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**Leaning Conservative:
Innovation and Presidential Campaign Coverage
by U.S. Newspaper Websites in the Digital Age
Jane B. Singer**

Abstract:

Across the four presidential election years of the Internet age, massive changes occurred in campaign coverage. Or did they? This article reports on a unique longitudinal study: a series of four national surveys of online newspaper editors – in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 – that provide insights into evolving capabilities and their impact on journalists' own perceived social role. The results indicate widespread adoption of technological innovations, including those enabling citizens to shape the nature of their political engagement. Yet what matters most to online editors has been their own expanding capability to provide traditional kinds of information in new ways.

Journalists have long seen themselves as crucial providers of civically valuable information, and the quality of their election coverage holds pride of place in that self-assessment. According to the journalist's view of democracy, the core value of their endeavor lies in enabling citizens to inform themselves wisely enough to remain free and self-governing (Gans, 2003; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007) – a value that journalists insist endures, indeed expands, as potentially harmful misinformation or disinformation proliferates in our open networked world. Presidential elections, in particular, are a spectacular form of theater not only for politicians and their retinue (Campbell, 2008) but also for journalists, enabling them to carefully plan their coverage before stepping onstage to perform for an audience.

But that audience has dramatically different capabilities, expectations, and behaviors than it did before the rise of the Internet. A series of Pew reports illustrates the scope of the changes framing this study. The last presidential election cycle in which digital media played only a negligible role was 1996, when just 4% of Americans went online for election news (Kohut & Rainie, 2000). Since then, reliance on the Internet for political information has grown sharply and steadily. By 2012, nearly half of Americans – and close to two-thirds of those under 30 – cited the Internet as a main campaign news source; fewer than three in 10 said they relied mainly on newspapers (Pew Research, 2012). Citizens produced as well as consumed political information, particularly through

ubiquitous social networks. In 2012, more than a third of U.S. users of Facebook and Twitter said they promoted materials about political or social issues; used the networks to encourage others to vote; and/or published their own views about political or social issues (Smith, 2013). Mobile technologies were becoming platforms for civic activities once associated with legacy media, such as obtaining others' views about candidates or assessing the veracity of political information (Smith & Duggan, 2012). Overall, journalists played a smaller role in shaping what voters heard about candidates than they had a dozen years before (State of the News Media, 2013a).

Newspapers did not stand still during this period. Their affiliated websites, once disdained as peripheral at best to the “real” newsroom, became sophisticated centerpieces of a multi-platform news strategy. And although they no longer had a monopoly on news, they remained influential. By the time of the 2012 election, U.S. newspaper websites had, in the aggregate, well over 110 million unique monthly visitors (State of the News Media, 2013b), and the websites of newspapers and television news outlets accounted for 20 of the 25 most popular news sites for the year (State of the News Media, 2013c). Journalists from legacy outlets also were active in social media.

Across the four presidential election years of the Internet age, then, massive changes occurred in campaign coverage. Or did they? This paper reports findings from a unique longitudinal study: a series of four national surveys of online newspaper editors – in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 – that provide insights into the integration of expanded options for fulfilling their core civic function as journalists themselves define it. The results indicate widespread adoption of technological innovations but reluctance to cede or share prime occupational turf, the job of informing the electorate. Many options for involving citizens in election coverage have been made available – but accorded relatively little merit by editors. Journalists still seem to see themselves as the lifeblood of democracy (Fenton, 2010) and to firmly believe that it cannot function without them.

Journalists, Political Coverage, and Digital Innovation

In the early 2000s, more than 70% of U.S. journalists identified serving as a government “watchdog” as their core social role, with a sizable majority also highlighting their ability to get information to the public quickly (Weaver et al., 2007). A decade later, despite greater pessimism about their industry and profession, that watchdog role was even more likely to be seen as central to the journalistic enterprise; 78% of respondents labeled it extremely important, the highest percentage ever reported (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). The view of the journalist as a guardian of democracy has become a nearly transcendent self-perception, a source of vital resilience in the face of myriad technological, economic, and social changes. It has been ever thus; right from the start, journalists staked their claim to occupational legitimacy on a public need for reliable political information (Dooley, 2000). Not surprising, then, that many of the concerns journalists have raised about the Internet relate to whether its structure and affordances empower or compromise this mission (O’Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008).

Research into journalists’ responses to technologically enabled innovation over the past 15 years also provides context for the present study. This work documents tentative and

often reluctant adaptation to a growing repertoire of newsroom tools and even more skepticism about expanding audience capacities. Pavlik (2013) defines journalism innovation as “the process of taking new approaches to media practices and forms while maintaining a commitment to quality and high ethical standards” (p. 183), and he sees it as the key to news media viability as staffs and budgets shrink. Yet scholars have found that through much of the 2000s, U.S. newspapers exhibited generally low levels of innovation, with actions shaped more significantly by institutional stasis than by any propulsion toward creativity in the face of environmental pressures (Lowrey, 2011). The following sub-sections consider journalists’ adaptations to successive waves of change, particularly in relation to their political coverage and civic role.

Convergence and Multimedia

In 2000, newspaper-affiliated websites were all but ignored by most journalists in the “real” newsroom – the one whose output took the form of ink on paper. Online editors were not atypically outside the newsroom chain of command; their staffs were physically segregated and culturally isolated, accorded little attention and less respect (Singer, Tharp, & Haruta, 1999). Also ignored were signals that changes already under way necessitated innovation across the organization, not just in the murky corner where the geeky kids toiled at “repurposing” newspaper content. A comment from a print editor in the late 1990s is telling: “Our [online] news director needs to always be on top of new developments. It is not as critical for us on the print side” (ibid., p. 41).

In the early 2000s, some news organizations began trying to address this digital divide by promoting newsroom “convergence” as a model for a multi-platform future. Convergence involved combining technologies, products, staff, and geography among the previously distinct realms of print, television, and online media (Singer, 2004) in an effort to change not only physical and organizational structures but also the way journalists did their jobs (Huang & Heider, 2007). Things did not go swimmingly. In many newsrooms, convergence efforts were resisted overtly or covertly. Even if experiments succeeded, one observer predicted, the result would be to distract journalists from “that single most important imperative of the craft – to create an informed society capable of intelligently governing itself” (Haiman, 2001). Although convergence had its champions, mainly among news managers tasked with implementing it, many newspaper journalists saw it as pulling them in a direction they had no desire to go. “I went to j-school to be a journalist, not to be a multimedia person, not to be a TV person, not to multitask,” one veteran reporter said. TV journalism, he explained, is “abhorrent, a sub-species” (Singer, 2004, p. 14).

Whether or not newsrooms opted to “converge,” greater emphasis on visual or “multimedia” storytelling was nearly universal in the early 2000s. Journalists instantly branded this innovation as supplemental, at best, to the skills that really mattered: the ones undergirding their ability to keep the citizenry informed. “It is fine to know all the bells and whistles in video and audio and Flash and all that,” a journalist in a converged newsroom said. But reporting should still be “first and foremost. Newsgathering should be the most important thing” (Dupagne & Garrison, 2006, p. 250). There were widespread complaints that multimedia technologies were difficult to learn, cumbersome

to use, and most important, took time away from that crucial newsgathering responsibility (Avilés & Carvajal, 2008). Even at leading newspapers such as *The New York Times*, multimedia was used during the 2000s mainly as an extension of the written word rather than as a primary storytelling format (Jacobson, 2012).

Blogs and “J-Blogs”

Journalists also adopted blogs relatively slowly and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Convergence and multimedia threatened to steal time that they felt could be put to better use. Bloggers – including political bloggers, among the first to gain prominence in the 1990s, when Matt Drudge broke the story of President Clinton’s dalliance with a certain White House intern – threatened to steal their very identity as information providers. By the 2004 election campaign, blogs had become standard fare on campaign websites (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005) and were widely used by politically engaged citizens, typically in combination with more traditional media fare (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). All the major presidential candidates had at least one, and growing numbers of journalists and news organizations did, too.

Yet “j-blogs” posed a significant challenge to the professional norm of non-partisanship, a disinclination to take sides on issues of public controversy such as politics (Singer, 2005). While previous technological innovations had been resisted largely on logistical grounds, blogs posed more significant ethical issues for journalists. “Bloggers aren’t preaching to the choir. They are the choir,” a newspaper columnist wrote in 2004. “This isn’t fair, unbiased and objective journalism. Nor is it trying to be” (Carlson, 2007, p. 268). Rare was the news organization that didn’t quickly draft lengthy guidelines intended to assuage managers’ fears that staffers would say something embarrassing at best and libelous at worst.

Of course, just as newsroom production of online content, including multimedia content, soon became commonplace, so too did newsroom publication of blogs. Singer (2005) suggests a process of normalization, in which an innovative form is shaped to fit existing conceptions and norms. Robinson (2006) offers a different interpretation, seeing j-blogs as a form of “reconstituted journalism” intended to recapture journalistic authority in the face of encroachments onto previously uncontested occupational turf. In doing so, she suggests, j-bloggers have not abandoned their traditional watchdog role but have taught themselves new tricks, some related to writing style but others “blurring the lines of independence, verification, the definition of news, and truth” (p. 79).

Newsroom blogs represented a transitional form of journalism, a bridge from traditional story structures to the social media formats that followed. Dependent on a journalist’s selection of material and thus grounded in traditional notions of professional roles, j-blogs also gave notice that those notions were changing: Within a one-to-many form of mass communication, they opened possibilities for stronger interpersonal relationships between journalist and user than traditional formats allowed (Matheson, 2004).

User-Generated Content and Social Media

Subsequent innovations in the latter 2000s revolved around rapidly expanding user capabilities to generate, publish, and share content. For some, “Web 2.0” reignited earlier excitement about an “electronic republic” (Grossman, 1995) that might foster a digital version of the perpetually elusive public sphere envisioned by theorists (Dahlgren, 2005) – or might at least lessen the influence of established news media over the political agenda (Bimber, 1998). For journalists, however, “user-generated content,” mainly though not exclusively in the form of comments on journalists’ stories, meant those in the newsroom no longer had the final say over what was published even under their own byline. Concerns were wide-ranging, but front and center were intertwined issues related to accuracy, credibility, and civility.

Material provided by users was difficult to verify – maybe factual, maybe merely “hearsay and gossip” (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010). When journalists report a story, “we talk to at least three sources. When we print something, we know it’s as close to the truth as possible,” a U.S. community journalist said. “When you have a citizen who has a gripe about the police department, that’s going to be as much opinion as fact. It affects the credibility of your organization” (p. 170). A British journalist was even blunter: “The platform gives credibility to people whose comments may be completely inaccurate, offensive or without foundation in fact. It arguably undermines the work of professional journalists by placing the words of people who have no training or professional responsibility alongside, or even on a par with, those who do” (Singer & Ashman, 2009, pp. 12-13). Journalists also worried that they would be liable for material posted by users that might violate libel, hate speech, or copyright law.

Even generally innovative news organizations remained wary of user contact. Among news producers at 43 websites nominated for Online News Association awards in 2002, for example, Chung (2007) found that site producers were enthusiastic about interactivity only when it did not involve engaging with actual humans. They lauded their own ability to use then-novel technologies such as Flash to provide “different types of storytelling” (p. 51), and users’ ability to use online capabilities to shape personal news consumption. But the potential for interaction among users, or between users and newsroom staff, was viewed much more coolly, with interviewees citing concerns about increased workloads stemming from inappropriate user input.

By the 2012 election, users (and journalists) were also publishing extensively through social media. Many social media formats, such as Twitter, are essentially micro-blogs, and journalists’ responses have in some ways echoed those raised a few years earlier. But social media material is potential source material, and questions about trustworthiness have been especially pressing: Is the information important and reliable enough for me to incorporate in a story with my byline attached?

Many journalists were initially dubious, seeing 140-character shout-outs as uselessly annoying. “The amazing thing is that enough people out there think this mindless stream of ephemera (‘I’m eating a tangerine’, ‘I’m waiting for a plane’, I want a Big Mac’) is interesting,” one columnist wrote (Arceneaux & Weiss, 2010, p. 1271). The ease with which anyone, anywhere could instantly post and share information through social

media – without an editor in sight – was a source of particular concern in the political and civic realm. News organizations scrambled to produce guidelines for journalists to help them “gather, triangulate and verify the often conflicting information” emerging on social media, particularly at times of crisis or disaster (Silverman & Tsubaki, 2014).

Nonetheless, journalists soon adopted social media. Indeed, it will be obvious that despite widespread initial resistance, all these “innovative” technologies have since become part of the newsroom landscape. Most newspapers today have a “digital-first” publishing philosophy. Visual news formats are pervasive. Rare is the journalist without a professional Twitter feed. Journalists’ work practices have indeed changed in the digital age – but the changes tend to be reactive rather than proactive. Examples of innovations initiated within the newsroom, rather than belatedly adopted, are exceedingly rare. “For the most part,” Ryfe (2012) points out, journalists “continue to gather the same sorts of information, from the same sorts of people, and package it in the same news forms they have used for decades” (p. 3). As O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) put it: “The social institution called journalism is hesitant in abandoning its conventions, both at organizational and professional levels,” even as digital technologies have reshaped society’s communication patterns. Journalists are not necessarily “recalcitrant technophobes, but they welcome the Net when it suits their existing professional ends and are much less enthusiastic about, and unlikely to promote, radical change in news work” (p. 368).

With this framework in mind, the longitudinal study reported here addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent did online editors of leading U.S. newspapers incorporate new newsroom capabilities in their campaign and election coverage over the first four election cycles of the 2000s?

RQ2: To what extent did they incorporate new audience capabilities during this time?

RQ3: How, if at all, did these capabilities shape their own content choices?

Methodology

Post-election questionnaires were distributed in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012 to online editors of the largest-circulation newspaper in each state and the District of Columbia, plus additional papers with print circulations of 250,000 or above (traditionally the largest category used by the Newspaper Association of America) according to data from the Audit Bureau of Circulations. These major publications are the ones most likely to have brand name recognition for every voter in their state, making them likely sources for those turning to an online newspaper for political content. Closed-ended questions focused on the presence or absence of particular features. Open-ended ones related to editors’ goals for their election websites and content areas of which they were most proud, among other topics. These key questions were replicated each year and supplemented with additional items reflecting online developments at the time.

In 2000 and 2004, the questionnaire was distributed by email to online editors identified from published sources; their responses then were manually transferred into Excel and Word for analysis. In 2008 and 2012, SurveyMonkey was used instead. The pool of potential respondents declined over the years as the number of newspapers with circulations over 250,000 fell. The response rate also declined. In 2000, 80 U.S. newspapers were included in the study, with a 71% response rate of completed surveys. The numbers were 77 newspapers and a 61% response rate in 2004; 76 newspapers and a 42% response rate in 2008; and 73 newspapers and a 21% response rate in 2012, reflecting a documented rise in journalists' reluctance to respond to questionnaires (Weaver et al., 2007).

Editors from 41 states were represented in the 2000 study (Singer, 2003). The figure fell to 35 states and the District of Columbia in the 2004 study (Singer, 2006), then dipped again to 28 states plus DC in 2008 (Singer, 2009). In both 2004 and 2008, editors from the largest and smallest newspapers in the sample were among the respondents, and both surveys obtained responses from editors who had participated previously as well as editors who had not. The 2012 study was problematic not only because of the low response rate but also because a technical glitch made it difficult to ascertain exactly who had responded. However, responses to demographic questions indicated all were well-seasoned professionals, averaging more than 25 years in journalism.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses to the closed-ended questions, which yielded mostly nominal data. Responses to open-ended questions were categorized thematically around journalistic roles, activities, and outputs related to evolving capabilities for innovation. Despite caution necessitated by the uneven response rates, broad comparisons over time were possible. Such longitudinal analysis is helpful in exploring the effects of social, cultural, and political change.

Findings: Coverage of U.S. presidential elections in the digital age

Findings suggest that despite massive changes in citizens' capabilities to shape the nature of political engagement, what has mattered most to editors has been their own expanding capability to provide traditional kinds of information in new ways. They consistently emphasized such long-standing news attributes as timeliness and enthused about the ability to contextualize political information, courtesy of an unlimited online news hole. Periodically, opportunities for more novel approaches were incorporated in their online offerings and duly noted. But those novelties then faded from noteworthiness in most editors' eyes; the primacy of "informing the public" never did.

In the sections below, the relevant citation to previously published results from the 2000, 2004, and 2008 studies is provided only once, for brevity.

The 2000 election: Need for speed

Nearly all the online editors in the 2000 study (Singer, 2003) – 45 of the 49 who answered the question – cited a goal directly related to informing users. The ability to provide timely news, especially on Election Night, was particularly valued. Several respondents crowed that they could finally beat television ... despite the fact that in

2000, some TV news outlets infamously jumped the gun and declared Al Gore the winner in Florida and therefore the nation. The Internet's lack of space constraints also was popular, for instance in publishing voting guides that gave readers "the ability to understand the choice they were about to make," as one editor said. In general, editors in 2000 saw the website as extending the print newspaper's brand rather than as a distinct entity.

Only four editors indicated they were attuned to the powerful potential of the then-new medium to stimulate political discourse among citizen users. Those four, however, were eloquent about its benefits. "This medium is about the empowerment of our community, to facilitate interaction with interesting or meaningful people," one editor wrote. "This is the place the readers have a voice, have a stake in the 'community' that a good newspaper nurtures."

Editors were invited to describe up to three sources of pride in their campaign coverage, and information-related attributes dominated the list. Sixty-seven items, more than two-thirds of the 95 listed in all, related either to depth and detail of the information provided or to its timeliness. Generating far less enthusiasm were options for user participation such as chats and discussion forums, cited 14 times as a source of pride. Editors who mentioned these options saw the ability to offer something impossible in print as their main advantage. Multimedia features generated 10 mentions, and another four editors cited as their top source of pride an option enabling users to identify the candidate whose issue positions best matched their own.

Overall, traditional information-oriented roles remained central to journalists' self-perception in their early years online. For most, the 2000 campaign marked an initial effort to provide extensive election coverage via the Internet, and they saw the medium as a way to address criticism about the superficiality of traditional political coverage. They were proudest of their new ability to offer breadth, depth, and utility not easily available in print. But their attempts at innovation were limited to doing old things in (somewhat) new ways. They viewed their goals and achievements in the context of good newspaper journalism – which could potentially be done better online.

The 2004 election: Other voices

Editors of newspaper websites continued to emphasize their provision of credible information in the 2004 campaign (Singer, 2006). But at a time when blogs and other platforms were making it easier for people outside the newsroom to gain an audience for political commentary, survey respondents seemed more open to the idea that readers could help shape coverage.

That is not to say their aims had changed substantively from four years earlier. A clear majority – 39 of the 47 editors answering the question – identified informing the public as the main goal, citing the Internet's ability to outperform print on speed, volume, and detail. Three emphasized the role of information in fostering civic engagement, for instance by increasing "interest in the process." But just two offered overall goals directly related to engaging citizens in a more explicitly discursive form of democracy,

for instance through “blogs and forums, giving the voters the interactive ability to discuss the issues and candidates and also to interact live with the candidates.”

Yet in describing their sources of pride in 2004, editors did place greater emphasis on these participatory options. There was a notable decline in the percentage of responses related to the timeliness of information, from 29 of the 95 total responses in 2000 to just 12 of 87 in 2004. In contrast, blogs, which were not available in 2000, were cited 16 times; options for user participation in and personalization of online offerings earned 11 mentions, a three-fold increase over 2000. Indeed, almost all the editors in the 2004 study said they complemented newsroom-generated political content with opportunities for users to contribute information or ideas.

The 2004 study identified three primary ways in which journalists facilitated a more participatory form of civic engagement. One was by providing baseline information that users could manipulate to suit individual needs or interests, for instance through ZIP code-tailored ballot builders. A second was the adoption of blogs, including those from local opinion leaders as well as from users. An editor whose website included three blogs, one featuring reader viewpoints, described them as “interesting, smart and lively,” with a debate between two contributors offering “some of the best commentary and analysis anywhere.” Chats, discussion forums, or message boards constituted the third avenue for user participation in 2004, with 33 of the 47 editors saying their sites offered such features, a place for people “to vent, to discuss, to congregate, to have their say.”

In general, then, the 2004 study suggested considerably greater openness than in 2000 to the then-innovative idea that website audiences could make valuable contributions to newspaper campaign and election coverage. Though delivery of credible information was still of paramount importance, that information was less likely to be static and more likely to be open to user input. The findings suggested a move toward integration of the journalist’s traditional civic role – providing trustworthy, accurate content to inform the electorate – with the open and participatory nature of the Internet.

The 2008 election: Back to basics

If the 2004 election signaled a step forward in online editors’ thinking about innovative campaign and election coverage, they took two steps back the next time around (Singer, 2009). In an election year during which social media gained importance and the Internet overtook newspapers as a primary source of presidential campaign news (Pew Research, 2008), most respondents to the 2008 questionnaire reverted to the themes expressed in a Web 1.0 world.

All 36 editors who answered the question about coverage goals in 2008 highlighted their own role as information providers, as in 2000 typically stressing the greater speed, volume, and capacity for detail online. A handful drew connections to civic engagement, but their goals had little to do with democratic discourse – that is, with use of the website as a platform to discuss political candidates or issues. Nearly all their websites included campaign-related contributions from users, but they did not seem to see that capability as having much if anything to do with them. Only one editor alluded to it at all

in describing website goals – and his reference was to providing a platform for candidates, not users in general, to “describe themselves and discuss issues.”

Earlier innovations within the newsroom, however, had gained wider acceptance by 2008. Multimedia content, primarily video, and journalist blogs were highlighted as sources of pride 15 and 18 times, respectively. Editors described their newsroom blogs as “the leading edge of our coverage,” a place to provide “the inside story on our state’s politicians” and a way to get a jump on competitors. Even so, traditional information continued to rule: 20 of the 31 editors offering a source of pride cited one or more features that offered deep or detailed information. And the ability to provide timely information on Election Night was mentioned a dozen times. Just two respondents said they were proud of user contributions, compared with seven in 2004 and 14 in 2000, years when far fewer options for such contributions were available.

All but one of the 32 respondents in 2008 said the website enabled users to contribute content, to personalize content provided by the newspaper, or both. But they described its value primarily in terms of utility to ... journalists. Only three mentioned the ability for user-generated content to strengthen interactions among citizens. Instead, the overall focus was on strengthening the information product that they themselves provided, either by adding diverse perspectives or by creating a bigger pool of potential sources.

Findings from 2008, then, suggested a rather blasé response to perhaps the most significant innovation of the Internet age to date: the advent of a widespread ability for citizens to participate in online civic discourse. Although space on newspaper websites was increasingly likely to be shared, published items remained separate and unequal in the eyes of most editors, who valued user-generated content well below their own. Retreating from their tentative excitement over user participation in 2004, editors returned to their initial instinct, reasserting a deeply held self-perception (or at least hope) that journalists are indispensable to the proper functioning of democracy.

The 2012 Election: New options, old attitudes

Which was the dominant trend over the four election cycles included in this study: an openness to innovative online affordances hinted at in 2004, or the renewed assertion of traditional perspectives evidenced in 2008? This section offers a more detailed look at findings from 2012. Although the low response rate means insights remain tentative, the data do suggest some talking points about the evolution of campaign coverage.

Content and coverage goals: Eleven of the 14 respondents answering the question provided online features or applications in 2012 that were not available in 2008, and they made greater use of social and mobile media, as well as live blogging and other formats that enabled rapid updates. Respondents universally used Facebook and Twitter to promote their campaign and election content. There also were indications of a willingness to open up avenues for external contributions, as discussed further below. For example, one editor cited an app enabling users to see locally generated Twitter buzz about the presidential contenders; another said local candidates could record their own short videos to accompany newsroom-generated profiles.

Again asked to identify their primary coverage goal, every single respondent cited informing the public; as one wrote, “We did a lot of things to help readers make educated choices, but the primary goal is still to cover the news comprehensively.” In another echo of responses from four elections past, editors also commonly emphasized the speed of online information delivery, such as the respondent whose goal was to publish a “swift and efficient report on who/what won” as quickly as possible. All agreed their goals had been met; they cited both content-related markers such as speed or depth, and usage indicators such as website traffic, as well as revenue. In the assessment of another editor, “We’ve got the drill down.”

All but one editor said users could access campaign or election content through a mobile app in 2012. The nature of available content dictated the delivery platform: “Results grids worked best on the web; a post containing continuous one-line updates worked best on mobile; and longer pieces worked best in print,” one editor wrote. Although all the editors said they commonly followed a “digital-first” publishing strategy, the sense that print was best suited to analytical pieces and long-form journalism was evident in several responses. One editor summed up the “formula we always use” this way: “The Web is for a speedy and basic report, with the ability to search through all the past content. Mobile is for delivering fast information. Print is for a more polished and refined report, with more analysis, more intensive and customized design.”

User contributions: There also were plentiful opportunities for user contributions in 2012. They included, among other options, comments on stories, columns, and blogs (enabled by all 15 editors answering the question) and user Twitter feeds (nine editors). Also cited by multiple respondents were Q&As with political journalists, candidates or experts; crowd-sourced campaign coverage, including visual content; and commissioned material from users.

Yet most of the editors admitted that this abundance of user-contributed riches played no role in their own coverage; only two said it had any influence at all. “We chased several stories based on audience recommendations,” one of these two editors wrote. The other said participation solicited through photo galleries, polls, and blogs affected decisions about where to assign newsroom resources.

No one relied on users for election results on the night, when editors reported that they obtained their information from traditional sources, including staff and wire reports and data from election officials. Only one editor reported getting results through social media. Six editors did use “blogs and/or social media from users” for supplemental Election Night information, and three made users’ text and photos available on their website. But journalists were the dominant sources for this feature-oriented information, as well: all 15 respondents used text and photos from newsroom staffers, 11 used blogs and/or social media from their journalists, and 10 used journalists’ multimedia content.

Was any campaign or election material from users “reverse published” in their legacy newspaper? Eight of the 15 editors said no, and open-ended responses from the

remaining seven suggested a broad definition of “users” that encompassed candidates or political experts. Only two respondents indicated that material from ordinary citizens made it into print. One took “mostly wrap-up stories” from Election Night. The other mentioned that a “great many tips” received online were followed up – by journalists – and that political events submitted online became part of a printed political calendar. Photos and letters submitted online also “may have” found their way into print.

Journalists’ incorporation of user-provided material about the 2012 campaign and election into their own news decisions, then, appears to have been minimal at most. Most paid little attention to user contributions; the rest used it only in perfunctory ways.

Taking advantage of opportunities to turn users into content promoters, on the other hand, was a more appealing prospect. All the respondents said they offered options for users to personalize and/or share campaign and election content created by the newspaper. Such options included social media feeds, ballot builders, and interactive graphics, such as electoral maps, that users could manipulate. But editors’ rationales for offering these features blended civic and commercial goals. They cited synergistic desires to “build engagement and increase page views,” or to generate “shared knowledge, SEO value.” Similarly, success tended to be measured in traffic data. “That’s what the metrics tell me,” an editor wrote in explaining why he felt these efforts to be wholly successful. “All-time record traffic despite advent of a strict paywall.”

Sources of pride: As in previous years, editors were asked to indicate up to three sources of pride related to their 2012 campaign and election coverage. Their responses overwhelmingly highlighted political content that fulfilled their traditional role as providers of thorough and timely information. Voter guides to candidates and issues – long a staple of newspaper election coverage, though several respondents mentioned online personalization features – were cited by nine of the 13 editors answering the question. Five were proudest of their ability to provide Election Night results quickly. Although several mentioned use of social media, particularly Twitter, other options enabling user input merited minimal recognition.

In explaining their responses, editors stressed the utility of information they provided. “Seriously, there can’t be enough said about immediate coverage and instant results,” wrote an editor whose top source of pride was live updates. “We often think that readers want these complex stories when in reality, they want to know what’s happening at their polling place and who won, especially the night of.” Another was proud that “we killed it. Other media had to cite us and our calls/results that night. Traffic was huge because we’ve built that expectation that we’d have the goods.” An editor who listed a voting guide first said it “cuts to the chase in terms of letting users see their voting choices, the candidates’ responses, and their personal, marked-up ballot.” Several mentioned that the guides included candidate responses to issue-related questions, creating “a thorough profile” and “a useful public service (that) sometimes produces news.”

The provision of useful information that, not incidentally, helped drive traffic to the site was central to the discussion of other online features, too. One editor described the

elections home page as “a heavily traveled place for readers to get all their election news in one place,” adding that it “became a mainstay in our ‘Top 10’ pageview lists in the days surrounding the election. I’m proud of it because readers used it.” Another highlighted online-only stories that “gave readers reasons to come back to the web during the day and helped fill a healthy appetite for what was happening at the polls.”

Discussion of user engagement also was connected to options that involved either visual or very brief content formats. One editor explained that “interactive graphics give readers something they love – the ability to control and decipher information.” Not surprisingly, social media were seen as well-suited to user participation. The only editor who referenced social media as his top source of pride described a partnership with a university journalism program in using tweets about a locally staged debate. Another editor proud of his social media use cited its ability to serve dual roles: “Our Twitter feeds were not only effective in informing the public but (became) a popular form of engagement with our readers.” A third, who used Twitter to publicize local reactions, said “it wasn’t scientific, but it was engaging and a lot of fun.”

In summary, even though respondents all offered extensive, multi-faceted opportunities for citizen input, they remained proudest of digital manifestations of their own long-standing self-perception as creators of an informed electorate, their ability to provide “thorough information on all our races and candidates, what people can expect when they hit the polls and where they can vote,” as one wrote. Overall, these longitudinal findings suggest that election coverage over time has been marked by a steadfast emphasis on traditional journalistic roles involving the provision of depth, detail, and timeliness. Together, these accounted for nearly 58% of the sources of pride over the four election cycles. Newer options – blogs, multimedia or animation, personalization features – generated an attention blip as they were integrated into election coverage, then a decline as they became commonplace. Table 1 encapsulates these trends.

[TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Conclusion

Over a dozen years and four presidential elections, online U.S. newspaper campaign coverage has gained in technological sophistication. As successive clusters of digital tools have been folded into newsroom routines, journalists have become increasingly innovative information providers. But the myriad opportunities afforded by dramatic changes in audience capabilities have been accorded minimal importance. In particular, social changes related to the production and consumption of information by people outside the professional tent – neither journalists nor traditional news sources in such spheres as politics or academia – have continued to butt up against the journalistic perception that informing the electorate is their job and theirs alone.

The findings suggest that while numerous options for users to contribute to political coverage are now widely available, there has not been a corresponding increase in editors’ willingness to foreground these capabilities or incorporate them into their coverage goals or decisions. After a small surge of excitement in 2004, as blogs gained ground, most online editors seemed to retreat from an emphasis on content originating

outside the newsroom. Instead, they continued to see their own output – in particular, timely hard news – as their most noteworthy contribution to the democratic process.

The first research question involved the extent to which editors have incorporated new capabilities into election coverage in the digital age. The findings suggest an impressive degree of innovation in conveying campaign information generated by the newsroom. By 2012, online newspaper journalists were live-streaming candidate interviews, integrating video throughout coverage, delivering multi-platform content, and more. And despite proliferating competition for readers' attention, they were generating enough use to make their efforts worthwhile from a financial as well as a civic perspective.

The second research question asked about incorporation of new audience capabilities. Here the findings are two-fold. On the one hand, they indicate that newspapers indeed created space online for user input, in line with the innovations of the day, across all four election cycles. By 2012, every editor who completed the survey described opportunities for users to contribute content and to personalize material offered by the newspaper. But in three of the four years considered here, including the most recent one, there was little enthusiasm for the value of this material – few editors even mentioned it as a source of pride or as a component of their goals for the website – and it was only rarely (and then minimally) incorporated into newsroom output.

So the answer to RQ3, about how an increasingly empowered audience might be affecting journalists' news decisions, is: not much if at all. Data from the social media era, 2008 and 2012, offer virtually no indication that what users said or did shaped journalists' choices about the form or content of their campaign coverage. Although editors did mention traffic as a marker of "success," particularly in the post-recession 2012 cycle, that traffic tended to be referenced as a benefit for its own sake. It was seen as a sign that people wanted what the journalists offered and not as an opportunity to offer something more, something different.

This study, then, suggests that journalists are willing and able to be innovative in their own practices, at least to the extent that the innovations are interpreted as enhancing their core role as providers of information vital for the proper functioning of democratic society. They are less willing, however, to accommodate challenges to that occupational turf. This longitudinal study adds to large body of evidence that ceding authority over what they see as their fundamental social role continues to be a bridge too far for many journalists. Over the four data collection periods, covering a dozen years of Internet evolution, the volume and variety of campaign-related material provided by users has soared. Yet asked what mattered most to them – their goals for the website, their key sources of pride – the overwhelming majority of editors in each year consistently cited material they themselves provided. Their emphasis remained on such traditional news attributes as timeliness, as well as an ability to contextualize political information thanks to the unlimited space afforded by the online medium. As successive innovations available to journalists have become routinized and normalized, they have either been put to use in connection with traditional practices or have faded from noteworthiness in editors' eyes.

To conclude: It is unfair to say that journalists are not finding innovative ways to help engage citizens in democratic decision-making. They are. But journalists still give pride of place to their own contributions to the process. The results suggest that at least among the veteran editors who participated in these studies, journalistic values are very deeply held, as are views about what their occupation is all about. Technologically enabled adaptations are appreciated largely because they drive traffic to the newspaper website – where, editors hope, users will linger to absorb the content journalists have labored to provide. Over a dozen years, questionnaire respondents have offered, more than anything, a reassertion of what they see as the civic virtue inherent in traditional journalism roles, products, and practices. The information that citizens *really* need to be free and self-governing, they are saying, is information that is accurate, trustworthy, timely, and significant. It comes, they maintain, from us, the journalists.

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Table 1: Editors' sources of pride over time

Numbers indicate how many times each type of feature was mentioned first, second, or third as a source of pride. Percentages relate to the total number of features mentioned each year and overall (last column). There were 13 responses to this question in 2012, 31 in 2008, 37 in 2004, and 44 in 2000. Percentages are included here for consistency and comparison despite the disparity in response rates.

	2012	2008	2004	2000	TIMES CITED 2000 - 2012
Depth / detail	17 (45.9%)	28 (32.9%)	34 (39.1%)	38 (40%)	117 (38.5%)
Updated information	5 (13.5%)	12 (14.1%)	12 (13.8%)	29 (30.5%)	58 (19.1%)
Journalist blogs:	1 (2.7%)	18 (21.2%)	16 (18.4%)	-	35 (11.5%)
Multimedia / animation:	2 (5.4%)	15 (17.6%)	7 (8%)	10 (10.5%)	34 (11.2%)
User personalization:	2 (5.4%)	10 (11.8%)	11 (12.6%)	4 (4.2%) ^a	27 (8.9%)
User contributions	3 (8.1%)	2 (2.4%)	7 (8%) ^b	14 (14.7%) ^b	26 (8.6%)
Social media (2012 only):	6 (16.2%)	-	-	-	6 (2%)
Multiplatform (iPad app, 2012 only):	1 (2.7%)	-	-	-	1 (< 1%)
TOTAL NUMBER OF FEATURES listed as sources of pride, per year	37	85	87	95	304

^a In 2000, the only personalization option offered was a "candidate match" feature.

^b In 2004 and 2000, user contributions consisted of forums, chats, and Q&As.