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ENVISIONING THE CAUCUS COMMUNITY:
Online Newspaper Editors Conceptualize Their Political Roles

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how local newspaper editors, as they move online and develop increasingly comprehensive and sophisticated Web sites, conceptualize the ways in which they might take advantage of the opportunities afforded by this new medium. To do so, it considers five caucus-specific sites in light of the notion of a potentially reinvigorated public sphere. The results suggest that despite the participatory nature of the medium, local newspapers' efforts to facilitate formation of an online democratic community remain tentative. Online editors recognize interactivity as a key attribute of the Web, but most are only just beginning to explore ways to move beyond their traditional role as information providers to create a space for meaningful political discourse.

KEY WORDS

caucus, community, Internet, news, newspapers, online, public sphere, Web

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By the end of the 20th century, presidential politics, like so much else, had become an online phenomenon. The Internet offered thousands of political sites, ranging from media giants such as the revival of CNN/*Time* magazine's AllPolitics to the newly established caucus site of the 47,000-circulation *Waterloo* (IA) *Courier*. Candidate sites were fully operational, and so were parody sites poking fun at those candidates. Lobbying groups, nonpartisan voters' guides, and political organizations large and small, national and local -- all were online, with more ready to roll out as the wheels of a presidential campaign began spinning once again.

The most participatory mass media form yet invented would seem a natural venue for democracy in action. Internet proponents hail it not just as a massive vehicle for disseminating political content, but more important, as a place for renewed political discourse. Establishment of a public sphere for exchanging information and forming meaningful public opinion through open discussion (Habermas, 1989) has long seemed impossible in our enormous, fragmented, media-saturated society. Yet today, some say it has been -- or at least can be -- revived and reconstituted online. Our traditional notion of community as a geographically constrained entity already has been challenged by the concept of community as a communication phenomenon, based more on sharing a reality with others than on occupying proximate physical space (Carey, 1989; Hardt, 1975). The phenomenal growth of the World Wide Web, the Internet's user-friendly graphical subset, since its debut in the mid-1990s offers hope of a practical way for millions to participate simultaneously in that shared reality, as well as to contribute to its construction. Though it now reaches an estimated 185 million Americans in their homes ("Nielsen//NetRatings Reports," 2001), the Internet is not nearly so inclusive as we might want it to be, and the traditionally

voiceless still, for the most part, are ("Falling Through the Net," 2000). Nor is it immune to the influence of major political, economic and media institutions. Nonetheless, its potential as a mass medium that demands an active rather than a passive audience is undeniable.

If the Internet is our most participatory form of mass media, the caucus arguably is our most participatory form of democratic action, albeit one attracting only a small number of self-selecting participants. Unlike a primary or general election, in which we make our decisions and cast our votes in isolation, a caucus requires us to join a group and take a public stand. We meet with our neighbors, express our views, and defend our ideas and beliefs. True, a caucus requires physical presence in a geographic community, while the Internet's online communities do not. But both are processes of direct participation and communication, of personal and communal involvement in a world of ideas. As we explore the implications of what Grossman (1995) calls the "electronic republic," the interplay between the Internet as a participatory medium and the caucus as a participatory political process bears examination.

Traditional media are seeking a place to fit in as the political and communications environment changes around them. Online forms pose numerous challenges to their political role as a "fourth estate" that in theory creates an informed citizenry but in contemporary practice stands accused of becoming more a hindrance than a help to the democratic ideal (Fallows, 1996; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999). With the Internet, the predominantly one-way flow of information gives way to a two-way flow that makes audience members active participants in the communication process. Interactive media put them in direct contact not only with sources but with one another, with potentially significant effects on the notion of everything from reference groups to community (Selnow, 1998). The Internet also has the potential to drastically affect the relative importance of local media in the formation of political sensibilities. "At the very least,"

says one political scholar, "the Net appears likely to decrease the influence of established media organizations over formation of the political agenda" (Bimber, 1998).

This paper considers the potential impact of the Internet on local media and, in turn, on the formation of political sensibilities in local communities. To do so, it explores how local newspaper editors, as they move online and develop increasingly comprehensive and sophisticated Web sites, conceptualize the ways in which they might take advantage of the opportunities afforded by this new medium. It considers five caucus-specific sites in light of the notion of a potentially reinvigorated public sphere.

POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Early in the last century, John Dewey suggested that the ability of individuals to organize in communal life is vital to achievement of the understanding and judgment necessary for those individuals to flourish and democracy to function. The very idea of democracy, he argued, is communal, the "logical and ideal end of associated living" (Eldridge, 1998, p. 107). The intelligence that gives rise to informed public opinion is "dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium" (Dewey, 1927, p. 219). His definition of democracy came in response to the proposition that the public needs experts to guide it through its democratic responsibilities (Lippmann, 1922). Instead, Dewey saw democracy as a manifestation of a stable and ethical community constructed by and because of discourse among its members. Citizenship is evaluated, Dewey believed, through communication and its use by people to act coherently for the good of the community (Menard, 1997). Conversation is the context within which knowledge is to be understood; discussion is necessary for the formation of public opinion (Carey, 1989). That informed opinion, in turn,

guides the responsible actions of experts, who frame and execute public policies based on social inquiry. The general public needs to develop the ability to judge the knowledge supplied by others, based on common concerns[1] (Dewey, 1927).

Habermas extended Dewey's ideas into a discussion of the competence of people to engage in public debate. He proposed that appropriate citizen action involves knowing the content of information, such as news, and applying it in constructive relations with others in democratic systems (Habermas, 1974). In particular, Habermas is concerned with how people can rationally achieve the ideal status of democracy. Perhaps his most resilient idea has involved constitution of the public sphere as a "domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (p. 49**)**. Although he has recast this idea somewhat in recent years (Habermas, 1996), the notion remains intriguing: a realm, at least potentially accessible to all, in which individuals gather to participate in open discussions (Holub, 1991). This public sphere is articulated in the process of communication, in conversations through which individuals come together to form a public. Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest, ostensibly free from the coercion of any institution or individual in a political space respectful of both the rights of the individual and the strength of the community (Gaynor, 1996).

The public sphere is the mediating space where state and society reach each other, "a site governed neither by the intimacy of the family, the authority of the state, nor the exchange of the market, but by the `public reason of the private citizen'" (Peters, 1993, p. 542). It is the playing field for citizenship (Schudson, 1998). Habermas' faith in democracy was built on the ability of the informed citizen to counter attempts at manipulation, to confront the state by the constitution of a responsible, rational public differentiated from the passive consumer of information. In this view, the aim of human society is the achievement of autonomy and well-being through reason

(Braaten, 1991). Even his later work continues to emphasize a theory of law and democracy that "starts with the socially integrating force of rationally motivating, hence noncoercive processes of reaching understanding" (Habermas, 1996, p. 6).

But with the spread of both press and propaganda, the public has expanded and become an arena of competition among interests, with the state intervening in private affairs and society penetrating into affairs of state. Seeking ways in which the notion of a public sphere could work in modern society, Habermas' response was the idea of communicative actions or "speech acts." Through dialogue informed by rationality, Habermas suggested, people can achieve social affiliation, community involvement and civic engagement. This is possible because of the use of three modes of communication: cognitive, which is concerned with propositional content; interactive, which involves interpersonal relations; and expressive, in which avowals divulge the speaker's intentions. This linguistic model provides the foundation for the public sphere: free debate as the rationale and goal of social existence (Holub, 1991), a means by which "interactions are woven together and forms of life are structured" (Habermas, 1996, pp. 3-4).

If democracy is a product of linguistically managed social interaction, it cannot be unaffected by changes in media technology, through which so much of that interaction, particularly in the political realm, occurs. Indeed, changes in communication technologies have made the contemporary public increasingly problematic, and the social spaces created by information technology raise interconnected issues of space, identity, economics, culture -- and politics (Monberg, 1998). Those spaces are locations of dispute over a variety of factors, such as inclusiveness, boundary-setting and control. The question of whether we can invent a space for public discourse that will provide opportunities for the development of a less distorted public sphere (Benson, 1996) remains an open one.

In the meantime, however, media transformations have redefined notions of community and participation, affecting how citizens experience political action and influencing both face-to-face relations among citizens and their relations with the state. Information technology potentially facilitates the massive diffusion of political education and enables development of an educated public, a requirement for the democratic ideal of Dewey and Habermas.

The rise of this new mass medium has been so rapid -- from a few thousand academic and scientific Internet users to an estimated 544 million worldwide in less than ten years ("How many online," 2002) -- that its effects can be hard to assess. As recently as the late 1970s, one political communication researcher proposed that while "interactive communication systems" were potentially well-suited to the political process, unfortunately, "it is only in the distant future that even primitive facsimiles of these advanced systems could become available to ordinary citizens" (Laudon, 1977, p. 43). Yet the Internet has already indisputably changed the way "ordinary citizens" exchange ideas and become informed, particularly since the appearance of the Web in the 1990s. And its influence has spread to the political sphere. By restoring some of the flexibility of oral communication needed for true interaction (Mukerji and Simon, 1998), the Internet has the potential to offer space for participatory democracy. In this shared space, citizens can come together to communicate and thereby form a virtual community. Among young people in particular, recent research indicates use of the Internet for information exchange strongly influences civic participation (Shah, McLeod and Yoon, 2001). Although Habermas has been largely silent on the specific issue of communication technology, he does suggest that optimal discourse can take place in the sort of social sub-groups -- mini-discourse communities -- that the Internet facilitates (Froomkin, 2001).

Some see in the rise of an "electronic republic" a redefinition of traditional roles of citizenship, as well as political leadership. Telecommunications technologies are breaking down barriers of time and distance that have precluded widespread political participation. Interactive media make it possible for millions of "widely dispersed citizens to receive the information they need to carry out the business of government themselves, gain admission to the political realm and retrieve at least some of the power over their own lives and goods that many believe their elected leaders are squandering" (Grossman, 1995, p. 6). In general, computer-based interactions have been used extensively to support many of the activities necessary to communities, giving members new tools for negotiating and rehearsing public forms of group life (Jones, 1995). The potential constitution of community by the dialogical competence of online communicators will have an impact on how public, citizenship and community are defined in the 21st century.

Of course, evolution of this medium along desirable lines is not a given. Computer-mediated communication has the capability to challenge the political hierarchy's monopoly on information and to revitalize citizen-based democracy. But like other new communication technologies before it, the Internet also has the potential to become easily commodified, so that online citizens are seen -- by themselves as well as by those with something to sell -- primarily as online consumers (Rheingold, 1993). Nor are online communities necessarily more welcoming of diverse opinions than more traditional ones; on the contrary, considerable evidence suggests that conformity to perceived social norms is a strong shaper of online discourse (Wood and Smith, 2001). Realists also have pointed out that a dramatic rise in populism demands not just greater communication capacity but also a desire to use that capacity for civic engagement (Bimber, 1998). And some observers fear that as a public space, the Internet is destined to be dominated by the same familiar actors: media corporations, interest groups and government

entities. In any event, there is general agreement that the political stakes are high, "not merely the gains and losses of one side or another, but the power to define reality" (Monberg, 1998, p. 430). Despite the concerns, the underlying premise remains that the more people participate as citizens in politics, the closer ones comes to the ideal of a public sphere (Schudson, 1995) -- and the Internet potentially facilitates participation on a scale that has never before been feasible.

POLITICS IN CYBERSPACE

In presidential politics, the caucus, in which voters gather in a public place to agree on which candidate their precinct will support, perhaps comes closest to Habermas' ideal of a space in which individual opinions can be articulated and public opinions formed. It did not start out that way. Participants in the original caucuses of the early 1800s were members of Congress from the two key parties, the Democratic-Republicans and Federalists, and the system was a poor vehicle for considering rank-and-file preferences. Such caucuses were abandoned in 1824 with the demise of the Federalist party and deepening rifts in the surviving faction; they were followed by various permutations that continued to give the most weight to the choices of a few party leaders for almost 150 years. The current system, in which public caucuses and primaries pave the road to party nomination for a shot at the White House, took effect in 1972. This system, a reaction to demands for election reforms, gives greater power to the voters -- and to the media through which candidates' messages must pass to reach those voters (Ragsdale, 1996).

But that powerful media lock on information is loosening. The 1992 successes of Bill Clinton and Ross Perot in bypassing traditional news formats and reaching voters through such forms as TV entertainment or talk shows did not pass unnoticed. By the 1996 campaign, the Web had burst upon the political scene, and prognosticators were happily predicting what a tremendous impact it would have as people flocked online to learn all about candidates and

issues for themselves. That impact did not materialize. In 1996, political Web sites served primarily as a cost-effective communications tool for party activists, as the faithful in local and regional organizations went online to download everything from position papers to bumper stickers (Hall, 1997). Usenet groups provided places for people to talk about politics -- but mostly people who already were political activists, many of whom seemed less interested in solving problems than in expressing and reinforcing existing views (Hill and Hughes, 1997). Such behavior, as Davis (1999, p. 177) has observed, "does not resemble deliberation and it does not encourage participation, particularly by the less politically interested." Among voters in general, while 27 percent said they had access to online services in the fall of 1996, only 6 percent said they ever visited any politically oriented Web sites, and fewer than 1 percent cited the Internet as the medium they relied on most ("New media," 1996). Research indicates that overall, nontraditional media in 1996 had a greater influence on candidate images than on political knowledge (Johnson, Braima and Sothirajah, 1999).

There is an argument to be made that such was the case at least partly because the medium was not used effectively by traditional political actors. Many candidates promoted their Web sites but seemed to consider them experimental, a frill that would be explored if time permitted. Sites that rarely if ever were updated, unanswered e-mail from visitors, and a common perception that the increased potential for interactivity primarily translated into a new avenue for fund-raising were among the problems that plagued political sites in 1996 (Davis, 1999). Indeed, the ideological goal of citizen empowerment seemed to be the last thing candidates wanted, much preferring to use the Web mainly as a novel marketing device (Stromer-Galley, 2001).

Sites provided by major news organizations looked good in comparison. Most made civic-minded and innovative use of the Web as a forum for information and opinion (albeit

almost exclusively from traditional news providers). The larger ones offered extensive databases of information as well as limited interactive opportunities to make it personally relevant, such as *The New York Times*' option for users to calculate their own taxes under plans proposed by Clinton and challenger Bob Dole (Hall, 1997). The widely publicized election-night crashes of several of these sites because of overwhelming traffic indicates the Web by 1996 had appeared on the public radar screen as a source of breaking news, even if it was generally avoided as a place to find less timely information or to actually engage in civic discourse.

As the 2000 election approached, some observers predicted 2000 would be the year the Internet came of age in the political arena (Bowen, 1999). In October 1999, more than a year before the election, 5,000 political sites already were online. Of particular interest to newspapers and other media outlets was the increasing use of the Internet for news. By 1999, anywhere from 37 to 64 percent (the figure fluctuated from month to month) of Internet users reported going online for news at least once a week ("Internet news," 1999). Moreover, the importance of the Internet as a source for campaign news also seemed to be significantly up over 1996. Among those online, 12 percent reported early in the 2000 election cycle that the Internet had become their primary source for campaign news[2] ("Tough job," 2000).

Other studies, notably those by Davis (1999), have confirmed that information dissemination was the most common function of political Web sites in 1996. But the pursuit of information is only the first step toward establishment of a community-based core of democratic action. Gronbeck (1997) has suggested the Web can function in two additional political ways. It can build solidarity, working to bind citizens together around a cause, as well as to build citizens' self-awareness as political actors. And it can persuade, seeking to alter the way users see the world. Together, these ideas suggest a return to the "speech acts" designated by Habermas as

forming the rational basis for the development of a true public sphere: what can be termed the cognitive, interactive and expressive modes of communication.

This exploratory study examines how local newspapers -- seen by political and communication theorists as both providers of and barriers to a free flow of information in their traditional print forms -- are using the Web not only to deal with the basic information needs generated by a major political event but also to explore their own role in utilizing the medium's potential as a sphere for citizens' civic engagement. It examines local editors' preparations for online coverage of the Iowa caucus, a national political event that plays out in their backyards once every four years, in light of these three communicative forms and functions.

METHOD

Newspaper editors are typically political communication practitioners rather than theorists, of course. In focusing on their perspectives, this study sought to investigate whether local journalists envisioned their papers' Web sites as serving a different purpose in the political arena than their print products have served and, if so, what the differences might be. Journalists traditionally see their roles as lying primarily along what Habermas would identify as the cognitive dimension of communication: they define themselves as information providers (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996). Would the capabilities of the new medium lead them to expand that definition? The following research questions guided this study:

1) Does online content provided by Iowa newspapers serve the range of communicative actions -- cognitive, interactive and expressive -- envisioned by political theorists as constituting prerequisites to formation of a public sphere for political discourse?

2) How do the online editors at Iowa newspapers -- all of which are small or mid-sized properties, as are the great majority of U.S. papers -- envision the purpose, role and audience for their caucus sites?

2a) Are they redefining or expanding their traditional purpose, role or audience as the newspaper moves online?

2b) Are they seeking to differentiate their online product from their own traditional products, as well as from other sources of political information?

This study was conducted in September and October 1999, several months before the 2000 Iowa caucus and more than a year before the general election. This was done in order to obtain the perspective of local editors during the planning phase of their caucus coverage -- editors who were the first to wrestle with how best to use the online medium as a community resource during the 2000 election cycle. They thus were uniquely able to provide a view of what they envisioned their sites as doing in the months to come -- unhampered by the economic and other pressures of day-to-day newspapering, and not yet influenced what other media were doing in covering the 2000 campaign online. The goal was to gain insight into journalistic conceptualizations of the political potential of the medium, particularly at the local or community level, and their own role in contributing to that potential. Rather than analyze these political sites in detail, then, this study seeks to explore the rationale behind them, as editors and Web developers began thinking seriously about how to cover the caucus and the campaign.

In the fall of 1999, nine Iowa daily newspapers offered Web sites that included updated news and other content ("Full-service U.S. dailies," 1999). However, only four individual papers, plus one newspaper chain (Lee Enterprises, which owns three dailies and a weekly in Iowa), had portions of their sites dedicated exclusively to caucus coverage (see Appendix A). Other papers

were folding politics into their regular sections at the time of this study. In addition to the Lee papers (including the 53,000-circulation *Quad City Times*, plus smaller dailies in Mason City and Muscatine), the newspapers with parts of their Web site specifically dedicated to the caucus were the *Des Moines Register* (the state's largest paper, with a daily circulation of about 163,000, owned by Gannett); the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* (67,000, independent); the *Sioux City Journal* (48,000, Hagadone); and the *Waterloo Courier* (47,000, Howard) (Editor & Publisher, 1999).

Two data-collection methods were used to investigate how editors envisioned their product and where they saw it going in the months to come. First, the five sites were examined in early September 1999 to identify the nature of the content they offered, then monitored throughout the month to note any changes. The goal was simply to identify the types of items available (news stories, polls, and so on), not to conduct a formal content analysis. Although fresh news stories and other updates were provided, no new features were added to any of the sites during this period.

In early October 1999, a person responsible for each Web site, identified through information online, was sent an e-mail note explaining the nature of the study, describing how the data would be used, and seeking responses to a short series of questions (see Appendix B). As the study was intended to examine specific online products, these editors or content managers were not promised either anonymity or confidentiality. Instead, the authors offered to share their findings with respondents -- but only after the caucus date, to head off concerns about tipping off competitors prior to the event itself. Although it took two or three follow-up requests, all five newspaper editors responded through e-mail. In addition, four of the five respondents agreed to answer additional questions by phone; these interviews were conducted later in the month.

This study dealt with existing caucus sites, and the motives of those not studied can only be guessed at. The newspapers described here are the ones that placed a certain importance on their role as online providers of caucus-related material early in the campaign cycle, while others presumably either did not see such a role, did not have the resources to support it or did not perceive a need well in advance of the January caucus date. Indeed, general public interest in the presidential campaign was quite low during this time. Only 15 percent of the respondents to a poll taken shortly after the GOP's Iowa straw poll in August said they were following news coverage of the campaign closely; 28 percent felt news organizations were giving too much coverage to the race ("Poll suggests," 1999). Such poll results would indicate that the audience for Iowa caucus sites, at least in the fall of 1999, might be fairly small -- and not be the average newspaper reader. The present study's findings support this supposition.

FINDINGS

Findings of this study are presented in two general categories. The first relates to the actual content of the Web sites themselves, grouped by communicative function. The second is based on responses to interviews, by e-mail and telephone, with the people behind these sites.

WEB SITE CONTENT

COGNITIVE MODE

Information was central to all the sites during the fall of 1999, with current and archived news stories a dominant feature. Most took advantage not only of their own in-house resources but also of the large and growing body of political information elsewhere on the Web. For example, the *Des Moines Register* offered a section called "How Others See Us," which consisted of news items about Iowa politics from media around the country. Similarly, the *Sioux*

*City Journa*l offered "Media Buzz," plus links to other sites about politics in general and Iowa politics in particular. All of the sites also utilized the medium's linking capability to connect users to information about the candidates, particularly to candidate home pages.

The nature of information beyond links to other sites varied. Of particular interest was the extent to which these sites took advantage of the Web's capabilities to enhance their role as information providers. The sites of the three larger newspapers included online polling, an element of interactivity that also plays an informative role. Multimedia capabilities were little utilized, with the sites relying on text and, to varying degrees, still photos. Only the *Register* went much beyond simple mug shots, offering an archive of campaign-trail photos. (The *Register*'s online editor was especially proud of this photo gallery. "I've got everything from stump speeches to Elizabeth Dole petting a pig," he said. "Some shots might not be flattering, but it's the truth. It's how these people looked in Iowa on a hot summer day at the state fair.")

The site of the *Register*, the state's largest newspaper, offered a particularly wide range of items that can be placed in a broad "information" or cognitive category. In addition to the features already noted, these included an "Exploring the Issues" section offering background on 12 issues identified by the *Register* as key to the 2000 campaign (education, gun control, social security and so on); candidate profiles and interviews with the paper's editorial board; a section with caucus FAQs, history and past winners; information on campaign finance, mainly through a link to a searchable external database; and a calendar of key dates leading up to the caucus.

All the sites included in this study fulfilled their role as providers of information about the Iowa caucus. In fact, as the interviews discussed below reveal, this role -- the most traditional one for the mass media -- dominated the editors' perception of what their sites should offer. Despite a few technological bells and whistles, the flow of information from media outlet to

audience member differed little from the traditional mass communication model outlined by media theorists such as Westley and MacLean (1957) in mid-century. Nor did it reflect any substantive change from the self-perceptions of traditional journalists as being, above all, people who collect information, interpret it, package it and pass it along (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996).

INTERACTIVE MODE

In 1996, many political sites worked hard to bind citizens together around a cause, whether it was as activists pursuing an agenda or simply as seekers after good government (Gronbeck, 1997). In general, it is the interactive capability of the medium that seems to political theorists to offer its greatest potential for creation of a contemporary public sphere. Several of the newspaper sites studied here offered discussion forums and other options for users to form ties with one another and, in a broader sense, with the political process in general, thus exploring ways to enhance not just political awareness but political involvement.

Places for users to "talk" and connect with one another, capabilities central to the formation of public opinion as envisioned by Habermas and others, were offered by the *Register* (which provided options both to discuss Campaign 2000 and to provide feedback to editors about the paper's political coverage), the *Gazette* and Lee newspapers. Lee's IowaPulse site included a chat feature and a "TalkBack" section for airing citizen viewpoints. In addition, the site offered a pair of unique sections profiling "Iowa People" and "Iowa Towns," an effort to provide a glimpse of the issues concerning Iowans whose voices seldom are heard in traditional time- and space-constrained media. The smaller *Sioux City Journal* encouraged users to contribute e-mail related to "surviving" the GOP straw poll. The *Journal*, whose site primarily consisted of external links and archived news items, also sought to encourage engagement in the political process through options to "send a quote" to a politician or write to a congressional representative.

The *Register* included a section of public school student essays (not all of them related to politics) linked from its caucus site; IowaPulse also enlisted the participation of schoolchildren in scheduled online "chats" with candidates. Unique to the *Register* was its "2020 vision" section, in which it presented views and concerns about the future from a variety of grassroots leaders along with a link to its online forums for public discussion of the issues raised.

These newspaper sites, then, did venture beyond their traditional role as information providers and experiment with ways of encouraging user engagement with the information and with other users. It is true that such interactive options hardly dominated the sites; their role was more supplemental. However, if the notion of a public sphere depends on conversation in the context of knowledge, this may not be an unreasonable approach. Moreover, as discussed below, those sites that were attempting to encourage public participation found the going to be tough. The online editor at IowaPulse said the original concept of the site was "to create an arena of interactivity among Iowans." But getting people to interact, he said, was "like pulling teeth." It's a learning experience for the paper and its online users, he added, "a chance to do something different. I just wish they'd learn faster."

EXPRESSIVE MODE

Some political sites also seek to alter beliefs, attitudes, values or behaviors (Gronbeck, 1997). Yet outside the op-ed and editorial pages, U.S. newspapers have not seen their news content as an instrument whose chief purpose is persuasion since the early days of the party press, and there is little indication they see themselves differently online. If there was an element of avowal or persuasion here, it was in the overall effort to encourage users to participate in the democratic process and to recognize its value. This function was served mainly through the use of links designed to improve not just the extent of political participation but its quality. For

example, as noted, the *Register* explored campaign finance; the *Sioux City Journal* offered links to a list of state legislators, an indirect reminder of the value of contacting those people to make one's views heard, along with its options to write to congressional representatives.

Despite the relative lack of importance that these local newspaper Web sites accorded this type of communication, a possible connection with another trend in mass-mediated communication throughout the 1990s is suggested here. Journalists have been hearing arguments for the better part of the decade about the merits of public or civic journalism, the idea that the media's role includes actively seeking to engage the audience in a civic process (Fallows, 1996; Merritt, 1995). In essence, civic journalism proposes an expressive or even persuasive function for the media: convincing local citizens of the possibility and importance of working together to resolve disagreements and improve their communities. The role has been consistently explored at relatively few papers. The online format, with its unlimited space and interactive nature, may prove more conducive to supporting such a function without threatening other journalistic roles. It is beyond the scope of this exploratory study to delve into whether these sites can be interpreted as taking a step in that direction. But the possibility merits consideration in future research, including follow-ups to exercises in deliberative democracy such as those conducted in Texas in 1996 (McCombs and Reynolds, 1999).

Before leaving the topic, it is worth quickly noting that one "expressive" element that underlies the traditional media -- advertising -- was all but nonexistent on these sites. Whether by design or because of a lack of advertiser interest (and several online editors indicated the latter may have been closer to the mark), these media sites were mostly commercial-free. At least one paper, the *Sioux City Journal* (which did have one ad, not related to politics, on its site), saw the

site as first a "reader service," but second and third as a way to build traffic and "a place to sell banners into," according to its new media manager.

E-MAIL AND PHONE INTERVIEWS

After monitoring the sites in September 1999 to determine the nature of their content, the researchers conducted e-mail and telephone interviews in October with the people responsible for the sites. The goal of the interviews was to understand how these editors conceptualized the purpose, role and audience of their caucus Web sites. Responses to the e-mail questions will be discussed first. The questions are provided in Appendix B.

Most respondents saw their site's primary purpose as cognitive -- providing information -- and, not incidentally, boosting the visibility and reputation of the sponsoring organization. The *Des Moines Register*'s online editor wrote that the paper "has long been a key source of reporting on the Iowa caucuses. It's my goal to extend this expertise to the Web. I want to make the *Registe*r THE site to go to for caucus information." Smaller newspapers saw an opportunity to serve as "an additional route to information about the candidates," as the woman in charge of the *Waterloo Courier's* site put it. The mid-sized *Cedar Rapids Gazette* saw the Web site as a way to extend its reach. "We feel that we are one of the state's leaders in understanding and covering politics," its online content manager wrote. "Since the Iowa caucuses attract national and international attention, we feel that our Web site has the lone ability within the organization of sharing our regional perspective and coverage with the rest of the world."

Only the online editor at Lee Enterprises (who also served as a city editor at the *Quad City Times* in Davenport) saw an interactive function as key. He listed "to engage Iowans in discussion about the caucus and candidates" as his primary purpose for the site; other goals included giving readers information that wouldn't fit in the daily paper, broadening the paper's

audience and, uniquely, using "online interactivity to create content for the daily." In other words, he saw information as more of a two-way street, a communal process: The paper provided some and Web site users, through their comments and discussion, provided some.

Other respondents did not specifically assign their audience this dual role as information consumer and provider. The two primary differences between the online and traditional audience that most identified were its size or scope, and the intensity of its interest in politics. "The audience is mainly regular *Register* readers, but also includes a much wider audience nation- and worldwide -- readers who either know of the *Register*'s reputation or deduce that Iowa's biggest newspaper will have information on the caucuses and search it out," the paper's online editor wrote. The online content manager at the *Gazette* pointed out that while visitors to the site as a whole are likely to be seeking the paper's regional news coverage, "those coming to the caucus site would not need to have such interest to find the information compelling." The paper wants its users to "appreciate the expertise and perspective" its experienced staff can provide.

The online editor at IowaPulse, the Lee site, agreed that the audience for the caucus site included "political junkies nationwide hoping to get an early read on the race," as well as Iowans interested in becoming involved in the caucus process. In general, he said, the online group was "much more focused" than the mass print audience, "which includes people disinterested in the caucuses but who might stumble upon the stories." Again, however, he had a somewhat different take on what he hoped online users would get out of the site -- not just the information they sought but also "a feeling of connectedness to the mysterious caucus process, so that they are better equipped to participate" in January.

He saw the site's online role, then, as different from the newspaper's traditional role, in that it "relies upon interactivity and input from our viewers." Other respondents did not identify

this aspect of their sites as a source of differentiation. In fact, several pointed out that the online product very much reflects the print one. In response to the question asking what set their sites apart from other caucus sites, they agreed with the new media manager in Sioux City who said "local insights" were the key. "Our online effort reflects the work and emphasis of the paper," the online content manager at the *Gazette* wrote. Similarly, the *Register*'s online editor saw his paper's "reputation and expertise" as differentiating his site from others: "No one knows more about the caucuses than we do." However, there were differences in specific structure or content that the respondents identified. Archives of news stories dating back for several months -- or even years in the case of the *Gazette*, the only one of these five newspapers to have a news Web site in 1996 -- and online polls were mentioned by several respondents. The new media manager at the *Sioux City Journal* said that online, content was organized by "target audience groupings" different from those in print; he cited football and politics as two examples.

In summary, responses to the e-mail questions indicated most of these online editors saw the Web products as extending but not significantly changing their traditional roles and missions, chief among which is to provide information. This mindset is reflected in the nature of the sites themselves. Most saw their audience as bigger and more interested in politics, but otherwise (with the exception of the IowaPulse editor) seemed to envision online users more as information seekers than as participants in a communal process of forming connections and, ultimately, shaping democracy through their negotiation with it. In other words, they seemed comfortable with the first requirement for formation of a public sphere -- the provision of information -- but did not seem to see themselves as taking a proactive role in going much further.

The follow-up telephone interviews[3] provided more details and insights into the inner workings of the sites. Although the e-mail findings were supported, the interviews were able to

touch on topics only hinted at or not covered at all through e-mail. They also allowed the researchers to probe how online editors conceptualize the notion of interactivity in relation to their caucus sites.

Indeed, when asked directly, interviewees did cite the participatory nature of the medium as one of its strengths. "The beauty of the Web is not just that you can sit in front of the screen and read the paper, but that you can interact with it," the *Register*'s online editor said. "Interactivity is my favorite word related to the Web. People can get involved with the news." And with each other. For instance, he cited the online forums in which a user could post a message lauding one candidate and be immediately engaged by another user saying a different candidate is better. The conversation can get rude -- "I sometimes wonder how these people would treat each other in person because they don't treat each other very well online," he said -- but the opportunities for connection are valuable nonetheless. (Such conversations mirror what happens during a caucus, when supporters of particular candidates cluster together, then try to devise arguments to convince the "undecideds" to join their ranks.) At the *Waterloo Courier*, creating a message board topped the webmaster's wish list. "Our readership is active; they like to get involved in the debates," she said.

One of the drawbacks, however, was getting people to take advantage of their ability to interact in this fledgling virtual public sphere. Aside from the truly committed (Pat Buchanan's supporters, in particular, were steered to the *Register*'s forums, the editor there said), few voters seemed interested in talking about presidential politics months ahead of the caucus, let alone the general election. "The interactive stuff is what has really attracted me," the IowaPulse editor said. Lee's promotional materials emphasized that "the caucus begins now," and the Lee site included ample opportunities for users to jump into the political debate. But if you build it, they

will not always come -- even in Iowa. "My approach so far has been to prime the pump with questions I think people will respond to," he said. The *Register* editor also said he sought to pose discussion questions that will "raise someone's eyebrows, get their backbones out of joint." As described above, both papers pursued efforts to engage public school students, hoping to interest future voters (and their parents). Still, the numbers of participants in online discussions remained low. It's hard to be interactive when there are so few other people around to interact with.

If users were not paying much attention, other Web editors were. All the interviewees referred to one another's products. In Cedar Rapids, for example, the *Gazette*'s online staff watched the IowaPulse forums as they tried to decide whether to commit resources to building their own. An online editor pointed out that while no one from outside the organization can tell how many hits a news story is getting, everyone can see exactly how popular a discussion group is -- or is not. Why, in effect, publicize the fact that no one is paying attention to what you are doing? The audience for political information, he said, is small, and although it is easy to speculate, no one is sure who that audience really is or how to attract and maintain their interest.

Also unclear was the nature of the competition for a caucus Web site. "We work in close tandem with the print model," the *Gazette* Web editor said. "Our mindset is that our competition is other Iowa newspapers." But, he added, the lines are blurry. The big competitors for a national story like the Iowa caucus really may be major outlets, some traditional media ones with an online presence such as CNN and others, such as Yahoo! or America Online, that do not even exist outside of cyberspace. The IowaPulse editor agreed that the composition of his competition online was hard to nail down. In the print world, it is the papers in Cedar Rapids and Des Moines; online, it is much broader, much better funded and much harder to keep up with.

Uncertainty over the nature of the audience, the nature of competition and the ability to sell advertising or otherwise make money from political sites makes coming up with a viable business model problematic. And newspaper Web sites are businesses -- or hope to be. Indeed, the *Gazette*'s online content manager said there was greater freedom in 1996, when the Web was in its infancy and all ideas were worth playing with; in 2000, it was harder to make a case for ideas that were tough to justify economically. When *Gazette* editors sat down to think about their 2000 caucus site, they came up with all sorts of possibilities: questions to assess how important different issues were to Iowa voters, online journals provided by candidates' staffers, whimsical features on topics such as the musical selections played by candidates at their campaign stops. But each of those ideas was labor intensive, and thus expensive. They never saw the light of day.

Corporate backing of and involvement in the papers' online effort varied. The IowaPulse editor said Lee executives were very supportive; in their vision of the future, papers cooperate to develop a branded site that works in harmony with the daily rather than simply replicating it online.[4] Online staffers at Howard's *Courier* and Gannett's *Register* said most of their decision-making was done locally; the corporate parents kept out of the content side (though the *Register* did have to present a business model for the Web site in general, as well as get corporate approval for third-party agreements, such as one with CNN to link to the *Register*'s caucus stories). At the family-owned *Gazette*, the need for fiscal justification of specific content seemed more important. However, the 67,000-circulation *Gazette* had as large a Web staff, about half a dozen people, as the 163,000-circulation *Register*. IowaPulse was produced by a handful of reporters, editors and designers who also wore other hats on the editorial side, while the *Waterloo Courier*'s Web staff consisted of two people with other major duties. All the respondents expressed frustration at not being able to do everything they wanted because of

limited resources, including time, a finding that supports earlier research into online newspaper staffs and their concerns (Singer, Tharp and Haruta, 1999).

One final, related theme that emerged from the follow-up interviews was the relative importance of the political information to the paper's online presence as a whole, as well as the relationship between the Web site and the printed product. The *Des Moines Register*'s online editor saw the political site as "our showcase"; he said he worked hard to keep its information current and to find new things to put on it. At the same time, he added, one goal was to drive people back to the print paper. The *Register*'s site was liberally sprinkled with encouragement to subscribe to the paper. Not all of the newspaper content was online -- though conversely, most of what was online came from print, with the exception of some interactive features. The situation was the same at the smaller *Waterloo Courier*. At the Cedar Rapids paper, which was revamping its overall Web site at the time of this study, the emphasis similarly was on making newspaper content available online; with the political audience being small, little justification was seen for an extensive caucus site. The IowaPulse site was less closely connected with its associated Lee newspapers. It actually was generating content for the print side: While the Web sites of individual papers were updated at the end of the print editing cycle, the political site was updated as soon as information became available, and stories subsequently were re-edited for the daily.

DISCUSSION

This study explored journalistic conceptualizations of the online medium for upcoming coverage of a local political event of national significance in light of the medium's potential to enrich public participation in a democratic community. The answer to the first research question, concerning the nature of the content that these newspapers provided on their caucus Web sites,

seems to be that most of it can be categorized as serving the cognitive function of providing information -- just as it was in 1996. Is the provision of information taking full advantage of the online medium's capabilities? No. Nor is it anything more than a first step in creation of a participatory democracy or a renewed and re-energized public sphere. Nonetheless, it is the role that newspapers are familiar with and have considerable expertise at -- and it is not a role that they can or should ignore, in print or online. The need to keep the citizenry informed on matters of public importance is precisely why the press has a constitutionally protected position in our society. It is not a role they should abrogate simply because they can now disseminate that information in a new way. Information is vital as the groundwork on which constructive communication and participatory democracy can build.

The interactive function, which in this context primarily involved creation of a venue for interpersonal relations among users of the newspaper Web site, offered an insight into what perhaps is the heart of the issue with which traditional journalists are wrestling as they move into an online environment. Their sites did offer some opportunities for user interaction, opportunities not available in the print product. But those options could perhaps best be classified as supplemental and experimental rather than as core components of the online product.

The expressive mode of communication was less in evidence, aside from the fact that having a caucus site available at all is in itself an avowal of the desirability of audience involvement in the political process. Only a small percentage of traditional journalists see themselves as opinion mobilizers (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996), and the medium seems to be having little effect so far in changing that self-perception.

The second, broader research question asked how the online editors at these newspapers envisioned their sites' purpose, role and audience. The findings indicate that what they saw is

what we got: For the most part, they conceptualized their primary role as being expert, credible sources of caucus information, and information is mostly what they offered. If that information could attract a bigger audience than the one at home in Iowa, terrific. Otherwise, their online products were more reflective of than significantly differentiated from their traditional print ones. While opportunities for building online political communities were recognized and appreciated (if not what most of the respondents thought of off the tops of their heads), they suspected, not unreasonably, that those communities would be even less representative of the electorate as a whole than their newspaper readership is.

While it is easy to criticize a tendency to stick to an old role of delivering a one-way communication feed when opportunities for creating a new role present themselves, research supports the logic of this approach. Activists dominated use of political sites prior to election night in 1996, and polls in the fall of 1999 indicated presidential campaigning was low on the list of things most people wanted to think about. It makes sense to suppose that the people seeking out caucus sites at the time of this study, far in advance of any actual voting, were indeed only the people really, really into politics. Even as the 2000 election date drew closer, information-seeking behavior dominated audience use of newspaper Web sites, as the lead author learned in a national study subsequent to the one reported here. People look to newspapers for information, and information is what they expect to find, regardless of the medium in which the newspaper is "delivered" to them.

But that said, the Web does offer an unparalleled opportunity to move beyond the role of information provider and to offer a place for citizens to connect with the political process and with one another. Newspapers and their editors are less comfortable in this role, as witness the reticence about the ideas of civic journalism mentioned above. Indeed, it may be an extremely

difficult one for them to fill, given their dual nature as both instruments of nonpartisan public service and instruments of profit for publishers and shareholders. If audience interest in online civic engagement through traditional media sites is indeed as low as this study and others suggest, then even editors' enthusiasm would be difficult to sustain in light of publishers' likely reluctance. Why commit resources to an enterprise with neither a past that fits in with the paper's historical mission nor a future that fits in with its revenue goals of attracting an audience that will in turn attract advertisers?

There are, perhaps, two answers. The less compelling is "because they can." Emerging technologies always offer new opportunities for existing media forms to expand their horizons. Yet if history is a guide, it is far more likely that newspapers will change incrementally in response to the Internet than that they will change radically -- far more likely that they will enhance their strengths as information providers rather than go head to head with, say, Usenet groups or America Online chatrooms. Television, for example, prompted newspapers to make their pages more colorful and their stories shorter, but corporate cross-ownership aside, it did not make them abandon their emphasis on written words organized in a linear fashion. Indeed, it is far more likely for existing media to evolve in ways that highlight existing strengths than in ways that bring them into direct competition with new media forms (Fidler, 1997).

The more compelling answer, at least from an outside-the-industry viewpoint, is "because they should." At a rather mundane technological level, newspapers should at least seriously consider taking on a more active role in fostering civic engagement because much of their discomfort with that role has stemmed from a physical reality that the Internet makes irrelevant. In a medium with limited space, embracing one mode of operation means giving up, or at least reducing the prominence of, another. Online, there is no such zero-sum game; there is ample

room to do both, in an environment that naturally lends itself to a more participatory role by users. This limited exploratory study, while hardly offering conclusive evidence, suggests that newspapers with the resources to do it are, in fact, moving in this direction. The enthusiasm for discussion areas and other interactive features indicates recognition of the merits of discourse in the formation of political opinion. However, some local outlets are easily restraining their eagerness to provide such areas even if they are not economically profitable. Others simply do not have the technical or human resources to offer such services at this time.

Local newspapers also should consider reconceptualizing their public service role to involve more outlets for interaction because there is an opportunity here to take advantage of their own unique place within their communities. They are not Usenet groups nor AoL chatrooms, and they should not try to be. Nor are they CNN or *The New York Times*, even if they share the vast online media space with such behemoths. Rather, they are reasonably credible sources of local information with, typically, long-standing institutional memory of their communities and unparalleled brand-name recognition within those communities. They have the potential to build on those strengths not simply by offering information in bits rather than atoms, but by helping instigate the re-emergence of a viable political community at the level at which, as former U.S. House Speaker Tip O'Neill reminded us, all politics operates: the local.

True, the responsibility for creation of a democratic public sphere does not lie with the newspaper or any other profit-oriented media outlet alone. It lies fundamentally with the citizens themselves (Bimber, 1998). Building a public sphere is an exercise in futility if it remains uninhabited, as this study suggests the small-scale, "local" places currently available for political discourse may be. The editors interviewed here indicated that for their caucus sites in general, usage was small relative to that of their overall Web sites -- just as the number of Iowans who

participate in the caucus is small relative to those who vote in the general election, and smaller still in relation to the state's overall population. Nonetheless, the community's current size does not mean that it should not be nurtured and helped to grow.

Providing information continues to be one service to the newspaper's community, a necessary ingredient to its development. Giving people new ways to interact with the information -- searching archives, participating in and perusing polls, hyperlinking to candidate sites or other online sources -- is an important way to start to take advantage of the medium's capabilities for personalization and depth. But it is only a start. Connections among informed citizens are waiting to be established, and the ability for them to make their voices heard and their opinions shared is waiting to be encouraged. There is a need for credible, even-handed information online, and newspapers can and should make meeting that need a priority. But ultimately, it will not be enough in and of itself.

Newspapers have always been, in essence, a forum for debate among and about the political elite. From their op-ed pages to news stories about government officials' ideas and actions, we have had ample opportunities to learn what our leaders think, say and do. The Internet gives newspapers an opportunity to open up that debate to more of the citizenry, to extend it so that it includes the people at the heart of a democratic political system. The medium allows newspapers to make that extension relatively painlessly -- without space limitations, incremental delivery costs, or the necessity of choosing one approach or piece of content only at the expense of another. The results will not only inform the users; it will inform the journalists, as well. Such is the nature of a two-way information flow: One learns as well as instructs, listens as well as speaks.

APPENDIX A

URLs of Web sites included in this study (October 1999)

The Cedar Rapids *Gazette*	www.crgazette.com/caucus
The Des Moines *Register*	www.dmregister.com/extras/politics
IowaPulse (Lee Enterprises)	www.iowapulse.com
The Sioux City *Journal*	www.siouxcityjournal.com/Politics/e2000
The Waterloo *Courier*	www.wcfcourier.com/features/caucusmain.html

APPENDIX B
E-mail questions asked of respondents

1) What do you see as your primary purpose or goal in having a Web site (**alternate text**: a part of your Web site) devoted to the Iowa caucus?

What one or two key things are you seeking to accomplish with this site?

2) Who do you see as your audience for your online caucus site?

Is this different from your traditional audience? If so, in what way?

What do you want your online users to get out of your site?

3) How are you differentiating yourself from other caucus-related sites online?

How are you differentiating yourself from other traditional sources of political information? Is your online role different from your own traditional role?

4) What choices have you made about the content or structure of your site in order to meet your goals?

Will your site change as we get closer to the caucus date? If so, how?

A fifth question asked about willingness to discuss the caucus site further by telephone.

FOOTNOTES

1) Dewey's arguments are related to the progressive ideal of the informed citizen, which served in the 1930s to organize small communities in an effort to make democracy work in the United States. The Carnegie Foundation and the American Association for Adult Education supported the first of these projects in Des Moines, Iowa. The project, organized by schools superintendent (and later U.S. commissioner of education) John Studebaker in 1933, "ran hundreds of discussion groups on contemporary political, economic and social issues" (Schudson, 1998, p. 220). The group's goal was to develop an informed citizenry for a better democracy, which ultimately was seen as the true obligation of every citizen of the state. Similar groups spread throughout the country by 1937, reaching almost 1,500 communities.

2) The reliance on the medium as a source of news has continued to increase since the period encompassed by this study. A Pew Research Center study found that nearly one in five Americans went online for election news in 2000; among those already online, fully one-third got election news from the 'Net, and their most common sources for political information were the sites of major news outlets, including newspapers. ("Internet election news," 2000). Since the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, the Internet has become an even more important news source. A Harris Interactive poll indicates that the percentage of Americans using the Internet as one of their information sources jumped from 64 percent of 80 percent in the two weeks after the attacks, second only to television; eight percent used it as their primary news source ("Harris Interactive survey," 2001). By February 2002, online news sites were attracting almost 57 million unique visitors a month, including about 20 million for msnbc.com and almost 16 million for cnn.com (“Olympics Have,” 2002).

3) One of the interviews, with the Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, offered an opportunity to talk with someone in addition to the person who had answered the original e-mail query.

4) In a conversation unrelated to this study, Lee's vice president for interactive media told the lead author that the company is extremely interested in exploring whether the online product can be a "driver" for print. For instance, he said, feedback obtained in online polls might be used both for story ideas and for story content -- a philosophy reflected in the opinions and perspectives of the IowaPulse editor. The executive also expressed strong support for IowaPulse. The Web, he said, has the potential to "re-engage people in the political process in ways they haven't been engaged in a long time." If they can recommit to the process and feel they can participate meaningfully, he said, they will be "not quite as distanced and not quite as cynical."

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