

**Online and Offline Activism:  
Communication Mediation and Political Messaging Among Blog Readers**

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During the 2004 presidential campaign, blogs made one of their first big splashes in the national news cycle by contesting claims made in a *60 Minutes* report about George W. Bush's National Guard service. Reacting quickly to the story's initial airing, members of several conservative blog communities presented critiques of the documents used to support the story, and CBS eventually apologized for the story. The reaction of former CBS executive Joe Klein sums up a common stereotype about bloggers and blog readers: "You couldn't have a starker contrast between the multiple layers of checks and balances [in traditional media] and a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas writing." (Kurtz, 2004)

Klein's conception of the blogger's writing as a solitary act, disconnected from group participation, is one we seek to challenge in this paper. Research has consistently found a connection between political talk and political participation (McLeod & McDonald, 1985; Kim, Wyatt & Katz, 1999; Pan et al., 2006), and other studies indicate that there may not be a reason to believe the kind of talk that occurs via political blogs is different from face-to-face discussions (Castells, 2007; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Trammell & Kaid, 2005). Though many researchers have studied the potential for the Internet to influence levels of participation generally, few have dealt with the notion that blog communities present avenues for individuals to be part of traditional political participation activities while also providing new online opportunities (Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2005; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Yamamoto, 2006).

The nature of the Internet as a discursive medium makes the relationship between political talk and online participation all the more interesting, particularly as increasing numbers of people begin to use blogs. A 2006 study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 39 percent of American Internet users read blogs and that 8 percent of American

Internet users have blogs of their own (Lenhart & Fox, 2006), both significant increases over 2005. The new expressive and participatory options that the Internet provides can only become more salient to the political process as those numbers continue to rise. In this study, we examine the impact of the online context by looking specifically at blog readers. Our analysis seeks to build on the communication mediation model (McLeod et al., 2001) by identifying relationships between political talk – both online and offline – and various forms of expressive and political participation. Using survey data collected from more than 3,900 blog readers of 40 leading political blogs, we model factors that predict online and offline forms of participation.

### Communication Mediation

Research has found that news consumption and interpersonal political discussion work in concert to encourage various forms of participation (McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod et al., 2001). News use promotes increased political knowledge, encourages media reflection and elaboration, and fosters a sense of political efficacy (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). These effects have been observed for consumption of hard news through newspapers, television, and the Internet, with TV producing the weakest effects. Consumption of public affairs content can also provide a resource for political discussion and create opportunities for exposure to viewpoints unavailable in one's social network (Mutz & Martin, 2001), encouraging discussion and dialogue that might not otherwise occur. In turn, political discussion raises awareness about collective problems, increases tolerance, and highlights opportunities for involvement, thereby encouraging engagement in civic and political life (Mutz, 2006; Walsh, 2004).

The idea that communication among citizens mediates the effects of news consumption and reflection on engagement is not new; it harkens back to two-step flow theories of press

influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). However, the notion of *communication mediation* considered here focuses on how people express and discuss ideas encountered in the news. One of the strengths of a *communication mediation* approach is the integration of mass and interpersonal communication into a unified process that fosters participation (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Most of these insights have resulted from research conducted on population cross-sections, but less is known about whether these same mediating processes operate among those who rely heavily on the Internet as a source for news and a sphere for communicative interaction.

Indeed, some assert that the rise of the Internet may make “some collective endeavors harder to maintain or easier to destroy” (Lupia & Sen, 2003, p. 316). This raises serious questions about whether communication mediation occurs among those on the leading edge of online politics. Bloggers and blog visitors may force a rethinking of the basic mediation model to consider a range of possibilities: (1) Does face-to-face political talk remain a robust pathway to participation among those who frequent political blogs or does this digital vanguard rely exclusively on online forms of communication? (2) Is online citizenship at odds with conventional modes of political participation? (3) Does visiting and interacting on political blogs spur campaign participation or simply satisfy the motive to feel involved in politics absent online or offline political action?

### Political Messaging

Political messaging via the Internet may be particularly important to this dynamic. Previous research has found that communicating about politics over the Internet complements face-to-face political talk (cite??). Interactive messaging technologies such as e-mail, instant messaging, online chat, and comment boards permit the sharing of political perspectives (Price &

Cappella, 2002; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). The Internet obviously allows people to “post, at minimal cost, messages and images that can be viewed instantly by global audiences” (Lupia & Sin, 2003, p. 316). And evidence is accumulating that political messaging via email — i.e., sharing political information or a news story via the Internet — contributes directly to civic and political participation (Authors, 2006). However, those who have conducted content analyses of online political discussion in chat rooms and discussion boards have been less sanguine about this medium’s mobilizing potential (e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000).

Along these same lines, political blogs are not known for their civility, and the potential for this sort of discourse to creep into the communications of blog visitors is a real possibility. Thus, even though political messaging has been found to encourage participation among representative samples of Americans, it remains to be seen whether this finding holds when examined among those who frequent political blogs. It is likely that, even among this population, emailing friends and associates about politics allows for the coordination of collective action. The associative features of e-mail readily allow individuals to share their views with many people. Messaging over e-mail — the most popular use of the Internet — may also permit people to encounter opportunities for various forms of political mobilization: expressive forms of participation such as letter writing and petition signing, as well as political forms of participation such as attending speeches and working on campaigns (Corrado & Firestone, 1996).

#### Expressive and Political Participation

No consensus exists as to how to conceptualize the construct of political participation. Based on the seminal writings by Verba and his associates (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995), political participation can be viewed as having four dimensions: voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, and collective activities. Somewhat similarly,

Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) distinguish between “campaigning” and “complaining” forms of participation. As these conceptualizations suggest, there is at minimum a distinction between collective (i.e., campaigning) and expressive (i.e., complaining) forms of participation.

With the mounting influence of Internet use among the American public, political participation has taken new forms on the web (Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis, & Norris, 2004; Krueger, 2002; van Dijk, 2000). However, current studies of online participatory behavior (e.g., Gennaro & Dutton, 2006) typically adapt batteries for measuring traditional offline political participation to online contexts, failing to take into consideration that “the context provided by the Internet means that the activities take on new dimensions and forms that are at once more visual, immediate, self-selected and impersonal” (Gennaro & Dutton, 2006, p. 566). Current conceptualizations of online political participation typically do not consider behaviors such as displaying campaign slogans on personal web sites, signing up for a political newsletter, or initiating, signing, and forwarding an online petition.

The difference between the range of political activities people undertake in an offline versus online setting is also evidenced by the factors that predict them. In one study conducted by Best & Krueger (2005), online participation was predicted by gender (female), race (white), online mobilization, Internet skill, and political interest, whereas offline political participation was predicted by age, race (white), civic skill, and political interest.

Even less explored in the current literature is the conceptualization of the dimensions of online political participation. On the one hand, the ease of using and creating new communication channels, such as blogs, video posts, and Web sites, has spawned the mushrooming of grassroots, bottom-up participation. Individuals have begun to take on the roles of established institutions, empowered to more openly and freely express their opinions. At the

same time, the Internet has brought elites and the public closer together, making it easier to express views to elected officials and established journalists. As such, communication and participation online has amplified conventional expressive and political participation.

Specifically, the ease of communication on the Internet has especially lowered the cost of online expressive participation. People write e-mails to newspaper editors and politicians with the expectation that their political messages will get to the recipient, and create political ads that are then posted to YouTube, sometimes generating audiences in the millions.<sup>1</sup> The opportunities created by the Internet propel more self-initiated, one-way participation among Americans.

These developments do not enfeeble collective forms of political participation in which an individual interacts with others in an attempt to collectively influence politics. On the contrary, online and offline forms of political participation appear to be blossoming simultaneously. A range of online activities has contributed to the convenient coordination of political activities and swift mobilization of political activists, complementing offline efforts (Bennett & Givins, 2006; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). The Internet has greatly enhanced collective political action that is less dependent on institutions (Bimber, 1998, 2002; Davis, 1999). A prominent example is Howard Dean's Blog for America, which served as a forum for people from all walks of life to get involved and coordinate events in the 2004 election (Cornfield, 2004; Trippi, 2004).

The conceptualization of expressive and political participation is also key to understanding offline political participation. Individuals express their political opinions by writing to politicians or engaging in other solitary expressive actions, while at the same time relying on collective effort to address certain types of problems. These two modes of participation also exist in offline settings, though their manifestations may differ.

## Theoretical Model

Although research on communication and civic participation has begun to clarify the linkages between patterns of media use, citizen communication, and public engagement, few studies have considered how these factors operate across a range of participatory political activities. In this research, we consider both expressive and political forms of participation, while differentiating whether these activities take place in online settings or through more conventional venues. This is particularly important given our focus on active blog users, whom many assume may be more inclined to participate online than offline and prefer expressive to collective forms of action. We do not share this assumption and plan to put it to the test by examining a citizen communication mediation model on this range of outcomes.

An early version of the model we present below was developed by Shah et al. (2005), though the model featured here contains a number of novel features. Although the previous citizen communication mediation model linked newspaper reading, broadcast news viewing, and online news seeking to public engagement through its effects on political messaging and political talk, in this model we include political efficacy and media reflection as mediating variables in this process (see Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; McLeod et al., 2001). We expect that efficacy and reflection are particularly important to examine among blog users, and contend that they spur greater political messaging and political talk among this group. This citizen communication, online and offline, will in turn encourage greater political participation, in all forms.

Integrating extant research with these assertions leads us to advance the following theoretical model (see Figure 1). This model highlights the role of the Internet in participatory action while also accounting for a much broader range of communication behaviors and socio-political attitudes. We assert that these online and offline communication behaviors are

complementary such that (a) newspaper, television and online news use can lead to online political messaging and (b) online news consumption can foster greater political talk.

### **Methods**

The number of weblogs varies according to different estimates by monitors such as Technorati, Blogstreet, and The Perseus Development Corp but can rank as high as hundreds of millions if all foreign language blogs are included. When examined more closely, the popularity of blogs becomes less marvelous. First, such astronomical numbers are inflated because many blogs are rarely updated or have become inactive. These are blogs posted by people as a lark or as an experiment, typically with free-and-easy programs like Blogger or LiveJournal. But the corpse of these inactive or abandoned blogs lingers in cyberstasis.

Indeed, many blogs live short lives or inactive lives. In research by the Perseus Group in 2004, 1.09 million blogs were abandoned on the day of creation, and within four months 66 percent of blogs had been temporarily or permanently left in limbo by their original creators.<sup>2</sup> Early counting methods included such lost blogs. Population counts are also deceptively inflated by fake or spam blogs, a new form of passive spam called “clogs.”<sup>3</sup> As of 2005, Technorati does track “clogs” but admits this is imperfect science. By their count, 2 to 8 percent of new blogs are created simply to sell products.

More than half of blogs survive the first three months after their creation--that is, their editors keep posting. Also, about 5.8 percent of posts on blogs are spam or fakes; usually, the number of such fake blogs increases in parallel to the number of legit ones which correspond to major news events such as the London bombings or Hurricane Katrina.<sup>4</sup> A 2006 survey by Blogads network categorized blogging into four blog communities: politics, gossip and celebrity news, motherhood and family issues, and music.<sup>5</sup>

To gain a representative sample from within the blogosphere is a qualitative and quantitative proposition. Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com/pop/blogs/>) offers its “biggest blogs in the blogosphere, as measured by unique links in the last six months.” The Blogstreet (<http://www.blogstreet.com>) ratings metric is its Blog Influence Quotient (BIQ). By such metrics, not all blogs are equal. By traditional measures, some blogs have huge ratings. The Huffington Post, Redstate, Powerline or MyDD are also frequently “blogrolled,” or listed, in the blogs of affiliation lists of other blogs as well as repeatedly mentioned as “kings and queens” of the bloglands by industrial media.

In sum, any survey of bloggers must take into account that some bloggers receive much more attention than others. In response, to construct our sample we took (in Winter 2006-2007) the 2006 lists of the top 300 most popular blogs from the above measurers and narrowed them down to “political” blogs, or those that have mostly political content. We further refined the sample by eliminating blogs that were in a foreign language because that would create problems for survey design and interpretation. We also culled out blogs that had not been in operation by the same blogger or groups of bloggers for at least two years in order to gain samples of (a) experienced bloggers and as well as (b) an audience that was familiar with the blog content and style.

On the basis of this sample selection process, our final solicitation was emailed to 154 top political blogs. This solicitation produced 66 usable responses from blog authors. Of these, 40 bloggers also posted a visitor survey on their blog, which produced 3,909 usable responses from the readers of these top political blogs. Of the total reader respondents, 26.2% were women and 73.8% were men. The mean age of the respondents was 46 years ( $SD = 12.3$ ). Ethnic distribution of the sample was 90.1% White. The median educational level was some graduate education and

the median annual household incomes were \$80,000 – 100,000. The gender, education, and income skews in this data are consistent with previous research on blog readers (Pew, 2005). Notably, this procedure also produced a very ideologically diverse sample, with 43% describing themselves as Democrats, 31% as Republicans, and 14% as Libertarians.

## Measures

### Dependent Variables

*Online political participation.* We constructed this variable from three items, which asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often in the past twelve months they engaged in the following activities: “Organized political activity via the Internet,” “Met in person with a political group I joined online,” or “Engaged in collective action that was organized through another blog.” These items were then averaged to create an index (cronbach’s alpha=.79, M=1.23, SD=2.05).

*Online expressive participation.* This variable is built using three items, asking respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often in the past twelve months they engaged in the following activities: “Sent an e-mail to an editor of a newspaper/magazine,” “Used e-mail to contact a politician,” or “Signed an online petition.” These items were averaged together to create an index for this variable (cronbach’s alpha=.78, M=3.58, SD=2.71).

*Offline expressive participation.* Like online expressive participation, this variable is also constructed using three items, asking respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often in the past twelve months they engaged in the following activities: “Wrote a letter to an editor of a newspaper/magazine,” “Displayed a campaign button or sticker,” or “Contracted a politician.” These items were averaged to create an index (cronbach’s alpha=.73, M=2.83, SD=2.65).

*Offline political participation.* Similar to online political participation, we constructed this variable using three items that ask respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often in the past twelve months they engaged in the following activities: “Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech,” “Worked for a political candidate or party,” or “Contributed money to a political campaign.” These items were averaged to create an index for this variable (cronbach’s alpha=.82, M=2.24, SD=2.68).

### **Endogenous predictor variables**

*Online political messaging.* One important variable that could predict participatory outcomes is use of the Internet to facilitate the spread of information. We conceptualized online political messaging as using the Internet to facilitate communication about politics and current policy. It was operationalized with two items that asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale how often they sent a political e-mail or a news story to friends. These items were averaged to create an index (cronbach’s alpha = .79, M=4.91, SD=3.16).

*Political talk.* Previous research has also demonstrated that political talk is an important variable that needs to be considered for its importance to participation (Scheufele, 2000; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Political talk was measured using one variable that asked respondents how many people they have talked with about politics or public affairs in the last week. This open-ended response was compressed, so everyone who answered twenty or greater was entered into the same group, creating a continuous scale from 0 to 20 (M=5.69, SD=4.81).

*Political efficacy.* Another key variable that helps predict political participation is political efficacy. For these analyses, we measured efficacy by creating an index of two items, which asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale their agreement with the idea that they do not have a say in government and their vote does not matter. Both items were reverse coded so a

higher number indicated a greater feeling of political efficacy. The items were averaged to create the index for this variable (cronbach's alpha = .57, M=5.97, SD=2.22).

*Media reflection.* People are not merely exposed to media content, but often chose to reflect on what was portrayed and to integrate this knowledge into their understanding of issues (Eveland et al., 2005; Eveland et al., 2003). An index of four items was used to create the variable "media reflection." Respondents were asked to rate on an 11-point scale asking them whether they thought about what they saw in the news or tried to relate to their personal experiences. These four items were averaged to create an index for this variable (cronbach's alpha=.80, M=7.42, SD=1.58).

### **Independent variables**

*Online News Use.* Online news use was operationalized as an additive index constructed from six items measuring various types of use of the Internet to gain political and current events information. Each item was based off an 11-point scale asking about the frequency of use of these various online tools, so the additive measure created an index ranging from 0 to 60 for online news use (cronbach's alpha=.63, M=34.20, SD=11.28).

*Print News Use.* To measure print news use, we used four items that asked respondents how frequently, on an 11-point scale, they read local, national, and international newspapers, as well as their use of news magazines. These items were averaged to create an index (cronbach's alpha = .73, M=4.87, SD=2.71).

*Television News Use.* For television news use, three items asking respondents how frequently, on an 11-point scale, they watched local and national television news programs and watched television news magazines, like 60 Minutes. These three items were averaged to create an index (cronbach's alpha=.79, M=3.66, SD=2.87).

## **Control Variables**

*Predispositions and Motivations.* Three control variables dealt with respondents' predispositions about and motivations for their use of the news. One variable our study looked at is a surveillance motivation for news use, operationalized through an index constructed with two measures of use of the news to stay informed and learn new ideas (cronbach's alpha=.84,  $M=4.66$ ,  $SD=2.67$ ). A second control variable tested partisanship. Respondents answered a question asking whether they were Democrats or Republicans, or another party. Respondents then ranked the strength of that identification on a three point scale, from weak to strong. These items were coded together for Republicans and Democrats, giving party identification and strength. Everyone who answered other than Democrat or Republican in the first question were grouped together as "Independents" on the 7 point scale ( $M=4.31$ ,  $SD=2.03$ ). Finally, a last motivation control variable deals with issue extremity. Issue extremity was constructed using six items asking respondents to rate their agreement on an 11-point scale with various current political debates like stem cell research, same sex marriage, and the 2006 election outcome (cronbach's alpha=.93). This scale was folded to create a measure for issue ideology extremity ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ).

*Demographics.* Our study also includes several demographic variables as controls in our model<sup>6</sup>. The first demographic variable is age, which was an open-ended question. The scale was compressed, as people who answered less than 18 or people who gave an age greater than 86 were replaced with the mean score. Age is used as a continuous variable in this analysis ( $M=46.02$ ,  $SD=11.23$ ). Education was measured with a single item, asking respondents for their highest completed educational level on a seven-point scale ( $M=4.81$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ). Income was measured with a single item, asking respondents for their annual income on a six-point scale,

with increments of \$20,000 ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=1.47$ ). Gender was also a single item, asking respondents to whether they were male or female (60.7% of respondents answered male)<sup>7</sup>.

## Results

First, to test the correlations between our key dependent variables, we ran zero-order correlations among the four variables (see Table 1). All of the dependent variables are significantly correlated to each other, which we expected given they are four measures of participation. However, the correlations also support our conceptualization of the variables – online and offline expressive participation are the most highly correlated at .776. However, the strengths of these correlations also indicate the importance of conceptualizing and testing these dependent variables as separate variables. Although each clearly is a component of participation, the correlations indicate that they are ultimately different types of behavior, and, as such, deserve separate analyses.

To examine the effects media use, political efficacy, online messaging, and talk have on these different forms of participation, both online and offline, we ran a series of hierarchical regression models. These analyses allow us to test the effects of our key independent variables, while controlling for the effects of demographics and motivations. Also, this analysis allows us to test each effect independent of the others, building a more nuanced understanding what is driving the motivation to participate among the highly engaged blog users.

This model performs very well for online political participation, accounting for 28.7 percent of variance (See Table 2). Each block significantly adds to the amount of variance explained, with the two most important blocks being media and political motivations, as well as political messaging and talk. The only demographic variables that survive to predict online political participation are age, with older people participating more, and gender, with females

demonstrating greater participation. However, all of the media use and political motivations variables are significant predictors of online political participation, with more liberal party identification, surveillance motivation for using mass media, and extreme issue positions all positively related to online political participation. Together, these demographic and motivational variables account for 13.3 percent of variance in the model.

Of the news media use variables, both print and television news use are reduced to nonsignificance in the final model. Only online news use remains to positively and significantly predict online political participation. Media reflection provides a significant influence when entered into the model, but this result is reduced to marginal significance when the political messaging and talk variables are introduced. Political efficacy remains a significant predictor of online political participation, supporting previous research about the importance of efficacy in participatory outcomes (cite?).

However, one of the most interesting findings is the large contribution of both the political talk and online messaging variables. Providing large independent contributions to online political participation, the effects of political talk and online political messaging resemble each other very closely. Together, these two variables explain 8.8 percent of variance. Ultimately, this model suggests that while many factors predict online political participation, the role of online news use, political efficacy, political talk, and online political messaging are especially important in predicting and encouraging online political participation.

Closely related to online political participation, a second hierarchical multiple regression model is used to examine online expressive participation. Our model accounts for 37.6 percent of variance (See Table 3). The demographic variables have much more explanatory power in this model; they explain nearly 6.8 percent of the variance alone. This generally supports the

importance of demographic variables in explaining participation. In keeping with the previous model, both age and gender show similar relationships, but while education is not a significant predictor when demographic variables alone are entered into the model, it becomes significant in the final model. Interestingly, the model demonstrates that less educated respondents actually report more online expressive participation, which suggesting that online expressive participation helps to give those normally less participatory in politics a comparative advantage, helping to offset their lack of participation in other areas. Again, the media and political motivational factors also remain significant, presenting a similar pattern to the model for online political participation. Together, the demographic and motivational factors account for nearly 19.3 percent of variance in the model.

While the news use variables perform similarly to the previous model for online political participation, television news use remains a significant predictor throughout the model. Online news use remains a more important factor in encouraging online expressive participation, but television news use also makes an independent positive contribution. As before, when entered, print news use is significant, but does not significantly predict participation in the final model. In contrast to online political participation, however, neither political efficacy nor media reflection significantly influence online expressive participation.

Finally, while both political talk and online messaging significantly predict online expressive participation, online political messaging has a much larger effect. Indeed, with a beta of .32, online political messaging provides the most explanatory predictor in the model of online expressive participation. Together, these two variables of political talk and messaging account for 12.2 percent of variance. Altogether, while the online expressive participation model produces many similar results to the online political participation, there are also significant

changes between the two models, demonstrating that while many of the factors remain the same, these are ultimately different forms of participation.

However, our analyses were also interested whether online and offline participation was comparable and what key differences may arise between the two types of participation. Therefore, we used the same hierarchical regression models to test the variables against two types of offline participation, which we tried to keep roughly equivalent to the related online forms of participation.

The model for offline expressive participation performs very well, explaining 35.7 percent of variance (See Table 4). Demographic variables such as age and gender remain significant in the expected directions, although the negative effect of education that was significant for online expressive participation is no longer significant in this model. Media and political motivations again are significant, as with online expressive participation – unlike online political participation, party identification and issue extremity contribute more to offline expressive participation. Ultimately, the demographic and motivational factors explain 15.1 percent of variance in our model.

However, unlike previous models, all three of the news use variables remain significant throughout the model for offline expressive participation. While online news use is still the strongest predictor of offline expressive participation, both print and television news use remain as significant positive predictors. This finding closely mirrors earlier findings about the importance of news media use for participation and emerges as a key difference between online and offline forms of participation. Opposite our results for online expressive participation, political efficacy makes a positive contribution to offline expressive participation, while media reflection is marginally significant. Finally, as in the previous models, both political talk and

online political messaging are both strong positive predictors of offline expressive participation. However, the pattern for these results more closely mirrors the pattern for online political participation than online expressive participation – the effects of political talk and online political messaging are nearly equal in this model. Together, these expression variables account for 13.2 percent of variance.

Finally, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the effects on offline political participation (See Table 5). The same model performed well, explaining 31.6 percent of total variance for offline political participation. Demographic controls demonstrate the same pattern as seen in all the previous models, although offline political participation includes a significant positive impact of income. The media and political motivational variables also demonstrate a consistent pattern, as all three variables in this block are significant positive predictors of offline political participation. Together these control blocks account for 14.4 percent of variance.

The model for offline political participation closely mirrors the results for offline expressive participation. Again, all three of the news media variables were significant positive influences on offline political participation. Also, the effects for the three news sources appear to be much more equivalent than in previous models, deemphasizing the earlier importance of online news use, demonstrating news usage patterns differently predict online and offline participation. Political efficacy is also a significant positive predictor of offline political participation, while media reflection does not contribute to offline political participation. Finally, as in the previous models, both the political talk and the online political messaging variables account for a significant amount of variance – this block alone explains 9.7 percent of variance.

However, in this model, political talk has greater explanatory power than online political messaging, reversing the general trend.

In addition to the hierarchical analysis, structural equation modeling was performed to advance the findings observed in the regressions. Our goal in this analysis was to examine the process of mediation among media use, efficacy and reflection, and citizen communication on online political participation, online expressive participation, offline expressive participation and offline political participation. In order to focus on the relationship among these variables and yet account for the effects of background variables, all variables included in the model were residualized for 1) demographics such as age, gender, education and income; and 2) orientations such as surveillance motivation, party ID and issue extremity.

As previously established by our general model, news media use, in conjunction to political efficacy and reflection on the news, is theorized to predict both political messaging and political talk, which ultimately predict four distinct types of participation: online expressive, offline expressive, online political and offline political. Consistent with past research on the communication mediation model, media use works through interpersonal discussion about politics to lead to participation. Our model replicates these findings. Particularly notable, media reflection and political efficacy not only predict political talk but also explain online messaging. Messaging emerges as a factor on considerable importance, equal in predictive power to political talk in relation to participation, both online and offline.

Results of our model also provide insight about the specific paths through which people engage in these various types of participation. There is a direct effect from certain forms of media use to participation but also an indirect effect mediated through 1) news reflection and political efficacy as well as 2) political talk and online messaging. These results are summarized

in Figure 2, which highlights the key findings of the structural equation modeling (please refer to Appendix Figures 1 - 4 for the individual models for the four criterion variables).

As illustrated by the SEM results, online news consumption is a constant predictor for all four types of political participatory behaviors whereas TV and print media use have a direct impact on offline political participation alone. On the one hand, regardless of the media people use, online political messaging mediates the effects of news consumption on the four types of political participation. Somewhat similarly, with online and print media use in particular, the indirect effect on the criterion variables is largely mediated by political talk.

### **Discussion**

Our results provide an interesting analysis of one of the most engaged and knowledgeable segments of the population – blog readers. While our research supports many previous findings, it also adds interesting new insights into the field of scholarship looking at different types of participation and their antecedents.

One of the largest contributions of this paper lies in the difference it advances between online and offline forms of participation. Previous research has found that communication about public affairs is an important predictor of political participation –political talk, television and print media use, and issue-specific media use have positively predicted political participation (Kim et al., 1999; McLeod et al., 1999). However, prior research has conceived of participation as an offline phenomenon, failing to consider how the Internet is creating new ways that people can engage in politics in the virtual world. Our results provide an important distinction between offline forms of participation and online forms of participation, and consider them both legitimate outcomes in their own right. We also distinguish between expressive and collective

forms of participation in these two domains, reflecting the diverse range of participatory opportunities that now exist.

While all three media use variables included in our analyses – print, television, and online news use – are significant positive predictors of offline participation, online news use is the only consistent predictor for online political participation, with television news use providing a small but significant contribution for online expressive participation. If blog readers are digital vanguards, as we suspect, then the movement into a world where more and more people get their information from the Internet and online news sources may encourage new forms of participation. For those who prefer using online methods to participate in politics, such as the blog readers who are the focus of this study, online news use may replace the more traditional forms of media in terms of direct effects on online participation. Yet this study also provides an optimistic view for the continuing importance of offline media like print and television news – even among blog readers, it contributes significantly to participation in more conventional offline settings.

Perhaps one of the most notable contributions of this study is the overwhelming importance of political talk and online messaging to facilitate political participation, both online and off. It is also clear that these forms of citizen communication mediate the effects of other variables on these outcomes, consistent with research on population cross-sections (Shah et al., 2005). In all forms of participation studied, these factors are consistent significant predictors, often accounting for sizable proportion of the variance explained. Also, while they sometimes behave similarly, online political messaging seems to have greater importance among blog readers for online expressive participation, while political talk appears more important for offline

political participation among this population. Again, this result highlights both the similarities and differences in online and offline forms of participation.

It is noteworthy that political talk remains a viable pathway to participation among this population. It is good news that frequent blog users do not only rely on virtual mechanisms alone to engage into political conversation but also talk politics in face-to-face settings. This suggests that blog readers view these two modes of citizen communication as complementary, and that political messaging is not displacing conventional political talk, but instead creating additional opportunities for expression.

Also notable is the influence of demographic variables within our analysis of blog readers. Again, many of these findings support previous research, as older blog readers are consistently more likely to participate in politics, even after controlling for other factors. However, another finding that may run counter to previous research is the consistent effect of gender, with women expressing greater levels of participation. Research has been contradictory about the role of gender in participation, especially as it relates to the Internet. Some studies find that gender matters differently depending on the type of participation (Kim et al., 1999), whereas other studies indicate males are more likely to engage in politics via the Internet (Pew, 2005). Our results from a sample of blog readers consistently indicate women participate more. This could, of course, be an artifact of our sample – female blog readers were a minority of the sample, yet are likely to be among the most motivated and politically interested women.

We also find that among blog readers' political efficacy is a significant and direct positive predictor of all forms of participation *except* online expressive participation. Ironically, online expressive participation is also the only form of participation in this study that is predicted by education, but in the opposite direction as previous research suggests. Instead, it is those with

less education who demonstrate more online expressive participation. This suggests that even the politically cynical or disenfranchised may be using the Internet to express their concerns, potentially offering a pathway to participation for those who feel political disempowered. Again, the ease of use of the Internet, as well as its potential anonymity, may allow those disengaged from conventional politics to begin to close this gap and allow for a more democratically equal society.

However, this study does not only investigate the direct effects of these variables on participation, but also mediating role played by some of these variables. For instance, the lack of direct effects of political efficacy on online expressive participation is at least partly explained by our structural equation modeling. In that case, the effect of efficacy is mediated by political talk, which in turn encourages online expressive participation. Our examination of these mediating pathways to participation among blog users indicates that this population has a multitude of mechanisms that could encourage greater involvement. The same is true of our news use variables – while only online news use has a consistent and direct effect across all types of participation, all of the news use variables have indirect effects on participation, through encouraging news reflection and efficacy, as well as promoting political talk and messaging. Therefore, online news use is not replacing the more traditional and conventional forms of news use, like print and television, and the more important contribution of news use as a whole is mediated through endogenous variables, rather than its direct effect on participation.

Second, our findings suggest that online citizenship does not hamper other conventional styles of political participation. The inclusion of blogs in people's media carte du jour does not only seem to satisfy an initial motive to be involved in discussion and politics but also constitutes a clear extension into the political arena, both offline and online. That is, online participation

seems to serve not as an endpoint of participation, but works to foster greater participation in a variety of settings. As such, blogs and bloggers may counter fears expressed by scholars such as Putnam (2000), who find that electronic media decrease social capital and inhibit participation. Frequent Internet use, at least for those reading blogs, appears to promote greater political talk and, ultimately, participation.

Nevertheless, there are some important limitations of our research: 1) Our sample obviously does not allow us to generalize these results to the rest of the population, though we do think these data provide a robust snapshot of readers of top political blogs. Having a purposive sample of blog readers is a drawback in that it does not allow us to make generalizations or assumptions about the population as a whole, but it is also a strength of our study. Blog readers are emerging as a new and significant force in the political world, and may be difficult to reach via conventional methods. By sampling the visitors to key political blogs, our research provides an overview of participatory influence, as well a first glance at the next wave of American political activity. Of course, expanding these findings to the general population remains as a question for future research. 2) Although statistically significant, the somewhat low influence of media use on political efficacy and reflection observed in our structural equation modeling may be partly due to the fact that blog readers in our study reported systematically high levels of news media consumption, restricting variance in these predictors.

All in all, this investigation may well serve as an addendum to the extant literature that goes along the lines of the communication mediation model. The inclusion of new virtual arenas and the use of newly available political mechanisms like political online messaging seem to work in concert with previous findings of communication mediation model research on news consumption, interpersonal discussion and media reflection. This research is a further step on

that direction. Overall, this paper provides insights into the leading edge of digital media: blogs. As the growth of interest in blogs has shown, blogs and their readers are only likely to become more influential in the coming years. As such, looking at what influences blog readers to participate allows us a greater understanding of their motivations. In addition, as more people read political blogs, this research and its conclusions regarding blog readers and expressive and political participation, both online and offline, may help encourage a more engaged public and a better functioning democracy.

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Table 1  
*Zero-Order Correlations Among Dependent Variables*

		Online Expressive Participation	Online Political Participation	Offline Expressive Participation	Offline Political Participation
Online Expressive Participation	Pearson Correlation	1	.570	.776	.543
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	3623	3620	3582	3582
Online Political Participation	Pearson Correlation	.570	1	.634	.664
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	3620	3620	3580	3580
Offline Expressive Participation	Pearson Correlation	.776	.634	1	.737
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	3582	3580	3582	3582
Offline Political Participation	Pearson Correlation	.543	.664	.737	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	3582	3580	3582	3582

Table 2  
*Regression analyses on Online Political Participation*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	.061**	.022	.037*	.047**	.038*
Education	.043*	.008	.016	.011	.016
Income	-.020	.029	.014	.008	-.012
Gender	-.112***	-.064***	-.051**	-.046**	-.039*
R <sup>2</sup>	1.8%				
Surveillance Motivation		.164***	.148***	.117***	.096***
Party Identification		.198***	.178***	.174***	.170***
Issue Extremity		.142***	.167***	.150***	.098***
R <sup>2</sup>	13.3%				
Print News Use			.049**	.042*	-.006
TV News Use			.042*	.034*	.017
Online News Use			.207***	.196***	.138***
R <sup>2</sup>	18.9%				
Political Efficacy				.081***	.058***
Media Reflection				.071***	.030†
R <sup>2</sup>	19.9%				
Political Talk					.204***
Online Political Messaging					.202***
R <sup>2</sup>	28.7%				

† p < .1, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001 Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients

Table 3  
*Regression analyses on Online Expressive Participation*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	.227***	.186***	.194***	.200***	.177***
Education	-.021	-.051**	-.042*	-.046**	-.040**
Income	-.025	.023	.010	.010	-.018
Gender	-.124***	-.074***	-.060***	-.058***	-.043**
R <sup>2</sup>	6.8%				
Surveillance Motivation		.145***	.132***	.105***	.071***
Party Identification		.149***	.127***	.123***	.125***
Issue Extremity		.217***	.243***	.234***	.176***
R <sup>2</sup>	19.3%				
Print News Use			.065***	.060**	.007
TV News Use			.063***	.059***	.036*
Online News Use			.189***	.180***	.113***
R <sup>2</sup>	24.9%				
Political Efficacy				.027†	.007
Media Reflection				.068***	.022
R <sup>2</sup>	25.3%				
Political Talk					.139***
Online Political Messaging					.321***
R <sup>2</sup>	37.6%				

† p < .1, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001 Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients

Table 4  
*Regression analyses on Offline Expressive Participation*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	.189***	.154***	.158***	.168***	.156***
Education	.009	-.019	-.014	-.019	-.013
Income	-.004	.039*	.026	.021	-.004
Gender	-.118***	-.073***	-.059***	-.054**	-.045**
R <sup>2</sup>	5.1%				
Surveillance Motivation		.110***	.098***	.064***	.036*
Party Identification		.126***	.098***	.093***	.089***
Issue Extremity		.213***	.241***	.224***	.161***
R <sup>2</sup>	15.1%				
Print News Use			.102***	.095***	.036*
TV News Use			.067***	.059**	.038*
Online News Use			.173***	.161***	.089***
R <sup>2</sup>	21.3%				
Political Efficacy				.077***	.050**
Media Reflection				.082***	.032†
R <sup>2</sup>	22.4%				
Political Talk					.246***
Online Political Messaging					.254***
R <sup>2</sup>	35.7%				

† p < .1, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001 Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients

Table 5  
*Regression analyses on Offline Political Participation*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age	.125***	.092***	.088***	.100***	.097***
Education	.048**	.013	.017	.011	.016
Income	.047*	.094**	.085***	.069***	.050**
Gender	-.125***	-.077***	-.064***	-.056**	-.052**
R <sup>2</sup>	4.0%				
Surveillance Motivation		.121***	.113***	.096***	.078***
Party Identification		.183***	.156***	.153***	.147***
Issue Extremity		.166***	.192***	.68***	.114***
R <sup>2</sup>	14.4%				
Print News Use			.110***	.105***	.055**
TV News Use			.078***	.067***	.051**
Online News Use			.129***	.120***	.060***
R <sup>2</sup>	19.5%				
Political Efficacy				.154***	.128***
Media Reflection				.029	-.014
R <sup>2</sup>	21.8%				
Political Talk					.255***
Online Political Messaging					.166***
R <sup>2</sup>	31.6%				

† p < .1, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001 Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients

Figure 1: Theoretical Model

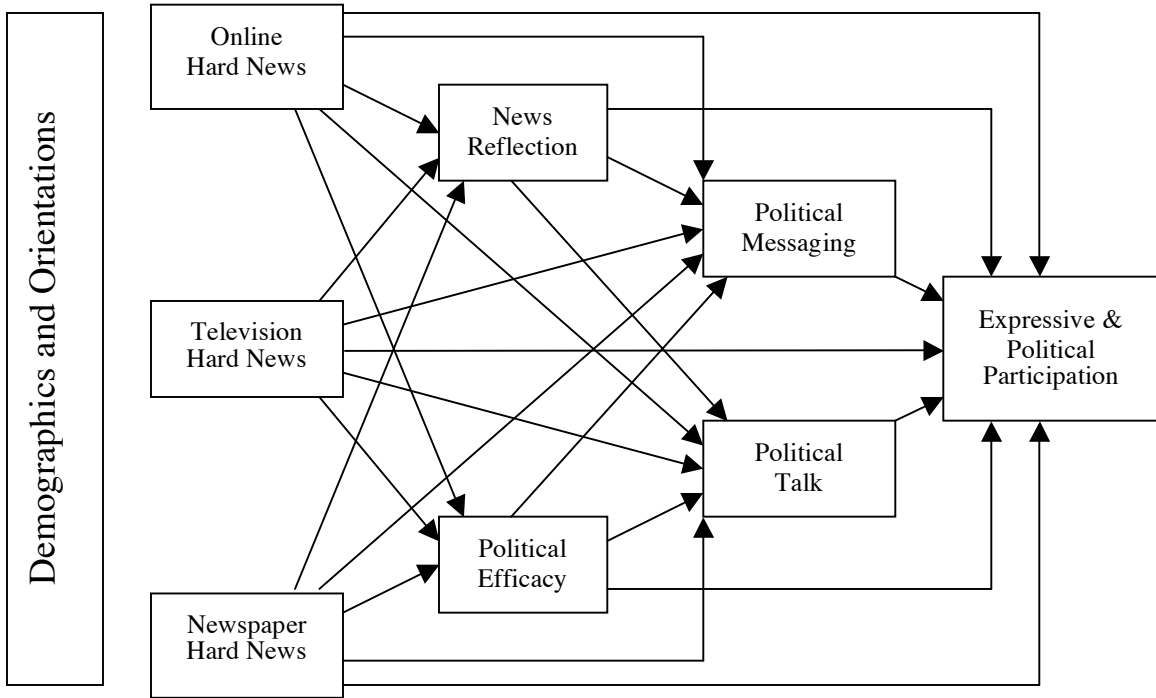
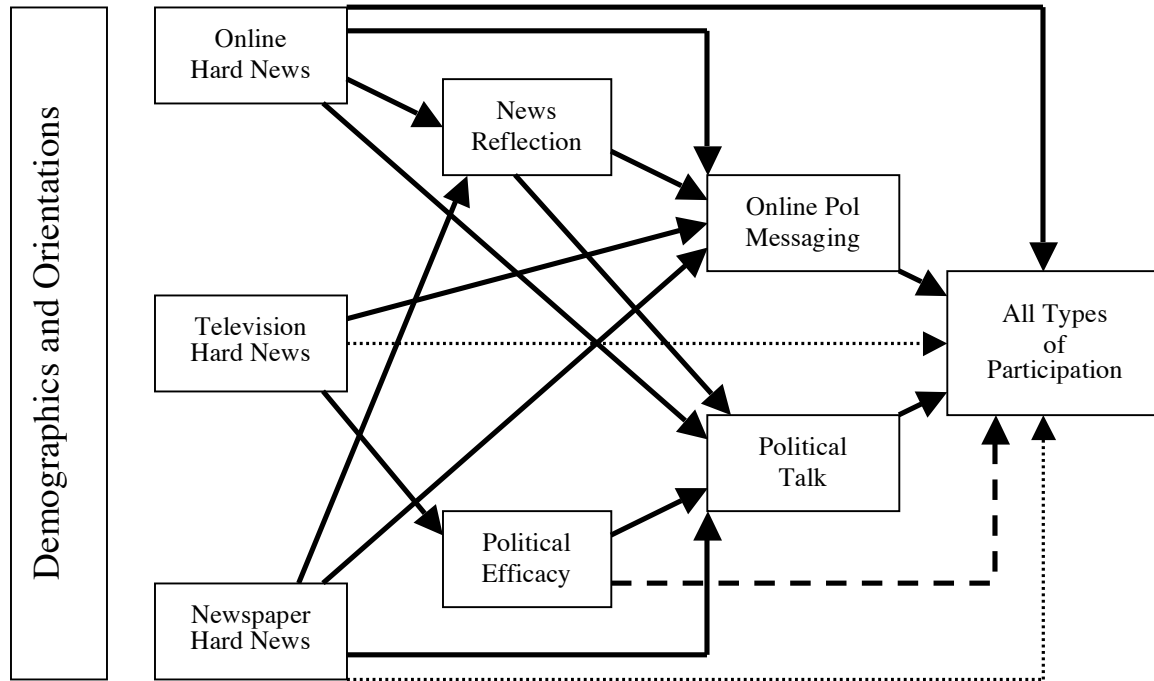


Figure 2: Summary of Structural Equation Modeling



Variables residualized 1) Demographics: Age, gender, education and income; 2) Orientations: Surveillance motivation, party ID and issue extremity.

All Betas are statistical significant at  $p < .001$

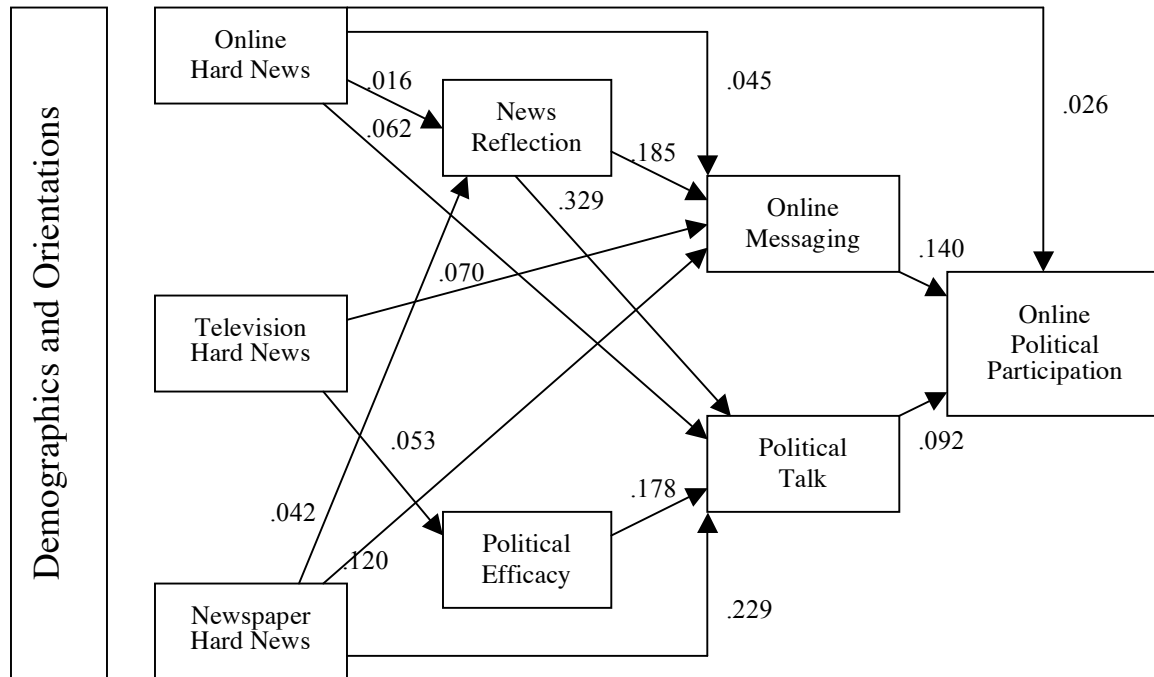
—▶ *Online Political Participation, Online Expressive Participation, Offline Expressive Participation and Offline Political Participation.*

- -▶ *Offline Expressive Participation & Offline Political Participation*

.....▶ *Offline Political Participation*

Appendix Figure 1

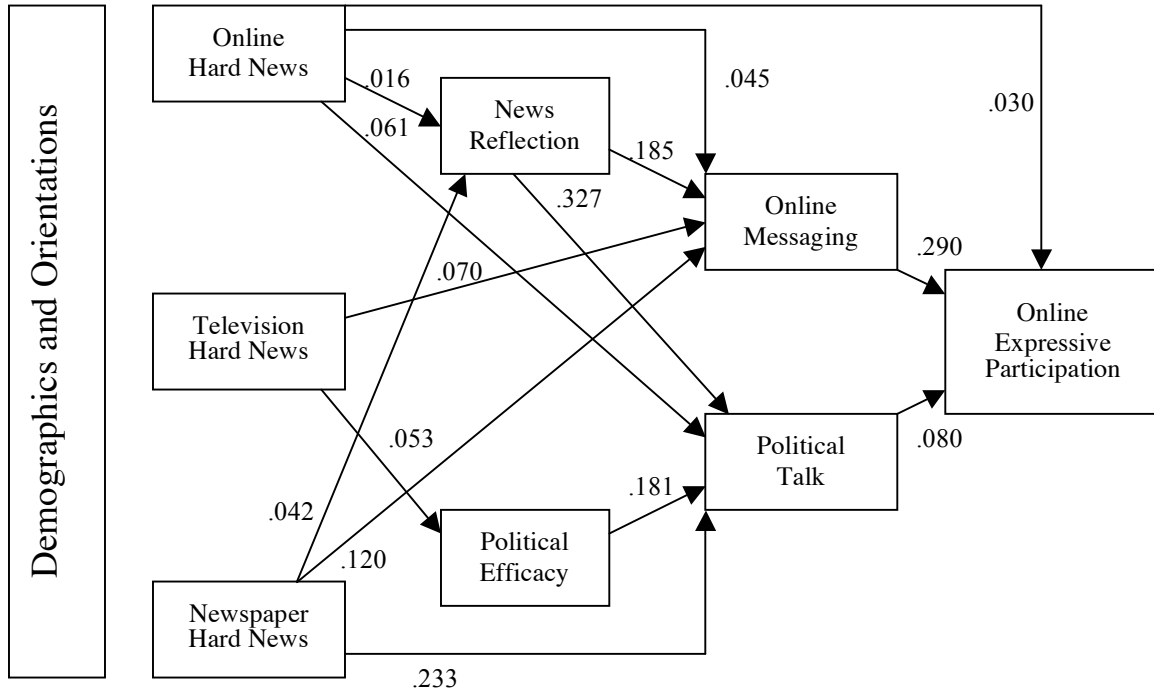
*Structural Equation Model for Online Political Participation*



All Betas are standardized at  $p < .001$ .

Model Fit: NFI = .919, IFI = .923, RFI = .92 ( $p < .001$ ). Chi-square = 188.55; df = 11

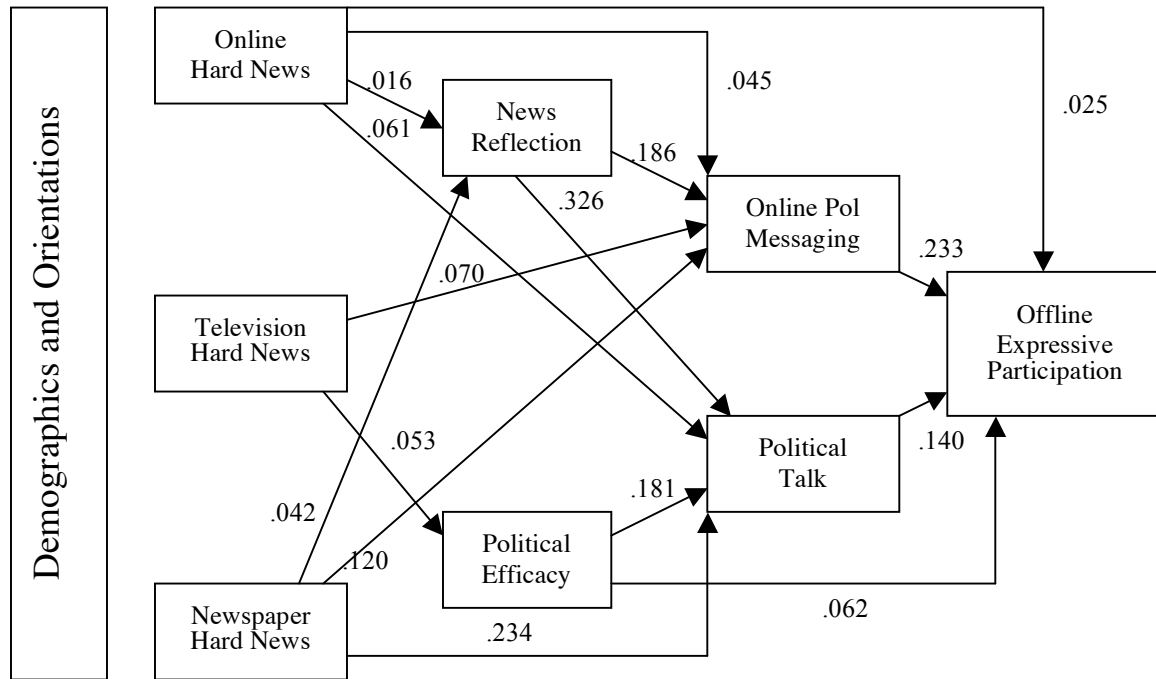
Appendix Figure 2  
*Structural Equation Model for Online Expressive Participation*



All Betas are standardized at  $p < .001$ .  
 Model Fit: NFI = .928, IFI = .932, RFI = .93 ( $p < .001$ ). Chi-square = 185.05; df = 11

Appendix Figure 3

*Structural Equation Model for Offline Expressive Participation*

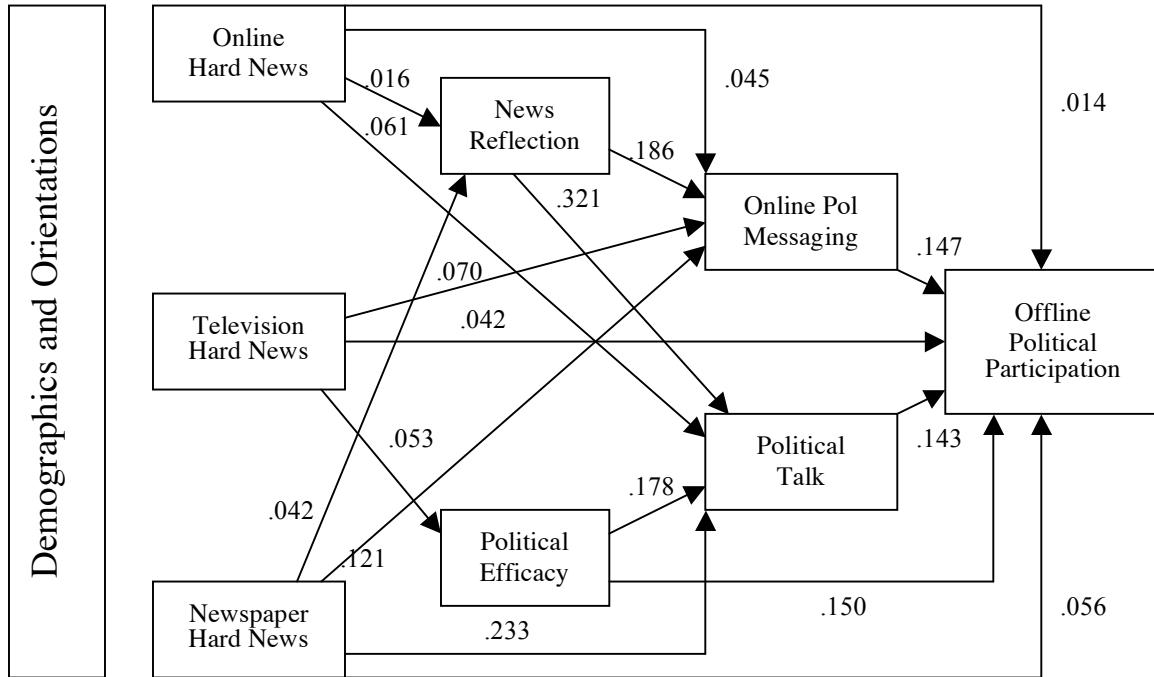


All Betas are standardized at  $p < .001$

Model Fit: NFI = .926, IFI = .93, RFI = .929 ( $p < .001$ ). Chi-square = 193.56; df = 10

Appendix Figure 4

*Structural Equation Model for Offline Political Participation*



All Betas are standardized at  $p < .001$

Model Fit: NFI = .928, IFI = .931, RFI = .93 ( $p < .001$ ). Chi-square = 174.62; df = 8

## Appendix

### Question Wording

#### Online Expressive Participation

“I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an “X” in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.”

- a. Sent an E-mail to an editor of a newspaper/magazine
- b. Used E-mail to contact a politician
- c. Signed an online petition

#### Online Political Participation

“I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an “X” in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.”

- a. Organized political activity via the Internet
- b. Met in person with a political group I joined online
- c. Engaged in collective action that was organized through another blog

#### Offline Expressive Participation

“I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an “X” in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.”

- a. Wrote a letter to an editor of a newspaper/magazine
- b. Displayed a campaign button, sticker, or sign
- c. Contacted a politician

#### Offline Political Participation

“I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an “X” in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.”

- a. Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech
- b. Worked for a political party or candidate
- c. Contributed money to a political campaign

#### Online Political Messaging

I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an “X” in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.

- a. Forwarded a political e-mail to friends
- b. Forwarded a news story to friends via e-mail

#### Political Talk

How many people have you talked with about politics or public affairs during the past week?

### Political Efficacy

Below you will find a number of statements about a range of interests and opinions. For each statement listed, I'd like to know whether you personally agree or disagree with this statement. After each statement, there are numbers from 0-10. The higher the number, the more you tend to agree with this statement. The lower the number, the more you tend to disagree with the statement. For each statement, please circle the number that best describes your feelings about that statement.

- a. People like me don't have a say in government decisions
- b. No matter whom I vote for, it won't make any difference

### Media Reflection

Below you will find a number of statements about a range of interests and opinions. For each statement listed, I'd like to know whether you personally agree or disagree with this statement. After each statement, there are numbers from 0-10. The higher the number, the more you tend to agree with this statement. The lower the number, the more you tend to disagree with the statement. For each statement, please circle the number that best describes your feelings about that statement.

- a. I often find myself thinking about what I've encountered in the news
- b. I often find myself thinking about what I've encountered on the blogs I tend to visit
- c. I often try to relate what I encounter in the news to my own personal experience
- d. I often try to relate what I encounter on blogs to my personal experience

### Online News Use

I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an "X" in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.

- a. Visited a news Web site (e.g. CNN.com; NYTimes.com)
- b. Used a news portal site (e.g., Google News, Yahoo News)
- c. Used an online news site which you have personally customized
- d. Used a blog index site (e.g., Technorati, Blogdex)
- e. Visited a blog you disagreed with
- f. Followed a link from a blog to a story at a news site

### Print News Use

I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an "X" in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.

- a. Read a local daily newspaper
- b. Read a national daily newspaper
- c. Read an international daily newspaper
- d. Read a news magazines (e.g., Time, Newsweek)

### Television News Use

I have listed below some activities that you, yourself, may or may not have engaged in. For each activity listed, please place an "X" in the appropriate box to indicate how often during the past 12 months you, yourself have engaged in this activity.

- a. Watched national evening news
- b. Watched local evening news
- c. Watched news magazine programs (eg., 20/20, 60 Minutes)

#### Surveillance Motivation for News Use

Below you will find a number of statements about a range of interests and opinions. For each statement listed, I'd like to know whether you personally agree or disagree with this statement. After each statement, there are numbers from 0-10. The higher the number, the more you tend to agree with this statement. The lower the number, the more you tend to disagree with the statement. For each statement, please circle the number that best describes your feelings about that statement.

- a. I use mass media to stay informed about what is happening in the world
- b. I use mass media to learn new ideas

#### Partisanship

Which one of the following best describes your political affiliation (Dem=1, Rep=2, Lib=3, Green=4, other=5)

How strong is that affiliation (strong=3, moderate=2, weak=1)

#### Issue Ideology Extremity

Below you will find a number of statements about a range of interests and opinions. For each statement listed, I'd like to know whether you personally agree or disagree with this statement. After each statement, there are numbers from 0-10. The higher the number, the more you tend to agree with this statement. The lower the number, the more you tend to disagree with the statement. For each statement, please circle the number that best describes your feelings about that statement.

- a. I am pleased with the outcome of the 2006 midterm elections
- b. I approve of the way George Bush is handling his job as President
- c. I oppose same sex marriage
- d. I support the immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq
- e. I support embryonic stem-cell research
- f. I am in favor of the death penalty

#### Age

Age?

#### Education

Education – (Some HS=1, HS=2, Some college=3, Bachelor's=4, Some grad=5, Master's=6, Doctoral=7)

#### Income

Income (Less than \$20K=1, \$20-40K=2, \$40-60K=3, \$60-80=4, \$80-100=5, More than \$100K=6)

#### Gender

Gender (Female=1, Male=2)

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<sup>1</sup> “Obama’s YouTube Bounce.” <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0307/3342.html>

<sup>2</sup> “The Blogging Iceberg,” <http://perseus.com/blogsurvey/thebloggingiceberg.html>

<sup>3</sup> David D. Perlmutter. *Blogwars: The New Political Battleground*. NY: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> David Silfry, “State of the Blogosphere, October 2005 Part 1: On Blogosphere Growth.” October 17, 2005. Technoratti. <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000343.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Kaye, “Survey shows the blogosphere is breaking out,” ClickZNews, April 26, 2006, [www.clickz.com](http://www.clickz.com)

<sup>6</sup> All of our demographic variables used mean replacement for any missing values. Due to survey attrition, many respondents did not answer the final demographic variable questions. However, we did not want to exclude the cases from our analyses for people who had completed all the relevant questions in our model. Therefore, mean replacement was used for all system missing in our demographic variables. As regression excludes anyone who did not answer a previous question, many of these respondents will be excluded from the analyses, but using mean replacement for control variables allowed us to gain power for our key results.

<sup>7</sup> Gender required a special method for dealing with system missing responses. As before, we did not want to exclude cases based solely on demographic controls, but mean replacement would not be appropriate or meaningful for the gender question. Therefore, all system missing were recoded as 1.5, a gender neutral number. This comprised 17.7% of total respondents, but as mentioned above, most would be excluded from analysis through failure to answer a key variable.