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Is the Internet
Bad for Democracy?

Cass Sunstein debates Simson Garfinkel, Shanto Iyengar,
Ronald Jacobs, Henry Jenkins, Robert McChesney,
Jay Rosen, and Michael Schudson.

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Stephen Burt *on James Merrill*

John Tirman *on Exile Literature*

Cynicism and Choice

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Professor Sunstein correctly points out that digital technology provides consumers with unprecedented choice and control over their intake of news. What is far less clear, however, is whether the replacement of editorial selectivity by user selectivity will have the consequences he foresees. Is it really to be feared that personal selectivity will reinforce biased and uninformed opinions, reduce chance encounters with unknown voices, exacerbate group polarization, and strain the institutions that currently function to aggregate group interests into public policy? My own view is that the enhanced ability to self-select into news audiences facilitates the democratic process by empowering individuals.

But to start at the beginning, I must disagree with Professor Sunstein's premise, namely, that the present media marketplace resembles a "public sphere," providing citizens with regular exposure to diverse perspectives. The reality is that in the case of the news source with the most users -- local television newscasts -- viewers encounter precious little "perspective." If there is a perspective, it is that the world outside is a Hobbesian state of nature characterized by rampant threats to public order. The preoccupation of local newscasts with violent crime is at odds with the reality that crime rates are in fact declining across the nation. Moreover, by frequently associating violent crime with nonwhite perpetrators, the conventional media's coverage of crime has the effect of strengthening primitive racial stereotypes (see Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000).

Even in the more prestigious journalistic forums, news content is characteristically shallow. During political campaigns, coverage is largely non-substantive. In place of hard information on the candidates' positions and past performance, media coverage gravitates toward the more "entertaining" facets of the campaign -- the horse race, the strategy and, whenever possible, instances of scandalous or unethical behavior. The "rhetoric of personal destruction" turns off voters and probably depresses participation (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995).

The professional culture of journalism further impedes the public's interest in elections. While candidates have become ever more savvy about utilizing the media to their own advantage, journalists have resisted these efforts. Rather than depicting the candidates as principled agents of the political parties who are committed to implementing their campaign pledges, reporters today emphasize the scripted and typically manipulative aspects of candidate behavior (Patterson, 2000). As carefully controlled studies demonstrate, this "strategic" frame effectively activates distrust of the particular individuals who seek elective office and generalized cynicism about the process itself (Cappella and Jamieson, 1995). Media-based campaigns do not, in fact, function constructively to enhance the "public sphere;" rather, they breed apathy and negativism.

Against this backdrop, the Internet offers a promising avenue for renewing *direct* communications between candidates and voters. The proliferation of candidate and other political websites make it possible for voters to bypass or supplement media treatment of the campaign. The 2000 election provided the first opportunity to test the potential of such unmediated campaign communication. Through the generous support of the Pew

Charitable Trusts and the Carnegie Corporation of NY, the Political Communication

Laboratory at Stanford University produced an extensive and easily searchable election

database, which was distributed to any voter who requested it. Compiled on a CD, the

database included the two major presidential candidates' campaign speeches, televised

ads and their respective party platforms. Of course, we did not expect that voters would

read through this voluminous compilation from beginning to end. Instead, we expected

them to seek out information that matched their own political sensitivities. Rather than

waiting passively, and most likely in vain, for the media to provide coverage of relevant

issues, voters could, on their own, obtain information that was personally meaningful.

The CD initiative also included a controlled study of voter attitudes and

behaviors. The CD was sent to a randomly selected sample of adults. The CDs produced

for study participants were programmed to enable "usage tracking." That is, each time

the CD was accessed, the user's computer activated a log of the specific pages visited and

the length of time each page remained on the screen.[1] Following the election, study

participants returned their tracking data. They were also interviewed and asked questions

about their levels of participation, interest in the campaign, and other measures of

political engagement.

We found that use of the campaign CD consistently and powerfully strengthened

interest in the campaign, voter turnout, and perception of the self as politically influential

(see Iyengar, 2001). Study participants also expressed somewhat more enthusiastic views

of American-style elections. That is, use of the CD served to reduce their level of

political cynicism.

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[1] Of course, study participants were fully informed of this feature.

The CD study also sheds light on selective exposure, the phenomenon Professor Sunstein believes is the principal liability of the Internet. In suggesting that voters build "gated communities" in order to nurture their partisan preferences, Sunstein is following in the footsteps of the founding fathers of modern political communication research. Here is how Lazarsfeld and his collaborators described the problem of partisan selectivity in their classic study of the 1940 presidential campaign.

> In recent years there has been a good deal of talk by men of good will about the desirability and necessity of guaranteeing the free exchange of ideas in the marketplace of public opinion. Such talk has centered upon the problem of keeping free the channels of expression and communication. Now we find that the consumers of ideas, if they have made a decision on the issue, themselves erect high tariff walls against alien notions. (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 89)

Subsequent research into the partisan selectivity hypothesis has demonstrated that American voters are not especially motivated to tune out dissenting voices or sources of information. Based on their assessment of the relevant literature, Sears and Freedman (1967) concluded that de facto selectivity -- the process by which people self select into more or less politically engaged strata -- rather than motivated or partisan selectivity was the norm. Given what we know about the level of information among the mass public, de facto selectivity implies that candidates should worry less about their ability to recruit from the ranks of the opposition than their ability to reach anyone at all.

Rather than screening information on the basis of their partisan values or ideology, voters are more inclined to employ a relevance or utility-based criterion that prompts them to tune in more carefully to news reports about issues that affect them. As the candidates and the media discuss particular issues, the composition of their audience changes so that voters personally affected by the "target" issue (for instance, unemployment) join the audience, while others for whom the issue is of less

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consequence, depart. This form of selectivity is hardly an impediment to deliberation; for a voter who places a high priority on healthcare, paying more attention to both candidates' positions on the issue facilitates issue-oriented voting.

In keeping with previous research, our CD study detected only slight traces of partisan selectivity, but substantial evidence of issue-based selectivity in participants' CD use. For example, voters who were more susceptible to out of pocket health-related costs (those with sick and elderly parents, or whose insurance coverage had been sporadic) devoted significantly more attention to both candidates' statements and positions on health-related issues, regardless of the candidate's party. On the other hand, Democrats and Republicans were only marginally more attentive to their candidates' messages.[2]

Thus, Professor Sunstein's assessment of the political role of the Internet is suspect on two independent grounds. As a comparison of new-versus-traditional media, his analysis suffers from a somewhat idealistic premise that the traditional media provide a meaningful and an accessible marketplace of political thought. In fact, little information is provided, and what is turns voters off. Nor is there any serious ground for concern that online sources will only attract users who already share their points of view. The available evidence is to the contrary. There is every reason to hope that the Internet will provide a better way to inform and engage voters.

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[2] My point here is not that partisan selectivity is absent; rather, the effects of partisan selectivity are much weaker than the comparable effects of issue-based selectivity.

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