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Hot Politics: The Changing Places of Political Participation in the Age of the Internet

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Literacy, print, and journalism have in recent centuries become associated with an informed citizenry, political participation, and democratic forms of government. Freedom of the press--the first amendment with its implied ability to question orthodoxy and entrenched interests, expose the deeds and misdeeds of the powerful and those entrusted with the powers of the state, and to present alternative views of life and belief--has regularly been viewed as the cornerstone of U.S. democracy. To this we have over the last century and a half added a strong belief in public education, to provide all citizens the means to participate in the free exchange of information as part of their political rights and responsibilities as citizens. Most recently radio, television, and now the internet have extended the promise of public information, a more informed citizenry, and greater citizen participation in democratic processes.

Our public commitments to a free press, public education, universal literacy, and accessible communications media have combined in an ideology of rational public discourse that thrived in America long before Habermas reminded justifiably suspicious twentieth century intellectuals of the eighteenth century formation of the public sphere. The realities, of course, have been more complicated than either our political ideologies or the Habermasian project have articulated, for both offer a broad sweep of hopes that obscure the particularities of actual historical formations. Only by continual struggle with the many forces that meet together in our communications forums do we manage to produce a political discussion that both engages significant parts of the population and rises occasionally to the seriousness of issues before us. The internet, while changing the dynamics and opportunities of communication, nonetheless, continues a complex system of political communication forged in previous media and still contains means to degrade or elevate our politics. It remains up to us as citizens and political actors to struggle with the rhetorical opportunities and dynamics of this new medium and make choices about the kind of politics we wish to engage in.

Among the many complexities of power, economics, interests, personality, passions, social interaction, ideology, culture, and religion that keep politics both more and less than rational deliberation are those that arise from the dynamics of literate

interchange, the historical formation of forums, and the generic shaping of utterances within those forums. Recent research on genre and discursive systems, along with situated cognition and action, suggests that the character of the local activity space is extremely important for what happens, what people think and learn, and what social consequences emerge (Bazerman 1988, 1994a, 1994 b, 1997a, 1997b, forthcoming; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; Devitt 1991; Freedman and Medway 1994a, 1994b; Russell, 1997a, 1997b). While the shape of politics to emerge in the cyber world is still somewhat obscure, by considering the forums of political interchange that are emerging on the internet, how they draw on previous forums and genres of political interchange, and the pressures that seem to be encouraging the heightening of certain elements within those genres, we may gain a first reading of some choices in front of us.

Context in Speech, Writing, and Cyberspace

In order to consider the impact of electronic genres on our political life, I will now make some gross distinctions between genres in the two major previous media of communication: speech and writing. The idealized distinctions I will make are in full awareness of the many overlaps, fuzzy middles, and particular cases that complicate the picture; nonetheless, the ideal types will help us identify the affordances of the media and potential tendencies in their use.

With face-to-face spoken genres, where major aspects of the interpersonal and material context may be immediately visible or directly sensible, everything from the physical gestures of participants to the chairs people sit upon and the birds that fly overhead may become salient aspects of context (greeting genres focus one on interpersonal markers of particular interlocutors, smiles and waves and physical signs of well-being). In face to face encounters, distant events and situations may also be called on as relevant context (the prior meeting last week in another city, perhaps mentioned in discussion; the actions of legislators that frame every encounter of citizen and government official); however, these distant events are generally brought to bear on a situation in the here in and now.

In more distantly mediated print genres (or even some phone conversations), however, the genre typically itself must announce and assemble the context. That is, when we receive a personal letter from the IRS, we all know that we are likely to be drawn up into their bureaucratic machinery, and the type of letter more specifically lets us know where--whether in the simple accounting of wrong addition or the inspectable world of substantiating deductions. Moreover, while we may have to pass through a number of specifiable physical places with observable humans, such as an IRS office with an IRS examiner or a U.S. District Court with lawyers and judges, the place we are caught up in is a place of symbolic interaction, lodged deep within documents and not a physical space. So while spoken face-to-face genres may

change the footing (Goffman, 1981) or perception of a situation, genres at a distance have to call forth a total recognition of the cultural symbolic space. We may think of this in terms of a stage, which in face-to-face interaction may undergo changes of lighting and perspective as genre or footing or contextualization clues change the saliences of interaction. But genres of distant communication must call forth an imagined world that they are part of, a world not only of co-participants, but of all the objects and utterances that are indexically and intertextually linked to the utterance of the moment.

The internet, and particularly the World Wide Web, provides another configuration, as the virtual contexts take on more concrete immediacy in embedding utterances within networks of other utterances that occur in visible proximate virtual locales, through links. We will explore this later through our examples.

However, locating the scene--the relevant contexts and indexical relations--is only part of the work of genre, the quieter part. Genre puts the scene into action and identifies activities expectably to be completed by the time the genre runs its course. In fact we might say that the virtual scene is built for action, assembled specifically around the activity to be discursively carried forth. The IRS letter assembles a place and relevancies and intertextualities all brought to mind not for our idle amusement or terror, but because the IRS wishes to conduct a particular business with us and we in reading begin to assemble where we stand and what actions are available to us.

In face to face encounters we may at times be in repose, sitting on a lounge chair and idly staring at the clouds in the company of intimates, but the moment we make a comment we start to give shape to the discursive moment. More forcefully, the moment we notice a more distant correspondence, or look at print materials or answer the phone, we are drawn into different times and places with specific kinds of transactions afoot. It is the active purposiveness of the discursive locales that bring to mind and imagination all the contextual relevancies and socially localizing elements attached to the type of communication we enter into.

As more and more of our interactions are mediated electronically, the activities may start by emulating and extending the interactions made possible in prior media, but the interactions and attendant relations and structures realized through the activities are likely to become transformed to take advantage of the new mediational opportunities, to move away from the practices that were conformable to previous media but awkward on the new medium, and to respond to the new communicative dynamics brought into being by the new medium. Those interactions that still seem important and are still best done in the prior media will likely remain in the prior media, but those activities that flourish in the new medium

will create major new definitions of social activity, providing new means of carrying out our social needs and desires within new kinds of places.

Rhetoric, Genre, and the History of Print Culture

Political communication, in the European tradition, gave rise to the study of rhetoric as a way to increase the force and power of individuals' public participation in the agora of the Greek polis. Rhetoric's genres of forensic, deliberative, and epideictic (i.e., roughly, courtroom argument, parliamentary debate, and public oratory of praise and blame) were built around face to face forums that emerged and were regularized around the activities of those genres--courts, legislatures, and public speeches or sermons by leaders to mobilize communal values (often executive, but sometimes legislative and sometimes spiritual, particularly after the introduction of Christianity). The continuity of these institutional forums, the intertextual or discursive contexts they provide for each new utterance, and the activities enacted through the associated discursive genres have in fact formed the basic structures of our core political institutions, particularly with the eighteenth century revival of the republic as the preferred political form--though with radically different notions of individuality, citizen rights and equality, and social negotiation.

However, literacy and literate genres early began transforming and extending forms of political life (Goody 1986). Written codes of law added a solemnity and consequentiality to legislative considerations as they were not just arguing for a single war or instance but producing a consistent and enduring set of regulations for daily life. Written law and court records provided the means to turn judicial discourse into increasingly a matter of textual interpretation, comparison of current matters to prior texts, and the production of an inspectable court record to justify decisions, so that the law as a system rose above the direct sentiments of individual revenge and justice enacted on immediate participants.

The regularity of law meant citizenship could be defined in terms of commitment to and obedience towards abstract rules--law abidingness, responsibilities, rights, and privileges--instead of personal commitment to individual personally familiar leaders. Decision making and power were removed from public forums to clerics, bureaucrats and scribes who controlled the written records of an increasingly organized, regularized, extended and distant state, which knew its citizens through the organized record-keeping. The forums became associated with the record of their previous judgments, laws, and rulings, and these records provided specific intertextual context for each new instance of judgment and decision making.

However, printing provided public forums for attack and critique of the state and the formulation of alternative programs. Polemics and manifestos, could be distributed in various levels of secrecy or openness, especially as printing

technology became less expensive and widely available (Eisenstein, 1983). Governments concerned themselves with identifying subversive material and controlling its circulation, resulting in regulation of printing, including copyright (Rose, 1993).

Availability of alternative views and the organization of heterodox opinion through circulation of common texts found common cause with the new economic power of commercial classes aggregated outside the state but supported by accounting and literate practices. Print culture fed the associated desires for commercial and political information through pamphlets, journals, and newspapers concurrently with the times of political revolutions and reforms of the last four centuries.

Newspapers, written ballots, literate practices of expanding commerce, and calls for informed citizenry were associated with the expansion of schooling beyond the training of clerics, bureaucrats, and to a lesser extent the aristocracy who monitored, with some negligence, the work of clerics and bureaucrats. Newspapers were particularly associated with the expanding educated urban commercial classes in Britain and the U.S. in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with the rise of political parties. Newspapers became forums for people to imagine themselves into wider political arenas and more distant events than they might daily have contact with, as well as providing opportunities for people to identify themselves as partisans and members of communities. (Habermas, 1989). In the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century the formation of an independent press also became associated with investigative journalism, public accountability, and the development of professional journalistic standards (Schudson, 1995). That is, the press developed a somewhat independent perspective, to some extent outside government, party, or particular economic interest (although always within limits and viewed with some skepticism) from which to view government and political processes. By reading the newspapers (or multiple newspapers and journals of opinions), citizens could become observers and evaluators (actively or passively) of public officials and political actors, entering into a continuing if vicarious relationship with government and politics. News then supported a political culture of critique, celebrity, spectator rooting, and competition. Citizens could also enter into marginal amateur production of political opinion through letters to the editor, but the production of news, critique, and opinion became largely a matter of professional production. These professional productions in turn provided the information that supported local civic activity, activist group participation, and individual and group communication with legislators. Community and activist group newsletters and other communications came to rely on the news, as did citizen participations in campaigning and elections. Thus newspapers became a major forum which mediated political participation of ordinary citizens, and the intertextual record of the news (as both remembered by

individuals and as a research file for continually unfolding events to be placed in retrospective contexts) became the context for further news items.

The political culture informed by the news also got played out secondarily in personal social gatherings where people exchanged opinions as a kind of identity play (Billig, 1988) as well as exchange of thought. This political culture was given further, if somewhat restrictive and ritualizing shape, through surveys by which public opinion was expressed and aggregated, thereby becoming news and having a continuing influence on government, as politicians kept closer and closer tabs on the moods of the voters as well as the news representation of the voters. Radio and television talk shows gave individuals an expanded opportunity to take this private exchange and turn it into public assertion and larger group affiliation processes, with consequences for public representations of public opinion as mediated through the print and electronic press.

In this evolving climate of public opinion, political parties developed their own internal cultures and media of communication and participation, in part enacted through traditional patronage and ward politics but in part enacted through other forms of more conceptualized partisan commitment, involving speeches, humor, demonizing characterizations of opposition, newsletters, serious program papers, and forms of public hoopla and celebration. These activities in turn become represented on the general news media, over which partisan groups attempt to exert control through media events, spin-doctoring, sound bites, and other means of shaping political messages for the news media.

The characterizations I have just provided are broad and sweeping--but beyond the particulars I point to, I want to suggest the range and complexity of political culture mediated through face to face, print media, and radio and television. This then provides a rich, but finely shaped field of public participation which new forms of electronic communication may extend and transform, at the same time as the existing modes of participation provide models of communication that may at first be fairly directly translated onto the internet.

Politics on the World Wide Web

The web became a clearly recognized presence as early as the 1994 election, with candidates already creating web sites to set out their positions and elicit support (Fund 1994; Harmon 1994; Lewis 1994; Powers 1994; Seib 1995). In the 1996 elections parties and candidates had extensive and elaborate web sites as well as many private, independent, commentary, journalistic, and humor sites, and the number of sites continue to grow with each public controversy and each political season (Allen 1996; Mossberg 1996; Seib 1997).

Quite visibly, the web has provided fertile soil for many politically related sites that provide forums and contexts for specific forms of participation. Major news and political commentary organizations have established their own sites re-presenting material presented in other media--many newspapers (the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and the *Washington Post*, just to name a few of the more prominent) political magazines (such as the *Congressional Quarterly*, the *American Prospect*, the *Washington Weekly*, *Tikkun*), public and private television and radio news shows (NPR *All Things Considered*, PBS *Evening Newshour*, MSNBC, and CNN). Some are exclusively devoted to political news, such as CNN's ALLPOLITICS. Further new electronic journals have appeared (such as *Slate* and *HotWired*).

Many of these sites are linked with each other and with other reputable sources of political and governmental information, giving some shape to a recognizable universe of legitimated professional public political information and commentary. This makes "What Washington is talking about" more public and accessible and virtually concrete--no longer requiring citizens to be at the right combination of cocktail parties, listening to a many interview shows, and keeping up subscriptions to a range of journals. One can in a fairly short time by following links around the net, have some access to the political buzz. However, while all these sites provide news and commentary for various publics to contemplate, and this news and commentary may provide the basis for later actions such as voting, community participation, or political involvement, immediately in themselves, these electronic journals afford no active form of participation except letter writing in response--typically, an email site is attached.

The more technologically adept can elevate themselves from consumer to producer of political chat by setting up an amateur political home page, and there are many such pursuing political commentary and humor. Pages are built in fan support of political heroes and attack of political enemies, as well as of parties and programs. Individuals assert their identity, share their vision and aggregate resources for like minded people. Humor is usually pointed, against political enemies. The activities on such pages are clearly derivative of, on one side the public media culture of political celebrity and partisanship and on the other of local community political argument, both extremes which feed off each other. It is not surprising that the talk show hosts, themselves mediating between national news and local discussion, become web celebrities at the center of fascination and discussion--heroes of political talk on the net. On June 17 of 1997, a search on Excite reveal 998,146 matches on the name Rush Limbaugh, 898,241 on the name Ollie North, 172,574 on the name Pat Buchanan, and 12,339 on Geraldine Ferraro. While this clearly indicates the political direction of this phenomenon, it suggest that even a Democrat new to the talk scene gets some attention. This amateur commentary is

outspoken and aggressive, expressing both strongly positive and strongly negative comments, as symbolized by the [Punch Rush Limbaugh Home Page](#). Like the talk shows, the amateur web political pages give non-politicians and non-journalists access to a media stage on which to perform political and journalistic activities, elevating their local talk into a public performance and an identity that extends out beyond one's geographically immediate group--and it allows one to affiliate with geographically separated people of common interests. By participating in talk shows and even more by creating web sites one can imagine oneself as politically engaged, without too much monitoring of the concrete consequences, if there are any, of that participation. The locale of such talk is clearly outside more official political talk, outside the beltway, so to speak, but it is clearly contextually and intertextually related to the public circulation of news and commentary.

One of the consequences of the multiplicity of amateur political sites, many of which are hot-linked to each other and to the more official sites, (some amateur pages consist only of index pages of annotated links) is that producers and consumers can immerse themselves more fully and immediately in critical, independent, and partisan information and commentary. We might call this an intensification and greater availability of the long-standing culture of political talk. The intensification, however, seems to bring about a qualitative change, as people can produce more extended turns for more extended audience.

The amateur political talk sometimes aggregates within more organized sites of controversialism, often around minor political parties, cult followings, and activist groups--sometimes mediated through the identity of a celebrity talk figure. For example, the [Rush Limbaugh Featured Site](#) contains links to the Berkeley College Republicans, Newt Gingrich sites, the Republican National Convention `96 site, the Massachusetts Republican Party, and other conservative groups.

Controversialism, always an aspect of advocacy journalism, has found new journalistic opportunities on the internet, as any individual can set themselves up as a public source of news, rumor, or editorial opinion, which immediately becomes widely accessible both to political activists and to more mainstream and professional journalists. The amateur production of "news" outside the standard practices, institutions, and self regulation of print journalism (as loose as those procedures are) and outside the scope of libel laws written for a print age, has led to the elevation of unconfirmed reports and gossip into apparent journalistic credibility. Matt Drudge, with his daily Drudge Report, for example has been a primary means of breaking unreliable reports, particularly aimed against President Clinton. (Felsenthal, 1998, Harmon 1998, Kaplan, 1997, Kurtz, 1997, Shaw 1998). The spread of less reliable unconfirmed stories into mainline internet journalism sites is fostered by the immediacy of discussion, which makes traditional time pressures of "being scooped" more intense.

Organized political argument and activism also aggregates around a variety of movements, interests and organizations, with more or less programmatic coherence, such as libertarianism, objectivism, and many varieties and sites of environmentalism. The activities afforded by these sites are complex and multiple and I will not begin to examine them here, but will note that the sites are often affiliated with non-cyber political organizations. The pages of political organizations in turn typically present information, platforms, candidate biographies and positions, speeches, news, resources, and links to candidate pages and affiliated organizations.

Further there are a variety of national, state, and local government sites, some of which are aimed at presenting the accomplishments of the agency and the incumbent administration, along with agency relevant information, query access, forms, and form filing opportunities. Individual office holders have their pages affording a variety of activities and providing a variety of governmental and political and constituent service information. Legislative caucuses and other political groups of office holders also have their sites.

Further there are public service independent organizations that provide non-partisan information on office holders, candidates, and elections, such as project Vote Smart.

Thus the political landscape on the Web is become increasingly complex, and to some extent taking on its own novel character, building on prior forms of political activity but transforming them. Political culture is finding far more public forums and is being more easily spread. It is easier for someone to immerse oneself in an array of opinions, surround oneself with networks of like minded, and to assert a place in public political culture by establishing a page and links. A local person, even without affiliation with political groups or some institution that harbors political activity (like a university campus), can form a public political presence and establish an identity within a political group, even a fringe political group.

While the increased opportunities for participation and affiliation seem to foster the ideals of democracy, there are also fewer filters on the partisanship, controversialism, and unreliability of reports that can become widely visible and seem to have some spillover effect into more traditional media. Individuals with internet access are finding much larger soapboxes, megaphones, and opportunities for affiliations over much wider areas than in the past; at the same time they are able to bypass traditional systems of responsibility, regulation, and accountability. The court attempt to apply libel laws to the internet in the Matt Drudge case is only the beginning of a struggle to develop new systems of accountability for electronically mediated political speech. Similarly we will no doubt see a struggle to

organize the fragmenting trends of internet political controversy and mobilize the aggregating possibilities of electronic linking and networking in order to influence issues played out on the mass scale of the nation.

The Democratic National Committee Website

The traditional means of fostering, aggregating, and developing some coherence to political participation has been the official party organizations. Of the two major parties in the United States, it has been the Democratic Party to this point that has made the most effort to establish a strong internet presence through its web site, first established in June 1995. The remainder of this paper will examine the web site of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to see the institutional party response to the dynamics of internet political communication.

The first impression the DNC site (<http://www.democrats.org/>) presents, as examined on various days in June 1997, is that it is embedded in the culture of news. The upper right of the home page has a publicity photo of President Clinton signing legislation and the left, just below a bold title "Democratic Party Online" has the day's date, suggesting the daily updating of news. Just below is a ticker tape banner that announces the latest news bulletins. Below that the hot-button table of contents is headed by "DNC News". (The news ticker itself is also directly related to that news page, both in the content of the headlines and as a hot-link).

Thus the DNC site is immediately set within a context of breaking news, defining political participation as a form of involvement with unfolding news stories. The news, as might be expected is partisan. "The Daily News" from DNC, on June 10 for example, includes the headlines: "Unemployment Drops Again While Wages Continue to Rise," "Republicans Force President to Veto Disaster Relief--It's 1995-1996 all over again," "Barbour Sold Business Deals in China to Foreign Contributor," "Gingrich Admits Fundraising Hearings Targeted at President, Vice-president; Wacko GOP Investigator Reportedly Stalks Witnesses."

Each of these headlines is followed by a few sentence elaboration, emulating the lead paragraph of a news story, followed by a citation to a professional news organization (where possible hot-linked to the full story at the news agency's home site) or by reference (and hot-link) to a DNC news release which elaborates the story and provides references to the independent press. There is also an archive of previous stories going back to the initiation of this newspaper feature on March 26, 1997.

The reference to the independent press (and as often as possible to right-leaning news sources) is important to maintain credibility for the reported news, even as it has a partisan edge and implications, because the larger part of the rhetorical

impulse seems to be over trustworthiness and credibility--which party and which individuals can be relied on to deliver and who is misleading the American public. The approximately dozen stories on any day going back about a week divide up pretty evenly into tales of Clinton's and Congressional Democrats' accomplishments and Republican leaders' embarrassments. In the middle is usually placed a quotation of the day, again highlighting a Democratic accomplishment or a Republican betrayal. The news as reported here is really a trafficking in celebrity, credit, and thus potential support.

This partisan retelling of the news, traced back to independent news sources relies on news media already heavily engaged in reporting political warfare, partisan events and leaks created for the media, and pre-spun news releases. That is, the news already is filled with stories of partisan import with consequences for evaluation of the opposing parties and consequent support. Part of the political struggle is for each party to gain an upper hand in this struggle over appearances of credibility. The DNC page presents itself as embedded within this partisan struggle for control of news impressions, and thus places its readers in the role of consumers of political opinion, or as purveyors of it insofar as they use the news reports as a resource for their own political discourse.

To draw the visitors more fully into a realm of partisan representation of the news, the page offers direct subscription via email to the news site, and this service is offered through several postings on the main page, the news page, the "Get Active" page, and several other spots. The subscription page appeals to subscribers as party activists who will help purvey the information to others.

Think about the potential... For the first time in our Party's history, we have the ability to arm you with up-to-the minute news and information direct from Party Headquarters!

....

When the DNC launched Democratic News our goal was very simple -- to help equip supporters with the information they need to deliver the Democratic Party's message. DEMOCRATIC NEWS enables the Party to get the same information to thousands of Democrats across the country instantaneously.

Whether these updates provide grist for dinner table talk, talk show retorts, or editorial writing they increase the circulation of partisan news, with a particular orientation to celebrity hero and villain politicians--most notably the president and vice-president and the congressional leaders of both parties, as well as whoever might be the target of the latest Republican embarrassment. (As of June 1998 this

service was still active, providing bi-weekly the same partisan news that appears at the web site).

This sense of partisan celebrity is further enacted through the DNC's version of the "Punch Rush" page: an opportunity to vote on whether Newt Gingrich should pay his fines from his own funds. Each \$0.99 call to the 1-900 "Stop Newt Hotline" profits the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. This is accessed through the What's Hot page, along with a more sedate survey (also prominently displayed on the main home page) which collects net use information, rather than political opinions. This page also links to sites of three rather high-minded, nominally non-political causes: The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial project, the Net Day initiative (aimed at gaining volunteers to wire up schools), and the Kids Campaign (an extensive set of resources on children's issues). So what is hot apparently again consists of representations of high-road activities and accomplishments of the democratic office holders, with which the user can become affiliated, and low-road attacks on the deviousness of the opposition party, which one can enjoy and become incensed over.

Other opportunities for user participation are presented on the "Get Active" page. Here one can join the DNC, volunteer to work for local candidates, find out about internship positions, get voter registration information and download a registration form, sign the guest book (also linked on the main home page), or subscribe to the DNC news, described earlier. Except for the last, these are all traditional and soberly respectable activities carried out by the political party. Interestingly, beyond the DNC membership fee (choices of \$20 up to \$100) and the Stop Newt Hotline, there is no fund-raising carried out at the site, presenting the Democratic party as a source of information and site for identification and involvement without any pressure or cost. The suppression of the strong fund-raising motive that pervades much of modern political life suggests a conscious strategy of engagement by the designers of the page. The only thing there is pressure for the visitor to give up is their name. The Guest Book, the volunteer registration, the subscription to the DNC News, and the User Survey all are means of gathering names. As anyone who has worked in politics knows, the only thing more valuable than money in politics is mailing lists of supporters--which provides access to both money and votes.

The DNC site also supports access to more in depth information on policies, positions, and government actions as well as access to local democratic parties and related information through two pages--the DNC FAQ page (which embeds links in its prose responses to such questions as "How does the DNC work with local and state candidates?" and "Where can I find the Party's platform?"; and the Democratic Party Headquarters Page, which is an extensive index of related links. These extensive links largely keep one within the orbit of Democratic party organizations and affiliates, but one page, Linking With America, leads the user outward to a wide

array of amateur political sites, campaign professionals, local groups, activist abortion rights and environmental group, and in short to the entire complex of left/liberal political culture.

The structuring of the site to keep the user in the orbit of the DNC pages and affiliated organizations is one of the major changes that have occurred in the site since last election, when the site was more irreverent, playful, and cyber-culture oriented, and also quickly led the user outside the narrow world of democratic party representations of the world, democratic party activities and democratic party sentiments into a general young, ironic, and multivalent left political culture. Now the DNC pages try to keep the users engaged for a longer period in a more official, controlled, organized, and institutional world of political practice and in a more coherent viewpoint where the world is divided between workers for good and abusers of the public trust.

By June 1998, the site had moved further to institutional sobriety and providing more extensive access to policy statements and concrete policy accomplishments. While the basic format of the site remained the same, a new set of pages, accessed through a new entry-page title, "Where We Stand," gives extensive details of "Economic Progress Under President Clinton," "Democratic Platform," "Democratic Position Papers," "Democratic Accomplishments Overview," and "State by State Presidential Accomplishments" (actually kept at the whitehouse.gov server). The information presented here is concrete and extensive. There are, for example, over forty detailed position papers available on topics including "Clean Air," "Permanent Replacements for Lawful Economic Strikers," "Violence Against Women," and the "National Endowment for the Arts." While some (but not all) of this information was accessible in earlier versions of the site, gathering them together here and supplementing them foregrounds the party as an instrument of policy rather than a vehicle of partisan interests. The site also distances itself from raucous partisanship by dropping the outdated "Stop Newt" hotline and not replacing it with any similar amusement. Nonetheless, the partisan "Democratic News" remains.

The changes that have occurred in the DNC site, as a professional strategy of party presentation and supporter enlistment seem to have taken over from a kind of exuberant overflow of the youthful political culture of cyber-savvy twenty-something staffers, suggest not only that a great deal of thought and energy is going into the creation of institutionally significant web sites, but that some thought and energy is going into thinking what kinds of engagement and participation are being offered to the non-professional participant in political culture. No doubt the web and participant design is in dialectic with the responses and opinions of users (it would be interesting to note how that information is gathered and used), probably in a way that parallels any marketing, entertainment or political venture.

At the moment the result appears to be a backing away from the kind of partisan brawling that seems to pervade amateur politics on the web, and a movement to providing more solid and extensive information and policy thought (though of course still partisan). If such a trend continues and it is matched by similar developments at the web sites of other political institutions such as advocacy groups, citizen information organizations, as well as political parties and political campaigns, some of the hopes for access to increased political information may be realized. On the other hand, this information seems to be centrally controlled and distributed with little opportunity for citizen discussion and participation. Other potential sites for serious public discussion may be developing, but I have not yet seen them.

It may be that on more serious policy issues, beyond the visceral controversial issues which are manipulated in marketing strategies for parties and candidates and which evoke the kind of controversialist amateur participation that seems so pervasive on the web, the discussion is so professionalized and dependent on substantial informational and intellectual resources that citizen participation already requires a large investment in becoming informed and much work in finding a place in the conversation. Yet on particular issues such as the environment or health care large numbers of citizens have shown the commitment both to understand the issues and to assert their presence in the policy discussions. It is perhaps around special issues that depth of information and discussion might develop most forcefully on the internet.

Politics and Sociality in the Cyber-Age

The example of the DNC site, however, for the moment, still seems to draw upon our culture of news, now spun and pre-spun into a partisan frame, heavily weighted with emotions of benefaction and trust set against suspicion and repulsion, then projected onto celebrity heroic and villain figures. These emotions of political culture are being muted from their most virulent forms of political entertainment and are given the somberness of institutional authority, yet they pervade the selection and organization of the information. Nonetheless, this morality drama is providing entry ways into increasingly more substantive information and deliberation.

There is no reason to think that the current DNC site will stabilize as the form by which major party participation will be enacted in the cyber age. Perhaps the major parties will find other strategies for enlisting partisans and support. Perhaps the opportunities of cyber-space will support other political organizations or forms of action. But what does seem already clear, is that long-standing issues of political and journalistic responsibility are only written fresh and more compellingly on the web. On the web, the time immediacy, the wide geographic spread, democratic access,

and ability to make large amounts of information available do not in themselves protect us from the narrowest forms of partisanship, rumor, scurrilous attacks, and crude appeals; indeed, the Web has shown itself to be an inviting place for the baser forms of politics. The web equally can serve as an instrument of further centralization, advancing the causes of the most legitimated institutions, as quality information with institutional approval may become a distinctive and valued commodity against an unregulated open market of unreliable information, and as institutional voices delegitimize the voice amateur citizens. Even if we find a right mix of legitimated information from multiple sources and perspectives with opportunities for citizens to develop and express their positions and form political identities, we still need to establish vehicles for political opinion to aggregate in ways that become effective within mass society.

The ancient issue of democratic politics, how democracy becomes more than rabble rousing, is being posed fresh in the cyber age under new conditions and dynamics of communication. The solutions we will develop in the long run are as yet unsettled, but the future of our political culture depends on them.

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