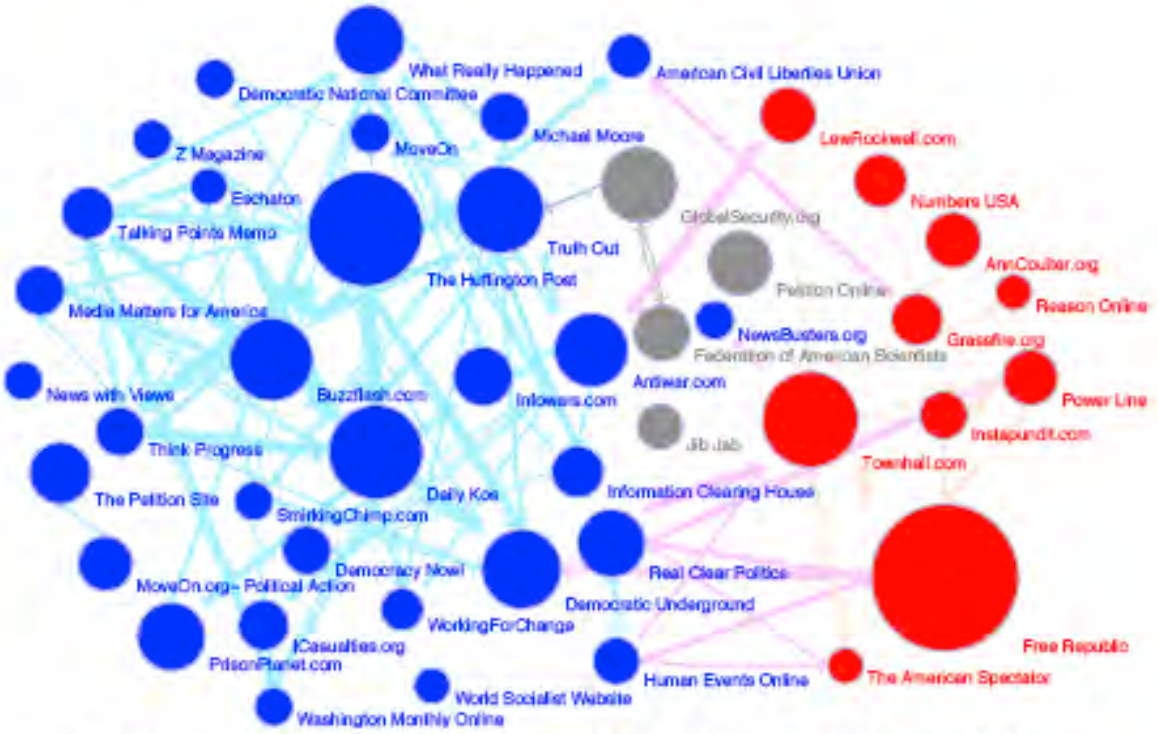


Figure 4.4: This figure maps traffic among the top 50 political Websites, as of May 2006. Liberal- or Democratic leaning sites are in blue; conservative- or Republican-leaning sites are in red. Self-declared neutral or nonpartisan sites are in gray.

Polarization by gender?

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

Between private and public

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

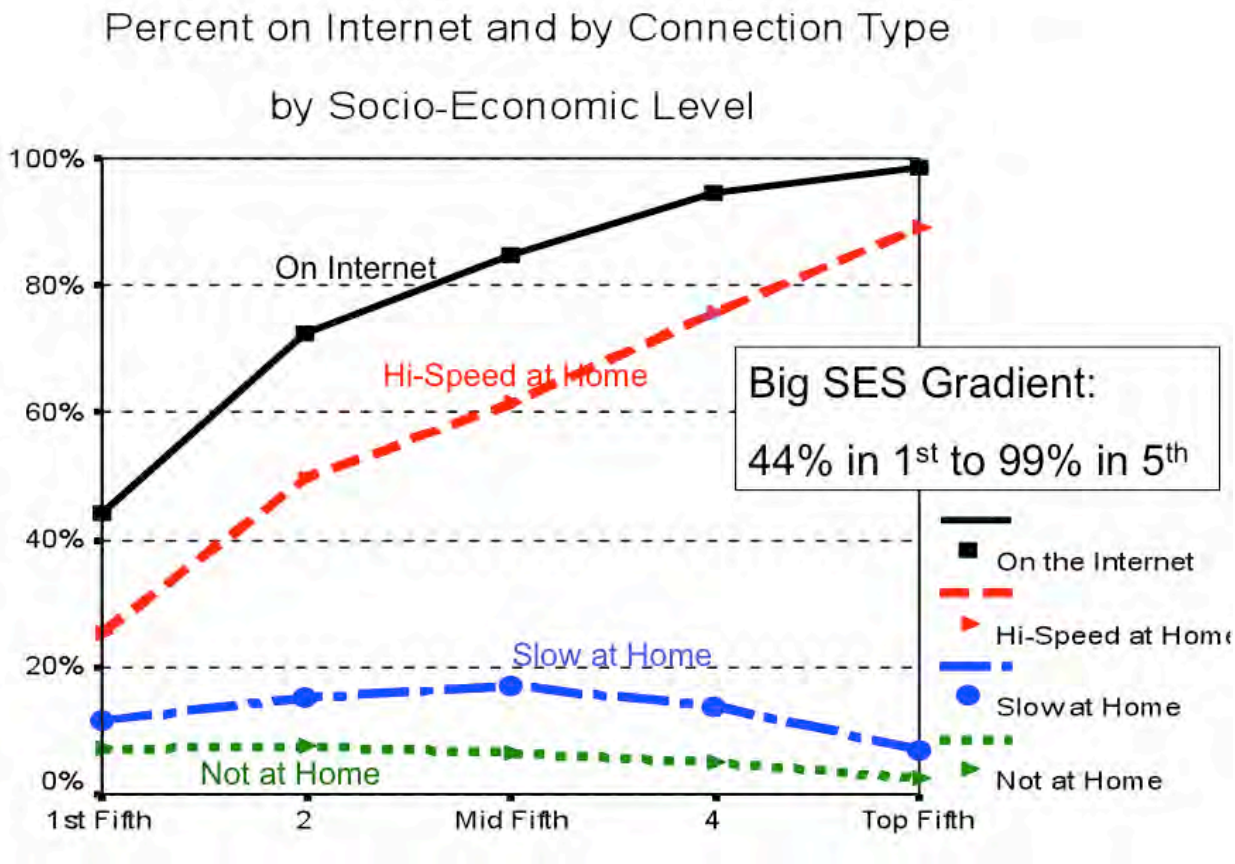
"…private individuals, assembled into a public body…"
Habermas

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

The variety of actors in the public sphere

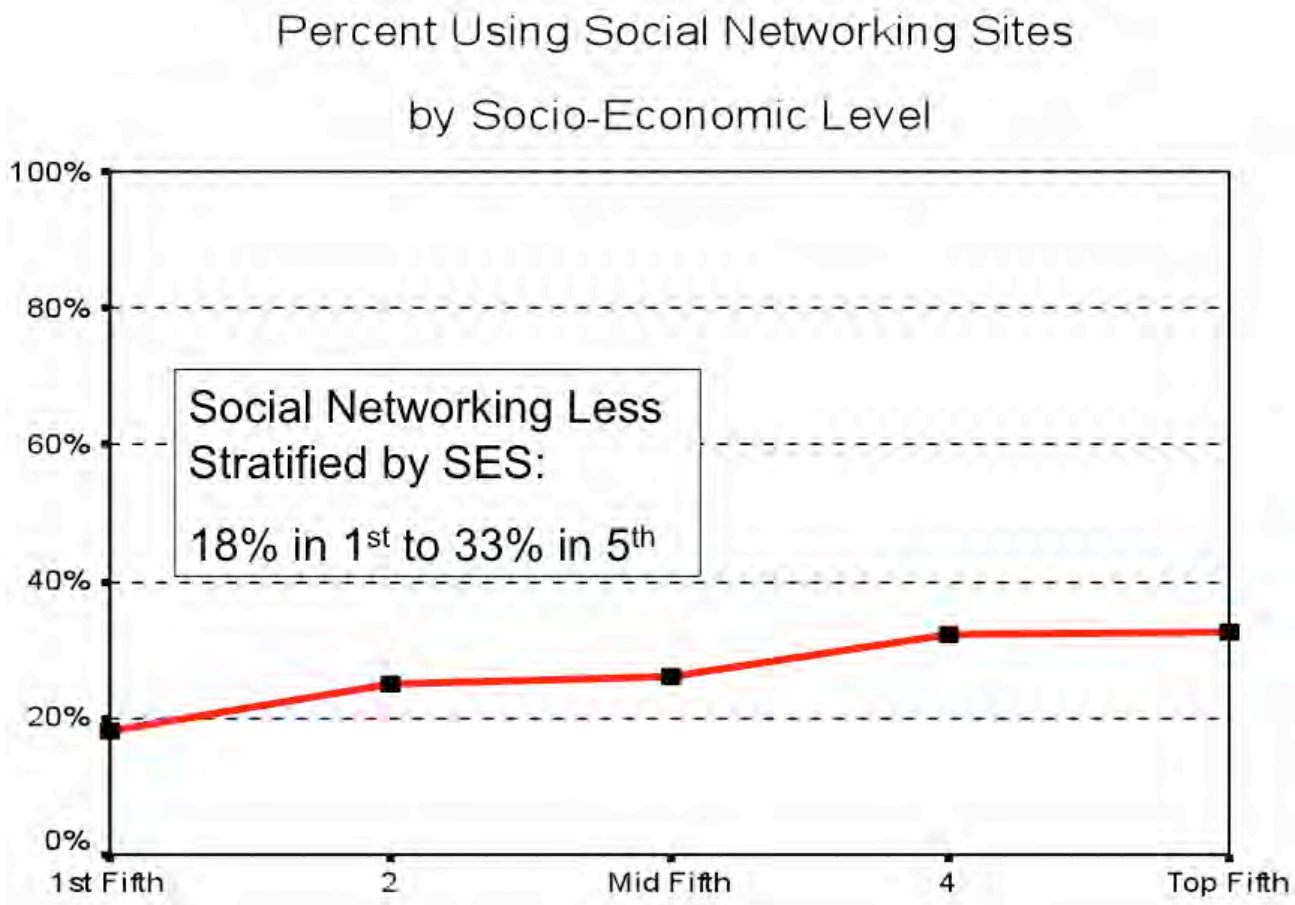
Issues of Access

Political Participation Online



Courtesy of Henry Brady

Political Participation Online



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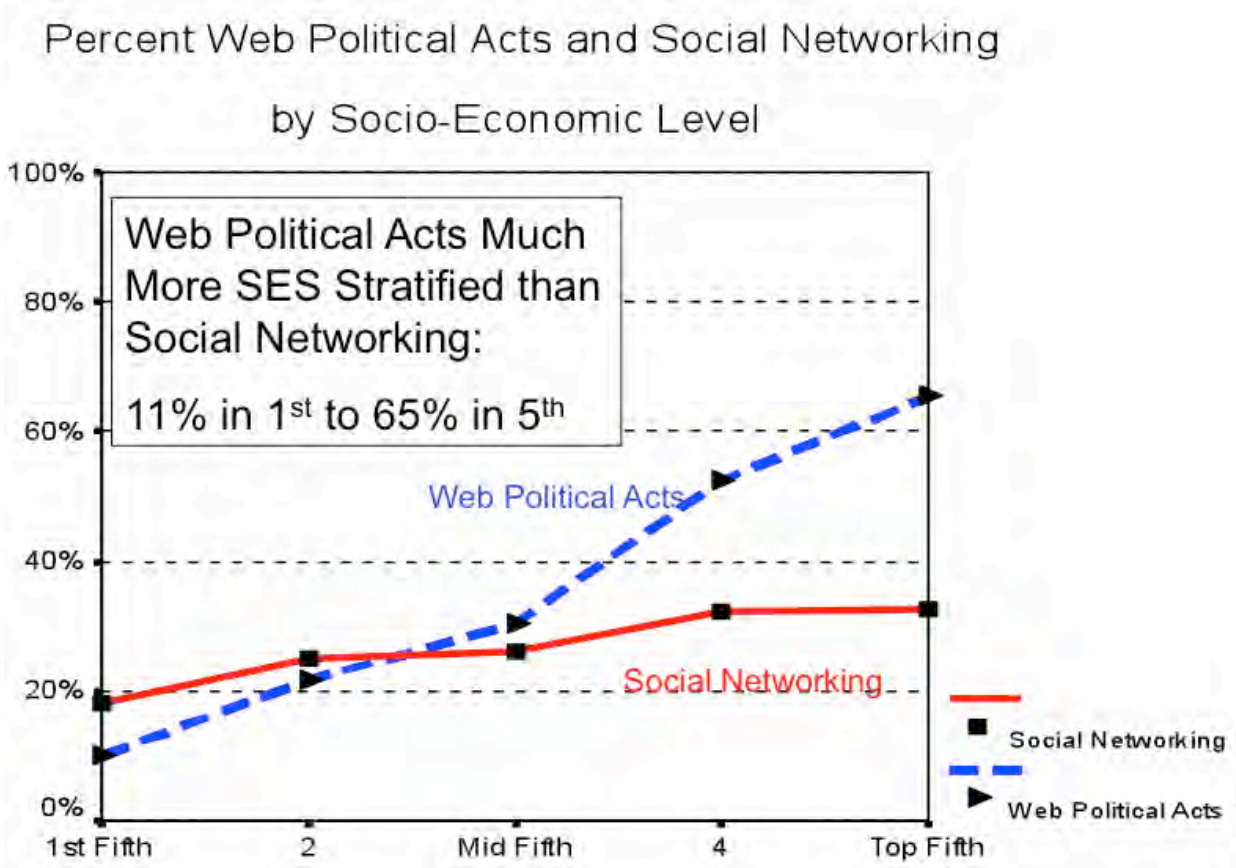
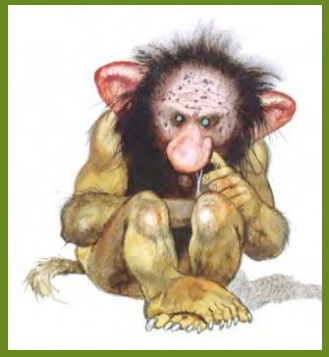


Deliberation and civility

The New Bestiary: Flamers, Trolls, Sock Puppets



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

The Rise of Incivility

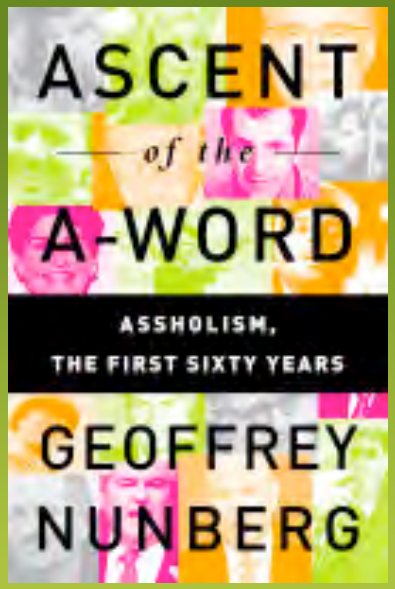
Technological explanations

> ...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*

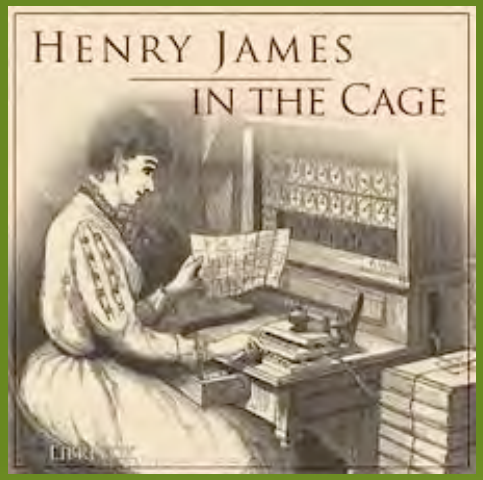
> ...maybe banging out an e-mail is just so easy, compared with all the necessary elements of writing a letter, that the id can send out a half-dozen e-mails before the superego can stop it. Michael Kinsley

> Flamers … belong to the growing uncommunity of people who now act with the protection of anonymity. Elllen 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:

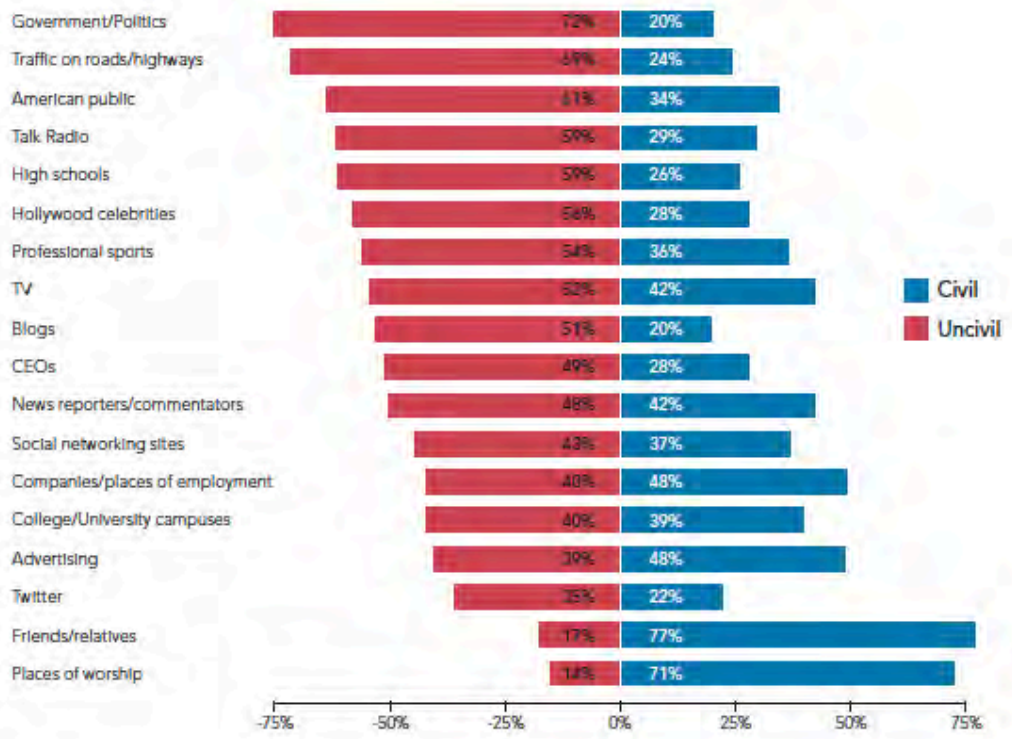
- nosy telegraphists
- intrusive telephone calls, party line hogs…
- *The serenading troubadour can now thrum his throbbing guitar before the transmitter undisturbed by apprehensions of shotguns and bulldogs* (1884)
- Noisy transistor radios

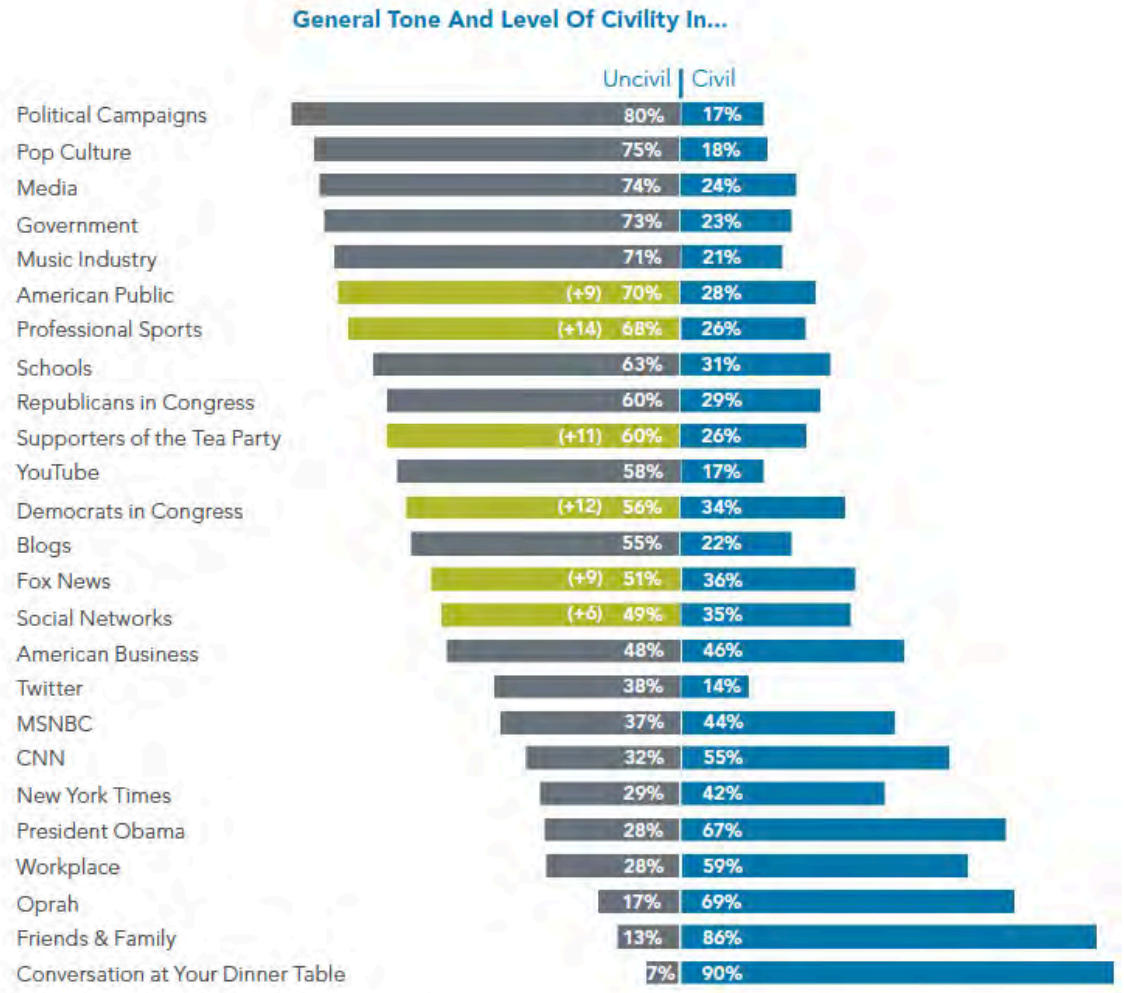
Transistor Craze—
There's No Escape

by DAVID E. SCHERMAN

On Oct. 15, 1960 Mrs. Sol Boro of 1309 38th St., Brooklyn, N.Y., a veterinarian's assistant, heard Elvis Presley singing *Hound Dog* over station WABC through a stethoscope while examining a large dog which had swallowed something. Mrs.

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...
Uncivil
Civil
Political Campaigns 80% 17%
Pop Culture 75% 18%
Media 74% 24%
Government 73% 23%
Music Industry 71% 21%
American Public (+9) 70% 28%
Professional Sports (+14) 68% 26%
Schools 63% 31%
Republicans in Congress 60% 29%
Supporters of the Tea Party (+11) 60% 26%
YouTube 58% 17%
Democrats in Congress (+12) 56% 34%
Blogs 55% 22%
Fox News (+9) 51% 36%
Social Networks (+6) 49% 35%
American Business 48% 46%
Twitter 38% 14%
MSNBC 37% 44%
CNN 32% 55%
New York Times 29% 42%
President Obama 28% 67%
Workplace 28% 59%
Oprah 17% 69%
Friends & Family 13% 86%
Conversation at Your Dinner Table 7% 90%

The Rise of Incivility

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*