

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Online Groups and Political Discourse:
Do Online Discussion Spaces Facilitate
Exposure to Political Disagreement?**Magdalena E. Wojcieszak^{1,3} and Diana C. Mutz²¹ IE School of Communication, IE University, Campus de Santa Cruz la Real, Cardenal Zúñiga, 12, 40003 Segovia, Spain² Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6220

To what extent do online discussion spaces expose participants to political talk and to cross-cutting political views in particular? Drawing on a representative national sample of over 1000 Americans reporting participation in chat rooms or message boards, we examine the types of online discussion spaces that create opportunities for cross-cutting political exchanges. Our findings suggest that the potential for deliberation occurs primarily in online groups where politics comes up only incidentally, but is not the central purpose of the discussion space. We discuss the implications of our findings for the contributions of the Internet to cross-cutting political discourse.

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Since its inception, many have hoped that the Internet would diversify the marketplace of ideas and provide an improved forum for political deliberation (see Papacharissi, 2002). For many, the Internet held out hopes of reinvigorating democracy by encouraging discourse among those of opposing views, one where the status of participants is less important, and where ideas sink or swim by virtue of the strength of their arguments. Others have conversely emphasized the Internet's potential to damage deliberative ideals by facilitating selective exposure to like-minded political views (Sunstein, 2001; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1997).

Both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives remain prevalent, yet very little is known about the naturally occurring use of online discussion groups. Given that "much of what goes on in the cyberspace is talk" (Chadwick, 2006, p. 25), addressing these contrasting perspectives requires knowing more about online spaces and their potential to connect dissimilar individuals and to produce cross-cutting political talk. In this study we draw on a large random population sample of those who have reported participation in online chat rooms or message boards within the past year. We use these data not only to examine the extent to which group-oriented online

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communication involves political chat rooms and message boards, but also to ask whether various kinds of *nonpolitical* online spaces generate political discourse. Most importantly, we assess the extent to which online political discourse involves disagreement. Finally, we examine whether selective exposure facilitates encountering like-minded views in political relative to other kinds of online discussion groups. Overall, our findings suggest that the potential for chat rooms and discussion boards to contribute to cross-cutting political discourse may be underestimated due to the considerable difficulties involved in deciding where to look for disagreement in political communication.

Internet-Based Political Discourse

The Internet has increased the amount and the availability of political content, thus instigating a debate as to the quality of the newly surfaced online discourse. Some suggest that the Internet could promote deliberative exchange of ideas (Papacharissi, 2002) because it facilitates the distribution of information and the circumvention of gatekeepers (Shapiro, 1999), and because it enables the emergence of online groups, that is, “individuals or organizations that come together . . . through an electronic medium to interact in a common problem or interest space” (Plant, 2004, p. 54).

Although these conditions might seem theoretically ideal for invigorated political discussion, most observers remain skeptical. Their skepticism, however, is based primarily on evidence on Internet use for information seeking. Here, studies find that the majority of the top 100 most frequently visited websites are dedicated to commerce and entertainment as opposed to political discourse (see Gandy, 2002). Analysis of audience measurement ratings also suggests that over half of Internet users do not access any public affairs information online, but seek out sports, financial, and entertainment websites (Tewksbury, 2003). Surveys moreover show that Internet users e-mail or obtain information from groups or websites associated with professions, hobbies, and sports rather than with political issues or causes (Horrigan, Rainie, & Fox, 2001).

Some scholars thus conclude that the online environment does not involve political discussions, but is rather “coming to resemble a realm of shopping, play, entertainment, and little else” (Barber, Mattson, & Peterson, 1997, p. 38). Although these conclusions may be warranted, what they suggest about informal political talk in online discussion groups remains unclear. We know little about the extent to which Internet users participate in political online groups, and even less about the extent to which nonpolitical online spaces discuss political topics. To date these gaps in basic knowledge have prevented meaningful evaluations of online political discourse.

While political talk *per se* may be valuable, it is political talk that involves exchange of dissimilar perspectives that is especially beneficial to individuals and society at large (see Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Scholars have made contradictory predictions regarding the contributions of the Internet to cross-cutting political discussion. Some have claimed that online groups might, for a variety of reasons, invigorate political discourse. First, the absence of nonverbal cues may prevent interlocutors

from judging opinions based on factors other than the arguments themselves, such as the race or gender of the argument providers, thereby increasing the participation of disadvantaged individuals and diversifying the views expressed (Blader & Tyler, 2003). In addition, online groups may facilitate exposure to opinions beyond the confines of participants' immediate associations (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). The lowered sense of social presence experienced online, moreover, may encourage expression of dissenting views and reduce the social risks and potential negative effects of disagreement (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2003).

Other scholars have suggested, however, that the Internet primarily enables interactions with like-minded people (Sunstein, 2001; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1997). In face-to-face contexts, individuals tend to select discussion partners based on similarities (e.g., Laumann, 1973). To the extent that the same principle applies to online interactions, Internet groups will tend toward homogeneity. Online chat rooms or message boards may actually allow people to reinforce their predilections to an unprecedented degree, because the same features that enable Internet users the potential to connect with dissimilar individuals facilitate their interactions with agreeable associates. Because the Internet transcends the confines of local communities, users might easily locate like-minded online groups in distant parts of the country even if like-minded people were not part of their immediate environment, and via Internet partisans may anonymously voice controversial views without fearing social repercussions otherwise experienced among dissimilar others (see Hill & Hughes, 1998; Norris, 2002).

To date, there is no comprehensive empirical evidence on the potential of online groups to engage participants in discussions across lines of ideological difference. The evidence has been inconclusive or suggestive at best because studies that rely on standard random population samples produce too few respondents who participate in chat rooms or message boards, while other research has a larger number of participants, but is constrained by its use of convenience samples of online groups. Not surprisingly, when scholars study online spaces *a priori* defined as politically heterogeneous, they portray the Internet as involving deliberative exchanges among open-minded participants who appreciate dissimilar perspectives (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2003). If researchers focus instead on partisan online groups, they are likely to conclude that the Internet consists of echo chambers where like-minded people are exposed to one-sided arguments, which reinforce their initial predilections (e.g. Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998, 1997; Wilhelm, 2000; Wojcieszak, in press).

To remedy the lack of representative evidence regarding political discourse on the Internet, this study takes advantage of an extremely large random national survey of almost 40,000 respondents who were recruited for an ongoing web-based panel. Because this large, representative pool of respondents had already been asked about their participation in interactive chat rooms or message boards, it was possible to randomly sample from specifically those participants who reported participating in online groups.

Our brief questionnaire was designed to address four progressively more specific research questions as a means of assessing characteristics of online political discourse.

First, what proportion of the online discussion groups that Americans use involves *political* chat rooms or message boards? Second, to what extent does political talk, that is, talk about political topics or controversial public issues, occur in online chat rooms and message boards that are established for purposes other than political discourse? Third, to what extent does political talk arising in various types of online groups serve to expose participants to like-minded views as opposed to challenging them via exposure to disagreement? Fourth, what is the role of partisan-based selective exposure in influencing the extent to which disagreement is experienced in political and nonpolitical online discussion spaces?

Method

Data for this study come from a survey sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics at the University of Pennsylvania. In order to obtain a representative sample of online chatters, we piggybacked our study onto a very large panel sample gathered by Knowledge Networks of Menlo Park, California. Data for our study were gathered between March 23 and 28, 2006. Knowledge Networks originally recruits its large panel of respondents via random digit dialing, and respondents are asked to take part in periodic surveys, in an exchange for free Internet access and other incentives.¹

In the screening survey administered prior to our study, roughly 11% of the representative national sample reported having used a chat room or a message board in the past year.² Those who reported participating in online groups are certainly not representative of the population as a whole, as is true with respect to Internet use more generally. But by identifying all qualified respondents in advance, we were able to randomly sample 1786 chat room or discussion board users. A total of 1386 completed the survey, for a completion rate of 78%. Responders and nonresponders were not significantly different from one another on standard demographics including gender, race, sex, age, education, region, and metropolitan versus nonmetropolitan areas.

As part of our survey, respondents were asked to confirm at the time the questionnaire was administered their participation in online discussion groups; 358 of them reported not participating in the past year, thus leaving a sample of 1028 respondents. These users did not differ significantly by any demographic from the larger sample of qualified respondents, nor from the portion of that sample that cooperated.³

The survey asked each respondent to think about “the type of online chat room or message board that you have visited most frequently in the past year” and provided 11 options, including hobby sites, professional organizations, and groups that promote social or political change, among others.⁴ This same question was repeated up to three times to capture multiple online groups that the respondents visited, asking about the next most frequently visited in the past year, and so forth, thus providing us with data on a total of 2041 user-online group pairings. By design, all

respondents in this data set participated in at least one chat room or message board, but 63% had visited two, and 36% reported visiting three or more online spaces.

When respondents selected an apolitical online group, they were next asked whether people participating in the group ever talked about political topics or controversial public issues. Responses were coded as 0 if political discussion did not occur and 1 if it did, with four politically oriented chat room or message boards coded as 1. If political discussion occurred in a given online group, respondents were asked whether they generally agreed or disagreed with the views expressed by other participants, with the response option ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), with 3 indicating “neither agree nor disagree.”

Results

Overwhelmingly, people are most likely to participate in online discourse centering on shared hobbies, interests, and activities, what we collectively refer to as “leisure activities.” Forty-five percent of the online discussion groups generated by our random sample were of this variety. As illustrated by the percentages shown in parentheses at the bottom of Figure 1, online groups for professional organizations, fan communities, support groups, and political groups are far less popular, but each of these four spaces accounts for between 10-13% of the total online chat room or

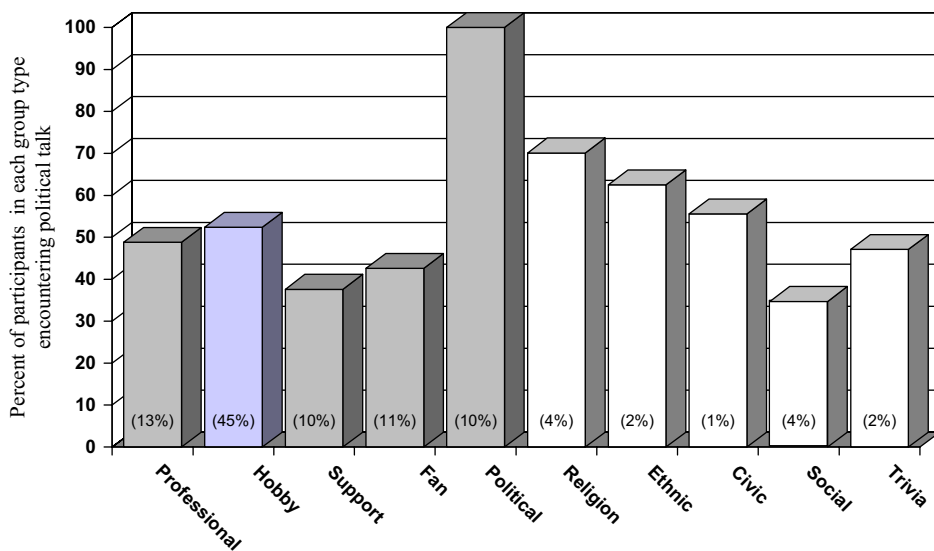


Figure 1 Exposure to political talk by type of online discussion group.

Note: Percentages in parentheses indicate the percentage of all online groups that fell into each category. Bar height illustrates the percentage of each type of online groups that include political talk. The unit of analysis is the group-respondent pair ($n = 2041$).

message board participation. All remaining types of online discussion groups are less likely to be visited.

Political forums are neither the most nor the least popular of online discussion groups. However, just as political discourse can occur in the course of everyday activities, online political exchanges may also occur in nonpolitical contexts. As illustrated by the height of the bars in Figure 1, on average, roughly half of participation in nonpolitical chats or message boards nonetheless involves some discussion of political topics and controversial public issues. Given the relatively minor status of politics in most Americans' lives, this high a percentage is surprising. Outside of explicitly political groups, political discussion is most pronounced in groups affiliated with religious, ethnic, and civic organizations. Importantly however, politics online also diffuses through the online population through hobby-based groups. The most frequently visited type of online group—one revolving around hobbies, interests, or activities—is in essence political, with 53% of participants encountering political topics within this context. Even the least politicized online chat rooms and message boards expose visitors to some political discussion with 35% talking politics while socializing or flirting. Thus the answer to our second research question—to what extent does political talk occur in nonpolitical online groups—is more than most would expect. Studies focusing exclusively on *political* online discussion spaces will miss these contributions entirely.

Because it is not political talk *per se*, but rather political discussion open to disagreement that is broadly advocated, it is crucial to address our third research question. To what extent do online political exchanges expose participants to like-minded versus challenging opinions? As shown in Figure 2, the modal online

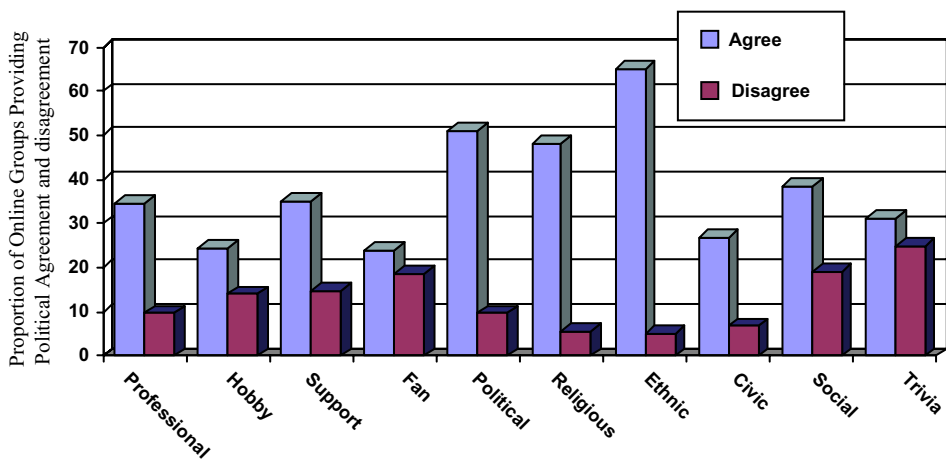


Figure 2 Percent of online discussion groups exposing visitors to agreement or disagreement.

Note: The unit of analysis is the online-group respondent pair, excluding those where politics was not discussed at all ($n = 1110$).

exchange is with people who agree rather than disagree, and this is true regardless of the kind of chat room or message board considered. Given that agreement consistently dominates disagreement in face-to-face political communication, this pattern should come as no surprise (see, e.g., Mutz, 2006). There are, nonetheless, important variations in the extent to which online discussion spaces facilitate exposure to dissimilar views. As shown in Figure 2, explicitly political groups and the highly politicized ethnic and religious organizations stand out as far more homogeneous than other chats and message boards. Online fan and hobby groups show the weakest tendency toward greater agreement. Although some types of hobbies may have strong political overtones in popular culture (for example, NASCAR and gun clubs are associated with Republicans, while yoga and vegan diets are perceived as more Democratic interests), hobby-based discussions online appear to be independent of traditional selectivity biases.

Does the pattern observed in Figure 2 produce large enough differences that we can be confident that some kinds of online groups are truly more politically homogeneous than others? To test the statistical significance of this pattern, we collapsed the types of chat rooms or message boards into four broad categories indicating whether they are predominantly (1) Professional (groups of trade, educational, or professional associations), (2) Leisure (groups that share a hobby, interest or activity, provide support, revolve around socializing and romance, fan groups for a TV show, actor, movie, musical group, or sports team, and general trivia groups), (3) Religious/Ethnic, or (4) Political/Civic (groups that discuss political issues, are associated with a political party or cause, promote sociopolitical change, and also civic/charity groups). We used an analysis of variance with planned contrasts relative to the Political/Civic category to test for whether the three kinds of online groups are significantly more heterogeneous in their political exchanges than political online spaces.

The mean levels of political agreement for Religious/Ethnic ($M = 2.37$, $n = 74$) and Political/Civic ($M = 2.40$, $n = 223$) online groups are virtually identical. However, both Leisure ($M = 2.84$, $n = 689$) and Professional ($M = 2.64$, $n = 123$) online groups produce substantially higher levels of disagreement when politics comes up in these contexts. Both of these means are significantly higher than the mean for Political/Civic online chat rooms and message boards ($p < 0.001$ and $p < .05$ respectively).

The data presented thus far have not *simultaneously* taken into account the number of people using the types of online forums, the prevalence of political talk, *and* the extent to which this talk involves exposure to cross-cutting views. In order to accomplish this, we generated an indicator of the overall extent to which the four kinds of online chat rooms or message boards contribute to cross-cutting discourse. We took the percentage of the online population that used the Leisure, Professional, Political/Civic, and Ethnic/Religious categories, multiplied it by the percent of contacts in that kind of online group who report political discussion, and then weighted that number by the 5-point scale indicating extent of political disagreement relative to agreement in the given category of chat room or message board. A high score

indicates a scenario in which a particular type of online group attracts many users, often generates political discussion, and entails a high level of disagreement.

As shown in Figure 3, this combined index makes it quite obvious which kind of chat room or message board contributes to cross-cutting political discourse online. Political/Civic and Religion/Ethnic groups are extremely limited in their contributions, due both to their relatively low usage and to high levels of political homogeneity among users. It is the Leisure online groups, that is, those revolving around socializing, sports, general trivia, movies or TV shows, or hobby or interest, that inadvertently bring together people who share something other than political views, but who nonetheless end up exchanging opinions on controversial public issues.

Our final research question asks in what ways selective exposure might account for the patterns seen in these results. We entertained two possible explanations for the greater homogeneity in political groups relative to others. First, it could be that political and nonpolitical groups simply attract different kinds of people. Strong partisans, for example, would especially value political agreement, and thus tend to select politically like-minded online groups in general. Alternatively, Internet chatters could approach all online groups with the same underlying desire for reinforcing encounters, but political discussion spaces could make it easier to accomplish selective exposure relative to leisure-oriented chat rooms or message boards. In other words, either individual characteristics (such as partisanship or its strength) or characteristics of the online group itself may drive the patterns observed thus far.

In most cases it is difficult to disentangle these two possibilities. Fortunately, these data provide a unique opportunity to differentiate the person-driven and discussion-space-driven alternatives because the same people in our data set often

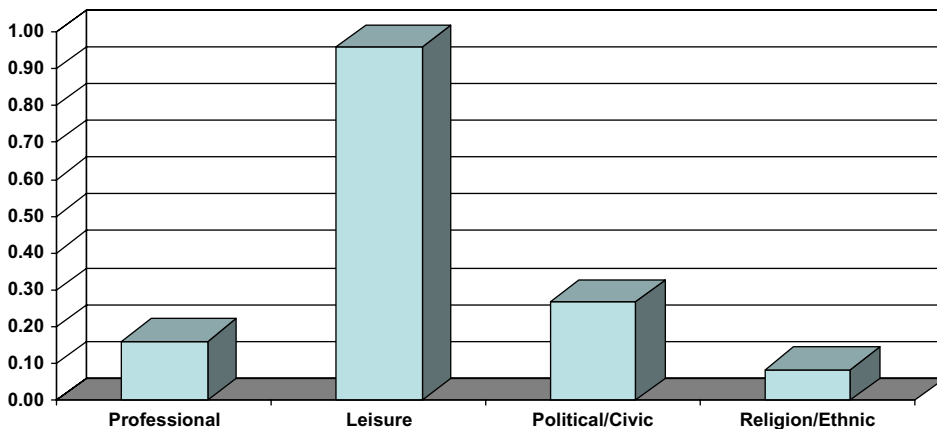


Figure 3 Combined indicator of extent of exposure to cross-cutting political views.

Note: Indicator was created by weighting the percentage of respondents who talk politics in the type of online group by the mean level of disagreement versus agreement the online group generates.

enter into multiple kinds of online chats or message boards. If it is characteristics of the person that drive higher or lower levels of like-minded exposure, the type of online group would not explain the differences we have observed. On the other hand, if it is the kind of online discussion space that drives these patterns, then the same person should encounter varying levels of political agreement across different chat rooms or message boards.

Because our data are structured so that each person-discussion space combination forms a dyad, several of which may involve the same respondent, our final analysis required an approach that takes into account the lack of independence between observations of person-discussion space combinations, and that addresses the nested structure of these dyads within respondents. Toward this end we used a hierarchical linear model predicting the extent to which the political views expressed in a given respondent-online group dyad involved disagreement. Along with the demographics variables and partisanship and its strength, we included categorical variables that represent the three main categories of chat rooms or message boards (Leisure, Professional, and Ethnic/Religious), leaving out Political groups as the reference category. Our purpose was to test whether it is the *type of online discussion space* that drives the greater homogeneity in some online groups, or characteristics of the *kinds of people* who choose to visit these types of chat rooms or message boards. Because individual differences cannot account for varying levels of homogeneity across multiple online groups visited by the same person, the nested structure of the data allows us to differentiate effects at the level of the individual respondent, and those at the level of the dyad.

Table 1 presents the results of an analysis that models personal characteristics as well as situation-based online group context using type of online space as level 1 predictors of disagreement in the dyad, and individual-level differences as the level 2 predictors. Table 1 shows the final fixed effects estimates using restricted maximum likelihood estimation. Surprisingly, individual characteristics are not very strong predictors of online exposure to political disagreement. Older people are less exposed to political disagreement online than younger people, and married people are more likely to encounter political disagreement than single people. Even more surprising, strong partisans are not significantly less likely than weak partisans to encounter disagreement, and Democrats, Republicans, and Independents are equally likely to come across dissenting political views.

However, as shown at the bottom of Table 1, the type of chat rooms or message boards visited does matter. Consistent with the results already shown, relative to Political online groups, Leisure discussion spaces are significantly more likely to expose visitors to political disagreement, even after taking into account personal characteristics. Although the other two categories have coefficients that approach significance—Professional online groups provide cross-cutting views, and Ethnic online spaces encourage reinforcing discussions—it is clearly the Leisure chat rooms or message boards that are important for purposes of increasing exposure to dissimilar political perspectives. The nested structure of our analyses means that even if

Table 1 Hierarchical Linear Model of Exposure to Disagreement in Online Groups in Which Political Talk Occurs

	Coefficient (SE)	T-ratio
(Intercept)	2.74*** (.032)	85.66
<i>Individual-Level Fixed Effects</i>		
Age	-.01** (.00)	-2.73
Education	-.03 (.02)	-1.26
Gender (male)	-.01 (.07)	-.02
Married	-.25** (.07)	3.63
Income	-.00 (.00)	-.16
Race (White)	.09 (.08)	1.02
Republican	.04(.01)	.48
Democrat	-.14 (.09)	-1.52
Strength of Party Identification	-.11 (.08)	-1.34
<i>Online Group-Level Fixed Effects</i>		
Professional Online Groups	.22 (.13)	1.63
Leisure Online Groups	.33** (.09)	3.53
Religious/Ethnic Online Groups	-.25 (.17)	-1.47
<i>Random Effect</i>		
Variance	.53	
Chi-square	1337.19***	
Level-1 error	.73	

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. P -values are two-tailed tests. Estimates are the result of a Hierarchical Linear Model with Political Group as the reference category.

a given person talked about politics in all four categories of online groups, we would still anticipate the highest exposure to disagreement in online groups revolving around hobbies, sports, or movies. Perhaps because they draw participants for non-political reasons, leisure chat rooms and message boards are natural places for disagreement to occur when political talk comes up.

Discussion

Political conversation, particularly one that exposes people to dissimilar political views, has been widely touted as beneficial for effective democracy. The logic of deliberative democracy is that if people discuss politics with other citizens, they will be more informed, tolerant, and reflective, and thus have higher quality opinions. When citizens are confronted with disagreement, moreover, they will have the benefit of taking others' views into account in reevaluating their own preconceived opinions. Both discussion in general, and disagreement in particular, could be either facilitated or thwarted in the online environment due to the increase in the availability of political content and the accessibility of anonymous and geographically unbounded online groups.

Using a representative sample of chat room and message board users, we find evidence of both the feared reinforcement of like-minded political perspectives online, but also some promising political discussion in groups organized around nonpolitical topics. Internet users who are not sufficiently engaged in politics to self-select into explicitly political online chat rooms or message boards inadvertently encounter political views online in hobby and interest groups in particular. This finding suggests that differentiating between the political and apolitical uses of the Internet is apparently not as clear cut as it first seems. Just as politics often comes up in face-to-face contexts when discussing other issues such as movie listings, personal gossip, or children's problems at school (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000), the same is true of online exchanges.

Moreover, political discussions that occur within nonpolitical online groups frequently involve participants who disagree with each other. Our results, therefore, suggest an especially promising contribution of casual political talk online, in that these nonpolitically motivated exchanges expose participants to dissimilar perspectives. Although politically oriented online activities may well be beneficial for some purposes, we find that political chat rooms and message boards make limited contributions to promoting cross-cutting discourse. The limitations of political groups occur both because they are used by a relatively small segment of Internet users, and because those who use them already tend to agree with one another in the first place.

To be clear, the number of Americans who participate in online groups of any kind remains relatively small, and the number who participate in explicitly political chat rooms or message boards is even smaller. However, the latter finding turns out to be beside the point for our purposes because most such online spaces already preach to the converted. In addition to confirming this "conventional wisdom" regarding homogeneous political online groups, we find that the incidental political talk in nonpolitical online spaces is more common than anticipated. As summarized in Figure 4, our estimates suggest that roughly 5.1 million people in the U.S. discussed politics online at the time of our study, and the majority of those people had these discussions in nonpolitical online forums. Because these estimates are based only on adults, as only respondents over the age of 18 were included in our sample, we cannot speak to the question as to what extent minors engage in online discussion spaces and make political comments. Unfortunately, based on our data, we also cannot address the quality of conversations that occur in these contexts, nor would we suggest that these exchanges meet the varying requirements for truly deliberative encounters. Logically one would suspect that the depth of conversation is not as great in nonpolitical online groups as in political chat rooms or message boards.

Our hierarchical linear model makes one additional point that is particularly important. The political homogeneity of people's online communication environments is less a function of the *people* involved than of the particular *social context* in which they find themselves. Strong partisans are no more likely to self select into like-minded online discussions. But those Internet users who talk politics primarily within explicitly political chat rooms or message boards are indeed likely to have their views

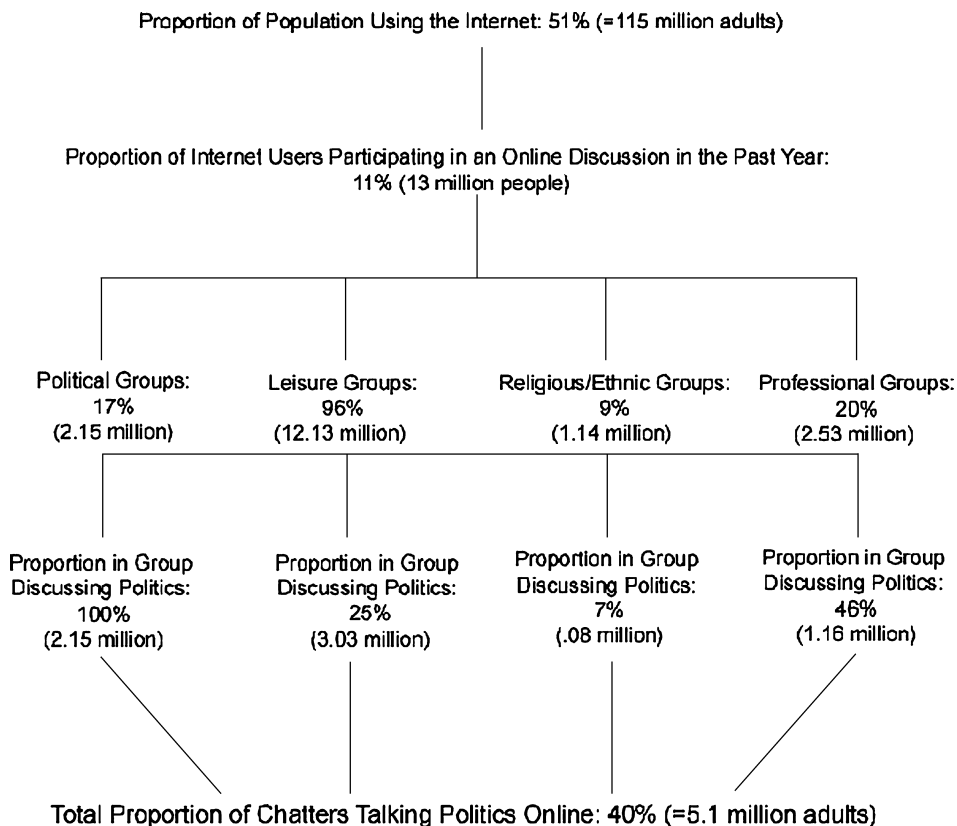


Figure 4 Estimated proportion of U.S. adult population engaging in online political discourse, 2006.

Note: Figures at the top level of this diagram were obtained from a comscore press release on May 4, 2006, the best data corresponding to the period of this survey, (Accessed at <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=849>). Subsequent levels are based on estimates from the data in this study.

reinforced by others. Regardless of individual characteristics, in the context of leisure online discussion groups, participants are more likely to be exposed to political disagreement than in any other type of chat room or message board.

We see this finding as optimistic, in that even those who are highly politically engaged and who have strong political predilections may encounter diverse opinions in online discussions revolving around fashion trends, technological gadgets, or sitcom characters. Future research will need to address how controversial political topics come up in seemingly apolitical discussions, as well as how they are tolerated by the participants. It may be that people’s level of comfort in engaging in cross-cutting exchanges is far greater when political discourse is not the central purpose of the interaction. Once people have established common ground—perhaps as

gardeners, or as weekend house fixer-uppers, political differences may be less threatening and more easily deflected than in an online discussion group designed explicitly for political exchanges.

As with any study, our approach to assessing political discourse in chat rooms and message boards has limitations. First, we rely on respondents' self-reports rather than on actual observations of disagreement occurring within online discussion groups. Although firsthand observations are in one sense ideal, they would necessarily mean a loss of representativeness in our sample. It is simply not feasible to analyze the content of all such groups that had been visited by a representative sample of the U.S. population. Based on evidence from social network self-reports with follow up confirmations by discussion partners, such reports tend to be highly accurate. When perceptions err, it tends to be in the direction of perceiving more agreement than is actually present (see Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995a). To the extent that this finding applies to perceptions on the web, what we have presented may be a *conservative* estimate of the amount of actual political disagreement encountered online. However, if disagreement is not communicated clearly enough to be noticeable to a person, it is doubtful that it can provide any of the many benefits widely attributed to it.

Our results are also likely to be conservative estimates of the amount of political discussion in which Internet users engage. For one, we let the respondents decide what constituted political discourse, simply asking whether "political topics or controversial public issues" arise in the online group they visit. This framing was purposely quite broad, but because people without strong political interests are less likely to perceive matters as "political," it may nonetheless underestimate what would qualify by another scholarly definition (see Eliasoph, 1998).

In addition, our study was conducted during a relatively quiescent time in U.S. politics. It was not a presidential election year, nor was the field period sufficiently close to the fall 2006 congressional elections. Given that we framed our question about political and controversial discussions more generally, elections are not the only possible topic. Nevertheless, we expect that periods of high political controversy that generate high levels of interest and media coverage would also stimulate higher levels of online political discourse (e.g., during a decision to go to war or during a presidential election).

A third reason we expect this to be a conservative estimate, is that 358 respondents (26% of our sample), who originally reported participating in online chat rooms or message boards in the past year, did not confirm this when our follow-up questionnaire was administered several months later. While this might suggest that those respondents provided unreliable information, it is also possible that they reported accurately both times but temporarily stopped participating during the intervening months that had elapsed. This would indicate that for some Internet users engagement in online discussions is an episodic rather than an ongoing activity. This would also mean that had we been able to rescreen respondents at the time our questionnaire was distributed, we could have found the same initial percentage of users

interacting with online groups. Notably, those who reported not participating when recontacted do not differ from those originally sampled or those who were still active in chat rooms or discussion boards.

Importantly, we only asked respondents about their participation in chat rooms and message boards. We did so because those online spaces most closely approximate a public forum, where even total strangers can communicate with one another interactively before an audience. The Internet obviously offers numerous other venues for interactive one-to-one political discussion, including e-mail and instant messaging. It also offers one-to-many weblogs and websites for distributing political information. However, our interest was in the Internet as a public forum, and thus we steered away from formats where an individual blogger or journalist is in primary control of the content. So while our conclusions apply to understanding political discourse that takes place in chat rooms and message boards, they are not intended to estimate the incidence or characteristics of all online political communication, of which online discussion spaces may be only a small part.

For reasons of practicality and avoiding respondent fatigue, our questionnaire only asked about up to three chat rooms or message boards, which could have implications for the extent of exposure to cross-cutting political views online. If many users visit more than three online groups (36% in our sample listed all three), and if less frequently used groups provide the “weak ties” that carry differing opinions and thus constitute prime contexts for political disagreement, then we may underestimate the extent to which Internet users are exposed to dissimilar political perspectives in online discussion groups. In a similar vein, the survey contained only one question to assess the extent to which disagreement occurred in each online group. Including more such measures tapping this concept would not only potentially increase the reliability of the measure we used, but – inasmuch as people might have different conceptions of what constitutes disagreement – could also expand the number of such reported incidents. The battery of questions we used were modeled after the items used to assess disagreement in networks, and have been validated by network assessments in face-to-face, but not online contexts. Variability in responses appears to have more to do with disagreement about what constitutes “political” discourse than about what constitutes disagreement, or, in our case, disagreement when discussing “politics or controversial public issues” (see Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995b).

Regardless of these limitations, our study suggests that the Internet’s potential as a deliberative forum may have been undersold based on empirical evidence from political online groups, as well as oversold based on optimistic predictions. Just as one should not generalize from a political rally or convention to conclude that all face to face interactions involve political reinforcement, likewise political discussion groups are probably not the best place to look for evidence of online cross-cutting deliberation. As with political conventions, such sites are far more likely to serve the purpose of mobilizing political activists. Both purposes are

important, but fully identifying and promoting the deliberative potential of the Internet will necessarily involve research with a far broader focus than political online forums.

Notes

- 1 The response rate for the larger panel recruitment (unfiltered sample) was typical of quality telephone surveys (28% AAPOR RR3), and the sample was representative of the general population. Comparisons with Current Population Survey (CPS) census benchmarks indicate no significant difference between the weighted panel data and the general adult population on any major demographics including gender, age, race, education, income, region, and metro/nonmetro residence. The only deviation by more than 2 percentage points appears with regard to age, with those under 29 being slightly overrepresented (25.4% in the total sample versus 23.1% in the U.S. census). The response rate was calculated for each RDD panel recruitment replicate that contained a case sampled for the study. This mean value for the replicate was assigned to the case that was sampled from that replicate. The mean rate across all the sampled cases was then calculated for the panel response rate. For details on how this sample is recruited, see Pineau and Dennis (2004). A bibliography of methodological assessments of the panel recruitment quality is available at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html>.
- 2 Respondents were screened into eligibility for our study by answering yes at some point in the previous three months to the following question: "Which of these activities do you use your computer for? Participating in chat rooms or message boards."
- 3 Those who did not qualify for the survey because they reported no participation in online chat rooms and message boards when contacted (despite reporting participation previously) do not differ from those originally sampled or those who completed the full questionnaire and were still participating in online groups. Our final sample slightly underrepresents those under 29 (23.2% versus 25.4% in the qualified sample, and 23.1% in the portion that cooperated) and overrepresents those with higher education (41.4% versus 38.1%, and 39.1% respectively) and Whites (82.8% versus 81.7% and 80.8%). Given that our final sample is drawn from a representative sample, it is the best obtainable representative sample of online group visitors.
- 4 The specific categories provided were: (1) A trade, educational, or professional association; (2) A group for people who share a particular hobby, interest, or activity; (3) A support group, such as for a medical condition or personal situation; (4) A group that promotes social or political change, such as an environmental organization; (5) A group associated with a political party or political cause of some kind; (6) A fan group for a particular TV show, actor, movie, musical group, or sports team; (7) A group that discusses political issues and controversies; (8) A religious group or organization; (9) An ethnic group or organization; (10) A charitable group or civic organization (11) Other ("please specify"). When respondents selected the "other" category and described the chat room or message board they had visited, we assigned responses into one of the existing categories (e.g. "tennis" or "cars" to the "Hobby and Interest" and "Disney" or "Kid Chris Show" to the "Fan Group" category). In order to account for

the open-ended responses that did not clearly belong to the already existing categories, we created two additional categories: “Social and Romance” (e.g. “social group” or “gay/lesbian”) and also “General Trivia” (e.g. “just a regular chat room,” “general casual chat room”).

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Los Grupos Online y el Discurso Político: ¿Facilitan los Espacios de Discusión online la Exposición a los Desacuerdos Políticos?

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Resumen

¿Hasta qué punto los espacios de discusión online exponen a los participantes a hablar de política y sobre sus visiones en temas relevantes de política? Recurriendo a una muestra nacional representativa de más de 1000 Estadounidenses que reportaron haber participado en salones de conversación ó foros de mensajes, examinamos los tipos de espacios de discusión online que crearon oportunidades para intercambios de temas relevantes de política. Nuestros resultados sugieren que el potencial para la deliberación ocurre primariamente en los grupos online donde los temas políticos aparecen solo en forma incidental, pero no es el propósito central del espacio de discusión. Discutimos las implicancias de nuestros hallazgos para las contribuciones del Internet sobre los temas del discurso político relevante.

在线团体和政治谈话：

在线讨论空间是否促进了人们对政治异见的接触？

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摘要

在线讨论空间在何种程度上促进了人们对政治谈话（尤其是最新政治观点）的接触？根据对 1000 多个使用聊天室或信息讨论版的美国人进行的全国性问卷调查，我们研究了为人们讨论政治热点问题提供了机会的网上讨论空间的类型。研究结果表明，思虑性的讨论主要出现于这样的在线团体中，即政治讨论在那里只是个别出现，并非该团体主要感兴趣的東西。我们最后讨论了本研究对有关因特网促进政治热点讨论之研究的涵义。

온라인 그룹들과 정치적 담론: 온라인 담론장이 정치적 의견 불일치에
대한 노출을 촉진하는가에 관한 연구

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요약

어느 정도로 온라인 토론장들이 정치적 대화 그리고 교차적 정치적 견해에 노출되도록 하는가. 챗 룸과 메시지 보드에 참여했다고 밝힌 1,000명 이상의 국가적 샘플을 이용, 우리는 반대적인 정치적 교환을 위한 기회들을 창출하는 온라인 대화장의 형태를 조사하였다. 우리의 발견들은 숙의를 위한 가능성은 주로 온라인 그룹들, 즉 정치가 오로지 간헐적으로 그리고 우연히 나타나는 곳에서 나타나며, 이는 의견을 나누는 곳의 주요 목적은 아닌 것으로 나타났다. 우리는 인터넷이 교차적 정치적 담론에 대한 기여도가 어떠한지에 대한 함의들을 논의하였다.